

33. Smith, Morton, *Clement of Alexandria and a Secret Gospel of Mark* (Harvard University Press 1973)

Lots of old memories associated with this book, which I purchased and read shortly after it first was published. Well, let me tell the truth, I read what I could of it. It is a scholar's tome, with lots of Greek and other languages that are Greek to me.

When I was reading it, it confirmed in a big way what a Mormon scholar, Hugh Nibley, was saying about the early church: it had two layers of teachings, a layer for the missionaries to use in bringing converts into belief in Christ, and then another layer to bring them from belief to perfection in Christ. (See Nibley, item # 30).

Hugh Nibley and Morton Smith make compelling arguments, using many sources, to show there was a secret tradition, reserved for those who were reaching maturity in the life of a Christian. Smith also makes a compelling case for there being more to the initiatory ordinances than the simple baptism currently practiced, making and substantiating pretty much the same list Nibley gives, with the exception of the marriage-ceremony allusions.

So can you see that reading this book when it first came out, to me as a believing Mormon it became just another proof that what my church claimed for itself was true. A Mormon convert is baptized by immersions and receives the laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost. After at least a year of showing that the person is maturing in his or her dedication to living the Christian life, the next set of initiatory ordinances, including a washing and anointing and a marriage in most cases, are encountered in the temple. Hence the pattern Nibley (see item # 30) was looking for in

his readings of the apocryphal literature becoming available in recent times, and the great support given to that pattern by Morton Smith.

Morton Smith apparently found, hand-written into the back of an old manuscript, a partial copy of a letter written by Clement of Alexandria to a presently unknown believer called Theodore. This believer had written about claims made by proselyting Carpocrations about them having a more complete version of mark showing that Jesus took part in some rites they suggested to be indications of the practice and thus approval of homosexual sexual acts. Clement wrote back that there indeed was a secret book written by Mark, one kept for those who are being perfected. The Carpocrations got a copy through bribery, and added to it what fueled their licentious ideas. They believed that to be saved one had to experience everything, both good and evil.

Clement then tells Theodore to have nothing to do with them, and then cites several passages to show there was indeed a secret gospel of Mark, and that the Carpocrations had added to it to make it fit their notions.

On pages 446 and 447, just two pages after hundreds of pages of scholarly discussion, the translation is given of the actual text found by Smith. Clement of Alexandria's words on the nature of the secret gospel were (the first part gives a perhaps true insight into the origins of the first of the gospels):

As for Mark, then, during peter's stay in Rome he wrote an account of the Lord's doings, not, however, declaring all of them, nor yet hinting at the secret ones, but selecting what he thought was most useful for increasing the faith of those who were being instructed. But when peter died a martyr, Mark came over to

Alexandria, bringing both his own notes and those of Peter, from which he transferred to his former book the things suitable to whatever makes for progress in knowledge. Thus he composed a more spiritual Gospel for the use of those who were being perfected. Nevertheless, he yet did not divulge the things not to be uttered, nor did he write down the hierophantic teaching of the Lord, but to the stories already written he added yet others and, moreover, brought in certain sayings of which he knew the interpretation would, as a mystagogue, lead the hearers into the innermost sanctuary of that truth hidden behind seven veils. Thus, in sum, he prepared matters, neither grudgingly nor incautiously, in my opinion, and, dying, he left his composition to the church in Alexandria, where it even yet is most carefully guarded, being read only to those who are being initiated into the great mysteries.

Smith in his book argues (as does Crossan) for the reverse being true, our Mark is an edition based on Secret Mark. Their arguments for this are very good. But to me it begs the question: could there not have been an original shorter Mark, then added to for the Secret Mark. Then edited back down for the intermediate sized Mark we now have? The one then used as a source by Matthew and Luke? Hey, no evidence except Clement's suspect letter, but that is pretty good evidence of things having been more complex than originally thought..

Clement's words on the content that was being misused by the Carpocratians was this (giving insight into a more elaborate initiation ceremony and its wilful misinterpretation by the Carpocratians; no Mormon will miss the description of this more elaborate ritual as being similar to two separate portions of the temple initiation ceremonies that used to, in the first days of temples, be an all-day affair):

