

Lecture Twelve

The Secret Gospel of Mark

Scope: One of the most controversial "discoveries" of modern times occurred in 1958 at the Mar Saba library near Jerusalem, when Morton Smith, professor of ancient history at Columbia, came upon the fragment of a letter allegedly written by the second-century church father Clement, which indicates that in Clement's home church of Alexandria, there existed a second edition of Mark's gospel. This "secret" gospel was intended only for the spiritually elite in the community. Clement's letter cites two passages from this secret gospel, one of which appears to have homoerotic overtones, as a young man whom Jesus had raised from the dead comes to him wearing "nothing but a linen cloth over his nakedness" and spends the night with him, learning about the Kingdom of God. Overshadowing all of the many controversies surrounding this newly discovered text from Clement is a fundamental issue: Is it authentic or a modern forgery?

Outline

- I. To this point in our course, we have seen a number of gospels that were known from ancient sources or discovered only in recent times. In this lecture, we will consider one of the most intriguing and controversial discoveries of modern times, a fragmentary account of a secret gospel allegedly written by Mark.
- II. Mark is the oldest and shortest gospel.
 - A. It was not used extensively in the early church.
 - B. Most of Mark's stories are also found in Matthew and Luke, leading early Christians to believe that, perhaps, it was a condensed version of Matthew.
 - C. According to the second-century heresiologist Irenaeus, the Gospel of Mark was used by Gnostics who separated the Jesus from the Christ.
 1. Mark begins with Jesus at his baptism, where the spirit of God comes into him.
 2. At the end of his life, Jesus on the cross cries out to God, "Why have you left me behind?"
 - D. The proto-orthodox Christians accepted Mark as a bonafide canonical

gospel.

- E. Was there a second version of Mark?
- III. A good deal of intrigue surrounds the circumstances of the discovery of the Secret Gospel of Mark.
- A. It was discovered by Morton Smith, one of the most erudite scholars of Christian antiquity of the twentieth century.
 - B. In 1941, as a Ph.D. student at Harvard, Smith spent time in Israel and visited the monastery of Mar Saba, southeast of Jerusalem.
 - C. Years later, as a tenured professor at Columbia, Smith decided to spend a sabbatical there, to bring order to its library.
 - D. While cataloguing the Greek and Latin manuscripts and printed books of the library, he made a remarkable discovery.
 - E. In the final blank pages of a seventeenth-century edition of the writings of Ignatius (an important second-century church father), he came across a handwritten copy of a letter allegedly by Clement of Alexandria, another important church father from near the end of the second century.
- IV. The letter is a remarkable document.
- A. It is allegedly written to an otherwise unknown Theodore.
 - B. In it, Clement addresses a question Theodore had raised about the existence of a second version of the Gospel of Mark.
 - C. Clement indicates that Mark had, in fact, produced two versions of his gospel, the one popularly known (that is in our New Testament) and a second more secret one intended only for the spiritual elite.
 - D. But members of a heretical gnostic sect known as the Carpocratians, notorious for their wild and licentious activities, had gotten hold of this secret version of the gospel and falsified it for their own purposes.
- V. Clement then goes on to narrate two passages found in Mark's secret gospel.
- A. One is an account of Jesus raising a young man from the dead who then is said to have loved Jesus and come to him later at night "wearing nothing

but a linen robe over his nakedness." Jesus is said to have spent the night with him, teaching him the mysteries of the Kingdom of God.

