

Nastiness, Nonsense, Antinomianism, and Abuse: Morton Smith versus Morton Smith on Jesus, Secret Mark, and the *Letter to Theodore*

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Abstract

Morton Smith's arguments defending the authenticity of the *Letter to Theodore* and its depiction of an antinomian Jesus display creative and conjectural characteristics, the sort that Smith ridicules in his methodological essays. The paradox is amplified by nastiness: Smith scorns scholars for fantasy and creativity, but at times Smith deploys nastiness in defense of his elaborate argumentation. Complicating matters further, Smith conjures an antinomian Jesus who not only secretly breaks the laws he publicly keeps, but also does so in a way that we could characterize as abuse. Exploring this territory, this article identifies unnoticed interconnections among Smith's various writings on sexual matters and his contacts with a guru known for sexual license. None of this amounts to direct evidence of forgery on the part of Smith. Indeed, it remains imperative to consider a wider range of possibilities while we ponder the irony that Smith's creative argumentation is undermined by his own methodological rigor.

Key Words

Carpocratians, Clement of Alexandria, forgery, Gershom Scholem, *Letter to Theodore*, Morton Smith, Secret Gospel of Mark

1. Introduction

In 1973, Morton Smith (1915–1991) published two books that presented Jesus and at least one early wing of his movement as radically, though secretly, antinomian.¹ Smith's argument was based on the *Letter to Theodore*, attributed

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to Clement of Alexandria, that Smith found in a manuscript in the Library of Mar Saba in 1958. The incomplete letter was written out on the end pages of a copy of Isaac Voss's 1646 edition of the letters of Ignatius, and fully published in the more academic of Smith's two volumes. In the letter, Clement ostensibly praises the otherwise unknown addressee, Theodore, for his efforts to counter the deceitful and sinful Carpocratians. The letter then testifies to, and seemingly preserves fragments of, a Secret Gospel of Mark, which in turn depicts Jesus as engaging in nocturnal initiation rites with sexual overtones—a striking overturning of Jewish law by Jesus himself. The impact of Smith's provocative theories regarding early Christian libertinism have been blunted by the unsettled controversies surrounding Morton Smith and his find: is the letter preserved in this modern manuscript attributable to Clement? Are the Secret Mark fragments possible evidence of early Christian antinomianism? How can scholars assimilate these controversies in the context of Smith's justifiable influence on the field?

In 2003, Charles Hedrick spoke of a “stalemate in the academy,” describing the then-current *status quaestionis* regarding Smith, the *Letter to Theodore*, and the Secret Gospel.² Nearly two decades later, it is difficult to say whether that stalemate has resolved, even though there has been no dearth of efforts to do so. In 2005, Stephen C. Carlson believed he had established the case for Smith's “hoax,”³ only to run up against Scott G. Brown's elaborate argument for the authenticity of Secret Mark, published the same year.⁴ In 2007, Peter Jeffery believed that he had disclosed the psycho-sexual anachronisms proving the charge of forgery.⁵ In 2008, Guy G. Stroumsa published the Morton Smith /

Theological Seminary, and Union Theological Seminary (1986–97) had been students and/or colleagues of Morton Smith and I credit Smith, albeit always at one remove or more, for infusing an aura of academic suspicion into the atmosphere that engulfed my formation as a scholar; that too is reflected here. I received helpful advice from the editor and anonymous reviewers for this journal as well as reviewers for one other journal that, in the end, found this essay to be out of its scope. These readers saved me from errors and pointed me in better directions. All remaining errors of fact and judgment are mine.

¹ Morton Smith, *Clement of Alexandria and a Secret Gospel of Mark* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973). Important supplemental information—including Smith's narrative of discovery—appears in the popular volume, *The Secret Gospel: The Discovery and Interpretation of the Secret Gospel According to Mark* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973). For the latter, we follow the 1982 (and 2005), reprint: (Middletown, CA: Dawn Horse Press, 2005), on which see further below.

² Charles W. Hedrick, “The Secret Gospel of Mark: Stalemate in the Academy,” *J ECS* 11.2 (2003): 133–145.

³ Stephen C. Carlson, *The Gospel Hoax: Morton Smith's Invention of Secret Mark* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2005).

⁴ Scott G. Brown, (*Mark's Other Gospel: Rethinking Morton Smith's Controversial Discovery* ESCJ 15 Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2005).

⁵ Peter Jeffery, *The Secret Gospel of Mark Unveiled: Imagined Rituals of Sex, Death, and Madness in a Biblical Forgery* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

Gershom Scholem correspondence, arguing that the documents decisively proved Smith's innocence at last.⁶ But the debate continues. My approach is a skeptical one for two main reasons. Pierluigi Piovaneli has convincingly demonstrated what many have long suspected: Smith's prior interests in the distinctive content of the find.⁷ Forgeries, as is known, have an established tendency to find their way to those who are most sympathetic to their content.⁸ The second realm of suspicion concerns the underappreciated fact that the author of the *Letter to Theodore* plainly professes that one is required to lie about the Secret Gospel passages, even under oath (II, 10–12); to accept authenticity, therefore, is to believe the words of a confessed liar.⁹ Yet Bart Ehrman's hesitation¹⁰ and Anthony Grafton's inclination toward innocence¹¹ give me pause.

Scholarship does not need yet another review of the state of the question or one more large line-up of the arguments for and against.¹² This is especially so given the vitriol that this debate engenders.¹³ Nor is scholarship

⁶ Guy G. Stroumsa, ed., *Morton Smith and Gershom Scholem, Correspondence 1945–1982*, (JSRC 9; Leiden: Brill, 2008), esp. xv–xx. Smith met Scholem when the younger scholar was studying in Jerusalem (1940–45); their correspondence began after Smith returned to the United States in 1945 and continued intermittently until Scholem's death in 1982.

⁷ Pierluigi Piovaneli, "Halfway between Sabbatai Tzevi and Aleister Crowley: Morton Smith's 'Own Concept of What Jesus "Must" Have Been' and, Once Again, the Question of Evidence and Motive," in *Ancient Gospel or Modern Forgery? The Secret Gospel of Mark in Debate*, ed. Tony Burke (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2013), 157–183.

⁸ On patterns of forgery, see Anthony Grafton, *Forgers & Critics: Creativity and Duplicity in Western Scholarship* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990); and Christopher P. Jones, "The Jesus' Wife Papyrus in the History of Forgery," *NTS* 61.3 (2015): 367–378 and "The Syntax of Forgery," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 160.1 (2016): 26–36.

⁹ On this, see Francis Watson, "Beyond Suspicion: On the Authorship of the Mar Saba Letter and the Secret Gospel of Mark," *JTS NS* 61.1 (2010): 128–170; see esp. 138–139; the point is more fully developed in Klawans, "Deceptive Intentions: Forgeries, Falsehoods, and the Study of Ancient Judaism," *JQR* 108.4 (2018): 489–501 (esp. 493–496).

¹⁰ Bart D. Ehrman, "Response to Charles Hedrick's Stalemate," *JECs* 11.2 (2003): 155–163, and "The Forgery of an Ancient Discovery? Morton Smith and the Secret Gospel of Mark," in *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 67–90.

¹¹ Grafton, "Gospel Secrets: The Biblical Controversies of Morton Smith," *The Nation* (7 January 2009): 25–30.

¹² For a relatively balanced collection, see Burke, ed., *Ancient Gospel or Modern Forgery*. For a bibliographic essay on the matter (one leaning toward authenticity), see Timo S. Paananen, "From Stalemate to Deadlock: Clement's Letter to Theodore in Recent Scholarship," *Currents in Biblical Research* 11.1 (2012): 87–125.

¹³ On this unfortunate feature of the current debate, see Paananen, "From Stalemate to Deadlock," 114–120. It may merit noting that the scholarly discussion on this topic skews heavily toward the masculine.

well-served by claims to solve the matter once and for all based on a discovery or new argument.¹⁴ As Ehrman has emphasized, the matter will not be settled definitively unless the manuscript pages turn up and can be subjected, finally, to scientific testing.¹⁵ The goals here are more modest, though the present analysis starts from a position of skepticism and intends to point further in that direction. We will not, however, raise here an accusation of forgery against Smith. Nor will we debate whether Smith's interpretations of the letter or the *Secret Mark* fragments are correct. Rather, the following analysis re-examines select passages from Smith's writings to demonstrate that his creative argumentation regarding Secret Mark breaks, at key points, his own rules of the game (which we can discern from Smith's methodological essays and reviews). The contradictions are highlighted by Smith's rhetorical nastiness: Smith deploys scornful comments at times to chide scholars for fantasy and creativity, but at critical moments in *Clement of Alexandria*, he wields nastiness precisely to support his creative defense of authenticity.

The inconsistency would be less notable—is any of us fully consistent or always fair?—were it not for the fact that the thrust of *Clement of Alexandria* puts forward a vision of an antinomian Jesus who secretly breaks the laws that he publicly keeps.¹⁶ Smith, we will show, breaks academic norms in defense of the authenticity of a letter presenting evidence that Jesus was a rule-breaker. Here, too, scholarship finds itself distracted. Much ink has been spilled on the (significant) questions regarding the homoerotic elements in Smith's understanding of Jesus.¹⁷ Yet, scholarship has not fully grasped the extent to which Smith's Jesus not only violates ancient Jewish and early Christian sexual norms but does so in a way that we should characterize as abuse. None of this will amount to direct evidence of forgery on the part of Smith—indeed, the present analysis offers nothing new on that score. What we will see does counter Guy Stroumsa's claim—echoed by Tony Burke—that Smith was only doing

¹⁴ We disagree equally with Stroumsa and Watson in this respect.

