Factualizing the Folklore: Stephen Carlson's Case against Morton Smith*

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Stephen C. Carlson's *The Gospel Hoax* sets out to validate the long-standing suspicion that Professor Morton Smith, late of Columbia University, forged his famous discovery of a letter of Clement of Alexandria, which quotes from a longer ("secret") Gospel of Mark.[1] This academic folklore has been passed on like an esoteric tradition since 1975, when Quentin Quesnell called on Smith to make the manuscript of this letter available for forensic testing in order to rule out the possibility of a recent hoax. Quesnell had difficulty substantiating his concerns. In his article in the *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, he postulated that a modern scholar might have devised the letter as "a controlled experiment" in order to examine how scholars react to new evidence. Yet the manuscript of this letter, which Smith found in 1958, was inscribed on the last pages of a seventeenth-century book that purportedly was kept in a locked room of a monastery in the Judean desert. What modern forger would leave his creation there and gamble that someone would discover it in his lifetime? For this scenario to seem at all plausible, Quesnell needed to imply what he personally suspected, namely, that Smith forged it himself for this purpose. Accordingly, Quesnell described his hypothetical modern "mystifier" as someone who shared Smith's abilities, opportunities, resources, and interest in what people make of the document.[2]

Smith's incensed reply to Quesnell's article appeared the following year in the same journal. He found Quesnell's hypothesis of a modern mystifier completely

* My thanks go to Allan Pantuck and Birger A. Pearson for their helpful suggestions.

[1] Stephen C. Carlson, *The Gospel Hoax: Morton Smith's Invention of Secret Mark* (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2005). Smith translated the word μυστικός as "secret" rather than "mystic." Neither is satisfactory, so I use his alternative designation "the longer Gospel of Mark." All biblical quotations are from the RSV.

[2] Quentin Quesnell, "The Mar Saba Clementine: A Question of Evidence," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* [*CBQ*] 37 (1975) 48–67, at 55, 58.

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implausible and objected to Quesnell's insinuations.[3] Smith did not own the manuscripts that he had catalogued and photographed at Mar Saba, so one could hardly fault him for not making this one available to other scholars. Nevertheless, as the years passed, many people who had witnessed this exchange began to wonder why no one besides Smith ever claimed to have seen the document. Some privately doubted Smith's report that he left it "in the top room of the tower library," unaware that three Western scholars had in fact located it there in 1976 but failed in their attempt to arrange for its testing.[4] Few took note of Thomas Talley's report in 1981 that the book into which the manuscript had been copied was now in the patriarchal library in Jerusalem, in part because Talley had not seen the actual manuscript, which a librarian, Kallistos Dourvas, had removed for photographing around the time of the book's transfer from Mar Saba in 1976. The present librarians claim that they cannot find it.[5]

Unconstrained by physical evidence and legal consequences, the folklore of forgery entered the secondary literature shortly after Smith's death in 1991, when Jacob Neusner set out to demolish Smith's reputation in retaliation for Smith's public denunciation of his error-ridden scholarship at the SBL meeting in 1984. Dubbing Smith's discovery "the forgery of the century," Neusner asserted that Smith created the "secret" gospel to prove that Jesus was a homosexual.[6] A few writers have recently promoted variants of this scenario, some subscribing to the Gay Gospel Hypothesis, others, to the notion that Smith produced the document as a joke or for the satisfaction of duping everyone.[7] What these imaginative allegations

[3] Morton Smith, "On the Authenticity of the Mar Saba Letter of Clement," *CBQ* 38 (1976) 196–99.

[4] Smith's report is cited in Quesnell, "Question of Evidence," 49 n. 4; idem, "A Reply to Morton Smith," *CBQ* 38 (1976) 200; and Smith, "Authenticity," 196. The three Western scholars who located the manuscript and brought it to Jerusalem are Guy Stroumsa, David Flusser, and Shlomo Pines. See Guy G. Stroumsa, "Comments on Charles Hedrick's Article: A Testimony," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 11 (2003) 147–53.

[5] Thomas J. Talley, "Liturgical Time in the Ancient Church: The State of Research," *Studia Liturgica* 14 (1982) 34–51, at 45; trans. of "Le Temps Liturgique dans l'Église ancienne," *La Maison-Dieu* 147 (1981) 29–60. On the issue of the manuscript's present location, see Charles W. Hedrick and Nikolaos Olympiou, "Secret Mark: New Photographs, New Witnesses," *The Fourth R* 13 (2000) 3–11, 14–16; John Dart, *Decoding Mark* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 2003) 137–40.

[6] Jacob Neusner, *Are There Really Tannaitic Parallels to the Gospels? A Refutation of Morton Smith* (South Florida Studies in the History of Judaism 80; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993) 27–31, at 28; this was republished several times. For a fuller overview of the controversy sparked by Quesnell, see Scott G. Brown, *Mark's Other Gospel: Rethinking Morton Smith's Controversial Discovery* (Studies in Christianity and Judaism 15; Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2005) 34–48.

[7] Donald Harman Akenson, *Saint Saul: A Skeleton Key to the Historical Jesus* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) 85–89; Bart D. Ehrman, "The Forgery of an Ancient Discovery? Morton Smith and the Secret Gospel of Mark," in his *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003) 67–89; Robert M. Price, "Second Thoughts on the Secret Gospel," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 14 (2004) 127–32.

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have lacked, strangely enough, is proof that the document is a modern forgery and evidence tying the alleged crime to Smith. That, however, is the promise of Baylor University Press's latest "scholarly bombshell."[8] In *The Gospel Hoax*, Carlson endeavors to prove three things: that the document is a forgery; that Smith had the ability, opportunity, and motive to create this document; and that Smith forged it himself as a hoax, leaving intentional and unintentional clues to his prank. I have addressed the issues of motive and ability elsewhere.[9] The present paper is limited to examining the third aspect of Carlson's case, his circumstantial evidence connecting the document to Morton Smith.

Carlson offers five items into evidence, so to speak. First, he claims to have uncovered another manuscript from Mar Saba in the same handwriting as Clement's letter "to Theodore" (hereafter *Letter to Theodore*) and that Smith intentionally assigned this second manuscript to a fictitious contemporary who "bears an uncanny resemblance to Morton Smith himself."[10] Second, Carlson reinforces this claim with the contention that the eighteenth-century handwriting of the manuscript contains four anomalous letterforms that accord with Smith's own Greek handwriting. Third, Carlson argues that Smith deliberately "salted" the document with clues to his identity,[11] including an anachronistic allusion to an invention by the *Morton* Salt company in the letter's expression "even the salt loses its savor." Fourth, he contends that this clue is complemented by a concealed reference to the word *smith* in Smith's exposition on this expression. Fifth, Carlson argues that the letter's first quotation from the longer Gospel of Mark, in which Jesus teaches a young man "the mystery of the kingdom of God" (as in Mark 4:11), anachronistically depicts a homosexual relationship between persons of equal status. This equation of the mystery of the kingdom of God with a forbidden sexual relationship within a letter of Clement that exhorts secrecy constitutes Smith's own seal of authorship, since he had already linked these elements together in his scholarship prior to his discovery of the manuscript.

This a priori case sounds impressive. How well does it stand up to scrutiny?

Exhibit One: The Writing of M. Madiotes

Argument: Carlson's first argument concerns the manuscript that Smith catalogued as item number 22 during his stay at Mar Saba in 1958. A reproduction of the first page (recto) of this manuscript appears in both *The Secret Gospel* and the journal

[8] The quoted words are from Larry W. Hurtado's endorsement on the back cover.

[9] On motive, see Brown, *Mark's Other Gospel*, 49–54; idem, "The Question of Motive in the Case against Morton Smith," *JBL* 125 (2006) 351–83. With respect to ability, Carlson conveniently ignored the problem, demonstrated in chapters 4–8 of *Mark's Other Gospel*, that Smith's comprehension of the *Letter to Theodore* and of its gospel excerpts was far too inadequate for him to be the author.

[10] Carlson, *Gospel Hoax*, 43.

[11] Ibid., xviii, 85.

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Archaeology as an illustration of how monks sometimes pasted together loose pages of old manuscripts in order to fortify the bindings of books.[12] This page contains personal notes written by several different individuals. The names of some of these men appear in Smith's published catalogue of Mar Saba's manuscripts.[13] According to Carlson, the uppermost handwriting (see figure 1) is the same as that of MS 65, the one containing Clement's *Letter to Theodore*, yet Smith attributed this eighteenth-century hand to a twentieth-century individual named "M. Madiotes" (Μ. Μαδιότης), whose surname must be fictitious because it does not appear in the online Greek phonebook.[14]

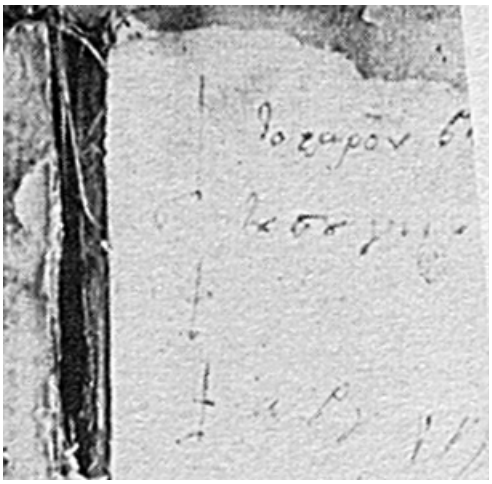


Figure 1 *The top hand of the first page (recto) of* MS *22.*

This odd attribution is a deliberate clue. The name Madiotes is a pseudonym meaning "baldy" and "swindler," derived from the verb μαδάω. A balding Morton Smith invented Madiotes, added his handwriting to MS 22, assigned this hand to the twentieth century, and included a picture featuring this writing in both *Archaeology*

[12] Morton Smith, *The Secret Gospel: The Discovery and Interpretation of the Secret Gospel According to Mark* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973; repr., Clearlake, Calif.: Dawn Horse, 1982) 37 (rev. ed.; Middletown, Calif.: Dawn Horse, 2005) 35; idem, "Monasteries and Their Manuscripts," *Archaeology* 13 (1960) 177.

[13] Morton Smith, "Ἑλληνικὰ χειρόγραφα ἐν τῇ Μονῇ τοῦ ἁγίου Σάββα" (trans. Archimandrite Constantine Michaelides), *Νέα Σιών* 52 (1960) 110–25, 245–56, at 119–20.

[14] Figure 1 is derived from the 1984 reprint of the 1982 Dawn Horse Press edition of Smith, *Secret Gospel*. This reproduction of Smith's photograph of MS 22 reveals a few more letters than the 1973 Harper & Row edition, which is cropped at the right edge of the *omicron* in παρον, thus showing most of the incorrect circumflex accent but none of the *nu* or the *beta*. The 1960 reproduction in *Archaeology* is cropped slightly past the beginning of the *omicron*, thus mostly concealing the circumflex accent. Carlson's reproduction (his figure 5) is cropped in the same place.

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and *The Secret Gospel* as a clue that he was swindling people with a twentieth-century forgery.[15] This argument is represented graphically on the cover of *The Gospel Hoax*, which uses a colorized rendering of Smith's photograph of MS 22 with a magnifying glass superimposed to tell the publisher's story of how a "master sleuth" found this clue to Smith's hoax by poring over a forgotten manuscript.[16] Although this novelesque image suggests a visit to Mar Saba, Carlson actually inspected the published photograph and not the manuscript itself.

Assessment: The possibility that a twentieth-century individual wrote the *Letter to Theodore* using an eighteenth-century hand would be damning evidence of forgery, so I examined this claim in detail when the editors of *The Expository Times* invited Carlson and me to reply to each other's books on longer Mark.[17] Here I shall summarize the two main points that I made in that paper. First, the top handwriting on the first page of MS 22 is too limited to permit a positive identification of its author. In order to eliminate the possibility of two different writers, one must have writing samples that are extensive enough to exhibit several instances of most (preferably all) letters of the alphabet and the ligatures that each writer uses, for the examiner needs to determine whether these letterforms are rendered the same way in both the questioned writing (here MS 22) and the known samples (here only MS 65), whether these letterforms display the same range of natural variation (discussed under "Exhibit Two"), and whether the questioned and known specimens demonstrate the same habits in the way that they connect, or do not connect, the various letter combinations. Second, even though the small sample does not permit a positive conclusion of one writer, it nevertheless allows this conclusion to be refuted, for as experts in handwriting identification insist, "Repeated small differences establish clearly that two specimens are the work of two individuals despite a great number of general similarities."[18] We cannot always talk about *repeated* differences in the case of the top handwriting in MS 22, because the specimen is so limited. But since the four distinct words and five isolated letters visible in the published photograph differ from the writing of the *Letter to Theodore* in over a dozen respects, these differences cannot all constitute aberrations. Here I shall discuss the most significant differences. For convenience, I shall use "MS 22" hereafter to refer to the top hand on the first page (recto) in Smith's photograph.

