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Halfway Between Sabbatai Tzevi and Aleister Crowley: Morton Smith’s “Own Concept of What Jesus ‘Must’ Have Been” and, Once Again, the Questions of Evidence and Motive*

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De-essentializing the Study of Early Christian Apocryphal Texts

One of the phenomena most characteristic of the modern rediscovery of Christian apocryphal texts is the tendency to make exceptional claims about their value for the reconstruction of early Christian history only to have them counterbalanced with more critical interpretations that end up practically denying their worth outright—at least for the history of the first-century Jewish sectarian communities and movements that progressively metamorphosed into the variety of second- and third-century Christian churches.¹ This is exemplified by the ongoing debate over the famous (or infamous) *Gospel of Judas* which was recently rescued from the oblivion of time and the injuries suffered at the hands of a gang of less than scrupulous antiquities dealers.² Even more amazing, however, is the polarization that exists between

* I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the organizers, Tony Burke and Philip Harland, for inviting me to participate in this highly stimulating conference on the *Secret Gospel of Mark*. My thanks are also due to Robert Edwards for his constant efforts to improve the quality of my English style.

¹ A development pertinently described by Heikki Räisänen, *The Rise of Christian Beliefs: The Thought World of Early Christians* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010).

² See the volumes published by Madeleine Scopello, ed., *The Gospel of Judas in Context: Proceedings of the First International Conference on the Gospel of Judas. Paris, Sorbonne, October 27th–28th, 2006*, NHMS 62 (Leiden:

specialists who believe that every scrap of apocryphal text preserves traditions as old and valuable as those of their canonical counterparts and, at the other end of the spectrum, scholars who hold that they are no more than secondary rewritings of New Testament texts. John Dominic Crossan is one of the most outstanding representatives of the first group, while Craig Evans can legitimately be considered the new champion of the second trend.³ Everyone, however, hopefully will agree that reality cannot so easily be reduced to a black and white picture without any nuance of grey. Thus, a few years ago, following the path of a scholar so competent and circumspect as Jean-Daniel Kaestli,⁴ I started examining the material evidence and the arguments put forward in order to substantiate the various interpretations proposed—notably on the *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Gospel of Peter*, and the so-called *Secret Gospel of Mark*—by the proponents of the two conflicting schools of thought.⁵ Not surprisingly, the *Gospel of Thomas* appeared to be the finest and largest fish ever caught by the last two generations of “wise fishermen” of apocryphal texts, while the *Gospel of Peter* was a nice specimen but not quite as extraordinary as some (Irish) anglers would have one believe. As for the *Secret Gospel of Mark*, though it was not an old shoe that someone had thrown into the water that looked like some type of aquatic being, it has proved finally to be an extremely sophisticated fishing lure.

Once Again, the Question of Evidence

The Wrong Document, at the Wrong Place...

It is well known that the debate over the authenticity of the fragmentary *Letter to Theodore* attributed to Clement of Alexandria, and discovered by the late Morton Smith (1915–

Brill, 2008), and April D. DeConick, ed., *The Codex Judas Papers: Proceedings of the International Congress on the Tchacos Codex Held at Rice University, Houston, Texas, March 13–16, 2008*, NHMS 71 (Leiden: Brill, 2009).

³ Contrast, e.g., John Dominic Crossan, *Four Other Gospels: Shadows on the Contours of Canon* (Minneapolis: Winston [Seabury], 1985); idem, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 427–34, with Craig A. Evans, *Fabricating Jesus: How Modern Scholars Distort the Gospels* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity, 2006), 52–99 and 252–60; idem, “The Gospel of Judas and the Other Gospels,” in *Gospel of Judas*, 2nd ed., ed. Rodolphe Kasser, Marvin Meyer, and Gregor Wurst (in collaboration with François Gaudard) (Washington, D.C.: National Geographic Society, 2008), 103–24. On the ideological presuppositions underlying contemporary indiscriminate criticism of non-canonical texts, see Tony Burke, “Heresy Hunting in the New Millennium,” *SR* 39 (2010) 405–20.

⁴ See especially Jean-Daniel Kaestli, “L’utilisation de l’Évangile de Thomas dans la recherche actuelle sur les paroles de Jésus,” in *Jésus de Nazareth. Nouvelles approches d’une énigme*, ed. Daniel Marguerat, Enrico Norelli, and Jean-Michel Poffet, MoBi 38 (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1998), 373–95; idem, “L’Évangile de Thomas. Que peuvent nous apprendre les ‘paroles cachées de Jésus’?,” in *Le mystère apocryphe. Introduction à une littérature méconnue*, 2nd ed., ed. Jean-Daniel Kaestli and Daniel Marguerat, EsBi 26 (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 2007), 73–93; idem, “L’Évangile secret de Marc. Une version longue de l’Évangile de Marc réservée aux chrétiens avancés dans l’Église d’Alexandrie? Fragment d’une lettre de Clément d’Alexandrie au sujet de l’Évangile secret de Marc,” *ibid.*, 113–36.

⁵ Pierluigi Piovanelli, “Pre- and Post-canonical Passion Stories: Insights into the Development of Christian Discourse on the Death of Jesus,” *Apocrypha* 14 (2003) 99–128; idem, “L’Évangile secret de Marc trente trois ans après, entre potentialités exégétiques et difficultés techniques,” *RB* 114 (2007) 52–72 and 237–54; idem, “‘Un gros et beau poisson.’ L’Évangile selon Thomas dans la recherche (et la controverse) contemporaine(s),” *Adamantius* 15 (2009) 291–306; idem, “Thomas in Edessa? Another Look at the Original Setting of the *Gospel of Thomas*,” in *Myths, Martyrs, and Modernity: Studies in the History of Religions in Honour of Jan N. Bremmer*, ed. Jitse Dijkstra, Justin Kroesen, and Yme Kuiper, Numen Book Series 127 (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 443–61.

1991) in an annex of the Mar Saba Library in the summer of 1958, was reopened by Stephen C. Carlson in 2005 with a short book in which he was able to highlight a series of anachronisms and technical anomalies—including codicological, paleographic, and graphological examples—that would betray not only the forged nature of the document but also its modern, Smithsonian origins.⁶ He was promptly followed in 2007 by Peter Jeffery, whose study of the ritual and liturgical use—if any—of *Secret Mark* in Alexandria seems to have brought even more anachronisms and inconsistencies to light.⁷ More recently, in 2010 Francis Watson detected some troubling verbal and conceptual correspondences between Morton Smith’s retelling of his own discovery in 1973 and James Hunter’s popular novel, *The Mystery of Mar Saba*, published in 1940.⁸

In reaction to the offensive against the authenticity of the *Letter to Theodore*, Scott Brown has not hesitated in assuming the valiant task of refuting, in detail and at length, almost every point of Carlson’s and Jeffery’s criticisms—particularly the question of the anachronisms and the riddles supposedly embedded within the text.⁹ In this endeavor Brown has also received the support of some Scandinavian bloggers who have pointed out other weaknesses in the line of reasoning followed by the advocates of the modern forgery approach, such as the poor quality of

⁶ Stephen C. Carlson, *The Gospel Hoax: Morton Smith’s Invention of Secret Mark* (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2005). In doing so, Carlson has taken on and radicalized many of the critiques already formulated by Quentin Quesnell, “The Mar Saba Clementine: A Question of Evidence,” *CBQ* 37 (1975) 48–67; idem, “A Reply to Morton Smith,” *CBQ* 38 (1976) 200–203. See Piovanelli, “L’Évangile secret de Marc,” 63–66 (Quesnell) and 242–45 (Carlson), as well as Alain Le Boulluec’s penetrating remarks in his review of both Scott G. Brown, *Mark’s Other Gospel: Rethinking Morton Smith’s Controversial Discovery*, *ESCJ* 15 (Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2005), and Carlson’s book in *Apocrypha* 19 (2008) 308–13. As for the reception of Carlson’s theses by German scholarship, see Hans-Josef Klauck, *Die apokryphe Bibel. Ein anderer Zugang zum frühen Christentum*, *Tria Corda* 4 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 62–93; Eckhard Rau, “Weder gefälscht noch authentisch? Überlegungen zum Status des geheimen Markusevangeliums als Quelle des antiken Christentums,” in *Jesus in apokryphen Evangelienüberlieferungen. Beiträge zu ausserkanonischen Jesusüberlieferungen aus verschiedenen Sprach- und Kulturtraditionen*, ed. Jörg Frey and Jens Schröter, *WUNT* 1.254 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 139–86; idem, “Das Geheimnis des Reiches Gottes. Die esoterische Rezeption der Lehre Jesu im geheimen Markusevangelium,” *ibid.*, 187–221.