¹⁵ Ehrman, "Response," 162–163. On the 1976 transfer of the manuscript (then still embedded in the end pages of Isaac Voss's 1646 edition of the letters of Ignatius) from Mar Saba to Jerusalem's Patriarchal Library, see Stroumsa, ed., *Morton Smith and Gershom Scholem*, xx–xxi, and "Comments on Charles Hedrick's Article: A Testimony," *J ECS* 11.1 (2003): 147–153. The last scholar to consult the manuscript in the Patriarchal Library was Quentin Quesnell; see Stephan Hüller and Daniel N. Gullotta, "Quentin Quesnell's 'Secret Mark Secret': A Report on Quentin Quesnell's 1983 Trip to Jerusalem and his Inspection of the Mar Saba Document," *Vigiliae Christianae* 71.4 (2017): 353–378. It is impossible to know what happened next, but for reports of unsuccessful searches carried out by Agamemnon Tselikas, see Hedrick, "Appendix: Interview with Agamemnon Tselikas," in *Ancient Gospel or Modern Forgery*, Burke, ed., 60–66 and Tselikas, "Summary Report," in *Ancient Gospel or Modern Forgery*, Burke, ed., 142–144.

¹⁶ Smith, *Clement of Alexandria*, 251–278; cf. *Secret Gospel*, 91–130.

¹⁷ See, e.g., Jeffery, *Secret Gospel*; cf. Brown, "The Secret Gospel of Mark Unveiled: A Review Essay," *RBL* 9-15-2007 (https://www.sblcentral.org/API/Reviews/5627_5944.pdf).

what scholars do (researching finds, gradually grappling with the issues, putting books back on the shelf, and so on).¹⁸ On the contrary, we will see that Smith's creative argumentation in defense of authenticity (especially in *Clement of Alexandria*) repeatedly violates the academic standards to which Smith holds others; Smith's more popular book raises additional questions, academic and moral. As Smith's arguments for authenticity repeatedly violate academic norms he elsewhere upholds, caution and suspicion regarding the *Letter to Theodore* remain in order.

2. Nastiness

Memorializing Morton Smith, Shaye J. D. Cohen identified five "central themes and concerns" that characterize Smith's academic achievement: (1) a "determination to destroy boundaries" (disciplinary, linguistic, conventional); (2) a "concern for varieties" (of Judaism and Christianity in particular); (3) "terminological precision" (e.g., "zealot" and "gnostic"); (4) a "concern for the big picture" and (5) "scorn for pseudo-scholarship," directed, especially against "pronouncements and opinions born of religious faith and confessional conviction but masquerading as 'objective scholarship.'"¹⁹ Without minimizing the significance of points one through four, this fifth concerns us here.

Cohen's collection of Smith's essays includes several of Smith's articles in this vein, but even occasional readers of Smith's oeuvre will surely remember one or another of his (often entertaining) anti-theological zingers.²⁰ Grafton recalls Smith's review of the *Cambridge History of the Bible*, where Smith quotes a passage of Christian piety and notes: "It remains only to notice what is perhaps a printer's error: at the end of the book the word 'Amen' has been omitted."²¹ Here is a less-known example that also illustrates Cohen's point perfectly. In a paper discussing Jewish daily prayers concerning creation, Smith points out that the connection between the themes of creation and revelation is less direct than traditional Jewish commentators (and the scholars who follow them) might assume:

¹⁸ Stroumsa, ed., *Morton Smith and Gershom Scholem*, xvii–xx; see also Hershel Shanks, "Was Morton Smith the Bernie Madoff of the Academy," in *Ancient Gospel or Modern Forgery*, Burke, ed., 135–142 (esp. 139–141); see also Burke, "Introduction," in *Ancient Gospel or Modern Forgery*, Burke, ed., 1–29 (esp. 27).

¹⁹ Shaye J. D. Cohen, "In Memoriam Morton Smith," in Morton Smith, *Studies in the Cult of Yahweh*, vol 2, ed. Shaye J. D. Cohen, (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 2.279–285 (esp. 283–285).

²⁰ See in particular Smith's discussion of "pseudorthodoxy" in "The Present State of Old Testament Studies," *JBL* 88.1 (1969): 19–35 (=Smith, *Studies*, 1:37–54).

²¹ Smith, "Review of *Cambridge History of the Bible, Volume 1* (edited by P. R. Ackroyd and C.F. Evans)," *American Historical Review* 77.1 (1972): 94–100 (quote from 98); quoted in Grafton, "Gospel Secrets," 28.

Of course, to the theologian's eye everything is necessarily connected with everything else, so creation was a necessary preparation for the giving of the Law. It was also a necessary preparation for the giving of the Marx brothers. But these two hymns never hint at either of those great, far-off events.²²

A third example brings us closer to the problem at hand. In his justly famous essay on "Pseudepigraphy in the Israelite Tradition," Smith comes right out and calls Deuteronomy a forgery—after first poking fun at scholars who would admit as much in their semi-private classrooms—while warning their students against saying such things in public.²³ In this instance, the now-published Smith/Scholem correspondence enables us to see that Smith, at times, held his fire. Smith knew well that Scholem, his former teacher, was among those who argued for exempting religious pseudepigrapha from the charge of forgery:

Pseudepigraphy is far removed from forgery. The mark of immorality, which is inseparable from falsehood, does not stain it, and for this reason it has always been admitted as a legitimate category of religious literature of the highest moral order.²⁴

When Smith sent Scholem a copy of his essay arguing against this view, Smith could have anticipated the elder scholar's response:

The discussion on Pseudepigraphy has done much to enlighten me about some distinctions that could be made in this field. Still I wonder whether there are many secret²⁵ texts which would not come under the title of pseudepigraphy, of one kind or another. Of all people, Mohammad seems the only authentic author of a secret text who can claim full credit. And in spite of all this, we

²² Smith, "On the *Yôṣēr* and Related Texts," in *The Synagogue in Late Antiquity*, ed. Lee I. Levine (Philadelphia: American Schools of Oriental Research [for the Jewish Theological Seminary], 1987), 87–95 (quote from 92).

²³ Smith, "Pseudepigraphy in the Israelite Tradition," in *Entretiens sur l'antiquité classique 18 = Pseudepigrapha I*, ed. K. von Fritz (Geneva: Foundation Hardt, 1971), 191–215, esp. 191–193 (=Smith, *Studies*, 1:55–77 [esp. 55–56]).

²⁴ Gershom G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken, 1946 [1941]), 204 (cf. 120–121); see also Piovanelli, "What Has Pseudepigraphy to Do with Forgery? Reflections on the Cases of the *Acts of Paul*, the *Apocalypse of Paul*, and the *Zohar*," in *Fakes, Forgeries, and Fictions: Writing Ancient and Modern Christian Apocrypha*, ed. T. Burke (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2017), 50–60.

²⁵ *sic*; I wonder if "sacred" is what is meant here and throughout the passage; cf. Scholem, *Major Trends*, 204. Scholem wrote this letter in his rather imperfect English.

will go on speaking of *Moshe Rabbenu* [= “Moses our Teacher/Rabbi”].²⁶

Smith never engaged Scholem’s defense of pseudepigraphy, whether in public or private; he directed his caustic sarcasm on the matter toward other targets. This is just one example of the two scholars politely talking past each other in their correspondence.²⁷ But the larger accusation remains: for Smith, the effort to distinguish pseudepigraphy from forgery reflects theological apologetic.

Be this as it may, we do not need to search far and wide in Smith’s works to establish that the academic targets of his scorn were not all pseudo-scholars arguing in defense of Jewish or Christian pieties. Two examples, in particular, should be well known to scholars interested in Judaism or Christianity in the ancient world. In an essay reviewing scholarship on ancient Jewish rebel groups (the Zealots and the Sicarii), Martin Hengel comes in for some particularly tough criticism.²⁸ To be sure, Smith registers valid points, displaying that characteristic terminological precision: “we cannot suppose that every individual who claimed to be a ‘zealot,’ or was called so by his neighbors, was a member of an organization.”²⁹ Hengel is not Smith’s only target.³⁰ However, it is noteworthy that Hengel stands accused by Smith of engaging in “fantasy,” putting forward a theory that “has no substantial evidence,” albeit one accompanied by elaborate annotation that “seems a model of solid scholarship—that is the great German façade.”³¹ All this should leave careful readers of *Clement of Alexandria* scratching their heads and wondering about “façades” concerning “substantial evidence.” Fantasies abound in this volume, for its central hypothesis would appear to be as baroque as academic fantasies

²⁶ Stroumsa, ed., *Morton Smith and Gershom Scholem*, 155 (July 3, 1973).

²⁷ See Klawans, “Deceptive Intentions,” 496–497 for the back and forth on pseudepigraphy, and Piovaneli, “‘Une certaine “Keckheit, Kühnheit und Grandiosität” ...’. La correspondance entre Morton Smith et Gershom Scholem (1945–1982): Notes critiques,” *Revue de l’histoire des religions* 228.3 (2011): 403–429, esp. 416 (where he notes that Scholem stops replying to Smith’s protestations about objections to his work on Secret Mark).

²⁸ Smith, “Zealots and Sicarii: Their Origins and Relation,” *HTR* 64.1 (1971): 1–9 (reprinted in Smith, *Studies*, 1:211–226). Smith’s main target here is Martin Hengel, *Die Zeloten: Untersuchungen zur jüdischen Freiheitsbewegung in der Zeit von Herodes I. bis 70 n. Chr.* (Leiden: Brill, 1961); English Translation: *The Zealots: Investigations into the Jewish Freedom Movement in the Period from Herod I until 70 A.D.*, trans. David Smith (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989).

²⁹ Smith, “Zealots,” 3 (= *Studies*, 1:212).

³⁰ Smith refers to an argument by S. G. F. Brandon—to the effect that gospel references to Simon the Zealot prove the existence of a Zealot party—as a “bad pun” (“Zealots,” 6 [= *Studies*, 1:215]). The bulk of an article by Cecil Roth is derogated as “an amazing muddle of misinterpreted texts and baseless conjectures” (“Zealots,” 9 [= *Studies*, 1:218]).

³¹ See Smith, “Zealots,” 15 (= *Studies*, 1:223): “fantasy”; “Zealots,” 13 (= *Studies*, 1:221): “no substantial evidence”; “Zealots,” 10 (= *Studies*, 1:219): “the great German façade.”

can be—that the *Secret Gospel of Mark* (preserved ostensibly in a single 17th century manuscript of an otherwise unattested second-century letter) accurately describes better than any other source Jesus’s secret initiatory practices and the antinomian nature of his teaching. Authentic, historically accurate, early gospel fragments preserved only in an 17th century manuscript?³² And as for “façades,” Quentin Quesnell asked the critical question already in 1975: “Can any scholarly reason be assigned for most of the documentation the book includes?”³³

Smith’s criticism of Erwin Goodenough similarly seems like stones tossed from a glass house.³⁴ To be sure, Smith stood on methodologically solid ground criticizing the elaborate reconstruction of a Hellenized, diasporic, mystical Judaism put forward in Goodenough’s multi-volume work, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman World*.³⁵ But here again, the sharpness of Smith’s prose raises more questions than it answers. Goodenough, too, is accused of engaging in “fantasy” as his argument involves “enormous exaggerations of elements which existed, but were rare....”³⁶ Again, readers of *Clement of Alexandria* do well to scratch their heads.