[15] Carlson, *Gospel Hoax*, 42–44. The verb *to swindle* implies defrauding people of their money, which, as Carlson notes, is not the objective of a hoax (15–16). So this supposed meaning of Madiotes is inconsistent with Carlson's hoax hypothesis.

[16] The quoted words are from Mark Goodacre's endorsement on the back cover.

[17] Scott G. Brown, "Reply to Stephen Carlson," *Expository Times* 117 (2006) 144–49. This paper includes a discussion of the general principles of handwriting identification.

[18] Ordway Hilton, *Scientific Examination of Questioned Documents* (rev. ed.; CRC Series in Forensic and Police Science; Boca Raton, Fla.: CRC, 1993) 161.

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Figure 2 *The top hand of* MS *22 (left) compared with* MS *65.*

The top line of figure 2 compares the form of the definite article τό in MS 22 with the first twelve instances of τό in MS 65.[19] For this word, both writers use the taller, rounded form of *tau*, but the similarities end there. In MS 65, the initial stroke quickly curves upward to the right, causing the whole letter to slant in this direction, and the base of the stem curves in order to connect with the *omicron*. This combining of *tau* with a following *omicron* holds true for all sixty-four instances of το (with or without an accent) in the letter but not for the example of τό in MS 22.

The second line compares the first three letters of the word παρόν in MS 22 with all seven places in MS 65 where these three letters occur together. Two differences readily appear here. First, although both writers use an unusual form of cursive *pi* (i.e., ϖ, 𝓌), the latter writes it differently when it precedes *alpha*. In these cases, rather than connecting to the next letter at the baseline, the stroke loops backward over the top of the *pi* in order to form the horizontal bar before continuing to the next letter. This form of cursive *pi* also occurs before *epsilon*, *eta* (without an accent), *lambda*, *nu*, *rho*, *tau*, and a space. The form used in MS 22 does appear in MS 65, but only before *eta* (with acute accent), *iota*, *omega*, and the *omicron-upsilon* ligature (ϒ). In the 112 instances of *pi*, no exceptions to these habits occur. Second, when *alpha* precedes *rho* in MS 65, the letters are connected, and the top of the *rho* is shaped like a loop. The first hand in MS 22 did not connect these letters, and the top of his *rho* is circular.

The third line of figure 2 compares the way both documents combine *rho* with *omicron*. Again, the unconnected form of *rho* used in MS 22 does appear in the *Letter to Theodore* (examples occur under παρ in figure 2), but only before certain letters: *gamma*, *theta*, *kappa*, *nu*, *pi*, *tau*, *chi*, a space, and, occasionally, *alpha*, *epsilon*, *eta*, and *omega*. It never appears before an *omicron*. Instead, in these twenty-five instances, the tail of the *rho* always curves up to the right to connect with the *omicron* (a common ligature). The fourth line illustrates the shape and position of circumflex accents in both writings. Those in MS 65 are wavy (tilde), and the start of the stroke is normally aligned vertically with the left edge or the center of a wide vowel, but the stroke often continues past the right edge. The circumflex accent visible in the published photograph of MS 22 is straight, and the stroke begins before the left edge of the vowel and ends nearly in line with the right edge. Lines five and six compare the individual letters *beta* and *gamma*. Unlike the *beta* in MS 22, the upper loops of the fourteen *beta*s in MS 65 vertically overlap the bottom loops, which are not tight against the "back" of the letter, as they are in MS 22. The downward stroke of the *gammas* in MS 65 is noticeably straight, resulting in a letter that resembles an elongated *v*, unlike the downward stroke of the *gammas* in MS 22, which bends sharply to the left, resulting in a letter that resembles a *y*. These side-by-side comparisons demonstrate how very different these two writings are.

[19] The images of MS 65 in this article were scanned from the color photographs taken by Kallistos Dourvas (courtesy of Charles W. Hedrick).

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Of equal significance is the lack of accents in MS 22 on the words το, του, and σου and the incorrect accent on παρον.[20] The *omicron*s in the words το παρον (meaning "the present," or simply "this") should both have grave accents. If του represents the definite article, then του and σου should have circumflex accents. If instead του represents the last three letters of the last word on the previous line, accents might not be required. Whatever the case, any competent scribe would have put an accent over το, and no competent scribe would have put a circumflex accent over a short vowel. As William Wallace put it, "A short vowel circumflexed is, like metal on metal or colour on colour in heraldry, *pour enquérir*."[21] This writer's problem with accents strongly indicates that he was not only a different individual but also a considerably less competent scribe than the one who penned MS 65, whose use of accents was excellent.[22]

Carlson has simply mistaken two different writers for one. On its own, this conclusion eliminates his basis both for treating the photograph of MS 22 as a deliberate clue and for attributing MS 65 to a twentieth-century individual who "uncannily resembles Smith himself."[23] This case of mistaken identity does not end here, however. When some bureaucratic issues get resolved, Allan Pantuck intends to publish two documents that demonstrate that Carlson misattributed the top handwriting to M. Madiotes.

Exhibit Two: Anomalous Letterforms Attributable to Smith

Argument: Carlson turns to paleography for additional circumstantial evidence, arguing that MS 65 contains four paleographical anomalies that agree with Smith's Greek handwriting. These anomalies are established by comparing MS 65 with a few manuscripts written at Mar Saba in the eighteenth century, whereas Smith's writing habits are established from annotations that he wrote in the margins of books that he owned (the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City now houses his personal library). Carlson notes that the writer of MS 65 joined the left "leg" of his *lambdas* near to the bottom of the right leg and that he formed some of his *lambdas* in only one stroke. Smith also wrote *lambdas* in both ways. Carlson also notes that both Smith and the writer of MS 65 used a one-stroke short *tau*, where the horizontal line curves back and then turns down at the midpoint. And Carlson notes that the *thetas* in MS 65 appear "very similar" to the *thetas* that appear in Smith's marginal annotations, "including a leading horizontal stroke at midline."[24]

[20] The words του and σου on the second line of figure 1 use a ligature to represent *omicron* and *upsilon* (ϒ).

[21] William Wallace, "An Index of Greek Ligatures and Contractions," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 43 (1923) 184.

[22] See Morton Smith, *Clement of Alexandria and a Secret Gospel of Mark* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973) 2.

[23] Carlson, *Gospel Hoax*, 47.

[24] Ibid., 46–47.

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Assessment: Four fundamental problems in Carlson's approach undermine his paleographical argument. First, his determination of anomalous letterforms presumes that authentic manuscripts written at Mar Saba in the eighteenth century should share the same traits. That premise is erroneous. After the twelfth century, Greek handwriting became less standardized and more individualistic, with the result that we can more easily identify individual scribes. By the fifteenth century, "the varieties of style are numerous and overlapping, and there is no clear distinction between styles thought suitable for copying Biblical and patristic texts and those for secular manuscripts; still less are there any differences according to where in the by-now-shrunken Byzantine empire a manuscript was written."[25] So we should not expect manuscripts written in Mar Saba in the eighteenth century to share all the same stylistic traits. Indeed, they do not: at least seven differences in letterforms appear in the undisputed samples displayed in figures 2 and 7 of Carlson's book.[26] Moreover, as Aristarchos Peristeris noted, Mar Saba was from its inception "a monastery for more advanced and experienced monks." Consequently, "a considerable number of monks were already highly educated when they joined the monastery."[27] That was particularly true of the scribes, many if not most of whom developed their writing styles elsewhere prior to their stay at the monastery. Smith himself believed that the person who penned MS 65 was a Phanariot scholar who "had been trained in the Patriarchal Academy in Constantinople."[28] Why exclude that possibility? Finally, although it makes perfect sense that a manuscript containing a letter of Clement would be produced at Mar Saba, where a large collection of Clement's letters once existed, we cannot know for sure whether the manuscript was penned before or after the book came to Mar Saba, as Smith himself observed.[29] Thus, Carlson's position that MS 65 is anomalous wherever it differs from undisputed Mar Saba manuscripts of the same period (and accords with Smith's handwriting) is based on false or arbitrary premises. This fact eliminates his reason for treating the four alleged similarities as significant and suspicious.

Second, Carlson's neglect of the phenomenon of natural variation in handwriting renders his handwriting comparison dubious. People are not machines, so they

[25] Ruth Barbour, *Greek Literary Hands A.D. 400–1600* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1981) xxii, xxiii.

[26] All three comparison manuscripts in Carlson's figure 2 render *pi* differently. Figures 2b and 2c render *epsilon* differently than 2a. Figures 2a and 2c render *gamma*, *theta*, initial *kappa*, and terminal *sigma* differently from each other (those letters are not displayed in 2b). And *six* different forms of *theta* appear in figure 7. These differences among the eighteenth-century writers of Mar Saba could easily have been multiplied had Carlson offered more than four lines of text from three Mar Saba manuscripts as samples. It is highly tendentious to label commonplace differences anomalous only when they occur in MS 65 and agree with Smith's handwriting.

[27] Aristarchos Peristeris, "Literary and Scribal Activities at the Monastery of St. Sabas," in *The Sabaite Heritage in the Orthodox Church from the Fifth Century to the Present* (ed. Joseph Patrich; Leuven: Peeters, 2001) 171.

[28] Smith, *Clement*, 2–3.

[29] Ibid., 285–90.

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never write a letter exactly the same way twice.[30] Naturally, the variations in the way writers render letters have limits. One can establish this range of variation for a particular individual only by examining numerous instances of the way he or she writes individual letters, preferably from a variety of writing samples.[31] Only then can one make generalizations about a writer's habits and abstract a "master pattern" for any letter, a description of its typical shape. Thus, as a preliminary to handwriting comparison, practitioners often produce tables displaying numerous instances of particular letters as they appear in writing samples by the suspect and in the questioned document, as I did in figures 2–5. Carlson's own table (his figure 7) defeats the purpose of this procedure, for it compares two select examples of Smith's rendering of three Greek letters against two select examples from MS 65 and either one, two, or three select examples from seven eighteenth-century manuscripts from Mar Saba. By offering a few selective examples, he creates the impression that Smith's ways of writing the letters *lambda*, *tau*, and *theta* resemble the habits of the writer of the letter and differ from the "authentic" manuscripts without having established how these writers typically form these letters. In order to correct this problem, we need to examine a larger and more representative selection of these letters from Smith's Greek handwriting and MS 65 before generalizing about similarities and differences.

Third, Carlson's premise that a modern forger would "lapse" into his or her own writing habits when forging an eighteenth-century manuscript disregards an important distinction between publicly and privately executed forgeries.[32] Forgers are most likely to lapse into their own habits when they are obliged to work in public before witnesses and therefore do not have an exemplar present from which to copy. Hence document examiners can reasonably expect to find some of a suspect's writing traits in, for example, signatures forged in front of bank tellers or court-ordered writing samples produced by someone who is trying to disguise his or her writing. In such cases, forgers of necessity fall back on their own habits to supplement their imperfect *memory* of the writing they are attempting to simulate. The lapses, moreover, are not limited to a few features of a few letters but extend to many aspects of the forgers' writing habits, precisely because the forgers are relying completely on memory.[33] If the *Letter to Theodore* is a modern forgery of an eighteenth-century hand, the forger would not have produced it in public and naturally would have copied from exemplars, since the amount of information he or

[30] See, for example, Wilson R. Harrison, *Suspect Documents: Their Scientific Examination* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1981) 297–305; Hilton, *Questioned Documents*, 158–60.

[31] On the question of quantity of samples, see Roy A. Huber and A. M. Headrick, *Handwriting Identification: Facts and Fundamentals* (Boca Raton, Fla.: CRC, 1999) 249–50.

[32] Carlson, *Gospel Hoax*, 46.

[33] James V. P. Conway, *Evidential Documents* (Police Science Series; Springfield, Ill.: Charles C. Thomas, 1959) 24–27.

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she would have to retain in memory in order to imitate so many foreign letterforms and habits of connection without the aid of exemplars would be astronomical. With the aid of exemplars, a forger might occasionally lapse into his or her usual writing habits at times of waning concentration, in which case both the simulated letterform and the forger's own way of writing that letterform would appear,[34] with the latter occurring "progressively at various points" in the document.[35] The only times a forger might *consistently* substitute his or her usual habits while privately drawing the letterforms in exemplars are when those forms are too subtle to discern or too complicated to replicate. Thus, we should entertain the premise of Smith lapsing into his own habits only if the alleged similarities, like true lapses, occur "progressively at various points" in the manuscript or else involve very subtle or complex features.