⁷ 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). The highly polemical nature of Jeffery’s work has been variously appreciated by the reviewers: see Scott G. Brown, *RBL* (posted 15 September 2007) 1–47. Online: http://www.bookreviews.org/pdf/5627_5944.pdf; Paul Foster, *ExpTim* 119 (2007) 50–51; Maxwell E. Johnson, *Worship* 82 (2008) 85–89; J. Harold Ellens, *RBL* (posted June 2009) 1–9. Online: http://www.bookreviews.org/pdf/5627_7785.pdf; Nicole E. Kelly, *Magic, Ritual and Witchcraft* 4 (2009) 114–17.

⁸ James Hogg Hunter, *The Mystery of Mar Saba* (New York and Toronto: Evangelical Publishers, 1940). See Francis Watson, “Beyond Suspicion: On the Authorship of the Mar Saba Letter and the Secret Gospel of Mark,” *JTS* 61 (2010) 128–70 (at 161–70). The connection with Hunter’s work of fiction was initially made by Philip Jenkins, *Hidden Gospels: How the Search for Jesus Lost Its Way* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 101–2, and Robert M. Price, “Second Thoughts on the Secret Gospel,” *BBR* 14 (2004) 127–32.

⁹ Scott G. Brown, “Factualizing the Folklore: Stephen Carlson’s Case against Morton Smith,” *HTR* 99 (2006) 291–327; idem, “The Question of Motive in the Case against Morton Smith,” *JBL* 125 (2006) 351–83; idem, “The *Letter to Theodore*: Stephen Carlson’s Case against Clement’s Authorship,” *JECS* 16 (2008) 535–72; Allan J. Pantuck and Scott G. Brown, “Morton Smith as M. Madiotes: Stephen Carlson’s Attribution of Secret Mark to a Bald Swindler,” *JSHS* 6 (2008) 106–25; idem, “Stephen Carlson’s Questionable Questioned Document Examination,” *Salainan evankelista* (posted 14 April 2010), n. p. Online: <http://salainenevankelista.blogspot.com/2010/04/stephen-carlsons-questionable.html>.

the pictures used by Carlson to carry out his graphological analysis.¹⁰ However, the most serious attempt to vindicate Smith's academic honor and reputation was the 2008 publication of a corpus of one hundred and twenty letters exchanged by Smith and his mentor and friend, the great Israeli specialist of Jewish mysticism, Gershom Scholem (1897–1982), between 1945 and 1982.¹¹ Thus, in the opinion of Guy Stroumsa, its editor, “[t]he correspondence should provide sufficient evidence of his [i.e., Smith’s] intellectual honesty to anyone armed with common sense and lacking malice.”¹² Sadly enough, as I will clarify below, this was just wishful thinking on his part and, in spite of their undisputable interest, the content of some of Smith’s letters serves to make his position more ambiguous and fragile than ever.

Before reviewing this new evidence, it would be best to remember briefly at least two incontrovertible facts that are going to play, cumulatively with other considerations, a decisive role in the validation or invalidation of the authenticity and historical reliability of the *Letter to Theodore*. The first is that Clement’s fragment was found, so to speak, in the wrong place—this means that it was discovered in a location in which it would be both unnatural and even suspect to find such an amazing document. Actually, in spite of Smith’s efforts to convince his readers to the contrary,¹³ this is the only case in the history of not only Greek but also Latin, Hebrew,

¹⁰ Roger Viklund, “Reclaiming Clement’s Letter to Theodoros—An Examination of Carlson’s Handwriting Analysis,” *Jesus granskad* (posted 7 February 2009), n. p. Online: <http://www.jesusgranskad.se/theodore.htm>; idem, “Tremors, or Just an Optical Illusion? A Further Evaluation of Carlson’s Handwriting Analysis,” *Jesus granskad* (posted 12 December 2009), n. p. Online: <http://www.jesusgranskad.se/theodore2.htm>.

¹¹ Guy G. Stroumsa, ed., *Morton Smith and Gershom Scholem, Correspondence 1945–1982*, *Jerusalem Studies in Religion and Culture* 9 (Leiden: Brill, 2008). Stroumsa announced the discovery of these letters at the Jewish National and University Library in Jerusalem in his essay, “Comments on Charles Hedrick’s Article: A Testimony,” *J ECS* 11 (2003) 147–53 (at 149–53). For a critical review of Stroumsa’s edition and a first evaluation of the data, see Pierluigi Piovanelli, “Une certaine ‘Keckheit, Kühnheit und Grandiosität . . .’ La correspondance entre Morton Smith et Gershom Scholem (1945–1982). Notes critiques,” *RHR* 228 (2011) 403–29. Also see the important reviews by Saverio Campanini, “A proposito di un carteggio recente. Saggio bibliografico,” *Materia giudaica* 13 (2008) 397–405, and Domenico Accorinti, in *Gnomon* 82 (2010) 261–71.

¹² Stroumsa, *Correspondence*, xv.

¹³ Thus, examples from Mar Saba of the practice of recycling older fragments of parchment in the bindings of more recent volumes were presented by Morton Smith, “Monasteries and Their Manuscripts,” *Archaeology* 13 (1960) 172–77 (at 174–75 and 177); idem, “New Fragments of Scholia on Sophocle’s *Ajax*,” *GRBS* 3 (1960) 40–42; idem, *The Secret Gospel: The Discovery and Interpretation of the Secret Gospel According to Mark* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 37. However, this is not exactly the same as finding an unknown ancient text and copying it at the end of a modern printed book. In order to explain such a unique phenomenon, Smith had to imagine a chain of exceptional events—i.e., that 1) a codex containing no fewer than twenty-one letters of Clement was kept at Mar Saba, because it was probably there that John of Damascus had seen and cited it in the first half of the eighth century (but see below, n. 20); 2) this codex had been almost completely destroyed by the terrible fire which devastated the library of Mar Saba at the beginning of the eighteenth century; and 3) someone—probably a learned Greek monk with an excellent knowledge of patristic literature—found a folio of the codex containing the first part of the *Letter to Theodore* and, intrigued by its content, hastily copied it on the blank pages at the end of a printed edition of the letters of another illustrious Father of the Church. See Morton Smith, *Clement of Alexandria and a Secret Gospel of Mark* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973), 1–4 and 285–90; idem, *Secret Gospel*, 22–23 and 143–48. One should note that the motif of a manuscript fragment miraculously being found among the smoking ashes of a prestigious library was already used to justify the “rediscovery” of the famous Adagio in G minor attributed to Tomaso Giovanni Albinoni (1671–1751), actually “reinvented” by the Italian musicologist Remo Giazotto (1910–1998), who claimed in 1945 to have received a fragment of its score recovered from the ruins of the Sächsischen Landesbibliothek in Dresden. Ironically enough, Giazotto published it in 1958!

Aramaic, Coptic, Syriac, and other ancient classic and late antique literature in which an important text by a major author would have been found copied at the end of a European book—in this case, Isaac Voss’s edition of the *Epistulae genuinae S. Ignatii Martyris*, published in Amsterdam in 1646—at a date as late as the first half of the eighteenth century.¹⁴ Moreover, the volume in question was found in a library where, in the absence of any rigorous control, almost anybody could have fraudulently introduced it between ca. 1750 and 1958. In other words, if a new, revolutionary text attributed to a classic author were to be discovered outside of a manuscript found in an old cemetery, an ancient cache, or a well-kept and organized library, but instead penned by a modern hand on the back pages of an old volume of, e.g., Migne’s *Patrologia Graeca*, even if such a volume was retrieved from the shelves of the library of a very remote Armenian or Georgian monastery, it would be more than legitimate to be suspicious about its provenance and to adopt an extremely prudent attitude with respect to its authenticity.

The second problematic fact is that, in the opinion of some of the most qualified specialists, the information provided by the *Letter to Theodore* does not fit very well with what we presently know about Clement of Alexandria and the history of the Egyptian Church. I am referring here to the doubts recently expressed by Attila Jakab, Alain Le Boulluec, and Annick Martin, three French (or French-speaking) historians of early Christianity in Egypt who have been involved, at different times and to varying degrees, with the Association pour l’étude de la littérature apocryphe chrétienne (AELAC).¹⁵ Thus, Jakab points out that the author of the letter seems to know the Carpocratians much better than Clement, who apparently thought that Epiphanes, Carpocrates’ son, was the true founder of the school (*Strom.* III.2.5).¹⁶ In the same vein but in a more articulated manner, Martin argues that, 1) the revised chronology of Athanasius’s *Festal letters* does not confirm Thomas Talley’s reconstruction of a “primitive” Alexandrian liturgy for the baptism of the catechumens that would have been based on the chronology suggested by the initiation rite (“after six days”) described in the first episode of *Secret Mark* quoted in the *Letter to Theodore* (III.6–7); 2) for Clement the baptism seems to be the only way to obtain illumination, sonship, perfection, and immortality (*Paed.* I.6), without the need for more advanced initiatory stages that would have been devoted to the specific study of a single, more mystical gospel; and 3) moreover, even the eventual presence of Carpocratians in Alexandria—at least at the end of the second century—is doubtful, since Clement does not

¹⁴ Not to mention the extremely troubling detail—emphasized by Bart D. Ehrman, “Response to Charles Hedrick’s Stalemate,” *JECS* 11 (2003) 155–63 (at 162–63); idem, *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 87—that the *Letter to Theodore* was copied on the blank pages that follow the very last sentence of the edition, in which Voss denounces the impudence of “that scoundrel” who had dared to write down Ignatius’s apocryphal letters “filling so many pages with such trifles” (“Plures enim paginas nugis istis implebat impudentissimus iste nebulo” [Voss, *Epistulae genuinae*, 318]).