To you, therefore, I shall not hesitate to answer the questions you have asked, refuting the falsifications by the very words of the Gospel. For example, after "And they were in the road going up to Jerusalem," and what follows, until "After three days he shall arise," the secret Gospel brings the following material word for word: "And they come into Bethany. And a certain woman whose brother had died was there. And, coming, she prostrated herself before Jesus and says to him, 'Son of David, have mercy on me.' But the disciples rebuked her. And Jesus, being angered, went off with her into the garden where the tomb was, and straightway a great cry was heard from the tomb. And going near Jesus rolled away the stone from the door of the tomb. And straightway, going in where the youth was, he stretched forth his hand and raised him, seizing his hand. But the youth, looking upon him, loved him and began to beseech him that he might be with him. And going out of the tomb they came into the house of the youth, for he was rich. And after six days Jesus told him what to do and in the evening the youth comes to him, wearing a linen cloth over his naked body. And he remained with him that night, for Jesus taught him the mystery of the kingdom of God. And thence, arising, he returned to the other side of the Jordan." After these words follows the text, "And James and John come to him," and all that section. But "naked man with naked man," and the other things about which you wrote, are not found. And after the words, "And he comes into Jericho," the secret Gospel adds only, "And the sister of the youth whom Jesus loved and his mother and Salome were there, and Jesus did not receive them." But the many other things about which you wrote both seem to be and are falsifications.

I added the words about the three women because they were so important to Crossan's arguments about this being a stylized group. I was impressed with Crossan's analysis until I re-read Smith's analysis on his pages 188 through 190. Smith did most of what Crossan did. Am I saying that Crossan plagiarized from Smith? Heavens no! It is just that once you put down a book and think of what you learned from it, you remember some of the key lessons, seldom do you remember the footnotes that are embedded in that lesson.

OK, so there you have it. There was secrecy in the early church. There was a graded approach to teaching. There were ordinances/rites beyond the well-known baptism. And there were expectations that with these types of helps, a convert would be able to become a mature Christian over time. So, Hugh Nibley was right? Yes, in general terms.

But there is another exciting insight into pre-Pauline Christianity from Morton Smith. Recall that in my discussion of Daniélou's book (see item # 13) I said that "Daniélou clears up a considerable mystery for me (if he is right): the reason there is confusion about the role of Peter and James in the Jerusalem church is that James was the resident authority and Paul was an itinerant (missionary) authority." Now enter Morton Smith with another scenario that is also compatible with the extant evidence: James did a hostile takeover of his brother's movement and ousted Peter!

This deserves some serious explanation. Smith can explain this to you himself if you read his pages 254 through 266. For our purposes I'll mention just some highlights:

Pages 254 and 255 establish that the persecution of the earliest Christians just did not make sense: they taught what many Jews, especially in the apocalyptic mood of the times,

believed. However, what if they were not teaching about a future destruction of the temple and abolishment of the law, but were declaring that even now the law was already superceded by the actions of Christ? That could be perceived as libertinism and considered treasonous to many jews. That could explain the stoning of Stephen and the killing of James the brother of John, and the attempt on Paul's life.

Maybe this drove Peter underground and allowed James, who isn't mentioned at all until now, to come into the picture and try to take his brother's movement over to steer it out of the hands of these fanatics. The libertines, who felt they were liberated from the law by Christ, were expelled, and the normative Jews who believed in the messianic nature of Jesus' life took over. Smith takes a couple of pages to establish that libertinism was rampant in the early church, meaning that in several cases persons were taken to task who taught the law of Moses no longer mattered, and in several other cases people were taking additional liberties and declaring that sexual/moral excess was also OK in the new vision provided by Christianity.

James, according to Smith, knew Paul had two sets of stripes, and could act like a jew among jews, and be himself among gentiles. But he moderated Paul's influence in Jerusalem and other centers under his control by having Paul agree to live the law when among the Jews. [If you will recall, Peter was accosted by Paul for refusing to eat with gentiles, making him a hypocrite just like Paul. But the idea is that Peter at least knew that Christ had freed him from all this, he was just afraid.]

Smith next shows the many places where Paul has to fight off the real libertines who celebrated incest and other excesses. Here is where the Carpocrations come in, the ones who later abused the Secret Gospel of Mark, and who

lay the root of their libertinism directly at the feet of Jesus and his teachings. This discussion takes several pages in Morton Smith's book, and there is a little warp-up of all he has shown us on page 262 to 263:

The fact that the libertine tradition was so early so widespread is evidence that it derives from Jesus' baptismal practice. To try to explain all of it as resultant from misunderstanding of Paul is implausible. Paul protests that his name and his sayings are being misused by the libertines (above on Acts 20.29, Rom. 3.8). He complains not of misunderstanding, but of deliberate misrepresentation, and he does not write as if the persons concerned were his former disciples. But if the misinterpretation was deliberate it was probably in the interest of some already existing position. (Paul was also misrepresented, by the opposite side, as preaching circumcision, Gal. 5.11.) Moreover, there is another figure to whom all the early and widespread branches of the libertine tradition can plausibly be traced, since attacks on his libertine teaching and practice are prominent in the reports of his work. He broke the Sabbath, he neglected the purity rules, he refused to fast, made friends with publicans and sinners, and was known as a gluttonous man and a wine bibber. He not only taught his disciples that the law had come to an end with the Baptist, but he also administered a baptism—"the mystery of the kingdom of God"—by which he enabled some of his disciples, by union with himself, to enter the kingdom and to enjoy his own freedom from the law.