Fourth, Carlson never addresses the question of whether the similarities he adduced between Smith's writing and MS 65 are probative. The handwriting of any two individuals using the same alphabet should contain similarities, including some striking ones. How do we know that these four alleged similarities are not simply coincidental? Ordway Hilton discussed this issue in connection with forged signatures:

> Identification of the forger by means of his writing alone is the exception rather than the rule. Seldom do enough of the forger's own writing habits remain to serve as the basis for an identification. In rather rare instances, however, the forger may be identified by a number of his small but highly individual habits that occur in the simulated signature. Nevertheless, it must be understood that positive proof of his identity can never be based upon merely one or two similarities between his and the disputed writing.[36]

When dealing with the possibility of a simulated forgery, then, the discovery of "a number of [the suspect's] small but highly individual habits" can at best constitute evidence supporting the identification, but only if these habits are "highly individual," which is to say, quite unlikely to occur in the writings of most other individuals. Accordingly, the only similarities between Smith's Greek handwriting and MS 65 that might be probative are the ones that are highly unusual, both for the eighteenth century and the twentieth.

From the preceding theoretical considerations we may distill four criteria that every alleged paleographical similarity must meet in order to have value as evidence against Smith. The letterforms in question must 1) represent Smith's normal ways of writing those letters; 2) be "highly individual" in relation to twentieth-century

[34] David Ellen, *Scientific Examination of Documents: Methods and Techniques* (Boca Raton, Fla.: CRC Press, 2006) 50.

[35] Conway, *Evidential Documents*, 27. He was describing publicly executed forgeries, but the same pattern should apply to lapses that result from mental fatigue.

[36] Hilton, *Questioned Documents*, 200.

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Greek writing; 3) be equally unusual for the eighteenth century; and 4) make sense as lapses or deliberate substitutions. Put differently, if these letterforms are easy to reproduce or appear consistently in MS 65, then the similarity to Smith's writing is probably coincidental. If they are normal for the eighteenth century, then there is no basis for treating them as suspicious. If they are commonplace in twentieth-century Greek handwriting, then there is no basis for ascribing them specifically to Smith. And if Smith normally wrote these letterforms in a different way, then Carlson's examples of Smith's Greek handwriting are unrepresentative, and there is no way to explain why forms that are atypical for Smith's writing would appear with any regularity in MS 65.

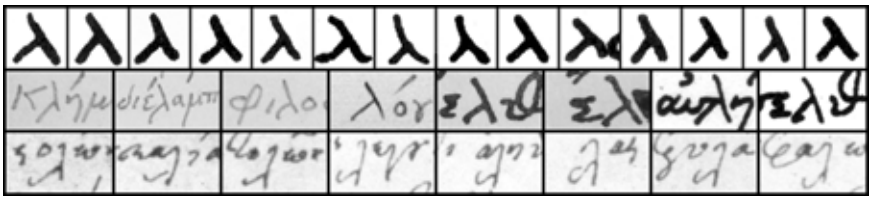


Figure 3 *Smith's two-stroke lambda compared with MS 65.*

We begin our reassessment of Carlson's paleographical evidence with the two-stroke *lambda*. The top line of figure 3 reproduces the first fourteen *lambdas* in Smith's book *Tannaitic Parallels to the Gospels*, where he added the Greek text by hand. The *lambdas* in the second line come from annotations in Smith's books and a letter he wrote in 1955. The third line, as best as I can determine using photographs, reproduces eight two-stroke *lambdas* from MS 65.[37] This figure readily illustrates the wide variation in the way Smith wrote this letterform. Note in particular the variations in the height of the left leg. We can quantify the range of this variation using the large sample of Greek writing in *Tannaitic Parallels*. There, 55 percent of the *lambdas* have a low left leg, 35 percent are formed with the left leg intersecting the middle of the right leg, and 10 percent intersect above

[37] First row: Morton Smith, *Tannaitic Parallels to the Gospels* (Journal of Biblical Literature Monograph Series [JBLMS] 6; Philadelphia: Society of Biblical Literature, 1951). Second row: images one through four are from Smith's copy of *Clemens Alexandrinus* (ed. Otto Stählin; Griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten drei Jahrhunderte, Band [12], 15, 17, 39; Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1905–1936) 1:xvi; 4:318 (courtesy of the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary; call number BR60.G7C6 1905 in the Morton Smith collection); images five and six are from Smith, letter to Erwin R. Goodenough, 3 January 1955, Goodenough Papers, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library (courtesy of Allan Pantuck). Images seven and eight are from my photocopy of notes Smith wrote on the verso of the half-title page (ii) of his copy of Alv Kragerud, *Der Lieblingsjünger im Johannesevangelium. Ein exegetischer Versuch* (Oslo: Osloer Universitätsverlag, 1959) (courtesy of The Library of The Jewish Theological Seminary; call number BS2615.2.K73 1959).

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the middle.[38] This natural variation in the way Smith wrote *lambda* is not reflected in MS 65, where 96 percent of the *lambdas* have a low left leg. The consistency of this feature in MS 65 eliminates the possibility that we are dealing with a forger's lapse here, as does the fact that a high left leg is too obvious a feature for a forger to overlook so consistently if it appeared in his or her exemplars.

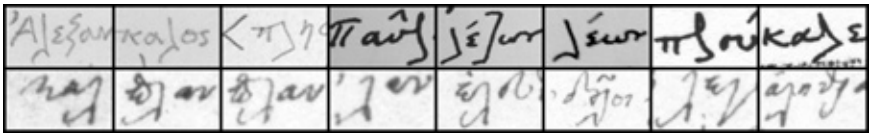


Figure 4 *Smith's one-stroke lambda compared with MS 65.*

Figure 4 compares Smith's one-stroke *lambda* with (what appear to me to be) eight one-stroke *lambdas* from MS 65.[39] With respect to frequency, Smith's one-stroke *lambdas* are rare (these are the only ones I have seen to date), whereas most of the *lambdas* in MS 65 appear to me to be rendered in one stroke. With respect to appearance, Smith's one-stoke *lambdas* look very different from his regular two-stroke *lambdas*, whereas the two types of *lambdas* in MS 65 normally take the same shape except for the fact that the pen does not leave the page in the one-stroke form. Smith's one-stroke *lambdas* are angled to the left, whereas those in the letter are roughly vertical or angled to the right. Most of Smith's one-stroke *lambdas* begin at the height of a tall Greek letter, whereas those in MS 65 always begin at the height of a small letter. The left leg of Smith's one-stroke *lambdas* is formed either as a right angle (which does not occur anywhere in MS 65) or as an arch to the left; as a consequence, this stroke retraces much less of the right leg if at all. The left leg

[38] Curiously, after the first chapter, approximately 60 percent of the *lambda*s in *Tannaitic Parallels* are formed with the left leg intersecting the middle or higher on the right leg. This difference within *Tannaitic Parallels* illustrates the importance of using multiple, extended samples when establishing normal writing behavior.

[39] First row: images one through three are from Smith's copy of Stählin, *Clemens*, 1:xvi; 3:178; images four through six are from Smith, letter to Goodenough; images seven and eight are from the first and second of three pages of handwritten notes that Smith made while reading C. H. Turner, "Marcan Usage: Notes, Critical and Exegetical, on the Second Gospel," *Journal of Theological Studies* [*JTS*] 25 (1924) 377–86; *JTS* 26 (1925) 12–20, 145–56, 225–40; *JTS* 27 (1926) 58–62; *JTS* 28 (1927) 9–30, 349–62; *JTS* 29 (1928) 275–89, 346–61. On 9 March 2006 I found these loose pages at the Jewish Theological Seminary inside Smith's copy of John Charles Doudna, *The Greek of the Gospel of Mark* (JBLMS 12; Philadelphia: Society of Biblical Literature and Exegesis, 1961) (call number BS2585.5.D6 1961). On pp. 2–3 of these notes, Smith refers to "Richardson's baptismal reading" of the longer gospel, which is the interpretation that Cyril C. Richardson proposed to Smith in a letter in mid-January 1961 (see Smith, *Secret Gospel*, 64–65; cf. 30). These notes became the basis for Smith, *Clement*, 134, and include most of the Greek phrases from the *Letter to Theodore* that appear on that page. I made photocopies for myself and left the originals with the archivist.

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of the one-stroke *lambdas* in MS 65 is usually formed by a stroke that retraces part way up the right leg before branching off in an abrupt, downward angle. The top of the right leg and the bottom of the left leg curve toward each other in MS 65 but not in Smith's writing. Thus, generally speaking, the pen strokes Smith made to produce his one-stroke *lambdas* are different from the ones made in MS 65. This fact is hard to explain if the latter represent an inveterate writing habit into which Smith constantly lapsed. Indeed, the premise that Smith used eighteenth-century exemplars containing *lambdas* with a high left leg but consistently overlooked this one obvious feature, lapsing instead into a letterform he rarely used and usually wrote very differently, makes no sense at all.

The only thing that is distinctive about the *lambdas* in MS 65 is the writer's preference for a low left leg. The majority of Greek writers in the eighteenth century preferred a high left leg, but there was also a minority who preferred the middle or a low left leg or showed no evident preference at all. This fact adequately explains why all of Carlson's examples from Mar Saba purportedly have a high left leg.

With respect to the small *tau*, Smith wrote it in both one and two strokes (the latter appears in *Tannaitic Parallels*). The single-stroke form used by Smith and MS 65 has been in common use in Greek handwriting for centuries and is anything but distinctive, let alone anomalous. Since this is the regular form of small *tau* in the letter, and its use is restricted to the article τῶν (with one exception noted by Carlson),[40] it also cannot be considered a lapse. Accordingly, we have no reason to view this letterform as suspicious or to connect it specifically with Smith.

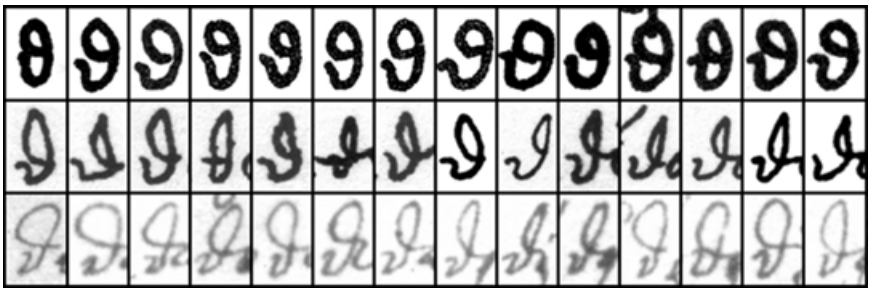


Figure 5 *Smith's open theta compared with MS 65.*

The top line in figure 5 reproduces the first fourteen *thetas* in *Tannaitic Parallels*. The second line reproduces the first fourteen *thetas* that Smith wrote while making notes on C. H. Turner's study "Marcan Usage."[41] The third line reproduces the first fourteen *thetas* in MS 65. As with the one-stroke *tau*, there is nothing unusual about the way Smith wrote the letter *theta* with a "leading horizontal stroke." Smith and

[40] Carlson, *Gospel Hoax*, 29.
[41] See above, n. 39.

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MS 65 usually employed the one-stroke cursive form of *theta* (ϑ) that has been the standard form in Greek handwriting for many centuries. This "open *theta*" (also called script *theta* and curly *theta*) is common in printed books and is a familiar symbol in mathematics.

Again, what is most noticeable about Smith's open *theta* is the variation, which is even wider for this letter than it is for *lambda*, perhaps because open *theta* is more elaborate. Smith learned Greek as an adult and apparently wrote this letter too infrequently to develop a regular form. The more limited variation in MS 65, however, centers around a master pattern. The *thetas* in MS 65 are almost always completed with the stroke crossing the oval, and the top halves of the letter are generally (but not always) much larger, more open, and more rounded than the bottom halves, which appear tight and angular. The letter slants to the right. Smith, by contrast, had much less of a tendency to finish the stroke by crossing the oval and a greater tendency to write without a slant (a general difference between his Greek writing and MS 65).