¹⁵ See especially Alain Le Boulluec, *La notion d’hérésie dans la littérature grecque, II^e–III^e siècles*, 2 vols. (Paris: Études augustiniennes, 1985); idem, *Alexandrie antique et chrétienne. Clément et Origène*, ed. Carmelo G. Conticello, Collection des Études augustiniennes, Série Antiquité 178 (Paris: Institut d’Études augustiniennes, 2006); idem, *Clément d’Alexandrie. Stromates VII*, SC 428 (Paris: Cerf, 1997); Alain Le Boulluec and Pierre Voulet, *Clément d’Alexandrie. Stromates V*, 2 vols., SC 278–79 (Paris: Cerf, 2006–2009); Annick Martin, *Athanase d’Alexandrie et l’Église d’Égypte au IV^e siècle (328–373)*, Cahiers de l’École française de Rome 216 (Rome: École française de Rome, 1996); Attila Jakab, *Ecclesia Alexandrina. Évolution sociale et institutionnelle du christianisme alexandrin (II^e et III^e siècles)*, Christianismes anciens 1 (Bern: Peter Lang, 2001).

¹⁶ Attila Jakab, “Une lettre ‘perdue’ de Clément d’Alexandrie? (Morton Smith et l’‘Évangile secret’ de Marc),” *Apocrypha* 10 (1999) 7–15 (at 13–14).

mention either Carpocrates or Epiphanes among the founders—Marcion, Basilides, and Valentinus—of the main heretical sects of the day (*Strom.* VII.17).¹⁷

Jakab and Martin also note that the *Letter to Theodore* gives a description of the earliest Christian community in Alexandria as already being in existence and having diversified prior to the arrival of Mark. This report is at odds not only with Clement's silence on Mark's involvement with Alexandria, but also with the account of Eusebius, who accepts the tradition ("some say") that attributes the first conversions in Alexandria to the evangelist (*Hist. eccl.* II.16).¹⁸ Concerning the origins of the church in Alexandria, the real question is not to determine which of the two versions of the story is more ancient and historically plausible, but to explain why Eusebius, who constantly relies on the work of Clement, seems to ignore useful information found in one of Clement's letters that he could have consulted easily in bishop Alexander's library in Jerusalem (*Hist. eccl.* VI.20)¹⁹—at least if any manuscripts containing Clement's correspondence existed and were kept there. This is the final and most fatal blow to the house of cards making up the connection between a postulated collection of Clementine letters and Mar Saba. Actually, as Martin makes perfectly clear, on the one hand John of Damascus lived and worked, until 742, in Jerusalem and not, as his later biographers claimed, at Mar Saba; on the other hand, it is not certain that Clement was the author of the three citations attributed to him, in the midst of other biblical and truly Clementine excerpts, in the *Sacra parallela* anthologies made, in the ninth century or later, from John of Damascus's presently lost *Hiera*. In other words, the existence of a corpus of letters of Clement could be but the result of an erroneous medieval attribution.²⁰ Thus, in spite of the remote possibility of a late antique falsification, Martin is compelled to acknowledge that "the hypothesis of a modern forgery starts again with renewed vigor" and that "the scientific reliability" of the *Letter to Theodore* "should be called into question," at least, until it is possible to recover the original document and analyze the ink used by its scribe²¹—a judgment also shared by Jakab and Le Boulluec²² with such agreement that it

¹⁷ 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, 29–31 mai 2003), ed. Louis Painchaud and Paul-Hubert Poirier, Bibliothèque copte de Nag Hammadi, Section Études 8 (Quebec, Leuven and Paris: Presses de l'Université Laval and Peeters, 2007), 277–300 (at 282–88). On the question of the Alexandrian liturgy and its sequence, see Alberto Camplani, *Le lettere festali di Atanasio di Alessandria. Studio storico-critico*, Corpus dei manoscritti copti letterari (Rome: Centro Italiano Microfiches, 1989), 171–83; idem, "Sull'origine della Quaresima in Egitto," in *Acts of the Fifth International Congress of Coptic Studies, Washington, 12–15 August 1992*, 2 vols., ed. Tito Orlandi and David W. Johnson (Rome: International Association for Coptic Studies and Centro Italiano Microfiches, 1993), 2:105–21; idem, *Atanasio di Alessandria. Lettere festali—Anonimo. Indice delle Lettere festali*, Letture cristiane del primo millennio 34 (Milan: Paoline, 2003), 178–81. For other problems inherent to Talley's and Smith's baptismal interpretation of the initiation to "the great mysteries" required of those who would have been allowed to read the *Secret Mark*, see Brown, *Mark's Other Gospel*, 147–50 and 266–67.

¹⁸ Jakab, "Une lettre 'perdue'," 14–15; Martin, "À propos de la lettre," 292–95 (the legend of the Markan origins could date from the years 220–30).

¹⁹ As Smith himself (*Clement of Alexandria*, 285–86) admits. Compare Martin, "À propos de la lettre," 296–97.

²⁰ Martin, "À propos de la lettre," 299–300. Already in the opinion of their first editor, Karl Holl, *Fragmente vornicänischer Kirchenväter aus den Sacra Parallela*, TU 20.2 (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1899), these fragments were "dubious."

²¹ Martin, "À propos de la lettre," 300. It is, then, extremely surprising to read in Stroumsa, *Correspondence*, xv, n. 19, that in her essay Martin makes "a convincing argument about the letter's authenticity"!

makes any previous statements about a growing consensus among Clementine scholars concerning the authenticity of the Mar Saba letter look obsolete.²³

... Discovered by the Wrong Person!

The publication of Smith's letters adds decisively to the aforementioned difficulties, specifically because the author of the discovery was already familiar with, and well trained, prior to 1958, in the main fields of research, topics, and methods that he would later find inextricably intertwined in the study of the *Letter to Theodore*. Thus, we learn that in 1948 he devoted the first six months of the year to the study of Gregory of Nyssa's "background—giving half of [his] time to classical literature and half to the early Fathers, especially Clement of Alexandria."²⁴ In 1951–1952, thanks to a Fulbright grant, he spent an entire year in Greece exploring monastic libraries in search of new manuscripts of the epistles of Isidore of Pelusium—the initial topic of his Harvard doctoral dissertation—and "brought back about 5,000 photographs of manuscripts (i.e. about 10,000 pages)" from "places like Patmos and Mount Athos" with the hope of putting them to use for his "Th.D. thesis on St. Isidore of Pelusium, an edition of St. Maximus's *Centuries on Love*, and some studies of patristic catenae."²⁵ According to the title of the unpublished catalogue that Smith compiled and deposited in the Brown University Library in 1952, the passages he had selected were taken "from Greek manuscripts of the tenth to nineteenth centuries found mainly in monastic libraries"²⁶—a chronological span that should betray Smith's familiarity, at that time, not only with medieval, but also with modern Greek handwritten materials.²⁷

Among the various publication projects that he undertook in 1947 were, "a book, two big articles, and a book review which should be almost an article, on strictly New Testament subjects,"²⁸ a "book on the lives of Jesus,"²⁹ "a book on Mark," which he had almost finished in

²² Jakab, "Une lettre 'perdue'," 15. As for the position of Le Boulluec, contrast his initially cautious appreciation of the *Letter to Theodore* in "La lettre sur l'Évangile secret' de Marc et le *Quis dives salvetur?* de Clément d'Alexandrie," *Apocrypha* 7 (1996) 27–41 (at 41), with his current reservations in "L'«école» d'Alexandrie," in *Histoire du Christianisme, Tome I: Le nouveau peuple (des origines à 250)*, ed. Luce Pietri (Paris: Desclée, 2000), 531–78 (at 547–48, n. 107), and the review mentioned above, n. 6.