- B. The other account is a shorter and more bland account of Jesus refusing to see several women who had come to see him.
- VI. The questions surrounding the text were numerous and momentous: When was the letter copied into this book of Ignatius? Could it have been a forgery? Did the letter actually go back to Clement of Alexandria? If so, was there really a second version of Mark? And if that was so, was Clement right that it was a secret version? Or could it have been the original version of Mark that got changed because of its possibly offensive overtones? If it did go back to Mark, what does that tell us about the practices and activities of the historical Jesus?
- VII. Smith was obviously ecstatic about this once-in-a-lifetime discovery.
- A. He photographed the relevant pages and spent the next fifteen years of his life analyzing them, getting expert opinions on different aspects of the problem.
 - B. Companion palaeographers (experts in ancient handwriting) agreed that the letter did, in fact, represent an eighteenth-century style of handwriting.
 - C. Experts in Clement of Alexandria by and large agreed that the letter conformed closely with Clement's writing style and vocabulary.
 - D. Experts on the Gospel of Mark by and large agreed that the quotations from "secret Mark" conformed to the style and vocabulary of Mark.
- VIII. Smith produced two books on the discovery, one for popular audiences and one for scholars, presenting his find and giving his interpretation of it.
- A. Most controversial was his interpretation: He argued that the narrative was not pure fiction but related to the life of the historical Jesus.
 - B. He concluded that the man had come to Jesus at night to engage in a secret nocturnal baptismal ritual, one that involved a naked baptism that united the person with Jesus in an ecstatic experience of the Kingdom of God.
 - C. This account, needless to say, had very strong homoerotic overtones. Not

all scholars were convinced.

- D. And now, some thirty years after these books were published, some scholars have their doubts about the text itself.
- IX. Could the whole thing have been forged? Possibly even by Smith himself?
- A. Few scholars have been bold enough to say so. If Smith did forge it, it is one of the most brilliant works of scholarship in the twentieth century!
 - B. But there are some intriguing issues. For one thing, no one else has actually seen the manuscript—even though many have tried.
 - 1. The manuscript has evidently been removed to a library in Jerusalem.
 - 2. The monks have not allowed anyone else access to the manuscript.
 - 3. This has raised considerable suspicions. The only way to know if the letter was actually copied into this book of Ignatius in the eighteenth century is to do a full chemical analysis of the ink. But it is unavailable.
 - C. In addition, some scholars who have explored the matter further have argued that the letter is in fact more like Clement's writings than any of Clement's other writings, as if someone were carefully trying to emulate his writing style but went overboard.
 - D. There are several other curious considerations, possibly making the whole thing too good to be false.
 - 1. The book of Ignatius that the letter was copied into was a famous 1646 edition, which was the first edition ever that printed only the authentic letters of Ignatius and excluded the forged letters of Ignatius that had been wrongly accepted as authentic throughout the Middle Ages. Isn't that a bit odd, that it is precisely into that particular book that someone copied a letter that may well itself be forged instead of authentic?
 - 2. On the facing page, the last printed page of this book of Ignatius, the editor is discussing a textual problem, in which he points out that later scribes have incorrectly modified the original text and added considerable dribble that confuses the true historical sense of the text. Isn't that an odd counterpart to this alleged letter?
 - 3. Finally, it is interesting to note how Smith himself dedicated the popular account of his book on the secret gospel. It is dedicated "To

the One Who Knows." Who is the one who knows? And what does he know?

- X. In conclusion, it is difficult to say whether this account represents an authentic discovery or a modern forgery.
 - A. If it is an authentic letter, it may provide us with some valuable information about Christianity in second-century Alexandria during the time of Clement and give us some interesting possibilities for understanding Mark's gospel and the historical Jesus.
 - B. If it is forged, it provides us with no authentic historical information, but may be of one of the most amazing feats of scholarship, in this case forged scholarship, of modern times.

Essential Reading:

J. K. Elliott, *Apocryphal New Testament*, pp. 148-150.

Morton Smith, *The Secret Gospel of Mark*.

Supplementary Reading:

John Dominic Crossan, *Four Other Gospels*.

Morton Smith, *Clement of Alexandria and a Secret Gospel of Mark*.

Questions to Consider:

1. Assume for a moment that the letter was actually penned by Clement and that there really was another edition of Mark available to the church in Alexandria. Is there any way that this other edition was in fact the first edition of Mark and that later, certain passages came to be omitted by scribes copying it, possibly because the passages were considered offensive?
2. Assume that someone forged this document. What might have been his or her reasons for doing so?