The one aspect of this letterform that Carlson identified as a suspicious parallel between Smith and MS 65 is the "leading horizontal stroke at midline" (e.g., ϑ). Forms of open *theta* without a leading stroke (ϑ) or with a stroke that curves upward on an angle from below midline (ϑ) appear in the eighteenth-century Mar Saba manuscripts that Carlson presented as comparisons. He describes this difference imprecisely, however, for as the extended comparisons in figure 5 reveal, both Smith's writing and that of MS 65 exhibit no fixed angle or length of leading stroke. The variability in the way they render this feature is common in informal Greek handwriting. MS 65 is basically an informal documentary hand. Although the distinction is not clear-cut, it is the more formal and aesthetic book hands, like the ones in Carlson's figures 2b and 2c, that attempt to keep this feature of the letter consistent and, in some cases, ornate. If there is anything unusual here, it is the fact that Smith's leading stroke frequently descends on an angle.

Given the wide variation in the way Smith wrote this letterform, it is easy to find the occasional "match" between one of his *thetas* and one in MS 65, but to present such random similarities as evidence of common authorship is highly dubious. For in handwriting identification, what matters is agreement in the master pattern and in the range of natural variation, which we clearly do not have here.

None of Carlson's four alleged similarities between Smith's writing and MS 65 satisfy more than one of the four criteria for evidence of common authorship. It is hard to imagine a less compelling paleographical argument tying this manuscript to Morton Smith.

Later in his book Carlson mentions in passing the existence of "modern letter forms" in MS 65.[42] This statement is surprising because he did not establish that any of the letterforms in this manuscript do not appear in eighteenth-century Greek

[42] Carlson, *Gospel Hoax*, 71.

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handwriting. He merely mischaracterized these four letterforms as "anomalous" because they purportedly do not appear in the samples he obtained of eighteenth-century manuscripts from Mar Saba.

Exhibit Three: The Allusion to Morton Salt

Argument: We return to Carlson's exposé of deliberate clues left by Morton Smith. Carlson detects an intentional anachronism in the *Letter to Theodore* 1.11–15, which reads, "Now of the things they [the Carpocratians] 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." The problem with this statement, as Carlson sees it, is that "it presupposes salt technology that did not exist in Clement's place and time":

> The imagery in *Theodore* involves mixing an adulterant with salt and spoiling its taste. For salt to be mixed with such an adulterant, it would have to be loose and free-flowing, but free-flowing salt is a modern invention. Pure salt draws moisture from the air, forming clumps, and often requires a mallet to be broken apart for domestic use. In 1910, however, a chemist at the Morton Salt Company discovered that salt's tendency to form clumps in humidity can be prevented by adding a small amount of an anti-caking agent to uniform-sized salt crystals obtained from vacuum-pan evaporation.[43]

Carlson explains that for "the modern reader of *Theodore* . . . the salt allusion is natural: free-flowing salt was and continues to be mixed with other ingredients perceived as affecting its taste. This was particularly true starting in the 1930s when Morton Salt added another ingredient to their table salt, harsh-tasting potassium iodide for the prevention of endemic goiter."[44] But for an ancient reader, the salt metaphor would not make sense, for the technology did not exist for mixing salt with other foodstuffs, and the adulteration of salt was not an issue. We have no evidence of the intentional adulteration of salt "even in Pliny's encyclopedic discussion of adulterated foodstuffs." So the letter contains a metaphor that would

[43] Ibid., 60.

[44] Ibid., 61. The addition of iodine was made in 1924, not "the 1930s" (or "the mid-twentieth-century," as Carlson states on p. 71), and the anti-caking agent was invented in 1911, not 1910, which is the year Morton Salt incorporated. See Mark Kurlansky, *Salt: A World History* (New York: Walker, 2002) 427; Pierre Laszlo, *Salt: Grain of Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001) 140; and Morton Salt, "History," http://www.mortonsalt.com/consumer/about_us/history/index.htm. It is worth clarifying that the vacuum-pan evaporation process was not invented by the chemist at Morton Salt; it was already used for sugar in the early 1800s and was adapted to salt in 1887 at Silver Springs, New York, by Joseph Duncan of the Worcester Salt company. See Kurlansky, *Salt*, 328–29; Garnett Laidlaw Eskew, *Salt, the Fifth Element: The Story of a Basic American Industry* (Chicago: J. G. Ferguson, 1948) 151, 169–70.

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not have made sense to its reader prior to Morton Salt's invention. Morton Salt contains Smith's given name, so Smith himself planted this "damning" "technological anachronism" as a clue to his authorship.[45]

Assessment: This argument is one long sequence of mistakes, beginning with Carlson's initial premise that "the imagery in *Theodore* involves mixing an adulterant with salt and spoiling its taste."[46] The letter nowhere refers to salt being mixed with anything. It is "the true things" spoken by the Carpocratians that are mixed with inventions, so presumably Carlson has inferred that the salt saying is intended as an analogy for how the true things are made false, as if the author wrote, "for the true things, being mixed with inventions, are falsified, just as salt (being mixed with adulterants) loses its savor."

But that is not what the author wrote. The syntax of the sentence precludes the dependent clause containing the salt saying from reiterating the independent clause in the form of an analogy. Instead, the conjunction ὥστε indicates that the dependent clause conveys a consequence or result of the independent clause.[47] The coordinating conjunction is properly translated "so that" or "with the result that" instead of "just as" or "much as," which is what an analogy requires. Furthermore, the phrase "as indeed the saying goes" (τοῦτο δὴ τὸ λεγόμενον) indicates that the salt saying is being employed in its conventional sense, which is unlikely to have anything to do with *how* salt loses its savor. The proverbial meaning of the expression "even the salt loses its savor" is evident from its connection with two sayings of Jesus, specifically, "Salt is good; but if the salt has lost its saltness, how will you season it?" (Mark 9:50//Luke 14:34) and "You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trodden under foot by men" (Matt 5:13// Luke 14:35). In both cases, salt signifies goodness or a good influence, whereas the loss of its taste signifies uselessness.[48] Thus salt losing its savor is a metaphor for the loss of innate goodness and value. The adverb "even" (καί) indicates that this loss is surprising.

[45] Carlson, *Gospel Hoax*, 61.

[46] Ibid., 60 (see also 59).

[47] The sentence in question (*Letter to Theodore* 1.13–15) reads, συγκεκραμένα γὰρ τἀληθῆ τοῖς πλάσμασι παραχαράσσεται ὥστε—τοῦτο δὴ τὸ λεγόμενον—"καὶ τὸ ἅλας μωρανθῆναι." When ὥστε introduces a dependent clause with the subject in the accusative and the verb in the infinitive, BDAG [Bauer, W., F. W. Danker, W. F. Arndt, and F. W. Gingrich, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (3d ed.; Chicago, 1999)] gives the translation "of the actual result ***so that***" (s.v. ὥστε, 2aβ).

[48] On the goodness of salt, see Origen *Contra Celsum* 8.70; Jerome *Adversus Luciferianos* 5. Numerous examples of how salt was used as a symbol of goodness and value are offered in Pliny *Naturalis historia* 31.41. On "the fate of savorless salt" as indicating "utter uselessness," see James E. Latham, *The Religious Symbolism of Salt* (Théologie historique 64; Paris: Beauchesne, 1982) 216–17.

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None of the words coordinating the salt saying with the preceding clause make sense within an interpretation that supposes that the dependent clause reiterates the independent clause in the form of an analogy. That fact is readily illustrated by adding into the sentence the words that Carlson assumes to be implicit:

> For the true things, being mixed with inventions, are falsified, with the result that, as the saying goes, even the salt, *being mixed with adulterants,* loses its savor.

Clearly the comparison that Carlson imagines must be expressed differently:

> For the true things, being mixed with inventions, are falsified, *just as* salt, *being mixed with adulterants,* loses its savor.

Carlson's theory requires not only a thorough revision of the coordinating words but also a strictly literal reading of the word *salt*, despite its connection with the metaphorical sayings in the gospels. What Carlson offers us, then, is not a "damning" anachronism, but unseasoned exegesis.

In order to appreciate the actual metaphorical comparison expressed through the salt saying, we must interpret this saying as a corollary of the mixing of "true things" with "inventions." The true things in question are the passages from the longer Gospel of Mark that Theodore wrote to Clement about. Clement is explaining to Theodore that these passages have been falsified by the "inventions" and "shameless lies" that Carpocrates added to his copy of this gospel, such as the words "naked man with naked man" and "the many other things about which [Theodore] wrote" (*Letter to Theodore* 1.13–14; 2.8–9; 3.13, 17). The additions "polluted" the longer text of the Carpocratians, with the result that "the spotless and holy words" inspired by God have been nullified. What is implicit within this sentence may be rendered so:

> For the true things *which the Carpocratians say about the longer text*, being mixed with inventions, are falsified, with the result that, as the saying goes, even the "salt" [the goodness and value of the longer gospel] loses its savor [is lost].

This statement does not imply Carlson's notion of salt being mixed with other substances, and the sentence would make little sense if it appeared there.

The problems with Carlson's exposition of an anachronism alluding to "the iodization of table salt by the Morton Salt Company" extend beyond the syntax of the sentence to the literal sense and proverbial point of the expression "even the salt loses its savor."[49] The verb in this phrase (the passive of μωραίνω) means either to become insipid (without taste) or to become foolish (without wisdom).[50] When applied to food and condiments, it refers to a lack of taste, not a modification in taste. Clearly, the addition of iodine does not cause table salt to become insipid (would

[49] Carlson, *Gospel Hoax*, 79, 71.

[50] For a discussion of this verb, see Latham, *Religious Symbolism of Salt*, 195–202.

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anyone use it if it did?), so Carlson's focus on a chemical that supposedly adds a sharpness to salt disregards the literal meaning of the saying. In point of fact, the added iodine has no demonstrable effect on the taste of salt, so Carlson's reference to "harsh-tasting potassium iodide" is simply deceptive.[51] Iodized table salt not only tastes the same as plain table salt but also retains all of its other beneficial qualities. It is in fact more beneficial than plain table salt because it counters iodine deficiency disorders, including goiter, hypothyroidism, and cretinism, so the proposed allusion to iodized salt also disregards the point of this expression, which is that something intrinsically beneficial can become worthless. Again, these problems are readily illustrated by rewriting the sentence to fit Carlson's argument:

> For the true things, being mixed with inventions, are falsified, with the result that, as the saying goes, even the salt, *being mixed with adulterants, tastes less pleasant*.

Carlson's theory requires this nonsensical revision of the salt metaphor because the table salt produced by Morton Salt, and other salt companies, is a highly refined form of a stable chemical compound, sodium chloride. Pure salt cannot lose its

[51] Carlson, *Gospel Hoax*, 61. Every scientific study of the effect of iodine on salt has concluded that there is no discernable effect on taste. For summaries of these studies, see Clive E. West and Richard J. H. M. Merx, "Effect of Iodized Salt on the Colour and Taste of Food," Report of a Study Carried Out at the Request of Unicef, New York under Contract No. PD/95/009 (June 1995), http://www.micronutrient.org/Salt_CD/4.0_useful/4.1_fulltext/pdfs/4.1.4.pdf; and Ray J. Winger et al., "Technological Issues with Iodine Fortification of Foods," Final Report for New Zealand Food Safety Authority (May 2005), http://www.nzfsa.govt.nz/science/research-projects/iodine-fort/iodine-fort-foods.pdf (pp. 5–6). Carlson addresses this fact in an endnote, explaining that larger amounts of potassium iodide were originally necessary because the compound was unstable. When dextrose was added to stabilize the compound, smaller amounts of potassium iodide could be used (*Gospel Hoax*, 123 n. 48). Carlson cited the above paper by West and Merx as evidence that "people *now* are not *usually* able" (emphasis added) to taste the difference, but that study offers no support whatsoever for the contentions that most people once could—and gourmands still can—distinguish a difference in taste, and actually undermines Carlson's explanation of why this was once possible. With one exception, this study found no effect of iodine on the taste of food: "The only exception was an effect on the flavour of tomato juice with the highest concentration of iodine-iodide mixture (200 mg mixture/kg can content). However, the concentration of iodine/iodide reached in the cans was more than 100 times that which would be added normally to tomato juice. Thus a large excess of iodine/iodide is required before changes in taste can be detected" (p. 4). This paper's own experiment to determine the effect on food quality of salt with iodine levels of 400 ppm concluded that this level of iodine, which is "four times higher than the maximum level recommended by UNICEF/WHO/ICCIDD," "does not effect [*sic*] the flavour and general appearance of boiled potatoes and boiled rice" (pp. 10, 11). These conclusions do not bode well for the notion that iodized salt tasted unpleasant prior to the addition of stabilizing chemicals, considering that the level of iodine was 200 ppm when iodized salt was introduced in the United States. Moreover, by 1936, three years before Edwin B. Hart discovered a means of stabilizing the compound, the iodine content of most American brands of iodized salt was 100 ppm, a level that is known to have no discernible effect on the taste of salt. See O. P. Kimball, "History of the Prevention of Endemic Goitre," *Bulletin of the World Health Organization* 9 (1953) 241–48. So even if it were true that iodized salt once tasted unpleasant, few people would have remembered that taste by the late 1950s. The issue is moot, however, since the verb μωραίνω denotes a lack of salt's distinctive taste, not the addition of another taste.