²³ See, e.g., Charles W. Hedrick, "The Secret Gospel of Mark: Stalemate in the Academy," *J ECS* 11 (2003) 133–45 (at 141), concerning the inclusion of the *Letter to Theodore* in the second edition of Clement's writings published by Ursula Treu, *Clemens Alexandrinus, IV: Register, 1: Zitate register, Testimonienregister, Initienregister für die Fragmente, Eigennamenregister*, GCS 39.1 (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1980), xvii–xviii. Obviously enough, this does not mean that some scholars, like Jeff Jay, "A New Look at the Epistolary Framework of the *Secret Gospel of Mark*," *J ECS* 16 (2008) 573–97, are still defending—N.B. on stylistic and literary grounds that are always the easiest to imitate—the attribution of the letter to Clement.

²⁴ Letter 11 of 17 August 1948 (Stroumsa, *Correspondence*, 28).

²⁵ Letter 31 of 26 January 1953 (Stroumsa, *Correspondence*, 63). The same information is repeated in the "Account of Advanced Studies" that Smith submitted to the Guggenheim foundation in 1962 (*ibid.*, 195).

²⁶ See the bibliography appended to Morton Smith, *Studies in the Cult of Yahweh*, 2 vols. ed. Shaye J. D. Cohen, *Religions in the Graeco-Roman World* 130.1–2 (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 2:257–78 (at 259).

²⁷ Compare the comments on the "completely chaotic" situation of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries patristic florilegia in Morton Smith, "The Manuscript Tradition of Isidore of Pelusium," *HTR* 47 (1954) 205–10 (at 209–10).

²⁸ Letter 8 of 9 May 1947 (Stroumsa, *Correspondence*, 22).

²⁹ Letter 9 of 12 December 1947 (Stroumsa, *Correspondence*, 23).

1955–1956,³⁰ and a new anthology of Jewish Pseudepigrapha in translation for 1957–1958.³¹ If such announcements were not the result of a vague desire to explore ever new avenues of research—and a few works published in those years seem to demonstrate that this was not the case³²—, we should conclude that Smith was, from an intellectual point of view, perfectly equipped to deal with both the content and the form of the amazing Clementine fragment that he was later to discover at Mar Saba.³³ In this regard, we should also remember that, from the first steps of the historico-critical school in nineteenth-century German universities, one of the most sensitive cases in the debate about the differences between the Gospel of John and the Synoptics was the absence in the latter of any mention of “Jesus’ greatest miracle,” the raising of his friend Lazarus of Bethany as narrated in John 11. Since the uncompromising analysis of David Friedrich Strauss, this episode has become a locus classicus for discussions of the Johannine question and the reliability of the Fourth Gospel’s evidence for the reconstruction of Jesus’ deeds.³⁴ Now, what Smith was going to discover in the first passage of *Secret Mark* quoted in the *Letter to Theodore* (II.23–III.11) was precisely the missing link between the Synoptics—in this case, an *Urmark*—and the Gospel of John that a good number of exegetes had dreamt of for more than a century. A scholar as meticulous and well-prepared as Smith, already conversant in New Testament criticism, would hardly have ignored this.³⁵

Once Again, the Question of Motive

In the Beginning, a Hoax?

Smith’s correspondence with Scholem also sheds a new light on the circumstances that compelled him to interrupt his collaboration with Brown University sooner than he had expected. In 1953 Smith was apparently doing well at Brown, where he was even planning to have Scholem invited as a guest professor with the help of some faithful friends such as William G. Braude, the well-known specialist of rabbinic literature. Unhappily, in spite of the prospect of

³⁰ Letters 40 of 1 August 1955 (Stroumsa, *Correspondence*, 81); 42 of 27 October 1955 (ibid., 85); 45 of 28 February 1956 (ibid., 89). In this regard, one should also note a perhaps significant slip when Smith designates, in 1968, his *Clement of Alexandria* then in press as “[t]he book on Mark” (letter 86 of 5 July 1968 [ibid., 144]).

³¹ Letters 55 of 9 December 1957 (Stroumsa, *Correspondence*, 106–7); 59 of 12 January 1958 (ibid., 110–11); 61 of 4 December 1958 (ibid., 112).

³² I am especially thinking of Morton Smith, “Comments on Taylor’s Commentary on Mark,” *HTR* 48 (1955) 21–64; idem, “The Jewish Elements in the Gospels,” *JBR* 24 (1956) 90–96; idem, “Aramaic Studies and the Study of the New Testament,” *JBR* 26 (1958) 304–13. Earlier materials were also updated and recycled in Morton Smith, “Prolegomena to a Discussion of Aretalogies, Divine Men, the Gospels and Jesus,” *JBL* 90 (1971) 174–99 (repr. in idem, *Studies*, 2:3–27).

³³ On this point, one cannot but agree with Carlson, *Gospel Hoax*, 74–76 and 128–29.

³⁴ Contrast David Friedrich Strauss, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, trans. George Eliot (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1860), 476–95, for whom, “[i]f the authors or collectors of the three first gospels knew of this [i.e., the raising of Lazarus], they could not, for more than one reason, avoid introducing it into their writings” (491), with, e.g., John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, vol. 2, *Mentor, Message, and Miracles*, ABRL (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 798–832, who laboriously tries to reconstruct the original content of the story before concluding that “the silence of the Synoptic Gospels about the raising of Lazarus says nothing one way or the other about the ultimate historicity of the tradition” (832).

³⁵ A point cleverly made by Price, “Second Thoughts,” 130–31.

tenure that they had used to lure him two years earlier,³⁶ another candidate received the position left vacant at the Department of Biblical Literature and History of Religions. As a result, at the beginning of 1954 Smith was informed that his contract was not going to be renewed:

They are “letting me go” allegedly because the teaching here is almost entirely of undergraduates and they think me better qualified to teach graduate students. The real reason, however, seems to be that the University, because of financial difficulties, depends heavily on current contributions from alumni and the religious group among the alumni have therefore been able to press the administration to support a religious revival. (I don’t think it took much pressure, really, but the capacity for pressure was there.) One step of this revival requires that a dynamic popular preacher of Christianity be placed in the Department of Biblical Literature. There are only two chairs in the department, and the man in the other one [i.e., Professor William Robbins] has “tenure”—i.e. has been employed so long that he can’t be fired except for grave scandal—so out I go.³⁷

Even if, from a technical point of view, Smith was not “denied tenure” at Brown³⁸—at least, not at the end of a formal process of internal and external evaluation by his peers—, the final issue was still his dismissal in favor of a colleague who was, according to Smith himself, theologically more correct in an institution—we can add—with a strong, foundational, Baptist orientation.³⁹ Moreover, in spite of the gentlemen’s agreement that allowed him to remain—as is usual in these cases—at Brown for one more year, until June 1955,⁴⁰ Smith harbored a long-term grudge against William J. Robbins (1913–2007), the professor of Old Testament and, since 1950, chair of the department, who had undeniably played a key role in the entire affair. According to Smith, Robbins was guilty of nothing less than not knowing the Hebrew language!

One fly has crept into the ointment: The present Professor of Old Testament has expressed regret that your seminar [a “Survey of Jewish Mysticism (Main Points of its History and Teachings)” that Scholem was planning to give during his invitation as visiting professor at Brown University, in 1956–1957] will require a reading knowledge of Hebrew. He says he thinks there would be a number of students who would like to take

³⁶ “After accepting the Yale scholarship I was persuaded to change my mind and stay in at Brown for security’s sake; since here [i.e., at Brown University] there is a full professorship in the offing and there [i.e., at Yale University], after finishing the research, I should be out of work and still on the level of an instructor” (letter 30 of 13 June 1951 [Stroumsa, *Correspondence*, 61]).

³⁷ Letter 36 of 14 May 1954 (Stroumsa, *Correspondence*, 72).

³⁸ As Carlson, *Gospel Hoax*, 8 and 80, incorrectly claims.

³⁹ Neither Smith, in his published letters, nor Pantuck, in his notes, disclose the name of this scholar. The most probable candidate seems to be Ernest S. Frerichs, who in 1953 was hired at Brown as professor of Religious and Jewish Studies. However, contrary to Smith’s all-too-negative description and pessimistic expectations, Frerichs quickly became a highly respected specialist of biblical archaeology and Second Temple Judaism, who eventually also contributed an article to Smith’s *Festschrift*: Ernest S. Frerichs, “Contemporary Ecclesiastical Approaches to Biblical Interpretation: Orthodoxy and Pseudorthodoxy,” in *Christianity, Judaism and Other Greco-Roman Cults: Studies for Morton Smith at Sixty*, 4 vols., ed. Jacob Neusner, SJLA 12 (Leiden: Brill, 1975), 2:217–27 (a rejoinder to Smith’s study mentioned below, n. 50).