Readers of Smith’s popular volume might ask different questions. In *Secret Gospel*—published eight years after Goodenough’s death in 1965—Smith tells us that Goodenough was inclined to view Smith’s find as “important” even while doubting the attributions of the letter to Clement or the gospel fragments to Mark.³⁷ Smith, in turn, praises Goodenough as a “non-conformist,” rightly “protesting against [his] Protestant background.”³⁸ Smith notes that Goodenough might be “pre-disposed in favor of a discovery that revealed a hidden, potentially mystical side in early Christianity,” which, according to Smith, he was. Smith then proceeds to speak about Arthur Darby Nock’s more cautious assessment (Nock, we must recall, is the dedicatee of Smith’s academic

³² Reviewing this issue, Hedrick supplies some partial comparanda (apocrypha preserved in only late medieval manuscripts); but nothing quite compares to what Smith would have us do with the *Letter to Theodore* and the fragments of Secret Mark. See Hedrick, “Secret Mark: Moving on from Stalemate,” in *Ancient Gospel or Modern Forgery*, Burke, ed., 30–59 (esp. 41–42).

³³ Quentin Quesnell, “The Mar Saba Clementine: A Question of Evidence,” *CBQ* 37.1 (1975): 48–67, esp. 60 (quoted above): the discussion that follows extends to 64.

³⁴ Smith, “Goodenough’s *Jewish Symbols* in Retrospect,” *JBL* 86.1 (1967): 53–68; reprinted in *Studies*, 1:184–200. It bears noting that Smith published this critique two years after Goodenough’s death in 1965. Those who object to vitriolic post-mortem criticisms of Smith (e.g., Paananen, “From Stalemate to Deadlock,” 114) should take note that Smith himself operated under no such constraint, bitterly criticizing his academic opponents, living or deceased.

³⁵ Erwin R. Goodenough, (*Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman World*, Bollingen 37) 13 vols. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1953–1968).

³⁶ Smith, “Goodenough’s *Jewish Symbols*,” 58 (= *Studies*, 1:189): “fantasy”; “Goodenough’s *Jewish Symbols*,” 65 (= *Studies*, 1:197): “enormous exaggerations.”

³⁷ Smith, *Secret Gospel*, 22–23.

³⁸ Smith, *Secret Gospel*, 22.

volume, *Clement of Alexandria*). Smith concludes this discussion with a reminder to his popular readers that, for scholars, “the matter will come down, in the end, to the question of evidence.”³⁹ But is the evidence in this case found on the side of Smith and Goodenough? Is it not strange for Smith to aspire, in his popular book, to side with Goodenough regarding evidence? Smith says nothing to his popular readers regarding his earlier, devastating refutation of Goodenough’s “fantasy.” Similarly, Smith says nothing to his academic readers regarding Goodenough’s ostensibly positive evaluation of the find, though he does cite Goodenough’s *Jewish Symbols* favorably in a handful of places.⁴⁰

In yet one more telling disconnect that emerges from the Smith/Scholem correspondence, Scholem puts his finger on the manifest contradictions:

My admiration for the scholarship and insight demonstrated in your book is enormous and I cannot imagine that it will not have its repercussions on future discussions... But there seems to me a great difference between the stringency of your other deductions and the hypothetical character of your assumption of Jesus as a mystical libertine.⁴¹

Smith does not reply to this point; he seems satisfied (is he relieved?) that Scholem has, it would appear, accepted the letter as authentic.⁴²

3. Nastiness and Nonsense

We could excuse, and perhaps even forgive, all we have surveyed above as rhetorical excess were it not that Smith deploys similarly insulting language at key points in his arguments for the authenticity of the *Letter to Theodore*. Smith criticizes,

The extravagance of exegetic fantasy needed to transform “Mark” from an editor—or a series of editors—to an author. Therefore, the question before us is not to decide the “authenticity” of the new material but to determine its

³⁹ Smith, *Secret Gospel*, 23–24 (quote from 24).

⁴⁰ Smith, *Clement of Alexandria*, 177, 181, 215 n. 6; but cf. 178 where Smith notes that Goodenough’s “argument is pushed to absurdity, but not thereby wholly invalidated.”

⁴¹ Stroumsa, ed., *Morton Smith and Gershom Scholem*, 159 (June 9, 1974).

⁴² Stroumsa, ed., *Morton Smith and Gershom Scholem*, 160 (July 12, 1974). Scholem’s reticence to accept Smith’s hypotheses regarding Jesus (and pre-Christian Jewish libertinism) appears in print in Scholem, “Der Nihilismus als religiöses Phänomen,” in *Norms in a Changing World* [= *Eranos-Jahrbuch* 43 (1974)], ed. Adolf Portmann and Rudolf Ritsema (Leiden: Brill, 1977), 1–50, esp. 12–13.

relationship to the long process of writing and editing which produced the present text of the second Gospel.⁴³

It is not unreasonable to suggest that the accusation—“extravagance of exegetic fantasy”—serves here to deflect readers from the very same.

A more disturbing example is found when Smith pre-emptively confronts what he knows will be a likely objection to what we can, with good reason, refer to as Smith’s own “extravagance of exegetic fantasy”: Clement’s letter, if authentic, survived intact for over 1700 years without ever being quoted, referenced, or even acknowledged to exist. Smith’s treatment of this issue is elaborate and must be quoted in full (I have inserted letters in brackets to facilitate the subsequent analysis):

[A] To prevent foreseeable stupidities, it must be said at once that the lack of reference to the letter is no argument against attribution of the letter to Clement. [B] In the first place, even those who think it is not by Clement recognize it to be ancient. Völker thinks it must date from the time of the gnostic controversy (the third century); Nock thought it on stylistic grounds not later than the fourth century; Munck thought it propaganda for the church of Alexandria and would presumably not have placed it later than the Christological controversies of the fifth century. [C] Even if we accept the latest of these dates, we must admit that the letter went unmentioned for fifteen hundred years. So the attribution to Clement does not much augment—proportionately—the period of neglect. [D] And the neglect is easier to explain if the letter be genuine than if not. If genuine it was, to begin with, a private and confidential letter of which no mention was to be expected in the years immediately after it was written—that is, if we have dated it correctly, the years before or after the Severan persecution (c. 201? or 210?). But if we can trust Origen (*Contra Celsum* V.62) the Carpocratians must have become rare and insignificant shortly after that persecution—perhaps as a result of it. Once they had become unimportant the letter would interest no one save a historian. But historians were few in the medieval Church, and historians willing to report aberrant traditions from the early fathers were fewer. Thus, the lack of any reference to the letter would be explicable. [E] On the other hand, if the attribution to Clement be false and the letter a forgery, it must have been written and attributed to Clement for some purpose of propaganda; that is, it was intended to be

⁴³ Smith, *Clement of Alexandria*, 97.

circulated and to attract attention. In this event the failure of anyone to comment on it—or at least the fact that no comment has been preserved is more difficult to explain. [F] So the total neglect of the letter through seventeen centuries argues for its authenticity. Nor is the neglect incompatible with the literary activities of the monks of Mar Saba. They excelled in hymnody and in the production of ascetic works and martyrologies...⁴⁴

There are two serious interrelated problems with this passage. The pre-emptive scorn for those who might approach the matter suspiciously [A] should set off an alarm that is seconded by the logically flawed argument that follows.

Smith's argument begins [B] with a brief listing of those scholars who questioned—directly to Smith, it must be added—the Clementine authenticity of the letter, with suggestions ranging into the fourth century. Since (as far as Smith acknowledges to us) no one suggested to him a later date, such a possibility is precluded. So a challenge to the purported antiquity of this ostensibly 17th century manuscript is pre-emptively set aside; given that no one thought so before Smith published his findings, why should anyone think so now? Therefore, readers are expected to accept that the letter was ignored for 1500 years, rendering the extra few hundred for attribution to Clement a mere rounding error [C]. Then we get Smith's devious turn-around [D]: "And the neglect is easier to explain if the letter be genuine than if not." This is because the letter was private, and the Carpocratians quickly became unimportant. But if forged (and Smith only has an ancient forger in mind now), surely the motive would involve publicity or propaganda [E]. But how could such an ancient forgery go unnoticed or unmentioned? Smith then concludes by tightening his devious inversion [F]: "So the total neglect of the letter through seventeen centuries argues for its authenticity."

How are we to respond to this? We have already noted the aura of politeness, a courteous avoidance of controversy evident by points quietly dropped on both sides of the Smith/Scholem correspondence. The problem is larger than making sense of Smith's epistolary dialogue with Scholem. Scholem aside, scholarly reaction to Smith's work was quite likely tempered by Smith's reputation for rhetorical stridency: scholars who dared to question Smith would open themselves to the kinds of attack he was already well-known for—behavior that can be reasonably described as "intimidation."⁴⁵ We need no longer fear

⁴⁴ Smith, *Clement of Alexandria*, 287; cf. Smith, *Secret Gospel*, 135–136, where a briefer form of the argument is offered, without the introductory frame. Quesnell noted pointedly (but briefly) that Smith's discussion in *Clement of Alexandria*, 287–290 "does not claim to be factual or evidential" ("Mar Saba Clementine," 62 n. 33).

⁴⁵ Piovaneli, "Keckheit, Kühnheit und Grandiosität," 416; compare Jeffery, *Secret Gospel*, 147: "Smith seems positively abusive, like an angry person willing to utter any insult that might stick, no matter how far-fetched." The stridency of the accusation naturally

intimidation, and, sadly, the challenge we face cannot in this instance be addressed with courtesy: polite understatement will not do.