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savor. The imagery in the letter presupposes an impure form of salt that can lose its sodium chloride without the compound disappearing altogether. Many of the salts used in antiquity were of this sort. As Pliny noted, the salt in these impure compounds was occasionally dissolved away by water, leaving "salt" that lacked its distinctive savor: "The drier the salt, the stronger it is in taste; but the most agreeable of all, and the whitest known, is that of Tarentum. In addition to these particulars, we would remark also, that the whiter salt is, the more friable it is. Rain-water deadens every kind of salt, but dew-water makes it more delicate in flavour" (*Naturalis historia* 31.41).[52] The fact that sodium chloride dissolves more readily than the other compounds in complex salts creates a serious problem when these salts are stored on earthen floors, for if the ground becomes damp, "the sodium chloride [is] dissolved and leached away," leaving a residue that, as Jesus put it, "is no longer good for anything."[53]

In addition to these exegetical errors, Carlson has erred in supposing that salt needs to be processed and "free flowing" in order for its taste to be modified through interaction with other substances. When theological dictionaries explain how salt can lose its savor, they often note that "the complex salts of Palestine . . . can lose savor through physical disintegration or through mixture with gypsum."[54] When windblown gypsum dust covers salt, it masks the sodium chloride, leaving "a stale and alkaline taste."[55] Thus, impure salt can lose its sodium chloride (through leaching or disintegration) or acquire an unpleasant taste (through mixture with gypsum) prior to being processed. Furthermore, the free-flowing property of modern table salt is not a requirement for mixing. For thousands of years, people have used mortar and pestle to grind chunks of salt into grains that are small enough to sprinkle onto food and mix with other substances. Thus Morton Salt's invention of an anti-caking agent is irrelevant to our understanding of the letter's salt metaphor, which envisions complex salts and is not at all concerned with how salt loses its taste but merely with the fact that this sometimes happens. Although the deadening of salt's taste was unusual, the ancients were more familiar with this phenomenon than are patrons of Morton Salt. It is the modern readers of the gospels who won-

[52] *The Natural History of Pliny* (trans. John Bostock and Henry T. Riley; Bohn's Classical Library; London: H. G. Bohn, 1856) 5:504. Robert P. Multhauf explains the different effect of dew-water on salt by noting that "the gentle moistening of mist and dew would dissolve and wash away the chlorides of calcium and magnesium, while leaving the sodium chloride largely unaffected due to its non-hygroscopicity and consequent resistance to dissolution" (*Neptune's Gift: A History of Common Salt* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978] 125, 128–29).

[53] Eugene P. Deatrick, "Salt, Soil, Savior," *Biblical Archaeologist* 25 (1962) 42.

[54] Deatrick, "Salt, Soil, Savior," 44. Likewise, *The New Westminster Dictionary of the Bible* (ed. Henry Snyder Gehman; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970) 820; Norman Hillyer, "ἅλας," in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (ed. Colin Brown; Exeter: Paternoster, 1978) 3:446.

[55] Deatrick, "Salt, Soil, Savior," 43. The quotation is from Friedrich Hauck, "ἅλας," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* 1 (1969) 229.

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der how salt can lose its savor and need to be told that unprocessed salt is often impure. The salt saying in the letter would have made more sense to Clement's contemporaries than it does to us.

Exhibit Four: The Confession Hidden in the Ellipsis

Argument: Having misinterpreted the words "even the salt loses its savor" as a deliberate anachronism, Carlson proceeds to argue that Smith covertly embedded his surname in the section of his commentary that discusses this metaphor as part of his supposed confession of authorship. No, the word *Smith* does not actually appear here. But another word *containing* the word *smith*, at least when translated into English ("every goldsmith [χρυσοχόος] is put to shame by his idols"), *would have appeared* in the ellipsis of a sentence that Smith quoted from the Septuagint translation of Jeremiah:

> Mt. 5.13, ἐὰν δὲ τὸ ἅλας μωρανθῇ, ἐν τίνι ἁλισθήσεται; = Lk. 14.34. The text here is closer to Lk., which differs from Mt. by beginning ἐὰν δὲ καί. Behind the choice of this proverb probably lies not only recollection of the context of these Gospel passages (and Mk. 9.50), which declare corrupted Christians fit only to be cast out, but also recollection of Jeremiah 28.17 (LXX) (= 10.14 Heb.) ἐμωράνθη πᾶς ἄνθρωπος ἀπὸ γνώσεως . . . ὅτι ψευδῆ ἐχώνευσαν, οὐκ ἔστιν πνεῦμα ἐν αὐτοῖς (and ff), which made the verse particularly appropriate for use against gnostics who had corrupted the Scriptures. This sort of multiple biblical allusion is typical of Clement and would be very difficult for a forger to imitate. In III.183.23ff Clement identifies as "the salt of the earth" those "more elect than the elect," "who hide away, in the depth of thought, the mysteries not to be uttered."[56]

Carlson finds Smith's suggestion of an allusion to Jeremiah very suspicious. Translating the sentence from Jeremiah as "every person is made dull from knowledge . . . because they have cast false things, there is no breath in them," he notes that "the linkage to Matthew 5:13's use of 'cast out' works only in English, not in Greek. . . . The only verbal commonality in the Greek lies in different forms of the verb μωρανθῆναι/ἐμωράνθη. . . . Such an allusion based on casting out could only be 'typical of Clement' if Clement knew English."[57]

For Carlson, Smith's confusion is unthinkable "in light of his otherwise superlative exegetical ability," so it must be a deliberate hint that the allusion to Jeremiah is about something else. Carlson finds the clue to Smith's intention in Smith's next sentence, which notes that for Clement, "the salt of the earth" signifies the true gnostics who hide away mysteries in the depth of thought. In Carlson's words, "The connection between Morton Smith and Morton Salt signifies that this comment applies to himself—that he has hidden away a mystery not to be uttered. Smith's use

[56] Smith, *Clement*, 18–19.
[57] Carlson, *Gospel Hoax*, 62.

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of an ellipsis in the Jeremiah 28:17 passage is the 'unuttered mystery' to which he then refers." The statement about goldsmiths in the ellipsis thus indicates that longer Mark is "a graven image that will confound its own smith: Morton Smith."[58]

Assessment: Carlson's rationale for taking the ellipsis as a cleverly concealed mystery hinges upon the letter's allusion to Morton Salt, which does not exist, and the premise that Smith's inference of an allusion to Jeremiah is based on Smith's association of two words that can be rendered as homonyms in English but have no connection in Greek. I concur that such an association would be a "howler."[59] But since Smith left the sentence from Jeremiah untranslated and did not call attention to the words "cast out" when summarizing Matt 5:13, it is not at all clear that Smith did associate Jeremiah's "cast (a mould)" with Matthew's "cast (something) out." Carlson simply inferred this association. Evidently he reasoned that the shared verb μωρανθῆναι in the saying: "But if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltness be restored?" and the passage in Jeremiah is not enough to justify Smith's claim of an allusion, so Smith must have implied that the passage in Jeremiah in some way parallels the idea of "corrupted Christians fit only to be cast out." Since the only commonality Carlson could perceive between Matt 5:13b and the quotation from Jeremiah was the verb "cast" in his own English translation, Carlson deduced that Smith made an unthinkable exegetical error.

Apparently Carlson did not consider the possibility that the parallelism with Matt 5:13b exists not in the words Smith quoted from Jeremiah but in the continuation of this verse indicated by "(and ff)" at the end of Smith's quotation. Smith would not have added "ff" unless the words following the quoted words were relevant to the point he was trying to make, and indeed the next sentence in Jeremiah parallels the concepts of worthlessness and destruction in Matt 5:13b:

> They [the lifeless idols] are worthless, objects of ridicule; at the time of their visitation they shall perish. (Jer 28:18 LXX; trans. mine)

> It [the savorless salt] is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trodden under foot by men. (Matt 5:13b)

In other words, the parallelism Smith perceived involved not only the context of the Greek words that he quoted from Matthew and Luke but also the context of the Greek words that he quoted from Jeremiah. It had nothing to do with the English word "cast." The ellipsis in Smith's quotation is a straightforward indication that the omitted words were not relevant to his point.

Although the allusion to Jeremiah that Smith proposed is not particularly convincing, it is not nearly so incredible as the mystery Carlson read into this allusion based on his own English translation of Jer 28:17 and neglect of Smith's appeal

[58] Ibid., 62–63.
[59] Ibid., 75.

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to the larger context. Carlson's highly unorthodox approach to interrogating texts has elicited another false confession.

Preamble to Exhibit Five: The Life Setting of the Gospel Excerpts

Argument: Carlson's last argument connecting the *Letter to Theodore* with Morton Smith is the most complicated. Essentially, he tries to show that the reference to the mystery of the kingdom of God in the letter's gospel quotation connotes a forbidden sexual encounter (homosexuality) using a twentieth-century euphemism and that Smith made this association in his writings prior to his discovery of the text. Instead of summarizing this lengthy argument at the outset, I shall critique it step by step. This topic requires familiarity with the gospel quotation, so I shall begin by reproducing Smith's English translation, using the standard versification:

> Longer Gospel of Mark (LGM) 1: (After Mark 10:34.) [1] And they come into Bethany. And a certain woman whose brother had died was there. [2] And, coming, she prostrated herself before Jesus and says to him, "Son of David, have mercy on me." [3] But the disciples rebuked her. [4] And Jesus, being angered, went off with her into the garden where the tomb was, [5] and straightway a great cry was heard from the tomb. [6] And going near Jesus rolled away the stone from the door of the tomb. [7] And straightway, going in where the youth was, he stretched forth his hand and raised him, seizing his hand. [8] But the youth, looking upon him, loved him and began to beseech him that he might be with him. [9] And going out of the tomb they came into the house of the youth, for he was rich. [10] And after six days Jesus told him what to do [11] and in the evening the youth comes to him, wearing a linen cloth over his naked body. [12] And he remained with him that night, for Jesus taught him the mystery of the kingdom of God. [13] And thence, arising, he returned to the other side of the Jordan.
>
> LGM 2: (Within Mark 10:46.) [10:46a] And he comes into Jericho. [1] And the sister of the youth whom Jesus loved and his mother and Salome were there, [2] and Jesus did not receive them.

Assessment: Carlson's attempt to prove that these verses anachronistically depict a modern homosexual encounter begins with an attempt to prove that the sentence "and he remained with him that night, for Jesus was teaching him the mystery of the kingdom of God" is a creation by the author of "secret" Mark: "The latter part of this sentence is a close parallel to Mark 4:11 but the main clause does not parallel the gospels but rather is crafted by the author of *Secret Mark*. Both its climactic location [within the pericope] and its composed, unparalleled nature indicate that it was carefully constructed by its author."[60] It is difficult to follow the logic here. Even if the clause "and he remained with him that night" were unparalleled in the

[60] Ibid., 66.

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gospels (it does have a parallel), that would not prove that the author of "secret" Mark composed it. When unique statements in the gospels contain no traces of redaction, scholars are free to ascribe them to oral tradition. Carlson cannot exclude that possibility here without presuming what he ultimately intends to prove, namely, that longer Mark is a modern composition. And why should the climactic position of this sentence prove that it was composed—even *carefully* composed—by the author of longer Mark? The climax of a gospel pericope is frequently the most secure traditional element, as in the case of pronouncement sayings at the conclusion of controversy stories.[61]

Having reasoned that the clause "and he remained with him that night" is an important sentence created by the author of longer Mark, Carlson attempts to prove that this sentence does not mean what it says. The obvious meaning, which is that the young man stayed with Jesus after sunset because Jesus was teaching him, is rejected by Carlson because it is too "bland" to fit the "compositional importance" of the sentence and would simply repeat information the reader already knows about Jesus' "lodging arrangement."[62] Both claims are incorrect. The reader will probably infer that Jesus resided at the young man's house for a week but has no reason to infer that they shared the same room at night. Ordinary hospitality dictates that a guest in a rich man's house receive a guest room. Paul, for instance, expected Philemon to prepare a guest room for him in case he showed up (Philemon's house was large enough to accommodate a church; see Phlm 1–2, 22). The fact that the young man comes to Jesus rather than the other way around, even though they are both inside the young man's house, makes more sense if Jesus had a guest room.[63] So the reader will probably not assume that Jesus and the young man stayed together in the same room every night and that the clause "and he remained with him that night" is superfluous. Rather, this clause implies that this was the only night that the young man remained in Jesus' room.