⁴⁰ Letter 38 of 19 June 1954 (Stroumsa, *Correspondence*, 76–77).

a seminar with you, but who could not meet that requirement. (He is right at least as to one student—himself, and I think his regret is due to the fact he thinks such a seminar as proposed might call attention to his deficiency in this matter).⁴¹

Tactfully, Scholem immediately expressed his sympathy to Smith in quite eloquent terms: “It is bitterly disappointing to hear that you are leaving Brown, and I wish you find a place where your tenure is not dependent on churchmen’s interests. That’s a bitter pill and I understand how you must feel.”⁴² At the same time, however, Scholem was displaying more tolerance and magnanimity toward the former colleagues of his protégé.⁴³

In January 1950 it had already been necessary for Scholem to comfort the young Smith following a failure at Bryn Mawr (Pennsylvania). The college was initially “looking for a potential Professor of the Philosophy of Religion,”⁴⁴ but Smith quickly realized that he had “no great hope of getting the chair, which seems likely to be reserved for someone with an ‘inspirational message.’”⁴⁵ On that occasion, Scholem’s reply had been, so to speak, prophetic:

Your expanding scholarship makes me wonder—where will all that lead to? The gentlemen at Bryn Mawr had apparently no use for an intelligent man. Meanwhile you will know too much for America, too much of the Fathers of the Church and out of sheer boredom with this world will become a Manichean.⁴⁶

Six years later, after the troubles at Brown and a fruitless attempt at Yale—where Smith was interviewed by what Erwin R. Goodenough (1893–1965) did not hesitate to define as “a committee of preachers”⁴⁷—with the announcement of a new application, this time at Cornell University (Ithaca, New York),⁴⁸ Scholem cried out: “How the American Universities let a scholar like yourself sit around and wait for a good appointment is above my understanding.”⁴⁹

It is certainly difficult to evaluate the psychological impact of such negative experiences, and this is in spite of the unshakeable support that Scholem and other influential scholars such as Goodenough and Arthur D. Nock (1902–1963) constantly offered to Smith. It was, perhaps, because of what he perceived as being a hostile attitude from a guild of theologians that Smith started developing—and making more and more obvious—an uncompromising dislike for what he would later call the “pseudorthodoxy” of Biblical studies, that is, “apologetic and anachronistic scholarship recruited for the defense of certain religious beliefs about the Bible.”⁵⁰

⁴¹ Letter 52 of 15 June 1956 (Stroumsa, *Correspondence*, 102).

⁴² Letter 37, not dated but presumably of 6 June 1954 (Stroumsa, *Correspondence*, 73).

⁴³ Letter 53 of 26 June 1956 (Stroumsa, *Correspondence*, 104). One should note, however, that neither Smith nor Scholem ever mention Robbins’s name. His identity was revealed by Pantuck (*ibid.*, 72, n. 206) and Stroumsa (*ibid.*, 102, n. 241).

⁴⁴ Letter 16 of 10 March 1949 (Stroumsa, *Correspondence*, 35).

⁴⁵ Letter 20 of 30 March 1949 (Stroumsa, *Correspondence*, 38).

⁴⁶ Letter 24 of 17 January 1950 (Stroumsa, *Correspondence*, 43–44).

⁴⁷ Letter 42 of 27 October 1955 (Stroumsa, *Correspondence*, 85).

⁴⁸ Letter 52 of 15 June 1956 (Stroumsa, *Correspondence*, 103).

⁴⁹ Letter 53 of 26 June 1956 (Stroumsa, *Correspondence*, 104).

⁵⁰ Stroumsa, *Correspondence*, 147, n. 349. This is Stroumsa’s summary of Morton Smith, “The Present State of Old Testament Studies,” *JBL* 88 (1969) 19–35 (repr. in *idem*, *Studies*, 1:37–54), a polemical essay in which Smith

Thus, it is not surprising if many distinguished specialists became the victims of Smith's fearsome polemical talent, his "caustic and sometimes devastating criticism of some of our contemporaries," as Scholem will acknowledge after the reading of "the first volume of [the] Secret Gospel discovery."⁵¹

Could such a cluster of misfortunes have pushed Smith to take a foolish revenge upon his supposedly incompetent pseudo-orthodox rivals? Did he compose the *Letter to Theodore* at "a point in his life" that was, as Carlson puts it, so "vulnerable"?⁵² Was his main goal, according to the same critic, "to test the establishment, whether to expose flaws in the gatekeepers of authenticity, to exhibit [his own] skill and cunning, or to take pleasure in the failure of self-appointed experts to pass the test"?⁵³ In other words, did Smith commit what Carlson considers to be "an academic hoax" in order to ridicule those "preachers" with no philological and linguistic skills who had dared to humiliate him? In my opinion, the absence of any clearly identifiable "joke" embedded within the *Letter to Theodore*,⁵⁴ along with Smith's sincere commitment to true scholarship⁵⁵ and, especially, his perseverance in defending the authenticity of his discovery without concessions until the very end, are all elements that tend to militate against Carlson's overly simplistic hypothesis of a hoax.

Finding the "Evidence" for a Mystical Libertine Jesus

Smith's extraordinary discovery at Mar Saba is mentioned for the first time in a letter written at the beginning of August 1959, in which he simply tells Scholem: "The material by Clement of Alexandria . . . is turning out to be of great importance, and as soon as I get all minor nuisances off my hands I must work hard at it."⁵⁶ By the end of October of the same year, however, he was able to tell Scholem about his project of "the edition of [a] fragment of a letter allegedly by Clement of Alexandria, . . . which contains some amazing information about the Carpocratians and the Gospel according to Mark."⁵⁷ The mention of the disciples of Carpocrates, well-known for their libertinism (real or imagined), had the immediate effect of arousing Scholem's curiosity. He promptly replied: "I am amazed to hear that there is still unknown

describes the Hebrew Bible as being "largely a tissue of miracle stories" (20) and Old Testament studies as being dominated by apologetic perspectives whose main goal is to defend the "'essential' truth" of the Scriptures (29–30). To this Frerichs, "Contemporary Ecclesiastical Approaches," 225, replied that, "[i]f the views of these scholars are judged to be 'pseudorthodox' in a secular setting, their views are 'controrthodox' in an ecclesiastical setting." For other appreciations of "Smith's beliefs and opinions about the piety of the Establishment," see Carlson, *Gospel Hoax*, 84–85 and 130.

⁵¹ Letter 94 of 3 July 1973 (Stroumsa, *Correspondence*, 155). In his correspondence with Scholem, Smith is sometimes inclined to make statements as provoking as, "Why is it that the study of religion attracts so many nitwits?" (letter 84 of 15 August 1967 [ibid., 141]). While in the case of Scholem, even if he is not always charitable towards the colleagues that he thinks are less than competent (see what he writes about Amos Funkenstein in letter 91 of 5 June 1972 [ibid., 151]), he is generally more detached, not to say a little ironic.

⁵² Carlson, *Gospel Hoax*, 79–80 and 85.

⁵³ Ibid., 78.

⁵⁴ Brown and Pantuck have convincingly dismissed the majority of Carlson's claims in this sense in the studies quoted above, n. 9.

⁵⁵ A quality acknowledged even by Carlson, *Gospel Hoax*, 85.

⁵⁶ Letter 63 of 7 August 1959 (Stroumsa, *Correspondence*, 115).

⁵⁷ Letter 65 of 28 October 1959 (Stroumsa, *Correspondence*, 117–18).

information about the Carpocratians to be found. *Those are the Frankists of Antiquity*. Produce it [i.e., the edition of the fragment attributed to Clement] as soon as possible!”⁵⁸—an understandably predictable reaction for anyone minimally familiar with the work of the great Israeli specialist of Jewish mysticism, who had already voiced his conviction that *the Frankists were the Carpocratians of modern times*.⁵⁹

From that point on Smith kept Scholem informed about the progress of his work on the *Letter to Theodore*, sending him at the end of January 1961 what seems to be a copy of the manuscript together with “a summary of [his] report on the parallelisms to Clement’s style, and a couple of other recent publications.”⁶⁰ In any case, at the beginning of 1963 Scholem apparently had already received and read the draft of the fourth chapter, on the historical background to *Secret Mark*, of the future *editio maior* to be released in 1973.⁶¹

Suddenly, between January 31 and June 12, 1961, Smith realized the scope of the impact that the two excerpts of *Secret Mark* cited in the *Letter to Theodore* would have on the continuing search for the historical Jesus:

Though I haven’t been able to work on the letter [to Theodore], I’ve been thinking a good deal about it, and about the possibility that Jesus may actually have taught a libertine gospel—Libertinism is so widespread in the New Testament, almost every book combats it, it cannot all derive from Paul, there are a lot of libertine sayings in Jesus’ mouth (The Law and the Prophets were until John, since then! [Matt 11:13//Luke 16:16a]).