Therefore, in our picture of pre-Pauline Christianity, alongside the legalistic interpretations of the religion, we must set the libertine. The legalistic interpretation went back to the (principally Pharisaic?) Converts of the Jerusalem church, and appealed to the

tradition of Jesus' exoteric teaching. The libertine interpretation went back to Jesus himself and preserved elements of his esoteric teaching. It was dominant in the Jerusalem church in the earliest days, but lost its hold as the small group of Jesus' original, initiated disciples was outnumbered by the new converts under the leadership of Jesus' brother James. We see the leader of the old disciples—Peter—challenged by the legalists in Acts 11; he disappears from the city in Acts 12; in Acts 15 he is back again—but is Acts 15 historical? Anyhow, James presides at the meeting. In Acts 21 only James remains. When Paul visits the city he is persuaded to make a public pretense of keeping the law. Paul, by virtue of his donations, was doubtless a highly valued member of the Church, moreover he could recall and might report the traditions of the original apostles, so James was willing to make adjustments—for Paul. As for his general policy, however, the mere appearance of his representatives in Antioch was enough to frighten Peter out of eating with gentiles (Gal 2.12). At least in Jerusalem the libertine tradition would be a secret doctrine.

Morton Smith sees an even more diabolical vision in his next section, still on page 263:

This leads to a fourth consequence of Jesus' baptismal practice, this time an indirect consequence: the "loss" of all writings from Jesus and his immediate disciples. That they were all illiterate is improbable. They founded a sect and the survival of the sect makes the disappearance of all works of its founders a noteworthy problem Having seen how Jesus' immediate disciples disappeared from the Jerusalem church, we may suppose that their writings went down with them. The libertine consequences of Jesus'

baptismal practice probably helped James and his party get rid of both the apostles and their writings.

James's works, if any, have also disappeared and we have nothing from the legalist Jerusalem church of A.D. 40-66, but these facts are largely explained by the great revolts of 66-73 and 132-135 in Palestine and of 115-117 in Egypt, Cairina, Cyprus, Syria, and Mesopotamia, which must have ruined most of legalistic Christianity Asia Minor was the only area in the Near East where a large Jewish population survived relatively undisturbed, and Asia Minor has been the scene of Paul's most successful work. This probably was a major cause of the predominance of Pauline material both in the NT canon and in the entire corpus of early Christianity.

Smith goes on to attribute Paul's success to his practicality: he came up with "safe and sane" middle road between the legalists and the libertines. He accepted Jesus' libertine teachings and the legalists' eschatology and drops "the nationalistic and political side of it" that led to mass suicide. Smith sees his find as fitting squarely into the later extension of this controversy, during the heyday of the Carpocrations and his followers starting about 125 A.D. until the end of that century at least. But the dating game is very unreliable of course, as many pages of scholarly notes and discussion come to conclude.

Did you notice something about Jesus' "exoteric" and "esoteric" teachings in the words taken from Morton Smith, above? This he explains on pages 199 through 229, and there is no way I am going to digest those pages here. But let me make this statement: I have always been perplexed reading the New testament how at one point Jesus would say that he wouldn't change one iota of the law and terrible things would happen to those who took away from the law.

Then in the next story he would illustrate that the law is the servant, not the master, the law is no more, etc. Smith explains all this in a context of the conflict between what Jesus would say in a Jewish crowd versus what he would say to his chosen disciples in private, in secret. Smith also goes into some of the magical aspects of the life of Jesus, which is material I found interesting but not too germane to the present quest. The idea that Jesus had one set of teachings for the public, another set for the initiated, is exactly what the Secret Gospel of Mark says, and Nibley says, and many passages in the New Testament say as well, as Smith's exegesis makes clear.

The bottom line? Here we have a radically different look at the early Christians, with a hostile take-over by a brother of Jesus perhaps trying to guard his family name by turning it safely back into the Jewish fold only to have it literally blow up in his face as the Jews revolt and the Romans show them who is boss? Interesting, and very different from what others have described, such as the author of Acts who covers over differences rather than accentuating them.

By the way, now I can see why Craig (see Copan, item # 8) had such a passionate negative feeling about Smith and his work. And I can see why there was some, apparent, distancing from Smith's work by Crossan, taking Smith's work out of the evidence cited to support his version of early Christian history centered on the resurrection. What an intriguing and exciting world this early Christian research field is!

And now that we have come this far it seems a good time to go to two places. Eisenman for a second opinion on James, and Crossan once more on the rewriting of the New Testament (shades of Freke and Gandy!) to make sure the Jews are blamed for Jesus' death since they started and lost

the war against the sincere and noble Romans who won, and in whose Empire Christianity now finds itself.

I used Smith's book in my opus at item # 36 too.