

“Roberts may have started his ministry with pure motives to give comfort to the sick and downtrodden,” Root concludes, “but he was eventually corrupted by power” (204). That narrative is all too familiar. Roberts and Root, however, make it colorful.

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The Secret Gospel of Mark: A Controversial Scholar, A Scandalous Gospel of Jesus, and the Fierce Debate over Its Authenticity.

By **Geoffrey S. Smith** and **Brent C. Landau**. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2023. xi + 240 pp., with illustrations. \$35.00 hardcover.

In 1958, Morton Smith visits the Monastery of Mar Sabas near Jerusalem. He is to catalogue its small library of printed books. He also hopes to discover manuscript sources written in or bound up with those printed books. And so it happens. Toward the end of his stay, he takes up a copy of a seventeenth-century edition of the letters of Ignatius of Antioch. On the final, blank pages of the volume, he finds a handwritten fragment of an otherwise unknown letter by Clement of Alexandria. He takes hurried photographs, and some years later introduces the Secret Gospel of Mark to the world.

In his letter, Clement tells his correspondent that Mark produced an expanded version of his gospel for initiates and that this fuller gospel was kept under close guard by ecclesiastical authorities in Alexandria. There follow two quotations from the fuller gospel. One of these would prove especially controversial: there, Jesus raises a young man from the dead, and for the next six days this young man comes to Jesus by night, naked but for a linen cloth, to be taught “the mysteries of the kingdom of God.”

As is well known, Smith’s Secret Gospel ignited a firestorm, including accusations that Smith himself forged the document—accusations fueled by the widespread belief that Smith was himself gay and that he had an intense dislike of traditional forms of Christianity.

Geoffrey S. Smith and Brent C. Landau have three goals in their book. The first is to write a history of Smith’s discovery and of the ensuing controversy. Here, they shine. The narrative is lively and readable, fleshed out with oral history and work in archival sources. In the end, the picture of Smith that emerges is complicated. While the authors offer a sympathetic portrayal, enough of Smith’s vanity and bigotry shine through to keep the picture endearing.

Their second goal is to argue that Smith himself could not have forged the document. The arguments to this end are varied, and the details can be left to readers. The authors are most persuasive when they parse the claims of those who claim to find “hidden clues” in Smith’s own writings where he admits to being the forger. As they argue, such clues are untenable at best and ridiculous at worst, more befitting conspiracy theorists than sober researchers.

Their final goal is to propose a new provenance for the text: it is a forgery from late antiquity—produced at Mar Sabas—in response to debates taking place at the time

regarding monastic discipline: whether boys should be received as members of the monastic community or allowed to live with elder monks in a cenobitic setting. The forger was a participant in that debate and hoped to ensure continued access to these boys, the authors argue. Given the homoerotic nature of the Secret Gospel, the authors are inclined to think that this included sexual access. They link this in turn to the Byzantine rite of “brother-making,” first made famous by John Boswell in his *Same-Sex Unions in Pre-Modern Europe* (New York: Villard Books, 1994).

The authors believe they can narrow the provenance still further, to the time of John Moschus, whose *Spiritual Meadow* they regard as “the elusive white whale of Secret Gospel scholarship” (174), because of three resurrection stories with “subtle erotic subtexts” (174): an elder at Mar Sabas raises a deceased monk from the dead to exchange the kiss of peace; a grave robber in Egypt is chastised by a male corpse for stealing his linen shroud; and a grave robber in Theoupolis (Antioch, not Jerusalem, contra the authors) is bawled out by a female corpse for stealing her clothes. For reasons that may seem less than evident to some, the authors regard these stories as strikingly parallel to the Secret Gospel and as justifying the conclusion that both were written at nearly the same time and place.

What else can be inferred about our forger, according to the authors? He made a surreptitious use of Eusebius’ *Ecclesiastical History*. While the authors think this use of Eusebius is obvious—as much so as when they catch “a clever student cheating on an essay or during an exam” (150)—others may not be convinced. Personally, I would not want to have to take the case before the Honor Council. In addition, the forger had an intimate knowledge of Clement’s authentic works, as he mimics Clement’s vocabulary and style all but perfectly. Lastly, the forger must have read Mark’s gospel with nearly modern historical-critical eyes. He noticed the subtle geographical anomalies of Mark 10 and reasoned that his forgery would be the more convincing if he resolved those anomalies, while also explaining the cameo of the naked youth at Gethsemane.

In sum, the authors conclude that the Secret Gospel was likely “composed in-house” at Mar Sabas “and never left the premises” (169) and that it should be assigned to sometime around the seventh century. It is a bold thesis, and while readers may debate whether the evidence is compelling, they will certainly find the arguments and presentation enjoyable.

To my mind, the thesis’ weakest point is its assumption of continuity at Mar Sabas. Between late antiquity and the present, the monastery was sacked, pillaged, and abandoned over a dozen times. Even after it was acquired by the Greek Orthodox in the seventeenth century, it was often little more than an almshouse for elderly monks and was frequently abandoned due to harassment by local Bedouin tribes. Today, if one wants to examine older manuscripts copied at Mar Sabas, one finds them at Mount Sinai, not at Mar Sabas. Since its acquisition by the Greek Orthodox, Mar Sabas was able to acquire a small collection of manuscripts, but this was a *de novo* effort. Nor is the collection especially exciting. (The collection has been housed in the Patriarchal Library in Jerusalem since 1880.) Given the discontinuities in the monastery’s history, it is hard to see how this text, or any other, could have survived uniquely at Mar Sabas from late antiquity to the present. Whatever its provenance, it must have come to Mar Sabas from elsewhere.

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