Do you think the body and blood eaten and drunk can be a ritual expression of libertinism? (Eating a human sacrifice was a way of binding conspirators together; Apollonius of Tyana was charged with it). I talked about it with [Elias] Bickerman the other day and he was rather enthusiastic, saying this background would explain the

⁵⁸ Letter 66 of 30 December 1959 (Stroumsa, *Correspondence*, 119 [emphasis added]).

⁵⁹ Scholem had explicitly made such a connection in his seminal study on “Redemption through Sin” (on which see Steven M. Wasserstrom, *Religion after Religion: Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and Henry Corbin at Eranos* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999], 215–24 and 340–45), originally published in Hebrew in 1937 and devoted to the controversial figures of Sabbatai Tzevi (1626–1676) and Jacob Frank (1726–1791), and in his groundbreaking monograph, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, whose first edition was published in English in 1941. See Gershom Scholem, “Redemption through Sin,” trans. Hillel Halkin, in idem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971; repr., 1995), 78–141 (at 132–33); idem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 3rd ed. (London and New York: Schocken Books, 1954; repr., 1995), 316. In this regard, one should also note that the “final manuscript” of *Major Trends* had been read, among others, by “Mr. Morton Smith, S.T.B. (Harvard), a research student at the [Hebrew] University” (ibid., xxvii).

⁶⁰ Letter 68 of 30 January 1961 (Stroumsa, *Correspondence*, 123). Two months later, Scholem thanked his friend “for the three reprints” he had just received in Jerusalem, “especially the two on Clement’s letter on the Carpocratians,” congratulating him for the discovery of such “an unexpected testimony!!” (letter 71, not dated but posted 31 March 1961 [ibid., 126–27]). The two articles were, most likely, Smith, “Monasteries and Their Manuscripts,” and idem, “Ελληνικά χειρόγραφα ἐν τῇ Μονῇ τοῦ ἁγίου Σάββα” (“Greek Manuscripts in the Monastery of St. Saba”), trans. Archimandrite Constantine Michaelides, *Νέα Σιών* (*New Zion*) 52 (1960) 110–25, 245–56.

⁶¹ For the review mentioned by Scholem (letter 81 of 3 March 1963 [Stroumsa, *Correspondence*, 138]), see Smith, *Clement of Alexandria*, 240. The other specialist to whom Smith submitted a draft of the same chapter (ibid., 195) was the patristician Cyril C. Richardson (1909–1976), Professor of Church History at the Union Theological Seminary in New York.

reaction to the crucifixion, which I think it would. Any comments you may make on *Mitzvah habaa b'avera* [i.e., “a commandment which is fulfilled by means of a transgression”⁶²] in or before the Tannaitic period will be most welcome.⁶³

In spite of the doubts and reservations immediately expressed by Scholem,⁶⁴ one year later Smith was back, so to speak, on the offensive: “I am really beginning to think Carpocrates and the sort of things he represented (and especially the ascent through the heavens) were far closer to Jesus than has ever been supposed. What’s more, *I have the evidence.*”⁶⁵ This “evidence” that enabled Smith to make an argument for a libertine Jesus who practiced ascent to heaven as an initiatory rite was, undoubtedly, the long passage from *Secret Mark* relating the resurrection of a young rich man in Bethany and his nocturnal initiation into “the mystery of the kingdom of God.” This was a major turning point in Smith’s research on the historical Jesus, a line of interpretation from which he would never depart and that would lead him to the publication, in 1978, of his famous, and controversial, monograph entitled *Jesus the Magician*.⁶⁶

It is reasonable to conclude that Smith had written the first draft of the pages that, in his commentary, would be devoted to the magical, esoteric, antinomian, and libertine dimensions of the Jesus movement and other early Christian groups as early as 1961–1962—or, at the very least, if our chronological reconstruction is accurate, before March 1963.⁶⁷ As for Scholem’s

⁶² As Scholem, “Redemption through Sin,” 99, aptly renders it. Actually, *Mitzvah ha-Ba’ah ba-’Averah* is the original title of the 1937 Hebrew essay, then freely translated as “Redemption through Sin.” On this and other aspects of “transgressive theurgy,” one should now refer to Charles Mopsik, *Les grands textes de la cabale. Les rites qui font Dieu. Pratiques religieuses et efficacité théurgique dans la cabale des origines au milieu du XVIII^e siècle* (Les Dix Paroles; Lagrasse: Verdier, 1993), 524–46.

⁶³ Letter 72 of 13 June 1961 (Stroumsa, *Correspondence*, 127–28). This early mention of the theory of a libertine Jesus performing rituals of erotic magic contradicts Stroumsa’s assumption that Smith first expressed such a view to Scholem no earlier than 1974 (*ibid.*, xiv).

⁶⁴ “About libertinism in the New Testament I do not feel competent to comment although there may be something in what you say regarding libertine sayings put in Jesus’ mouth. But I admit to an amount of skepticism regarding the hypothesis about the body and blood formula as a ritual expression of libertinism, Bickerman’s enthusiasm notwithstanding” (letter 73 of 3 July 1961 [Stroumsa, *Correspondence*, 129]).

⁶⁵ Letter 76 of 6 October 1962 (Stroumsa, *Correspondence*, 132 [emphasis added]).

⁶⁶ Morton Smith, *Jesus the Magician* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978). On Smith’s “own concept” of Jesus’ activities, see in particular Smith, *Clement of Alexandria*, 237; *idem*, *Secret Gospel*, 80–81 and 113–14; *idem*, *Jesus the Magician*, 134–35 and 138; *idem*, “Two Ascended to Heaven—Jesus and the Author of 4Q491,” in *Jesus and the Dead Sea Scrolls*, ed. James H. Charlesworth, ABRL (New York and London: Doubleday, 1992), 290–301 (at 293–94 and 300), repr. in *idem*, *Studies*, 2:68–78. Smith announced to Scholem the project of writing *Jesus the Magician* (letter 104 of 27 September 1976 [Stroumsa, *Correspondence*, 171]); its imminent publication (letter 108 of 24 November 1977 [*ibid.*, 176]); and finally, his “hope to hear what [Scholem] think[s] of *Jesus*, and especially any correction” (letter 111 of 13 September 1978 [*ibid.*, 179]). Scholem’s comments, however, were not, or are no longer, documented.

⁶⁷ According to Helmut Koester, “Was Morton Smith a Great Thespian and I a Complete Fool?” *BAR* 35.6 (Nov/Dec 2009) 54–58 and 88 (at 58), Smith had already suggested “that the initiation rite in the Secret Gospel indicated some homosexual ritual” in a lecture he had given in 1960 (most likely at a meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature covered by *The New York Times*, 30 and 31 December 1960, and mentioned in Stroumsa, *Correspondence*, 200 [“Appendix A”]). Koester recalls Smith’s visit to the University of Heidelberg, on the occasion of a sabbatical, in 1963, and the long discussions they had there about “details of the interpretation of Secret Mark” (*ibid.*). Smith himself had no difficulty admitting that Koester agreed with Scholem and shared the same reservations about his interpretation of *Secret Mark* (letter 97 of 12 July 1974 [Stroumsa, *Correspondence*, 162]).

friendly but, at the same time, firm reaction to his American friend's radical theses, we have to wait until June 1974, following the publication of Smith's two monographs on the *Letter to Theodore* and *Secret Mark* in 1973.⁶⁸ On the one hand, Scholem claimed that he was convinced by Smith's demonstration of "the authenticity of the letter by Clement of Alexandria" and his reconstruction of the Markan question, while, on the other hand, concerning "the libertine character of Jesus' teachings for initiates," he made it clear that, in his opinion, "it is a hypothesis which remains rather vague" and he admitted that he had "not been convinced."⁶⁹

That there were groups who drew libertine consequences from the teachings about the kingdom of God, I take it as firmly established by you and some of your predecessors. The further step to relate it to Jesus himself remains to me a hypothesis for which no hard evidence can be produced.

The doubts about your interpretation of the story on the new Gospel of Mark which I expressed in our talk in New York,^[70] have remained with me. I am not sure whether you proposed as a possible hypothesis or an unavoidable consequence of the context of this story within the background which you have described. 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*.⁷¹

Thus, Smith's attempt to reduce the historical Jesus to the status of a libertine miracle-maker worthy of the *Toledot Yeshu* was met with Scholem's flat refusal. Interestingly enough, Scholem did not qualify Smith's Jesus as a miracle worker/magician, but "as a mystical libertine," as though such an image of Jesus was more or less identical with his own depictions of Sabbatai Tzevi and Jacob Frank.⁷² In a certain sense, through the use of this expression the Israeli scholar was painfully signaling to his American friend that the latter's equation of Jesus with modern, antinomian Jewish messianic claimants was, at best, vague and speculative.