In truth, Smith's argument quoted above is simply nonsense, a term I use advisedly, with nods to both Francis Watson and Morton Smith himself.⁴⁶ Premedieval antiquity is presumed, so the letter's "neglect" becomes a fact that is turned into an argument for authenticity. Anything could be proven ancient by such logic.⁴⁷ In Smith's own words: "With such a theory you can't lose. The things that fit your thesis fit; the things that don't, also fit."⁴⁸ But the problem extends beyond the nonsense. We must also address the nastiness that introduces and protects it. By "sheer stupidities," Smith refers here to nothing other than the standard scholarly predilection for "evidence" (of which there is none) when faced with "extravagant exegetical fantasies" (which we find here in abundance). We must confront the contradiction: Smith deployed his rhetorical scorn to point out non-scholarly pieties as well as academic arguments he considered (not without reason) to involve undue scholarly creativity. Smith also employed the same kind of scorn to distract readers from his own violations of these standards.

4. Antinomianism and Abuse

So far, we have seen how Smith employs his characteristic nastiness to pre-empt objections to his own nonsense. The contradictions raise methodological and moral questions simultaneously, hovering around whether Smith considered himself exempt from the rules everyone expected him to follow. And in this respect, the Smith/Scholem correspondence is revealing. In 1945, Smith wrote rather extensively to Scholem about his fascination with the British antinomian occultist, Aleister Crowley (1875–1947), a figure that likely reminded Smith of the early modern would-be messiah (and erstwhile antinomian) Sabbatai Zevi (1626–1676).⁴⁹ Some thirty years later, Smith reveals to Scholem that he "learned more about Jesus from you and Shabbatai Zvi (I'm sometimes not sure which is which) than I have from any other source except the gospels and the magical papyri."⁵⁰ These two comments bookend three decades of Smith's fascination

boomerangs: Brown, in turn, has accused Jeffery of "Smith bashing" (Brown, "Secret Gospel of Mark Unveiled," 45–46); see Paananen, "From Stalemate to Deadlock," 98–99.

⁴⁶ Watson, "Beyond Suspicion," 141 n. 40: "confused nonsense" with reference to Smith's arguments in *Clement of Alexandria*, 137–138. See also Smith, "Zealots," 17 n. 91 (= *Studies* 1:225).

⁴⁷ For a similarly complex argument for authenticity that hinges on presumptions and logical nonsense, see *Clement of Alexandria*, 76–77; in this case, the nonsense is not accompanied by nastiness, so it is less relevant to the present argument.

⁴⁸ Smith, "On the Authenticity of the Mar Saba Letter of Clement," *CBQ* 38.2 (1976): 196–199; quote from 197; here responding to Quesnell, "The Mar Saba Clementine."

⁴⁹ Stroumsa, ed., *Morton Smith and Gershom Scholem*, 10–11, and see Piovaneli, "Halfway between Sabbatai Tzevi and Aleister Crowley."

⁵⁰ Stroumsa, ed., *Morton Smith and Gershom Scholem*, 170 (September 27, 1976); if

(on and off, to be sure) with antinomian sexual initiation rites. Indeed, it is Smith's established fascination with such rites *prior to the discovery* that is, to my mind, one of the most compelling causes for suspicion.⁵¹ Things come full circle in 1982, when—with Smith's permission and knowledge, no doubt—the reprint of *Secret Gospel* is published by Dawn Horse Press, the publishing arm of Avatar Adi Da (1939–2008), a guru who was well known at the time for advocating and practicing sexual license.⁵²

This brings us to the matter of gay sex. Despite Scott Brown's vigorous efforts to drive a wedge between the sexual reading of Secret Mark and Smith's own hypothesis,⁵³ there really can be no doubt that Smith wants his readers to consider the possibility that Jesus's initiation involved intimate physical union.⁵⁴ The discussion in *Clement of Alexandria* is, characteristically, scattered—but that tells us more about the book and its obfuscatory style than it says about this particular point. Smith's initial discussion (regarding Letter III, 13, "naked man to naked man") is belabored, speaking of various erotic and sexual elements—but concludes clearly enough with one key element: "In this respect, Carpocratian practices seems to have... required that *both* the initiate and the baptizing presbyter be nude."⁵⁵ Subsequently, Smith speaks more clearly about "sexual license," "homosexuality," and "physical union."⁵⁶ And here is how Smith describes the matter in his popular treatment:

Scholem ever replied to this directly, it is not in the extant correspondence.

⁵¹ Quesnell, "The Mar Saba Clementine," 58–60; Craig Evans, "Morton Smith and the *Secret Gospel of Mark*: Exploring the Grounds for Doubt," in *Ancient Gospel or Modern Forgery*, Burke, ed., 75–100 (esp. 81–89); Piovanelli, "Halfway between Sabbatai Tzevi and Aleister Crowley," 169–175; Watson, "Beyond Suspicion," esp. 156–161. We set aside the question of whether any early Christians engaged in such behavior; for a cautionary approach, see Jennifer Wright Knust, *Abandoned to Lust: Sexual Slander and Ancient Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

⁵² Jeffery, *Secret Gospel*, 37–38; and for additional details on the background to this edition of *Secret Gospel*, see Shawn Eyer, "The Strange Case of the Secret Gospel According to Mark: How Morton Smith's Discovery of a Lost Letter by Clement of Alexandria Scandalized Biblical Scholarship," *Alexandria: The Journal for the Western Cosmological Traditions* 3 (1995): 103–129 (esp. 113–115). On Avatar Adi Da and his sexual teachings and practices, see Michael (Anthony) Costabile, "Sexual Practice, Spiritual Awakening, and Divine Self-Realization in the Reality-Way of Adidam," in *Sexuality and New Religious Movements*, ed. Henrik Bogdan and James R. Lewis (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 89–125 and Georg Feuerstein, *Holy Madness: Spirituality, Crazy-Wise Teachers, and Enlightenment*, rev. exp. ed. (Prescott, AZ: Hohm, 2006), esp. 145–179.

⁵³ So, again, Brown, *Mark's Other Gospel*.

⁵⁴ See also Brown, "Factualizing the Folklore: Stephen Carlson's Case against Morton Smith," *HTR* 99.3 (2006): 291–327 (esp. 313–322). For a brief retort, see Watson, "Beyond Suspicion," 136 n. 25.

⁵⁵ Smith, *Clement of Alexandria*, 64–65 (quote from 65).

⁵⁶ The first two phrases appear in *Clement of Alexandria*, 185, the third on 251.

It was a water baptism administered by Jesus to chosen disciples, singly, and by night. The costume, for the disciple, was a linen cloth worn over a naked body. This cloth was probably removed for the baptism proper, the immersion in water, which was now reduced to a preparatory purification. After that, by unknown ceremonies [see below] the disciple was possessed by Jesus' spirit and so united with Jesus. One with him, he participated by hallucination in Jesus' ascent into the heavens, he entered the kingdom of God, and was thereby set free from the laws ordained for and in the lower world. Freedom from the law may have resulted in completion of the spiritual union by physical union. This certainly occurred in many forms of gnostic Christianity; how early it began there is no telling.⁵⁷

And regarding those "unknown ceremonies," Smith adds in a footnote: "Manipulation, too, was probably involved; the stories of Jesus' miracles give a very large place to the use of his hands."⁵⁸

Having established the sexual and homosexual overtones in Smith's words, we should note that Smith allows that the initiation may, at times, have been heterosexual. Scott Brown describes a marginal note, added by Smith to his personal copy of *Clement of Alexandria* (held by the Jewish Theological Seminary Library) to the effect that women, who were the first recipients of resurrection visions, "must have been initiated by Jesus during his lifetime."⁵⁹ If this reduces the distinctly homosexual character of the rite, it does not reduce its sexual element by any measure.

Marginalia aside, let us consider more of what Smith said about these matters in his various writings. There is one largely untapped resource for considering Smith's evaluation of homosexuality (and sexual ethics, more broadly speaking), and that is his late, strange book *Hope and History*⁶⁰—a philosophical, political work rooted in the Cold War era and influenced to no

⁵⁷ Smith, *Secret Gospel*, 107.

⁵⁸ Smith, *Secret Gospel*, 107 n. 12. For an extended discussion of this passage (including Smith's complicated n. 12 here), see Jeffery, *Secret Gospel*, 99–122.

⁵⁹ Brown, "Question of Motive," 364.

⁶⁰ Smith, (*Hope and History, an Exploration*, World Perspectives 54, ed. Ruth Nanda Anshen, New York: Harper & Row, 1980). References to this book are rare in discussions of Secret Mark; Jeffery cites one extended passage (*Hope and History*, 90–91) in *Secret Gospel*, 218–219. In 1978, Smith asked Scholem to write a blurb for this book. In describing the project, Smith admits to writing the volume purely to make money (comparing himself to Moses de León [c. 1240–1305] whom Scholem determined to be the author of the medieval pseudepigraph, the *Zohar*); see Stroumsa, ed., *Morton Smith and Gershom Scholem*, 178 (July 29, 1978). Scholem's response to this query has not been preserved, and the book was published without any blurbs at all, even on the dust jacket.

small extent by Aldous Huxley's 1932 "hedonistic nightmare," *Brave New World*.⁶¹ Smith speaks of homosexuality (always using that word) many times in this work, stereotypically as a form of abnormality. Typical of his approach is a question asked (parenthetically): "is the current explosion of homosexuality in part a consequence of the spread of bottle feeding instead of breast feeding?"⁶² Smith speaks of homosexuality elsewhere as a choice, one driven at times by despair or, more frequently, by the practical desire to pursue sexual pleasure without risking childbirth.⁶³ In passages influenced by Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, Smith speaks of homosexuality as a possible means of population control, rooting his contemporary ruminations on the experiences of classical Greeks (Spartans in particular).⁶⁴ The one upside to homosexuality's upswing is that it is a positive indicator of the weakening of religious puritanism ("both Christian and Jewish").⁶⁵

But Smith sees risks, rather serious ones. Again, it is necessary to reproduce a somewhat substantial portion of Smith's prose:

However, when made both an end in itself and readily available, sexual indulgence soon produces a class of dissatisfied sensualists (e.g., Baudelaire), many of whom go on, in search of excitement, to assorted perversions. This ennui, as well as the general relaxation of sexual controls, has contributed to the increase of homosexuality... Unfortunately, homosexual play—usually a harmless collection of contortions—often proves inadequate as a vehicle for repressed resentment. Once the symbolic satisfaction wears thin, something worse has to be

⁶¹ Smith, *Hope and History*, 93; additional allusions or discussions appear on 125, 133–138; other works by Huxley are cited/discussed on 61–62, 117 n. 10, and 185 n. 13. Another influence evident in *Hope and History* is Emanuel Swedenborg, cited and discussed on 63, 70, 115, 200, and 220. Jeffery (*Secret Gospel*, 150) notes that, as a youth, Smith attended the Academy for the New Church, a preparatory school affiliated with the Swedenborgian General Church of the New Jerusalem. However, Jeffery admits to not detecting Swedenborgian influences in Smith's writings. Here too, *Hope and History* fills lacunae in our understanding of Smith. One further curiosity: Smith (*Secret Gospel*, 5–6) speaks of the hypnotic impact of the monks' worship on him when he first visited Mar Saba in 1941: "I knew what was happening, but I relaxed and enjoyed it." The same phrase appears in a different context in *Hope and History*, 187 ("we may as well relax and enjoy it"). On this phrase (as a punchline to a crude sexual joke), see Jeffery, *Secret Gospel*, 125–131.