Carlson's argument that this clause cannot mean something as banal as it appears to mean is disproved by a parallel to this statement in John 1:39: "They [two disciples of John] came and saw where he [Jesus] was staying; and they stayed

[61] For example, the climatic pronouncement "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (Mark 12:17) is likely an authentic saying of Jesus. Similarly, the climactic sentence "And he rose, and immediately took up the pallet and went out before them all" (Mark 2:12) is paralleled in a different healing story in John 5:9 ("And at once the man was healed, and he took up his pallet and walked") and may derive from oral tradition.

[62] Carlson, *Gospel Hoax*, 66.

[63] Smith (*Clement*, 114, 115) found this detail peculiar. He reasoned that the young man's house was a villa and argued that Jesus and his disciples stayed in their own wing. These inferences are hard to justify on the basis of the text, yet since Carlson believes that Smith composed this text himself, Smith's conception that Jesus and his disciples lodged together in another wing of the house is incompatible with Carlson's inference that "and he remained with him that night" conveys nothing new.

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with him that day, for it was about the tenth hour." As Raymond E. Brown pointed out, the verbal parallels with LGM 1:12 are strong:

καὶ παρ᾽ αὐτῷ ἔμειναν τὴν ἡμέραν ἐκείνην. (John 1:39b)

καὶ ἔμεινε σὺν αὐτῷ τὴν νύκτα ἐκείνην. (LGM 1:12a)

In his 1966 commentary on the Gospel of John, Brown reasoned that the phrase "they remained with him that day" probably means that the disciples stayed with Jesus overnight, because the tenth hour, according to the Jewish reckoning of time, is about four in the afternoon (a new day begins at sunset).[64] The narrator is explaining that these two individuals lodged with Jesus because the hour was already late. Carlson discounted this parallel by observing that "the preposition, [the] word order, the time period, and the number of the verb are all different," adding that "Brown's proposed parallel in another gospel actually shows how different [*sic*, distinctive?] this clause is."[65] Of course, if these features were exactly the same in both texts, we would not be dealing with a parallel at all but with a repetition. What makes a parallel a parallel and not a repetition are the differences. One *could* argue, for example, that "even the salt loses its savor" is unrelated to "But if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltness be restored?" by noting even more of the same sort of differences, but that maneuver would ignore the patent similarities that make the comparison legitimate and helpful. In the case of John 1:39b and LGM 1:12a, none of the verbal differences affect the meaning: the different prepositions and time periods are semantically equivalent; the different position of the verb in relation to the prepositional phrase is semantically irrelevant; and the different number of the verb μένω merely reflects the different number of the subject. Moreover, there is a remarkable agreement between these two incidents: They take place in an otherwise unattested "Bethany" on the east side of the Jordan River (John 1:28; LGM 1:1).[66] This fact indicates that LGM 1:12a is a different form of John 1:39b and not just a similar sentence.

Other similarities between LGM 1:8–13 and John 1:35–40 are worth noting at this point. In both passages admirers of Jesus look intently at him, and men who have just met him express their desire to become disciples by indicating that they

[64] Raymond E. Brown, "The Relation of 'the Secret Gospel of Mark' to the Fourth Gospel," *CBQ* 36 (1974) 479; idem, *The Gospel According to John* (2 vols.; 2d ed.; Anchor Bible 29; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1982) 1:75. For additional discussion of John 1:39, see Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John* (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004) 74–76.

[65] Carlson, *Gospel Hoax*, 125 n. 3.

[66] See Scott G. Brown, "Bethany Beyond the Jordan: John 1:28 and the Longer Gospel of Mark," *Revue Biblique* 110 (2003) 497–516; idem, "The Secret Gospel of Mark: Is It Real? And Does It Identify 'Bethany beyond the Jordan'?" *Biblical Archaeology Review* 31 (2005) 44–49, 60–61; idem, *Mark's Other Gospel*, 90–92.

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want to be with him. In the Fourth Gospel, John the Baptist, "looking upon Jesus" (ἐμβλέψας τῷ Ἰησοῦ), says, "Behold, the Lamb of God!" Hearing this, two of his disciples start to follow Jesus, the way disciples follow their teacher. When Jesus asks, "What do you seek?" they phrase their request to become his disciples as, "'Rabbi' (which means Teacher), 'where are you staying?'" Jesus replies, "Come and see." In other words, they express a desire to be with him, and Jesus consents. In longer Mark, as soon as Jesus raises the young man, the latter, "looking upon him [ἐμβλέψας αὐτῷ] loved him and began to beseech him that he might be with him." They then go to his house. That this request to "be with him" is a request to be a disciple is evident from the larger context. Mark used the words "began to beseech him that he might be with him" (5:18; exactly in D) to describe the way the man formerly possessed by Legion implored Jesus to let him join his group. Jesus declined but commissioned him to preach on his own. Mark likewise used the expression "to be with him" (3:14) to denote Jesus' closest disciples: "And he appointed twelve, to be with him, and to be sent out to preach." So although these two accounts of men staying with Jesus in Bethany differ in many respects, they are different versions of the same story, much as LGM 1:1–7 and John 10:40–11:46 are different versions of the same raising miracle.

This parallel story in the Gospel of John proves that a gospel pericope can end with a banal description of Jesus staying overnight with an anonymous disciple without this comment requiring "an idiomatic meaning that goes beyond mere lodging."[67] Indeed, the banality of this incident within the context of the Fourth Gospel is perhaps the most interesting thing about it, for whereas LGM 1:12 indicates that Jesus spent the night teaching his new disciple the mystery that separates "those outside" from disciples (Mark 4:10–12), John 1:39 simply indicates that Jesus stayed overnight with two new disciples because it made sense for them to do that. This information seems so unedifying that some commentators feel compelled to propose that the verb μένω ("remained") must have the theological overtones of "abiding in" Christ and his teachings that it later acquires in the course of John's narrative.[68] In other words, they read into this statement an evening of theological teaching, like LGM 1:12. But no one supposes that the incident is actually about casual sex.

What Carlson wants to suggest, of course, is that "remained with him that night" must be a euphemism for sexual intercourse, specifically, the twentieth-century euphemism "spent the night together" or "spent the night with him." The longer gospel's own explanation for why the young man stayed with Jesus that night poses

[67] Carlson, *Gospel Hoax*, 66.

[68] Consider, for example, D. Moody Smith, *John* (Abingdon New Testament Commentaries; Nashville: Abingdon, 1999) 72: "The time of day, the tenth hour . . . is a superficial explanation of their reason for staying, but probably not the real and profound one. They want to abide with Jesus (cf. 15:1–11). Their abiding will be the fulfillment of their quest, but not, ultimately, until Jesus is glorified."

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a problem for this thesis because it confines their activity to instruction and specifies the subject matter as the same eschatological mystery that is concealed within the parables of Mark 4. Carlson solves this problem by rewriting the sentence: "The clause's bland recital of their lodging arrangement thus conveys almost no additional information and belongs more to the background, for instance, with something like: 'Jesus taught him the mystery of the kingdom of God, for he spent that night with him.'"[69] Now spending that night together is itself the mystery of the kingdom of God and not the circumstance in which Jesus imparted an eschatological mystery. Eventually, the adjective *that* drops out of Carlson's translation as he silently assimilates the actual phrase "stayed with him *that* night" to the actual idiom "spent *the* night with him." It hardly needs to be said that rewriting a sentence in order to make it express a preconceived meaning does not constitute exegesis. Exegesis is reading out of a sentence the meaning that it has within its immediate and larger contexts. Where gospels are concerned, this involves reading it as part of a pericope and reading that pericope as an episode within a larger narrative. It also involves respecting the literary techniques employed by the author, since these exist to guide the reader's interpretation. This is the domain of narrative criticism, and it is the method I followed in part 2 of *Mark's Other Gospel*.

Longer Mark's incident of nocturnal instruction makes sense within the larger context of Mark's gospel as an incident of private discipleship instruction. In Mark 4:10–12, Jesus revealed to "those who were about him with the twelve" that a particular mystery concerning the coming reign of God has been reserved for them. "Those outside" are prevented from understanding this mystery by the fact that, to them, "everything occurs in parables" (i.e., riddles), with the result that they do not understand what they see and hear and accordingly do not repent and receive forgiveness. Both the insiders and the outsiders "see" and "hear" the parabolic deeds and words of Jesus, but only the insiders receive private explanations relating to this mystery. Since this mystery "has been given" to the larger group of Jesus' disciples, and Jesus granted the young man's request to "be with him," the young man likewise receives private instruction in the mystery of the kingdom of God. As with the parable discourse, the author does not directly disclose the content of this mystery to the reader but does supply enough clues to allow the reader to perceive its meaning.[70]

There are two more steps in Carlson's argument for reading "remained with him that night" as a euphemism for sexual intercourse. First, he notes that longer Mark "contains explicit statements of love between the two males plus Jesus' rejection of three different women"; these details establish "an exclusive sexual preference" for Jesus.[71] The phrases in question are "But the youth, looking upon him, loved

[69] Carlson, *Gospel Hoax*, 66.
[70] For my views on that subject, see Brown, *Mark's Other Gospel*, 205–14.
[71] Carlson, *Gospel Hoax*, 68.

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him and began to beseech him that he might be with him" and "the sister of the youth whom Jesus loved and his mother and Salome were there, and Jesus did not receive them." Carlson offers no explanation for his simplistic equation of love and rejection with sexual orientation, presumably because this equation would be difficult to substantiate exegetically. The obvious reason for the young man's love for Jesus is the fact that Jesus delivered him from the grave. The platonic nature of this love is evident from his immediate resolve to become Jesus' disciple. Like the man who had been possessed by Legion, the young man responded to his savior by begging to join his group.

Jesus' love for the young man is conveyed as an afterthought in LGM 2:1, where the sister is described as "the sister of the youth whom Jesus loved." What is the nature of this love? Some scholars, including Smith, suppose that this rich young man is the same man who asked Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. Of him, the narrator reported, "And Jesus looking upon him loved him, and said to him, 'You lack one thing; go, sell what you have, and give to the poor'" (Mark 10:21). I doubt that these men are the same individual.[72] In my view, the phrase "whom Jesus loved" signifies a bond of friendship like the parallel description of Lazarus in John 11:3: "Lord, he whom you love is ill." This bond is much more emphatic in John's version of this story, where Jesus actually cries at Lazarus's tomb and "the Jews" remark, "See how he loved him!" (11:5, 35–36).

Carlson's inference that LGM 2 helps establish Jesus' exclusive sexual preference is even more arbitrary and implausible. A variety of motives could explain Jesus' refusal to meet with these three women. One very plausible explanation emerges from Jesus' actions earlier in this narrative. At Mark 3:19b–21, 31–35, Jesus' mother and brothers resolved to take control of him, but when they arrived at his home, Jesus refused to receive them, explaining to those around him that his true family consists of those who do the will of God. Given this precedent, the reader may infer that the same thing is happening in LGM 2. The young man's mother and sister intend to assert control over the son (it is unclear whether Salome is related to them), but Jesus anticipates their intentions and refuses to give them an audience. This action says no more about Jesus' sexual orientation than did his rudeness to the Syrophoenician woman (Mark 7:24–30). Carlson's presumption that Jesus rejects the women because they are women disregards the fact that homosexuality is a sexual orientation, not a generalized aversion to the opposite sex. Indeed, gay men often have enviably close friendships with women. The only way homosexuality could explain Jesus' rudeness in LGM 2 is if we presume, on the one hand, that the three women intended to seduce Jesus, and, on the other, that the immorality of having sex with a disciple's mother *and* her daughter *and* a third woman is not a sufficient reason for him to snub them. Why would we assume this?

[72] Smith, *Clement*, 171–72 and the annotation at the bottom of p. 169 in his personal copy of this book, which resides in the rare book room of the library of the Jewish Theological Seminary. Brown, *Mark's Other Gospel*, 102.