Smith immediately replied, thanking Scholem for his benevolent approval of a large part of the theses he had defended in the *Clement of Alexandria* volume, but reacting in a rather

⁶⁸ Scholem first received Smith's *Secret Gospel*, whose perspectives he found "indeed very exciting . . . The Jesus of the Sermon on the Mountain and Jesus the Magician, suppressed by the church tradition—what perspectives!" (letter 94 of 3 July 1973 [Stroumsa, *Correspondence*, 155–56]). Smith then personally gave him a copy of his *Clement of Alexandria*, most likely when they met during Scholem's stay in New York, from 17 to 27 September 1973 (mentioned in letters 95 of 13 July 1973 [ibid., 157]; and 96 of 9 June 1974 [ibid., 158]).

⁶⁹ Letter 96 of 9 June 1974 (Stroumsa, *Correspondence*, 158).

⁷⁰ See above, n. 68.

⁷¹ Letter 96 of 9 June 1974 (Stroumsa, *Correspondence*, 158–59 [emphasis added]).

⁷² To the bibliography cited above, n. 59, one should add at least Gershom Scholem's monumental biography, *Sabbatai Tzevi: The Mystical Messiah, 1626–1676*, trans. R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, Bollingen Series 93 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), as well as the entries he devoted to "Shabbetai Tzevi and the Shabbatean Movement," "Jacob Frank and the Frankists," "The Doenmeh," "Nathan of Gaza," and other prominent Sabbatian figures in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (1971–1972), conveniently reprinted in idem, *Kabbalah* (New York: Dorset Press, 1987).

nervous manner to the not-so-veiled criticism raised against the reconstruction of the career of the historical Jesus that he had proposed.

As to Jesus, I should perhaps have emphasized more strongly that *all* accounts of his teaching and practice are conjectural, and I claim to my conjectures only that they fit the reports as well as any and better than most. Of course nothing can be *proved* about this subject. For practical purposes the Gospels are our sole substantial evidence. And they are two generations later than the events and contradict both themselves and each other. Therefore every school of criticism concerned about consistency begins by forming arbitrarily its own concept of what Jesus “must” have been—a pious *‘am ha’aretz*, a Hillelite rabbi, an eschatological preacher, a prophet like Elijah, etc. etc.—and then declares authentic the material that supports its predetermined conclusion, forces as much neutral material as possible into the picture, and brands the rest “secondary”. The strength of my position, I think, is that, into this arbitrary guessing game, I have introduced the common-sense observations that (a) *it is more likely than not* that a man’s teachings are reflected by the practices of his disciples, and (b) *it is plausible to suppose* that disputes and divisions found almost universally in the earliest attested forms of the movement (the churches known from the Pauline letters) go back to some peculiarity in its origin. Now I have made my case, the next moves are up to my opponents. Let *them* explain: *If Jesus did not practice magic*, how does it happen that the central ritual of the *earliest* known Christianity is a rite of erotic magic (the eucharist)? *If elements of Jesus’ teaching were not libertine*, how does it happen that the libertinism was epidemic in Christian congregations, *by the time of Paul*? *If Jesus did not give his followers access to the kingdom*, where do the gospel passages that represent them as in it, come from? And so on, for all the questions I have raised, which *all* point back to the sort of figure I’ve hypothesized.⁷³

These kinds of methodological questions have rarely been raised—at least, not in such a direct and uncompromising way—and legitimately should be included in any serious anthology devoted to the research on Jesus of Nazareth.⁷⁴ They “*all* point back to the sort of figure” Smith had been “hypothesat[ing]” for years, even decades—actually, well before his discovery of the amazing document which would finally provide the “evidence” for his claims.

In the End, a Learned Forgery?

Smith retrospectively recognized that Scholem’s depiction of Sabbatai Tzevi—or, more to the point, his perception of that characterization—was one of the main inspirational sources for his own reconstruction of Jesus. This happened at the end of September 1976, when Smith wrote

⁷³ Letter 97 of 12 July 1974 (Stroumsa, *Correspondence*, 160–61 [emphasis in the original]). Smith had probably forgotten that Scholem had already expressed, thirteen years earlier, serious doubts about such an interpretation (see above, n. 65). In any case, he reiterated his views in *Jesus the Magician*, 122–23, 152, and 201.

⁷⁴ As, e.g., in the incredibly rich volume—with no fewer than 343 excerpts!—published by David F. Ford and Mike Higton, eds., *Jesus*, Oxford Readers (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

to Scholem in order to thank him for the sending of the Hebrew edition of his *Zur Kabbala und ihrer Symbolik*, originally published in 1960.⁷⁵

Your work is always invaluable, even to those like me who are working in fields quite other than the kabbalah, because of its illumination of the profundities of the religious mind (or whatever it is that the religious use[s] instead of a mind) . . . “I have read you with an eye to the deeper problems”, and *I think I’ve learned more about Jesus from you and Sabbatai Zvi* (I’m sometimes not sure which is which) *than I have from any other source except the gospels and the magical papyri*.⁷⁶

One should not be surprised by such an appraisal for a book in which Sabbatai Tzevi and other mystical nihilists are rarely mentioned. The fact is that Smith had not yet found the time to read it because he had just started working on his own *Jesus the Magician* and “[g]ospels and papyri ha[d] kept [him] busy all summer.”⁷⁷ Accordingly, the time was ripe to make a more general statement and acknowledge the intellectual debt that he owed to his mentor and friend: Smith’s Jesus had been (at least, in part) modeled after Scholem’s Sabbatai Tzevi.⁷⁸

Far from being a shift toward reductionism, the identification of possible convergences between the figures of the two illustrious religious leaders is one of the true marks of Smith’s genius and ability to anticipate the future evolution of the research on the historical Jesus. In other words, Smith’s exposure to Scholem’s studies on Sabbatai Tzevi had enabled him to see Jesus as a truly Jewish messianic figure, a flesh and blood Jew whose conduct and teachings (in this order) need to be reconstructed with the help of both friendly and unfriendly testimony and contextualized within the social framework of first-century Palestine.⁷⁹ Every sensitive student of the Kabbalah who also paid attention to Sabbatai Tzevi, from Elijah Benamozegh (1823–1900) to Scholem, immediately noticed the commonalities between the ancient rabbi from Nazareth and his modern colleague from Smyrna.⁸⁰ What is really amazing is that New Testament scholars and specialists of the historical Jesus were apparently unaware of such an analogy, and this in spite of the Albert Schweitzer Memorial Lecture that the late William David Davies (1911–2001) delivered at the meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature and the American Academy of

⁷⁵ English translation: Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Schocken, 1965).

⁷⁶ Letter 104 of 27 September 1976 (Stroumsa, *Correspondence*, 170 ([emphasis added])).

⁷⁷ Ibid. (Stroumsa, *Correspondence*, 171).

⁷⁸ Smith’s explicit confession thus confirms the hypothesis of a Sabbatian influence that I put forward in Piovanelli, “L’Évangile secret de Marc,” 247–50, prior to the publication of Stroumsa, *Correspondence*.

⁷⁹ See, in this sense, Smith, *Jesus the Magician*, 1–20 (albeit without mentioning Sabbatai Tzevi).

⁸⁰ In his 1863 unpublished monograph, *Essai sur les origines des dogmes et de la morale du christianisme*, the rabbi from Livorno wrote: “Shabbetai is a modern image which reflects in its most essential traits Jesus’ older depiction. Accordingly, he is a precious tool for the study, in a situation more accessible to modern (scholars), of an older phenomenon which was provoked by the same causes and the same abuses of the same doctrine” (Élie Benamozegh, *La kabbale et l’origine des dogmes chrétiens*, Lettres promises [Paris: In Press, 2011], 65 [my translation]). On Benamozegh’s fascinating perspectives, see Alessandro Guetta, *Philosophy and Kabbalah: Elijah Benamozegh and the Reconciliation of Western Thought and Jewish Esotericism*, trans. Helena Kahan, SUNY Series in Contemporary Jewish Thought (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009). As for Scholem’s more balanced position, see *Sabbatai Tzevi*, 795–99.

Religion, November 1, 1975 in Chicago.⁸¹ Smith, however, was not an ordinary New Testament scholar, but an enthusiastic disciple of the most renowned specialist of Jewish mysticism and messianism, whose “concern” for Kabbalistic, Sabbatian, and Frankist “ideas” dated at least as far back as 1947–1950,⁸² thus largely predating not only the writing of *Jesus the Magician*, but also the discovery of the *Letter to Theodore* and *Secret Mark*.