⁶² Smith, *Hope and History*, 151–152.

⁶³ Smith, *Hope and History*, 71 (sex without childbirth); 210 (despair).

⁶⁴ Smith, *Hope and History*, 71 (Sparta), 91–93 (classical Greeks, with discussion of Huxley worked in) and 185–186 (as a prescription for the 1980s); cf., more briefly, Smith, *The Ancient Greeks* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1960), 27 (discussion of homosexuality in classical Greece, in a chapter entitled: "Brave New World").

⁶⁵ Smith, *Hope and History*, 17; cf. 178.

found, commonly sadism and masochism. And once the ego's censorial power is undermined, deeper psychological drives come to the surface and demand actual gratification. Hence the desperate progress of the stupid from entertainment by violence to acts of violence and from acts of violence to atrocities, in futile efforts to retain the excitement of novelty. A sadist in Texas some years ago, after murdering several dozen boys, was reportedly killed while trying to handcuff, presumably with intent to murder, the boy who had been his decoy and assistant. Perhaps he felt he had come to the end of that road. No doubt even murder, reduced to a routine, becomes a bore.⁶⁶

Here we have it: In Smith's mind—in the 1980s for sure, but perhaps earlier as well—to engage in homosexuality was to proceed, pointlessly in his view, down a slippery nihilistic slope toward violence and abuse. To be sure, Smith does not speak explicitly of "abuse" concerning early Christian initiation. But Smith emphasizes the roles played by adolescent boys—as both initiates and victims—at various points in the literature we have just reviewed.⁶⁷ In a curious 1949 article on pastoral care and the church, Smith seems acutely aware that some young men were typically initiated into gay sex, during their adolescence, by older men; Smith reports that one such man he knew claimed that "adult-adolescent relationships" were among the "most helpful" to him. Adhering to the official church stance as he understands it, Smith also writes that this man "must be told that homosexuality is a sin far more serious than fornication."⁶⁸

Smith's interest in homosexuality is two-pronged. First, it is an index of sexual freedom; where homosexuality is practiced, Jewish and Christian puritanism has been defeated by antinomianism. Second, it is a sign of worse things to come, for some will inevitably break more laws in seeking even more excitement. So it is fitting at this point to assert that, certainly by our standards, the sexually charged initiation rite Smith imagines Jesus practicing ought not to be understood simply as gay sex. Smith's Jesus's secret initiation, rather, qualifies as guru sex abuse: a religious leader using charisma and authority to lure initiates into sex acts, ones ostensibly for their own betterment.⁶⁹ The list of

⁶⁶ Smith, *Hope and History*, 18; cf. also 220: "Every beautiful object, and especially a beautiful human body, confronts us with our intense desire to do something with it, and our inability to know what we want to do. The resultant fury is the source of sadism and much vandalism...."

⁶⁷ For adolescent initiates: *Ancient Greeks*, 27; *Hope and History*, 91–93; for adolescent victims: *Hope and History*, 18, quoted above.

⁶⁸ Smith, "Psychiatric Practice and Christian Dogma," *The Journal of Pastoral Care* 3.1 (1949): 12–20 (quotes from 16). For a full critical discussion of this article, see Jeffery, *Secret Gospel*, 151–162.

⁶⁹ Amanda Lucia, "Guru Sex: Charisma, Proxemic Desire, and the Haptic Logics of the Guru-Disciple Relationship," *JAAR* 86.4 (2018): 953–988. For a more sympathetic

gurus accused of such is long, but one name merits mention: the aforementioned Avatar Adi Da, responsible for the reprints of Smith's *Secret Gospel*.⁷⁰ As we have seen in his letters to Scholem as well as in his varied public writings, Smith was recurrently fascinated and alarmed by the sexual power of charismatic leaders. So surely Smith would not have missed the 1970s publicity surrounding the religio-sexual exploits of his 1982 publisher. It is not hard to discern why Avatar Adi Da's Dawn Horse Press would be interested in Smith's *Secret Gospel*.⁷¹ We understand that any author would want a book to remain in print, but the connections here have been insufficiently analyzed. At the very least, we have another paradox here: some theologians are the object of Smith's scorn; others pay him royalties. Smith self-righteously objected that his opponents were acting out of religious bias; he didn't seem to mind if his supporters were similarly motivated.⁷²

But the connection may be deeper, more personal: the 2005 Dawn Horse Reprint includes an advertisement for Adi Da's 18-page booklet, *The Effort to "De-Mythologize" Christianity: A Critical Appraisal of the Work of Rudolf Bultmann*. I would rather not send them my money, so I have not read it, but the title and length seem about right for a seminar paper. As it happens, Avatar Adi Da, under his given name of Franklin Albert Jones, attended Columbia College from 1957 to 1961 (Smith's long tenure at Columbia began in 1957). Like most entering Columbia College students, Jones enrolled in Humanities A; Smith taught Humanities A regularly during those years, and he had 95 students enrolled in his section in the Fall of 1957.⁷³ We should seriously wonder whether Jones was one of them. In any event, a full accounting of

exploration of such initiations, see Jonathan Cahana, "Dismantling Gender: Between Ancient Gnostic Ritual and Modern Queer BDSM," *Theology & Sexuality* 18.1 (2012): 60–75; I thank Thomas Roane for bringing this article to my attention about this matter.
⁷⁰ Basic internet searches of "Avatar Adi Da" will turn up relevant, lurid results, as Jeffery notes (*Secret Gospel*, 37–38). For a more properly documented account/accusation, see Geoffrey D. Falk, *Stripping the Gurus: Sex, Violence, Abuse and Enlightenment* (Toronto: Million Monkeys Press, 2009), esp. 141–157.

⁷¹ See, again, Eyer, "Strange Case," 113–115 and Jeffery, *Secret Gospel*, 37–38.

⁷² Smith, "On the Authenticity," esp. 197, and "Clement of Alexandria and Secret Mark: The Score at the End of the First Decade," *HTR* 75.4 (1982): 449–461 (esp. 455).

⁷³ Allan J. Pantuck lists several courses offered by Smith in 1957, including Humanities A; see Pantuck, "A Question of Ability: What Did He Know and When Did He Know It? Further Excavations from the Morton Smith Archives," in *Ancient Gospel or Modern Forgery*, Burke, ed., 184–211, esp. 203–204. Smith himself speaks of 95 students in his large survey course (presumably Humanities A) in a letter to Scholem; see Stroumsa, ed., *Morton Smith and Gershom Scholem*, 105–106 (December 9, 1957). Columbia Archivist, Jocelyn K. Wilk, provided a fuller list of Smith's courses during those years (by email, June 30, 2021). The Columbia Registrar staff confirmed that Jones enrolled, as expected, in a section of Humanities A in Fall 1957 (email, July 1, 2021; pursuant to privacy policies, no information beyond the public matter of course enrollment was shared). I am grateful for the courteous help I received from these two offices of Columbia University.

Smith's fascination with religio-sexual antinomianism begins with Aleister Crowley and Sabbatai Zevi and must continue to consider Avatar Adi Da, whose Dawn Horse Press continues to keep Smith's *Secret Gospel* in print.⁷⁴

So Smith's advocates like Scott Brown are partially correct: Smith may not have been as interested in gay sex per se as others of Smith's readers, interpreters, and critics have assumed. But some of Smith's defenders do a disservice by turning us away from his sexually charged language. And we cannot escape the matter through Smith's protective, evasive discussions of "probabilities."⁷⁵ At the very center of Smith's imagination was a Jesus who initiated his mostly young male followers by sexual means. Following Smith's own warnings and what we have learned about gurus, we do well to keep in mind the potentiality that such behaviors signal the tip of an abusive antinomian iceberg.

5. Licit Deceits

Abuse brings us back to lies, a lesser crime by any standard. While law-breaking sex remains loosely veiled in the *Letter to Theodore*, the permission—indeed, the obligation—to lie appears plainly, with a stated purpose: to safeguard the content of the Secret Gospel of Mark even from those who already seem to know. Theodore is told (I, 7–9):

For, even if they should say something true, one who loves the truth should not, even so, agree with them. For not all true things are the truth, nor should that truth which merely seems true according to human opinions be preferred to the true truth, that according to the faith.

And some lines later (II, 10–12):

To them, therefore, as I said above, one must never give way; nor, when they put forward their falsifications, should one concede that the secret Gospel is by Mark, but should even deny it on oath.

With regard to these matters, even Smith admitted that the *Letter to Theodore* contradicts what we know about Clement's prohibition of perjury, as expressed in the *Stromateis* (e.g., 7.8.50.1–51.8; 7.16.105–106).⁷⁶ It is for this reason

⁷⁴ Without reference to Jones/Adi Da, Robert M. Price recalls Smith speaking sympathetically of new age gospels: "If they [New Age Gospels] embodied someone's faith, weren't they authentic Gospels, no matter who wrote them or when?" See Price, "Second Thoughts on the Secret Gospel," *BBR* 14.1 (2004): 127–132 (130).