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Other explanations of LGM 2:2 are possible as well. Some scholars have interpreted Jesus' rudeness in terms of male chauvinism. Cyril C. Richardson, for instance, suggested that this verse "perhaps . . . reflects an Encratite group which *did* reject women."[73] Smith himself viewed the clause "and Jesus did not receive them" as a gloss added by a redactor who eliminated a discourse between Jesus and Salome. Smith reasoned that "the story, as it stands, can have been invented and preserved only as polemic against these women or their followers or persons who appealed to their authority (as the Carpocratians did to that of Salome: Origen, *Contra Celsum* V.62)."[74] Thus Smith believed that longer Mark originally depicted Jesus accepting and conversing with these women, indeed, validating Salome's authority. Smith never changed his mind about this. The annotation on page 190 of his personal copy of *Clement* acknowledges Richardson's explanation of LGM 2:2 and then states, "But he doesn't notice that it's secondary." Two years before his death Smith encouraged John Dart to eliminate LGM 2:2 from his reconstruction of the original form of Mark because Mark would not have used the Lukan-sounding verb ἀπεδέξατο ("received").[75] Carlson's sexual interpretation of this verse is not only implausible but also incompatible with that of the man who he claims is its author.

Carlson's argument for reading "and he remained with him that night" as a twentieth-century euphemism concludes with an attempt to demonstrate that ancient readers would have detected nothing sexual in this statement because 1) it has no euphemistic meaning in Greek and 2) homosexual relationships in the Roman world normally occurred between persons of unequal status, whereas the twenty-something rich man and the thirty-something messiah were social equals. Only modern readers, who are familiar with the English euphemism "spent the night together" and with homosexual relationships between social peers, could see the sexual import of this encounter.[76]

This argument actually undermines Carlson's thesis, because it takes no account of the fact that the social world in which the nocturnal instruction occurs is first-century Palestine. If the sentence καὶ ἔμεινε σὺν αὐτῷ τὴν νύκτα ἐκείνην is not a euphemism in Greek and would imply nothing sexual within the social world represented in this text, then there can be no justification for rendering this sentence as a sexual euphemism. It helps little to complain that Smith's translation is "wooden" and to point out that Smith advocated "idiomatic renderings."[77]

[73] Cyril C. Richardson, review of *Clement of Alexandria and a Secret Gospel of Mark*, in *Theological Studies* 35 (1974) 571–75, at 575.

[74] Smith, *Clement*, 121–22.

[75] This suggestion appears three times in comments Smith wrote in 1989 while critiquing an early draft of John Dart's book *Decoding Mark* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 2003), which Dart retained and allowed me to examine.

[76] Carlson, *Gospel Hoax*, 66–67, 68–69.

[77] Ibid., 67.

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What Smith advocated is idiomatic parity: if a phrase has an idiomatic meaning within the vernacular employed by the author, then it should receive a comparable idiomatic rendering in translation.[78] It is precisely because the words ἔμεινε σὺν αὐτῷ τὴν νύκτα ἐκείνην do not constitute a sexual euphemism in koine Greek that the unidiomatic translation "remained with him that night" is appropriate in LGM 1:12.

Ultimately, this compendium of arguments is meant to prove that LGM 1 reflects a particular life setting within 1950s America:

> The description in *Secret Mark* of the young man's clothing ("wearing a linen cloth over his naked body") uses the same language found in Mark 14:51–52 to describe the youth who fled from Gethsemane when Jesus was arrested, a textual link that implies that both young men came to Jesus seeking the same thing (an inference Smith drew in *Clement* 177; *Secret Gospel* 81). The sexually charged climax of *Secret Mark* means that what these young men were seeking was, to use the words of the New York statute, "a crime against nature or other lewdness." In other words, *Secret Mark* easily conjures up to the twentieth-century reader the image that Jesus was arrested for soliciting a homoerotic encounter in a public garden. An ancient reader of *Secret Mark*, on the other hand, would not have recognized the public solicitation offence because it did not exist in Clement's day.[79]

Since none of Carlson's arguments in support of reading LGM 1 as a "sexually charged" homosexual encounter bears scrutiny, this attempt to assign longer Mark to "a specific moment within a changing twentieth-century legal landscape that peaked in the 1950s" cannot be any more compelling.[80] In fact, it is remarkably less compelling, for it is predicated on a patently false statement about what "*Secret Mark* easily conjures up to the twentieth-century reader." Among the hundreds of twentieth-century discussions of "secret" Mark that exist in print and on the internet, I have yet to come across the observation that LGM 1 implies that "Jesus was arrested for soliciting a homoerotic encounter in a public garden." There are two good reasons actual readers of longer Mark (or, more accurately, of canonical Mark supplemented with LGM 1 and 2) do not make this inference. First, this gospel is set in first-century Palestine and not twentieth-century America. A man who lived two thousand years ago in another part of the world cannot be busted by the NYPD vice squad on charges of public lewdness. Second, Mark made it perfectly clear that Jesus was arrested because Judas betrayed him to members of the Sanhedrin and that Jesus was tried on false allegations of threatening the temple. His arrest by "a crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the scribes and the elders" is in no way connected with the young man who suddenly appears as Jesus

[78] Morton Smith, "Notes on Goodspeed's 'Problems of New Testament Translation,' " *JBL* 64 (1945) 501–14, esp. 511–13.

[79] Carlson, *Gospel Hoax*, 70.

[80] Ibid., 70–71.

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is being led away. These constraints upon the reading process prevent real readers from imagining the scenario that Carlson claims it naturally evokes.

The only support that Carlson can muster for this implausible reading of Mark 14:51–52 is Smith's "inference" "that both young men came to Jesus seeking the same thing (*Clement* 177; *Secret Gospel* 81)." This comment appears to imply that Smith read 14:51–52 as intimating a homosexual encounter. What Smith actually stated in those two books is that "this youth, too, had come to be baptized": "The business in hand was a baptism; the youth wore the required costume. The time—night—agrees with the story in the secret gospel; the place—beside a stream in a lonely garden—is suitable."[81] In other words, Smith fit this pericope within his theory that Jesus offered a mystery-cult rite called the mystery of the kingdom of God, whereby the initiate united with his spirit and ascended by hallucination to God's heavenly kingdom, where he *or she* was freed from the obligation to keep the Torah.[82] Smith's notorious *speculation* about physical symbolism of spiritual union being a conceivable (reread the last word) element in this baptism was limited to two brief comments that he made in *Clement* and *Secret Gospel*.[83] When Smith raised the specter of homosexuality in connection with the naked flight of the young man in Gethsemane, it was always as a foil to make his baptismal explanation appear more plausible. Specifically, in his replies to Reginald Fuller, Frans Neirynck, and Frank Kermode, he argued that the information about the naked flight of a young man during Jesus' arrest is historically reliable because it is too "embarrassing" and unedifying to have been invented by Christians (as a tradition, it has no apparent *Sitz im Leben*). Although this detail "is apt to elicit a snigger from the modern reader" (i.e., "Holy man arrested . . . naked youth escapes"), it must have meant something very different to the evangelist Mark or he would not have included it. Given the facts that some mystery and magical initiations included a linen sheet worn over the naked body and that such a sheet eventually became the Christian baptismal garment, Mark (and the tradents before him) probably believed that the young man was dressed for baptism.[84] In other words, Smith *rejected* a gay read-

[81] Cf. Morton Smith, *Jesus the Magician* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978) 138. In this book Smith refrained from describing this hypothetical ritual as a baptism; he suggested, more cautiously, that "it is . . . possible that 'the mystery of the kingdom' was a magical rite, by which initiates were made to believe that they had entered the kingdom and so escaped from the realm of Mosaic Law" (135).

[82] Smith noted in the margin on p. 244 of his personal copy of *Clement* that the women who experienced the first resurrection appearances must have been initiated into this mystery because "these resurrection visions were reflexes of the initiation experience."

[83] Smith, *Clement*, 251; *Secret Gospel*, 114.

[84] The fullest statement is Morton Smith, "Under the Sheet," *The New York Review of Books* 26 (8 February 1979), http://www.nybooks.com/articles/7916. The same argument, in a truncated form, appears in Smith, response to Reginald Fuller, in *Longer Mark: Forgery, Interpolation, or Old Tradition?* (ed. Wilhelm H. Wuellner; Protocol of the Eighteenth Colloquy: 7 December 1975; Berkeley: Center for Hermeneutical Studies in Hellenistic and Modern Culture, 1976) 13–14; and

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ing of Mark 14:51–52 as incapable of explaining the preservation of this incident in a canonical gospel.

Exhibit Five: Smith's Seal of Authorship

Argument: Unfortunately for Carlson, the last of his arguments connecting the *Letter to Theodore* to Morton Smith flows from the previous one. Carlson claims that Smith placed his own seal of authorship (*sphragis*) on the *Letter to Theodore*:

> The sexual innuendo that made *Secret Mark* such an interesting and potentially momentous find is now part of what identifies it as a modern fake, but it also does more than that—it is also Morton Smith's own *sphragis* that declares his authorship by alluding to his previous works. The climax of the nocturnal initiation of *Secret Mark* contains a juxtaposition of Mark 4:11 and a sexual practice forbidden in Jewish law (Lev 18:22, 20:13) and is embedded in a letter by Clement of Alexandria exhorting secrecy. These elements had already been connected to each other in Smith's publications before the summer of 1958.[85]

The statements in question appear in Smith's 1951 book *Tannaitic Parallels to the Gospels*, which is a revised form of his 1948 dissertation, and a paper titled "The Image of God," which was published "in March of 1958, . . . right before he returned to Mar Saba."[86] The former mentions Mark 4:11–12 in a paragraph that also mentions *t. Ḥag.* 2.1; the latter cites in a footnote a passage from Clement's *Stromateis* as a point of comparison to the rabbinic secrecy concerning Ezekiel's vision of the throne of God, which is mentioned in *t. Ḥag.* 2.1 and its parallels.

Why is this significant? According to Carlson, *t. Ḥag.* 2.1 mentions "forbidden sexual relationships," which is what "the mystery of the kingdom of God" denotes in longer Mark. This connection proves that Smith knew about the sexual nature of the mystery of the kingdom of God and linked it with Clement's secrecy before he discovered this text.[87]

Assessment: Clearly the key to this argument is the claim that both *t. Ḥag.* 2.1 and LGM 1:12 are about forbidden sexual relations and that Smith intended to draw this connection in his dissertation; otherwise, the former passage just happens to be something Smith mentioned once in the same context as Mark 4:11–12, and again, some years later, in the same context in which he mentioned Clement's reluctance to put secret teachings in writing. I have argued at length elsewhere that LGM 1:12 is not about gay sex.[88] What I intend to show here is that the "connection" between *t. Ḥag.* 2.1 and Mark 4:11–12 in Smith's dissertation has nothing to do with forbid-

Morton Smith, "Clement of Alexandria and Secret Mark: The Score at the End of the First Decade," *Harvard Theological Review* [*HTR*] 75 (1982) 458 n. 19.

[85] Carlson, *Gospel Hoax*, 71.

[86] Ibid., 72.

[87] Ibid.

[88] Brown, "Question of Motive," 353–73.

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den sexual relationships and that Smith's interpretation of Mark 4:11–12 was in no sense sexual prior to 1958.

Let us look at the passage from Smith's dissertation:

> Further I think the passage in Sifre on Deut. to have been based on the fact that an important part of primitive Christianity was a secret doctrine which was revealed only to trusted members. Such a doctrine is suggested by the words put in the mouth of Jesus, speaking to his disciples: "To you is given the mystery of the kingdom of God, but to those outside all things are in parables, that they may surely see and not perceive," etc. And Paul himself wrote in 1 Cor. 2.1–6 "And I, coming to you, brethren, came not proclaiming the testimony of God in lofty words or wisdom . . . that your faith might not be in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God. But we speak wisdom among the perfect, and a wisdom not of this age . . . but we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery." A similar distinction was recognized by the Tannaïm between material suitable for public teaching and that reserved for secret teaching, as we learn from *Hagigah T* 2.1 (233): "The (passages of the Old Testament dealing with) forbidden sexual relationships are not to be expounded to three (at a time,) but may be expounded to two; and the account of creation not to two, but it may be expounded to a single hearer; and (Ezekiel's vision of) the chariot may not be expounded to a single hearer unless he be learned in the Law and of good understanding."[89]

As Smith explicitly indicated, the point at issue in this paragraph is the fact that both the Christians and the Tannaim drew a distinction between exoteric and esoteric teaching. What those subjects consisted of does not matter here. Smith was simply describing "parallels with a fixed difference," as the title of this chapter of his book indicates. Carlson's quotation of this paragraph ends before the reference to the account of creation and the vision of the chariot (i.e., the throne of God), which would have put the reference to the Levitical laws about "forbidden sexual relationships" (incest, intercourse during menstruation, adultery, male homosexuality, and bestiality) in a different light. As Joachim Jeremias explained, these passages from the Jewish scriptures concern "the deepest secrets of the divine being," such as "theosophy and cosmogony," which must be apprehended with "great respect."[90] Jeremias made the same point years earlier in his book *Die Abendmahlsworte Jesu*, where he discussed *t. Ḥag*. 2.1 as evidence of the esotericism of the scribes and cited 1 Cor 2:6–3:2, the concept of "those outside" (οἱ ἔξω) and "the mystery of the kingdom of God" from Mark 4:11–12, and other New Testament passages as points of comparison.[91]

[89] Smith, *Tannaitic Parallels*, 155–56.