⁷⁵ Smith, *Clement of Alexandria*, 290.

⁷⁶ Smith, *Clement of Alexandria*, 53–54, 84–85.

(among a few others) that Eric Osborn has rejected the letter's authenticity, deeming it a "pious forgery."⁷⁷ Michael Zeddies's attribution of the letter to Origen also focuses on this matter; in his view, the letter's approach to deceit aligns more with Origen's views than Clement's.⁷⁸ Watson, as we have noted, emphasized that the letter's deceitful defense of secrecy is characteristic of pseudepigraphy.⁷⁹ Recognizing the problem at the outset, Smith once again pre-empts by inversion: "no imitator who intended to pass his letter off as Clement's would have included these contradictions unless he were ignorant of what the *Stromateis* said on these subjects, or unless the points made by the contradictory elements were his main concern."⁸⁰ However we contextualize this, herein lies the great paradox at the heart of the *Letter to Theodore*: Smith's arguments require that we trust a writer who tells us that he believes it is permitted—even mandatory—to lie about the very secrets he discloses.

Elsewhere in his writings, Smith warns his readers to be wary of deceitful theologians. In *Jesus the Magician*, Smith notes: "When a theologian talks of a 'higher truth,' he is usually trying to conceal a lower falsehood."⁸¹ In a late, angry, and lightly-annotated essay on the Transfiguration (Mark 9:2–10; Matt 17:19; Luke 9:28–36)—published the same year as *Hope and History* (1980)—Smith argues that the core of the story has nothing to do with resurrection (that would be "nonsense"), but everything to do with magic (and libertinism).⁸² Once understood, historicity can be granted. Smith describes the origin this way:

[Jesus] once took three disciples up a mountain for an initiation ceremony that led, presumably through hypnosis, to a vision of

⁷⁷ Eric Osborn, "Clement of Alexandria: A Review of Research, 1958–1982," *The Second Century: A Journal of Early Christian Studies* 3.4 (1983): 219–244 (esp. 223–225); cf. *Clement of Alexandria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005): 195, 219.

⁷⁸ Michael T. Zeddies, "Did Origen Write the *Letter to Theodore*?" *JECS* 25.1 (2017): 55–87 (esp. 63–68), and Zeddies, "An Origenian Background for the *Letter to Theodore*," *HTR* 112.3 (2019): 376–406 (esp. 384–385). Zeddies is following a more tentative suggestion of Annick Martin, "À propos de la lettre attribuée à Clément d'Alexandrie sur l'Évangile secret de Marc," in *Colloque international "L'Évangile selon Thomas et les textes de Nag Hammadi"* (Québec, 29 to 31 May 2003), ed. Louis Painchaud and Paul-Hubert Poirier (Québec: Presses de l'Université Laval, 2007), 277–300. For a helpful survey of early Christian approaches to deceit (licit and permitted), see Ehrman, *Forgery and Counterforgery: The Use of Literary Deceit in Early Christian Polemics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 529–548; on the views of Clement and Origen, see 542–544.

⁷⁹ Watson, "Beyond Suspicion," 138–139; cf. Price, "Second Thoughts," 130.

⁸⁰ Smith, *Clement of Alexandria*, 85.

⁸¹ Smith, *Jesus the Magician* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978), 166 (note to p. 4).

⁸² Smith, "The Origin and History of the Transfiguration Story," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 36.1 (1980): 39–44 (=Smith, *Studies*, 2:79–86). For "nonsense," see: 41 (= *Studies*, 2:83).

him in glory with [one or] two other figures. The ceremony required silence. When one of the disciples, excited by the vision, spoke, the hypnosis was broken and the enchantment ended.

And he continues:

People who tell the truth commonly improve on it. The disciples had to be identified...The interlocutors, too, had to be identified; they turned out to be Moses himself, and, of course, Elijah. The one creative thinker, not to say “liar,” who went beyond such innocent specification was, as might be expected, a theologian—the libertine apologist who saw the opportunity of subordinating the Law and the Prophets to Jesus, and drove home his point by having Peter propose to make temples for all three, using this proposal to precipitate the disappearance of the Law and the Prophets, and introducing the voice of God to contradict the implication of Peter’s proposal. (By these changes he produced a non-sequitur: “It’s good we’re here. And let us make three tabernacles.” No matter; theologians are tolerant of non-sequiturs.)⁸³

If scholars are not to be tolerant of non-sequiturs, then what we find here is further confirmation that Smith well understood what should be obvious but is nevertheless put most plainly in the *Letter to Theodore*: that libertarian theologians might well lie—or “improve the truth”—by expanding upon their supposedly received traditions to create textual justifications when the need is perceived. Once more, Smith undermines his own creative hypotheses by his paradoxical deployment of methodologically motivated insults, deriding those who would disagree with him as upholders of “nonsense” whose “ignorance” renders their views a “waste of time.”⁸⁴

6. Motive and Permission

In one of his vigorous defenses of Morton Smith and the Secret Mark fragments, Scott Brown focuses on the question of motive, arguing that Smith’s accusers have failed to supply a compelling motivation to explain why Smith might do what he stands accused of doing.⁸⁵ While there are indeed some compelling

⁸³ Smith, “Transfiguration Story,” 43 (= *Studies*, 2:85); the verse in question is Matt 17:4//Mark 9:5//Luke 9:33. See also the discussion of this passage by Jeffery, “Clement’s Mysteries and Morton Smith’s Magic,” in *Ancient Gospel or Modern Forgery*, Burke, ed., 212–246, esp. 244–245.

⁸⁴ Smith, “Transfiguration Story,” 41 (= *Studies*, 2:83).

⁸⁵ Brown, “Question of Motive,” 351–383. See also Paananen, “From Stalemate to

responses to Brown's challenge,⁸⁶ we set the larger matter aside here because, as emphasized already, the present analysis stops short of any charge of forgery. We remain focused on the lesser charges of violating academic norms in arguing for the text's authenticity. But questions of motive pertain nevertheless, for one may want to ask why Smith would have violated his own rules in the ways we have argued he did.

I advocate for decentering the question of motive—even concerning forgery, let alone lesser crimes—on three grounds. First, scholars should reject Brown's presumption that an academic allegation of forgery "must meet the standards of legal prosecution, which means the 'prosecutors' must establish beyond reasonable doubt that the letter is forgery, offer evidence connecting Smith with the manuscript, and demonstrate that the accused had the ability, and motive to produce it."⁸⁷ This approach is doubly misguided. First, it shifts the burden of proof away from where it belongs—falling on those who wish to draw ancient evidence from an early modern manuscript. Suspicion remains any scholar's rightful default (a lesson many scholars of ancient Judaism and Christianity learned from Morton Smith). Second, Brown has conflated forgery-charging with crime-solving. To be sure, forgery is a crime, and Anthony Grafton's classic discussion of motive, means, and opportunity remains essential reading.⁸⁸ Out of fairness and decency, any case against a given suspect must meet relatively high standards of argument, perhaps like an indictment. But failure to meet the standard of conviction (against a suspected forger)—or sidestepping the question as we are struggling to do here—does not render a suspicious object authentic. Our job as scholars is to determine whether data—in this case, the *Letter to Theodore* and the Secret Mark fragments—should be

Deadlock," 108–110.

⁸⁶ The best response to Brown, in my view, can be found in Piovanelli, "Halfway between Sabbatai Tzevi and Aleister Crowley," esp. 181–182, which suggests that Smith's behavior may be understood in light of Lurianic Kabbalah as developed by Sabbatian antinomianism—as a "strange act": a normally prohibited behavior performed in secret by the select, to serve some greater good, what Scholem spoke of (in 1937) as a "redemption through sin"; see Scholem, "Redemption through Sin," in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality* (New York: Schocken, 1971), 78–141. In addition to the various connections and potential inspirations Piovanelli establishes, we should add this: Smith's popular account is permeated with Smith's recollections of dramatic mood swings in relation to his find (*Secret Gospel*, esp. 10–12), not all of which match his other retellings of the matter (see Jeffery, *Secret Gospel*, 9–11, 35). Smith's mentor, already in 1940, characterized Sabbatai Zevi as suffering from manic-depressive psychosis, experiencing revelation (≈discovery?) during periods of manic excitement, often leading to antinomian behavior; see Scholem, *Major Trends*, esp. 290–291. For Scholem's later, fuller account, see (*Sabbatai Ševi: The Mystical Messiah*, trans. R. J. Zvi Werblowski, Bollingen Series 93, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), esp. 123–138.

⁸⁷ Brown, "Question of Motive," 351.

⁸⁸ Grafton, *Forgers & Critics*, esp. 36–68.

introduced into (or, in some cases, removed from) our collections of evidence. We need to critically evaluate the reliability of these texts and the evidence on which any arguments for authenticity rest; we need not accuse, let alone convict, a perpetrator. To wit: scholars have yet to determine who forged the Dead Sea Scrolls that successfully infiltrated the Green and Schøyen collections, duping experienced collectors and scholars along the way.⁸⁹ But our present inability to name suspects does not render these fragments any less fake. Most crimes remain unsolved; most forgers remain unidentified. Scholars must be free to question authenticity without proving culpability.

A second objection to putting too much weight on an alleged forger's motives concerns a vital possibility too frequently overlooked: that Smith was not the forger but a dupe; not the deceiver, but the deceived. However outlandish this may seem at first, considering the possibility has important value. Most of all, it allows for a reconsideration of authenticity while depersonalizing the matter. Those who find Smith's possible guilt to be "unfathomable" should be able to fathom Smith's falling into a trap.⁹⁰ What is more, a good deal of the argumentation against authenticity (including, I should add, what we have surveyed here) applies equally in both scenarios. Quesnell, Evans, Piovanelli, and Watson have all (among others) repeatedly highlighted that Smith's find suspiciously aligns with interests Smith displayed before 1958.⁹¹ We find this not only with forgers but also with their "marks," the intended targets of deceit (the recent case of the Gospel of Jesus's wife comes to mind).⁹² The forger's mark's excitement can similarly lead to rhetorical excess

⁸⁹ See Kipp Davis, "Caves of Dispute: Patterns of Correspondence and Suspicion in the Post-2002 'Dead Sea Scrolls' Fragments," *DSD* 24.2 (2017): 229–270 and Davis et al., "Nine Dubious 'Dead Sea Scrolls' Fragments from the Twenty-First Century," *DSD* 24.2 (2017): 189–228. See also the ArtfraudsInsights Final Report of November 2019: *Museum of the Bible Dead Sea Scroll Collection Scientific Research and Analysis* posted https://museumofthebible.cdn.prismic.io/museumofthebible/8ee1c3b3-8398-481a-bc7a-4da593c38728_MOTB-DSS-Report-FINAL-web.pdf.