[90] Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus: An Investigation into Economic and Social Conditions during the New Testament Period* (trans. F. H. and C. H. Cave; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969; repr. London: SCM, 1976; trans. of *Jerusalem zur Zeit Jesu. Kulturgeschichtliche Untersuchung zur neutestamentlichen Zeitgeschichte* [Leipzig: E. Pfeiffer, 1923]) 237–38.

[91] Joachim Jeremias, *Die Abendmahlsworte Jesu* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1935) 51, 53–54.

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Carlson's attempt to associate Smith's reference to "the mystery of the kingdom of God" in *Tannaitic Parallels* with forbidden sexual relations makes nonsense of the fact that in the same book Smith associated possession of this mystery with increased virtue. Smith cited Mark 4:11–12 as an example of "the rather interesting theory, not found in all systems of moral theology, that God helps the good to become better and the bad worse. The latter element of this theory is expressed in the Gospels . . . by . . . [the words] 'To those who are outside all things are in parables, in order that they may surely look and not see, and may surely hear and not understand, lest they should turn back and be forgiven,' and 'in [Tannaitic literature] . . . by the rule 'That the virtuous are caused to perform acts of virtue, and sinners acts of sin.'" [92] The logic of Smith's interpretation indicates that it is "those outside" who are made to sin, not the insiders to whom the mystery of the kingdom of God is given. God helps them to perform his will (i.e., the Law).

When Smith wrote *Tannaitic Parallels*, he viewed the whole of Mark 4:11–12 as a Christian invention, as the words Carlson quoted suggest: "Such a doctrine is suggested by *the words put in the mouth of Jesus*, speaking to his disciples: 'To you is given the mystery of the kingdom of God, but to those outside. . . ."[93] Smith's rationale for dissociating this saying from the historical Jesus is apparent in Smith's 1955 article on Vincent Taylor's commentary on Mark:

> Mk. 4.11–12 is probably an answer to Jewish polemic. The Jews are saying, "Jesus was not the Messiah, because if he had been he would have been recognized by our scholars. He was heard and rejected." The Christian answer is, "They never heard his true teaching. He revealed the mysteries [*sic*, pl.] of the Kingdom only to his disciples; for outsiders he had only parables. Thus he fulfilled God's command [in Isa 6:9–10] to prevent the Jews from believing."[94]

In both this article and *Tannaitic Parallels*, Smith interpreted Mark 4:11 in light of 4:12. He was highly critical of "T[aylor]'s attempt to escape the obvious meaning" of this saying by proposing that "the 'parables' originally meant riddles and the statement as a whole meant, 'In spite of all I do to make myself clear, it's Greek to them.'"[95] This explanation struck Smith as an apologetic attempt to neutralize Mark's image of Jesus deliberately preventing his fellow Jews from believing in him and being saved.[96] Smith's own critique of Taylor's position became problematic after he adopted Cyril C. Richardson's hypothesis that LGM 1:10–12 depicted a

[92] Smith, *Tannaitic Parallels*, 136.
[93] Ibid., 156 (emphasis added).
[94] Morton Smith, "Comments on Taylor's Commentary on Mark," *HTR* 48 (1955) 29–30.
[95] Ibid., 31, 30.
[96] Compare his remarks in Morton Smith, "Aramaic Studies and the Study of the New Testament," *Journal of Bible and Religion* 26 (1958) 312 n. 24: "The efforts of [C.] Torrey and [M.] Black to get rid of *hina* in Mk. 4.11 f. are obviously worthless apologetics; let them serve as examples of many similar attempts."

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baptism and decided that the phrase "the mystery of the kingdom of God" denoted a baptismal mystery initiation.[97] Thus in *Clement* Smith made a silent about-face and approved the position of Taylor (and Jeremias before him) that Mark 4:11–12 was "an old logion" that originally referred not to parables but to the idea that for outsiders "everything is puzzling."[98] This reversal allowed Smith to sever the mystery of the kingdom of God from its literary context, wherein it denotes a secret doctrine hidden in the parables, and to interpret it as a rite that the historical Jesus gave to his disciples.

The fact that prior to 1958 Smith associated possession of the mystery of the kingdom of God with moral improvement and viewed Mark 4:11–12 as a polemical Christian invention intended to defend Jesus' messiahship negates Carlson's simplistic position that Smith "connected" the mystery of the kingdom of God with forbidden sexual relations because the two ideas appear in the same paragraph. Like Jeremias before him, Smith cited Mark 4:11–12 as a salient example of "the fact that an important part of primitive Christianity was a secret doctrine which was revealed only to trusted members."

As for Smith's mentioning of *t. Ḥag.* 2.1 and Clement's *Stromateis* in two consecutive footnotes in an article published a few months before he returned to Mar Saba, it is hard to see any veiled significance to this fact. The proximity of this publication to Smith's stay in Mar Saba is coincidental. Carlson's statement that "Smith revisited this Talmudic passage right before he returned to Mar Saba"[99] requires his reader to overlook the process of peer review, the queue for accepted articles, and Smith's statement in the first footnote that this article was based on three lectures he gave at the Hebrew Teachers' College, Boston, in 1955.[100] The sequence of footnotes citing *Ḥagigah* and Clement is no more suspicious than the timing of the article's publication. Again, Smith was discussing secret doctrines, and Clement is the most obvious Christian example of the widespread philosophical attitude that the most profound doctrines should not be put in writing:[101]

> It is upon the tree of life that God rests when he comes to the Garden of Eden—on this rabbinic, pseudepigraphic, Christian and magical texts agree. This legend, plus the fact that the tree of life is the symbol of the saint, enables us to understand the cryptic saying of Resh Laqish, "The patriarchs,

[97] See Smith, *Secret Gospel*, 64–69.

[98] Smith, *Clement*, 178.

[99] Carlson, *Gospel Hoax*, 72.

[100] Morton Smith, "The Image of God: Notes on the Hellenization of Judaism, with Especial Reference to Goodenough's Work on Jewish Symbols," in *Studies in Historical Method, Ancient Israel, Ancient Judaism* (vol. 1 of *Studies in the Cult of Yahweh*; ed. Shaye J. D. Cohen; Leiden: Brill, 1996) 116–49. Originally published in *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 40 (1958) 473–512. Apart from postpublication additions by Smith that appear in brackets in Cohen's reprint of this article, the most recent publications cited by Smith are items from 1956; see nn. 37, 119, 164, 169.

[101] Smith, "Image of God," 144–45.

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> they are the throne of God." We should not expect this doctrine to be developed in the preserved rabbinic material, since the teaching about the throne of God is specified as that to be kept most secret of all,* and quite possibly was not committed to writing.** However, the saying has an almost exact parallel in the common Christian expression, *theophoroi pateres*, of which the active and passive senses are not to be separated.

The relevant footnotes read:

> * Hagigah 2.1 and parallels.
> ** Cf. Clement of Alexandria, Strom. 1.1.13–14 etc.

Notice that, contrary to Carlson's introduction to this passage, Smith did not link Clement with both Mark 4:11 and *t. Ḥag.* 2.1 in this passage.[102] Smith said nothing here of Mark 4:11 and simply compared the rabbinic secrecy about the doctrine of the throne of God with Clement's secrecy. Smith did not even mention the Levitical laws concerning forbidden sexual relationships when describing *t. Ḥag.* 2.1, since the only part of that passage that concerned him was its reference to secrecy in connection with Ezekiel's vision of the throne of God. Indeed, the throne imagery and its connection with Tannaitic esotericism is the only real overlap between the paragraph from *Tannaitic Parallels* and the paragraph from "The Image of God."

Carlson's discovery that Smith possessed "the crucial linkage between Mark's mystery of the kingdom of God, forbidden sexual practices, and Clement of Alexandria's discussion of secrecy" before going to Mar Saba in 1958 is yet another figment of his imagination.[103] Longer Mark does not depict homosexual sex; Smith did not connect the mystery of the kingdom of God with homosexuality or any other "forbidden sexual practices" before he discovered the manuscript; and he did not connect this mystery or homosexuality with Clement's reluctance to put certain doctrines in writing.[104]

Conclusion

According to *The Gospel Hoax*, Morton Smith invented "secret" Mark as a hoax in the 1950s in order to suggest that the authorities who were clamping down on gay sex in public parks were "crucifying Jesus Christ all over again" but then spent

[102] Carlson wrote: "If Smith's linkage of Mark 4:11 with forbidden sexual relationships in *T. Hag.* 2.1 in 1951 and *Secret Mark*'s coupling of Mark 4:11 with a forbidden sexual relationship are to be considered merely a lucky coincidence, Smith's prior knowledge of linking [*sic*] Clement of Alexandria to these [i.e., *both*] passages would be harder to explain away, since Smith barely mentioned Clement before 1958. However, in an article published in March of 1958, Smith revisited this Talmudic passage right before he returned to Mar Saba" (*Gospel Hoax*, 72).

[103] Ibid., 72.

[104] Carlson's reference to "a letter by Clement of Alexandria exhorting secrecy" (Ibid., 71) repeats a pervasive misconception about the *Letter to Theodore* 2.10–12 that I had corrected in *Mark's Other Gospel*, 30.

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years researching his own hoax and developing a different, scholarly interpretation so that he could distract people from its true meaning and thereby successfully dupe his colleagues, using this text as a private test of their competence.[105] It is little wonder that Carlson devotes one paragraph to Smith's eighty-three-page analysis of the historical background to the initiation story[106] and skirts the fact that Smith defended the various components of this theory in numerous articles from 1967 until his death in 1991.[107] Carlson's tale of "Morton Smith's Invention of *Secret Mark*" is bizarre and illogical and has no credible support. The confession of M. Madiotes the bald swindler, the anomalous letterforms that agree with Smith's handwriting, the anachronistic allusion to Morton Salt, the veiled confession of the goldsmith who is confounded by his own idol, the gay life setting in 1950s American parks, and Smith's seal of authorship are mere chimeras, specious attempts at squaring the facts about "secret" Mark with the academic folklore about Morton Smith.

[105] Carlson, *Gospel Hoax*, 85, 80–81, 78.

[106] Ibid., 11–12.

[107] On the element of freedom from the law, see Morton Smith, "Jesus' Attitude towards the Law," in *Papers of the Fourth World Congress of Jewish Studies* (ed. World Congress of Jewish Studies; Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 1967) 1:241–44; idem, "The Reason for the Persecution of Paul and the Obscurity of Acts," in *Studies in Mysticism and Religion Presented to G. G. Scholem on His Seventieth Birthday* (ed. E. E. Urbach, R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, and C. Wirszubski; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1967) 261–68; idem, "Early Christianity and Judaism," in *Great Confrontations in Jewish History: The J. M. Goodstein Lecture Series on Judaica, 1975* (ed. Stanley Wagner and Allen Breck; Denver: University of Denver, Dept. of History, 1977) 41–61, esp. 47–53. On the element of ascent to the heavens, see Morton Smith, "The Origin and History of the Transfiguration Story," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 36 (1980) 39–44; idem, "Ascent to the Heavens and the Beginning of Christianity," *Eranos* 50 (1981) 403–29; idem, "Two Ascended to Heaven—Jesus and the Author of 4Q491," in *Jesus and the Dead Sea Scrolls* (ed. J. H. Charlesworth; New York: Doubleday, 1992) 290–301. On the significance of the linen sheet, see Morton Smith, "In Quest of Jesus," a reply to "The Quest for the Magical Jesus" by Frank Kermode, *The New York Review of Books* 25 (21 December 1978); idem, "Under the Sheet." Many of these papers are among Smith's best works and therefore were reprinted in idem, *New Testament, Early Christianity, and Magic* (vol. 2 of *Studies in the Cult of Yahweh*; ed. Shaye J. D. Cohen; Leiden: Brill, 1996). Several are discussed in my paper "Question of Motive."

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