⁹⁰ For "unfathomable," see Paananen, "From Stalemate to Deadlock," 119. I can sympathize with those who find it impossible to imagine Smith's guilt, but those who take this view are, in my view, obligated to consider Smith's gullibility. Taking both possibilities off the table is a presumption of authenticity, not an academic stance. Interestingly, Smith himself provided encouragement to depersonalize the matter. Speaking of the difference between Jesus's self-perception and external interpretations of Jesus, Smith notes (*Jesus the Magician*, 8): "How many of our friends do we know as they know themselves? None. Even our knowledge of ourselves is mostly incommunicable. Personality is so complex and changeable that even a good autobiography is a high-speed photograph of a waterfall: it imposes a fixed form on a process falsified by fixation."

⁹¹ Quesnell, "The Mar Saba Clementine," 58–60; Evans, "Morton Smith and the *Secret Gospel of Mark*," 101–134 (esp. 81–89); Piovanelli, "Halfway between Sabbatai Tzevi and Aleister Crowley," 169–175; Watson, "Beyond Suspicion," esp. 156–161.

⁹² For a thorough review of this forgery case, see Ariel Sabar, *Veritas: A Harvard Professor, a Con Man, and the Gospel of Jesus's Wife* (New York: Doubleday, 2020). On King as the

and hasty arguments (made on behalf of the forgery by the over-excited mark) that divert readers from counterarguments or weaknesses in the case.⁹³ Much of the circumstantial evidence against authenticity may also work just as well if the letter was forged *for* Smith, not *by* Smith. The bad puns observed by Carlson—a bald scribe, Morton Salt—could have been created by anyone who had Smith in mind (if indeed the puns were intended at all).⁹⁴ Similarly, the ironic placement of the letter noticed by Ehrman—the first page of which faces Isaac Voss’s closing complaint against those who interpolate falsehoods into Ignatius’s letters—could easily be understood as an amusing signal meant for Smith, just as much as a joke by him.⁹⁵ Even the ostensible general echoes of a 1940 novel, noticed by Watson (the plot hinges on a forged manuscript found at Mar Saba) could be explained by pointing to any post-1940 hoaxer, not just Morton Smith.⁹⁶ In 1958, we should recall, Smith departed for Mar Saba on a

forger’s mark—with prior interests in the fragment’s content—see esp. 243–259 and 267–283.

⁹³ In this respect, see Karen King’s defense of authenticity: “Jesus said to them, ‘My wife...’: A New Coptic Papyrus Fragment,” *HTR* 107.2 (2014): 131–159, esp. 157–158: “The gravest difficulty for me lies in explaining how a forger incompetent in Coptic language with poor scribal skills (perhaps even anachronistically using a brush) was yet so highly skilled as to secure ancient papyrus, make ink with an ancient technique, leave no ink traces out of place at the microscopic level, achieve patterns of differential aging, fabricate a paper trail of modern supporting documents, and provide a good fit for an ancient historical context—one that no serious scholar considers to be evidence of the historical Jesus’s marital status. In my judgment, such a combination of bumbling and sophistication seems extremely unlikely.” What King here precludes was not that far from the truth: see Sabar, *Veritas*.

⁹⁴ See Carlson, *Gospel Hoax*, esp. 42–44 (bald scribe) and 58–64 (Morton Salt); against, see Allan J. Pantuck and Scott G. Brown, “Morton Smith as M. Madiotes: Stephen Carlson’s Attribution of Secret Mark to a Bald Swindler,” *JSHJ* 6.1 (2008): 106–125. See also Watson, “Beyond Suspicion,” 152–155. For a critical review, see Paananen, “From Stalemate to Deadlock,” 95–96 and, more fully, Paananen, “A Study in Authenticity: Admissible Concealed Indicators of Authority and Other Features of Forgeries: A Case Study on Clement of Alexandria, *Letter to Theodore*, and the *Longer Gospel of Mark*,” (PhD diss., University of Helsinki, 2019), esp. 21–29, 42–47, 65–80, 113–131.

⁹⁵ See Ehrman, “Response,” 162; the photograph that shows this layout appears only in Smith, *Secret Gospel*, 36.

⁹⁶ See Price, “Second Thoughts,” 132 and Watson, “Beyond Suspicion,” 161–170 on the possible influence of James H. Hunter, *The Mystery of Mar Saba* (New York: Evangelical Publishers, 1940). For a critical review, see Paananen, “From Stalemate to Deadlock,” 99–100 and, more fully, “Study in Authenticity,” 21–29, 37–42, 60–65. Beyond the general elements of the plot, Watson also identifies some linguistic parallels that would point more securely at Smith in particular (“Beyond Suspicion,” 161–166). But see Zeddies, “An Origenian Background,” 404–406 for the possibility that some of the alleged echoes of the novel find closer parallels with passages from John Marco Allegro, *Search in the Desert* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964), a book Smith likely would have read.

planned, return trip.⁹⁷

Entertaining the (related, but not identical) possibility that someone else was involved with Smith in the deed, Tony Burke objects: “if [so] the forgery hypothesis becomes a conspiracy theory with its own metaphorical second shooter on the grassy knoll.”⁹⁸ But we should consider that Smith’s own defense of authenticity is based, in part, on his determination that the letter, if forged, must have been forged by two different people: “No man who could write such a free and skillful imitation of so difficult an author as Clement would then write such a slavish imitation of so easy an author as Mark.”⁹⁹ For the record, Smith’s observation here seems oversimplified—it is one of many of his quips precluding forgery more by rhetoric than by argument. Various readers of the letter and Smith’s works have discerned a single hand here nevertheless.¹⁰⁰ And others have argued that the letter is too slavishly Clementine (in style, not content) to be authentic.¹⁰¹ Moreover, if Smith could offer this argument in the 1960s, a devious forger could have conceived of it in the 1950s or earlier. Nevertheless, scholars do well to think more about Smith’s argument not only as an argument for authenticity. To those who doubt the abilities of any given individual,¹⁰² we can ask, *following Smith*, could multiple forgers have been involved?

If all of this seems like undue, overly suspicious creativity, I plead guilty—but with an excuse. Academic defenses of suspicious objects often employ what I describe to my students as a “cooption of creativity”: elaborate theories of ancient production and preservation are accompanied by rhetorical preclusions of alternate possibilities, as if one would have to be thinking irrationally to consider any possibility other than authenticity. Its simplest version is the oft-repeated assertion that a certain object or manuscript simply could not have been forged.¹⁰³ But more complicated rhetorical distractions appear throughout Smith’s *Clement of Alexandria*: “a forger would probably have attempted something more spectacular”; “Learned forgery was not rare in the eighteenth century, but was customarily edifying and tendentious; this text

⁹⁷ Smith first visited Mar Saba in 1941; he describes his earlier experiences there in the opening chapter of *Secret Gospel*, 1–8.

⁹⁸ Burke, “Introduction,” 26.

⁹⁹ Smith, *Clement of Alexandria*, 76; the extended argument here (the section running from the top of 76 to the bottom of 77) is as problematic as the passage we discussed above, characterized by precluded possibilities and inverted arguments.

¹⁰⁰ See, e.g., Jeffery, *Secret Gospel*, 99 on this very point.

¹⁰¹ So, e.g., A. H. Criddle, “On the Mar Saba Letter Attributed to Clement of Alexandria,” *J ECS* 3.2 (1995): 215–220 and Osborn, *Clement*, 195 n. 42.

¹⁰² E.g., Pantuck, “A Question of Ability.”

¹⁰³ Examples abound. Early authenticators of the Gospel of Jesus’s Wife—including Roger Bagnall and AnneMarie Luijendijk—reportedly expressed this sentiment; see Sabar, *Veritas*, 24 (Luijendijk), 29, 32 (Bagnall).

is neither”; “Almost any work of ancient literature can be supposed a forgery.”¹⁰⁴ We have already observed that Smith’s response to the letter’s contradictions with Clement’s *Stromateis* works similarly: “no imitator who...would have....”¹⁰⁵ Scholars should give no heed to these distracting “Dead End” signs. No approach to the *Letter to Theodore* has simplicity on its side—an authentic letter must be mysteriously, indeed miraculously, preserved (without ever being cited); a forgery must have been elaborately produced. Those who are suspicious must bring creativity to their side, struggling to answer such rhetorical questions as these and then weighing the results against Smith’s wildly creative arguments for Clementine (and Markan) authenticity.

There is a third reason to shift the focus away from motive, and this brings us back to one of our main themes: Smith’s *Clement of Alexandria* is marked, for lack of a better word, by its own thoroughgoing antinomianism. Smith repeatedly breaks his own methodological rules in defense of the authenticity of a letter ostensibly by an author who permits (indeed, demands) deceit. This letter, in turn, presents Jesus as secretly violating norms he was largely expected to maintain. Taken together, what we find in this case permits us to downplay questions of motive. We usually consider a motive to explain why someone would commit a crime, thereby violating a known and (presumably) accepted norm. But such layered, thoroughgoing antinomianism removes the need for a motive. Where permission pertains, motive recedes behind a cloud cover of nihilism.

7. Nihilism, Jonas, and Scholem

Nihilism—a concept related to, but not entirely separable from, antinomianism—presents an opportunity to illustrate one final (and particularly relevant) way in which Smith’s works display a selective deployment of rhetorical nastiness. When discussing the term “Gnostikos,” Smith has particularly harsh words for Hans Jonas (1903–1993), whose phenomenological approach to Gnosticism compares poorly with Clement’s understanding: “As an

¹⁰⁴ Smith, *Clement of Alexandria*, 77; 85 n. 8; 88 n. 1; cf. *Secret Gospel*, 25: “Who would have forged a letter to a nobody?” Watson collects examples of such statements to establish Smith’s preoccupation with the forgery issue: “Beyond Suspicion,” 153–154 n. 69. Paananen has recently argued that forgery-accusers often use imprecise rhetorical questions to raise suspicion; in the case of the *Letter to Theodore* and *Secret Mark*, the guilt is surely on both sides, and, by Paananen’s own argument, Smith’s own use of what Paananen calls “unconcealed” (or even “hyperactive”) forms of questioning should raise questions about Smith’s defenses of authenticity. See Paananen, “WWFD or What Would a Forger Do: A Critical Inquiry of Poorly Argued Contemporary Cases for Forgery,” *Open Library of Humanities* 6.2 (2020): 22/1–28. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.519>. In the same vein, we can compare Karen King’s comments noted above (“Jesus said to them,” 157–158) with the revelations disclosed by Sabar, *Veritas* (see n. 93 above).

¹⁰⁵ Smith, *Clement of Alexandria*, 85.

authority on gnosticism, Clement has one great advantage over Jonas—he knew what he was talking about.¹⁰⁶ Perhaps more to the point, though, is Smith’s unhinged anger at Jonas’s heuristic deployment of a phenomenological “ideal type,” derided by Smith as “poppycock.”¹⁰⁷ But has not Smith himself admitted (albeit candidly, and directly to Scholem) that his construct of an antinomian Jesus was based on an ideal type (of a sort)—that messianic antinomian, Sabbatai Zevi?¹⁰⁸

In certain ways, Jonas’s larger approach to Gnosticism—especially regarding Gnostic nihilism¹⁰⁹—is not entirely different from Scholem’s; the latter figure spoke of Sabbatai Zevi and Sabbatianism as both antinomian and nihilistic—the terms appearing at times as hendiadys.¹¹⁰ And it is worth recalling one of Scholem’s early references to the Carpocratians in this respect: “In the history of Gnosticism, the Carpocratians are regarded as the outstanding representatives of this libertinistic and nihilistic form of gnosis.”¹¹¹ It may be that Smith was not as interested in nihilism per se as either Jonas or Scholem. But Scholem saw the connection: Scholem’s only citation of Smith’s *Clement of Alexandria* is found in his 1974 *Eranos-Jahrbuch* essay, “Der Nihilismus,” which takes a phenomenological approach to its subject matter.¹¹² Surely a more nuanced reading of Jonas, Scholem, and Smith would yield meaningful differences in their approaches. To Smith’s credit, Jonas’s approach to Gnosticism is hardly beyond reproach.¹¹³ Still, something in Jonas’s work on Gnosticism (and nihilism?) touched one of Smith’s nerves. Jonas believed that the radical, antinomian elements found within Gnosticism do not likely find

¹⁰⁶ Smith, “The History of the Term ‘Gnostikos,’” in *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism: Proceedings of the Conference at Yale March 1978*, ed. Bentley Layton, 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 1981), 2:796–807; quote: 803 (=Smith, *Studies*, 2:183–193 [quote: 190]). Smith here is responding to Jonas, “Delimitation of the Gnostic Phenomenon—Typological and Historical,” in *The Origins of Gnosticism: Colloquium of Messina, 13–18 April 1966. Texts and Discussions*, ed. Ugo Bianchi (Leiden: Brill, 1967), 90–108. For Smith’s earlier criticism of Jonas’s approach (kinder in tone), see Smith’s review of Bianchi’s *Origins of Gnosticism*, *JBL* 89.1 (1970): 82–84.

¹⁰⁷ Smith, “Origins,” 796 n. 3 (= *Studies*, 2:183 n. 3).

¹⁰⁸ Stroumsa, ed., *Morton Smith and Gershom Scholem*, 170 (September 27, 1976).

¹⁰⁹ See Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity*, 2nd enlarged ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), esp. 320–340 (“Epilogue: Gnosticism, Nihilism, and Existentialism”).

¹¹⁰ Scholem, *Major Trends*, 300, 317

¹¹¹ Scholem, *Major Trends*, 316; for a recent reconsideration on the degree to which Smith and Scholem may have overstated the antinomianism of this group, see Michael J. Kok, “Morton Smith and the Carpocratians,” *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 97.4 (2021): 629–645.

¹¹² Scholem, “Der Nihilismus,” 12–13; citing Smith, *Clement of Alexandria*, 251–278 on 13 n. 11.

¹¹³ For a recent critical assessment, see Michael Waldstein, “Hans Jonas’ Construct ‘Gnosticism’: Analysis and Critique,” *J ECS* 8.3 (2000): 341–372.

their origin within first-century Jewish circles. While such is possible, what is lacking is evidence to that effect.¹¹⁴ Scholem, it would appear, thought similarly.¹¹⁵ Jonas defined Gnosticism broadly, phenomenologically; Scholem, too, took a phenomenological approach (defining Gnosis even more broadly than Jonas) and was certainly loathe to restrict “gnosis” to groups that used that name.¹¹⁶ Given all this, we suspect that Smith’s ire directed at Jonas may serve as a proxy for his otherwise unstated disagreements with Scholem on these matters. In any event, Smith’s scorn stirred selectively, sparing Scholem while it ensnared others who spoke similarly. Here, however, motive does not elude us.

The Smith/Scholem correspondence certainly testifies to Smith’s reverence for and loyalty to his mentor. I find nothing objectionable in this, but these disparities remind us that reading Smith is not so straightforward. At times, what he has chosen to say in one place to one audience illuminates what he has chosen to conceal elsewhere. Yet, the atmosphere of mystery only thickens as we consider the possibility that Smith’s occasional outbursts of nastiness may hide as much as they reveal.

8. Conclusion

We must reiterate three essential points. First, since we cannot subject physical evidence to scientific testing, the authenticity questions cannot be answered definitively. We are left to hover between trust and suspicion, faith and doubt. Just as we cannot move (with Watson) “beyond suspicion,” so too, we cannot let the matter drop and accept authenticity until proven otherwise (as Stroumsa and others have wished). Second, our argument stops short of any charge of forgery: our concern here has been and remains highlighting disturbing inconsistencies in Smith’s defense of authenticity. Third, Smith’s positive contributions to the study of ancient religion, as summarized by Cohen above, remain a fact. We quoted Cohen’s praise above, with good reason, and we purposely recall these words again upon concluding as we face yet another paradox: the best of Smith’s scholarship fosters a hermeneutic of suspicion.

Smith abjures his readers to be alert to fantasies and façades; one finds both in *Clement of Alexandria*. Smith warns his readers not to give way to theologically motivated apology; *Clement of Alexandria*’s hypothesis rests on a theologian telling the secret truth even as he advocates lying to protect the secret.

¹¹⁴ Jonas, “Delimitation,” 102, 105, and 108; cf. Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1965), esp. 1–2, 10.

¹¹⁵ Scholem, “Der Nihilismus,” 12–13.

¹¹⁶ See, e.g., Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism*, esp. 1–2, 10. On Scholem’s complicated (and somewhat inconsistent) understandings of Gnosticism, see Moshe Idel, “Subversive Catalysts: Gnosticism and Messianism in Gershom Scholem’s View of Mysticism,” in *The Jewish Past Revisited: Reflections on Modern Jewish Historians*, ed. David N. Myers and David B. Ruderman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 39–76 (esp. 46–56).

At the center of Smith's creative hypothesis lurks an antinomian religious charismatic, whose sexual rites—ones that qualify as abuse by our standards—are ever so loosely veiled; Smith's book was republished by a modern avatar of just such a figure.

In that popular book, Smith recalls his conversation with Arthur Darby Nock (the dedicatee of the denser book), who, according to Smith's account, quickly reviewed the find and deemed it a forgery, although a late ancient one: "They made up all sorts of stuff in the fifth century." But along the way, Nock supposedly said something like this: "Good heavens, a Gospel Quotation! Oh no, this is too much!"¹¹⁷ Yes, too much indeed. The gospel fragments are too Markan to be Mark (as Smith himself all but admitted); the letter is too Clementine to be Clement (as Criddle, Osborn, and others maintain). We are left to ponder the conundrum of relying on Smith to relay Nock's suspicion. Smith undermining Smith is a mysteriously recurring pattern.

The forgery charge against Smith remains unproven and unprovable, and nothing we have offered here changes that fact. Even so, a great deal of circumstantial evidence raises questions about the letter and Smith's own problematic defense of it. Modern forgery—by one culprit or more—should remain on our radar, along with other possibilities, including forgery in late ancient times (as Nock suggested, followed by Zeddies), early modern times, or any time in between. The most important circumstantial evidence matches patterns in the history of forgery and applies to more than one of these possibilities: the letter's rhetoric of deceit is characteristically pseudepigraphic; its discoverer had an established prior interest in antinomian sex rites (which renders him, if innocent, the perfect dupe). I have tried to show that various conundrums surrounding Secret Mark and the *Letter to Theodore* are suspiciously implicated by Smith's words, uttered within these books and elsewhere in his dense and diverse *oeuvre*. Smith violates his own methods when defending the authenticity of a letter by a deceit-permitting theologian maintaining Jesus's secret antinomianism. Scholars should not accept the *Letter to Theodore* as authentic when relying only—or even primarily—on Smith's problematically contradictory arguments.

We who doubt the authenticity of the *Letter to Theodore* display what we have learned from one Morton Smith (the scholar modeling methodological rigor and suspicion) when evaluating the other Morton Smith (who indulged creative fantasies obscured by academic façades). In recognizing this duality, we credit Smith's mentor, Scholem, who long ago put his finger on the contradiction between Smith's creative hypotheses regarding an antinomian Jesus and the stringency more typical of Smith's scholarly achievement. *Clement of Alexandria and the Secret Gospel of Mark* is one deeply flawed book, and *Secret Gospel*—especially the Dawn Horse Press reprint—may be flawed even

¹¹⁷ Smith, *Secret Gospel*, 24.

more. Imagine: had one of Smith's contemporaries (other than Gershom Scholem!) authored either book, Smith's reviews would have been devastating. The irony of this mind game encapsulates the paradoxes of Morton Smith and the enduring enigmas encircling the *Letter to Theodore*.