Certainly by the time of his first contacts with Scholem in 1940–1944, Smith had developed an interest in the *Hekhalot Rabbati*, one of the most important “macroforms” (as Peter Schäfer qualifies these texts) of late antique and early medieval Jewish mystical literature of the Hekhalot (the heavenly “palaces” visited by the “descenders to the Merkavah”) pseudepigraphically attributed to the sage Ishmael ben Elisha (ca. 90–135 C.E.).⁸³ Smith had translated it into English from a preliminary edition of the Hebrew-Aramaic text prepared by Scholem and Chaim Wirszubski (1915–1977).⁸⁴ Then, having left the first draft of it in Jerusalem, he spent the next thirty-seven years in a series of cyclical attempts to retrieve and have it revised for a publication that only saw the light posthumously, thanks to Don Karr’s efforts, in 1995.⁸⁵ Nonetheless, Smith was able to crystallize his reflections on *Hekhalot Rabbati* in a conference paper he gave in 1960, in which he also reacted to the publication of the Israel Goldstein lectures on *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkavah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition* that Scholem had delivered at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America in New York, in 1957.⁸⁶

⁸¹ William David Davies, “From Schweitzer to Scholem: Reflections on Sabbatai Svi,” *JBL* 95 (1976) 529–58 (repr. in idem, *Jewish and Pauline Studies* [London: SPCK, 1984], 257–77). Davies’ essay has been incorporated (alas, without the footnotes) in anthologies like Harold Blum, ed., *Gershom Scholem, Modern Critical Views* (New York: Chelsea House, 1987), 77–97, or Maurice Kriegel, ed., *Gershom Scholem, Cahiers de l’Herne* (Paris: L’Herne, 2009), 200–13 (French translation), but it is conspicuously absent from historical Jesus studies, including the groundbreaking monograph of Davies’ former student Ed Parish Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985).

⁸² In 1947, Scholem had made an interesting proposal to Smith: “A lot of my small stuff has appeared both in the Kabbalistical and Sabbatian Heretical field, and if you tell me you are interested, I will be glad to send you some of it . . .” (letter 7 of 23 March 1947 [Stroumsa, *Correspondence*, 20]), to which Smith promptly replied, “Thank you also for the pamphlets you sent me . . . Please continue to send me such Kabbalistic and Sabbatian things as you think will interest me, remembering that *my concern is the ideas* and I am content to leave the bibliographical details to experts” (letter 8 of 9 May 1947 [ibid., 22–23 (emphasis added)]). Three years later he even declared, “[W]hat I should most like to translate would be a volume of your essays in Sabbatianism and Frankism: Could you and would you send me a suggested list of titles and places of publication?” (letter 25 of 16 March 1950 [ibid., 46]).

⁸³ The bibliography on Hekhalot texts and Merkavah mysticism is too important to be mentioned here. For a critical review of the main schools of thought and interpretation, see Ra’anana S. Boustan, “The Study of Heikhalot Literature: Between Mystical Experience and Textual Artifact,” *Currents in Biblical Research* 6 (2007) 130–60; Peter Schäfer, *The Origins of Jewish Mysticism* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), especially 243–330; Pierluigi Piovanelli, “Pratiques rituelles ou exégèse scripturaire? Origines et nature de la mystique de la Merkavah,” in *Mystique théorique et théurgique dans la littérature juive d’époque hellénistique et romaine*, ed. Simon C. Mimouni, Madeleine Scopello, and Arnaud Sérandour (Paris: Champion, forthcoming).

⁸⁴ See Stroumsa, *Correspondence*, 195 (“Appendix A”).

⁸⁵ *Hekhalot Rabbati*—הַיְכָלוֹת רַבִּיתִי: *The Greater Treatise Concerning the Palaces of Heaven, Translated from the Hebrew and Aramaic by Morton Smith*, 2nd ed., corrected by Gershom Scholem, transcribed and edited with notes by Don Karr (2009), n. p., 1–43. Online: <http://www.digital-brilliance.com/contributed/Karr/HekRab/HekRab.pdf>. For “the hapless course—as Karr defines it—of Smith’s translation” through his letters, see the index in Stroumsa, *Correspondence*, 205, sub voce “Hekhalot.”

⁸⁶ Morton Smith, “Observations on *Hekhalot Rabbati*,” in *Biblical and Other Studies*, ed. Alexander Altmann, Studies and Texts 1 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963), 142–60. In spite of a certain delay in the

A few passages that manifestly anticipate Smith's later ideas about ascents to heaven⁸⁷ deserve to be quoted in full:

As suggested in the course of the outline it [i.e., the text of *Hekhalot Rabbati*] breaks quite distinctly into two parts, chapters 1 to 12, the spells which are to be said by one who desires to see the *Merkabah*, and chapters 13 to 30 (the end), an account of the ascent through the palaces of heaven, culminating in a session with the Cherubim, the Ophanim, and the Holy Beasts, “[and they are called by the appellation of gods] being throned together,” as Clement of Alexandria said [*Stromata* VII,10], “with the other gods, who were first established in their orders by the Saviour.” [Footnote 3: This is the goal of Clement's gnosis; *Opera*, ed. Stählin, III, 41, lines 24f.].⁸⁸

Scholem's study of the materials in the hekhalot tradition . . . has just led us to conclusions amazingly close to those reached by Goodenough from his study of the archaeological remains: to wit, the Hellenistic period saw the development of a Judaism profoundly shaped by Greco-Oriental thought, in which mystical and magical . . . elements were very important. From this common background such elements were derived independently by the magical papyri, Gnosticism, Christianity, and Hellenistic and Rabbinic Judaism. I may add that in all of these traditions *such material was passed on as secret doctrine*.⁸⁹

The magical papyri occasionally prescribe the use of a medium, usually an uncorrupted boy, who, under the magician's direction, sees the gods and describes what he sees. [Footnote 28: Such mediums appear in *The Demotic Magical Papyrus of London and Leiden*, ed. F. Griffith and H. Thompson (Oxford, 1921), I, 8, 18f., II, 1ff., and in *Papyri Graecae Magicae*, ed. K. Preisendanz, vol. I (Leipzig, 1928), pap. IV, lines 89ff.].⁹⁰

Thus, as early as 1960, Smith was already associating the apothotic traditions of the Hekhalot literature with “the goal of Clement's gnosis.” He also detected within Second Temple Judaism and early Christianity the presence of Hellenistic “mystical and magical . . . elements” of the kind of those found in the so-called *Mithras Liturgy* and other magical papyri.⁹¹ Among those phenomena, he had singled out “the use of a medium, usually an uncorrupted boy”—albeit not a νεανίσκος, “young man,” as in *Secret Mark*, but a παῖς, “child”!—in order to acquire a divine

publication of the volume, Smith had already finished his paper and sent it to Scholem by the end of January 1961 (letter 68 of 30 January 1961 [Stroumsa, *Correspondence*, 121–22]). As for Scholem's contribution to the study of *Hekhalot Rabbati* and Hekhalot mysticism, see his *Major Trends*, 40–79 (“Merkabah Mysticism and Jewish Gnosticism”), and *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition*, 2nd ed (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1965), especially 31–35 (“Some Old Elements in the Greater Hekhaloth”).

⁸⁷ Smith, *Clement of Alexandria*, 237–48 (“The rite was a means of ascent to the heavens”); idem, “Ascent to Heavens and the Beginning of Christianity,” *ErJb* 50 (1981) 403–29 (at 415–29; repr. in idem, *Studies*, 2:47–67); idem, “Two Ascended to Heaven,” 290–94.

⁸⁸ Smith, “Observations,” 148.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 153–54 (emphasis added).

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 154.

⁹¹ A point criticized by Jeffery, *Unveiled*, 102–6 and 290–92.

assistant. In his opinion, such teachings and practices were “passed on as a secret doctrine.” This was precisely the cluster of basic “elements” that he would soon put to use in order to make sense of the strange gospel excerpts quoted in the *Letter to Theodore*.

Finally, Smith’s epistolary reveals an early and unexpected concern for a contemporary charismatic personage as anticonformist and controversial as Aleister Crowley (1875–1947), the famous British writer and occultist so well-known for the rites of “sex magick” that he customarily performed with his followers.⁹² Even if in his letter of November 1945 Smith acknowledged that these kinds of distractions were but “nonsense,” he had manifestly appreciated the reading not only of “a selection of [Crowley’s] poetry and one of his plays,”⁹³ but also of a “book about his life” published in 1930 by a certain Percy R. Stephensen—not “Stephenson,” as in the edited volume of the Smith–Scholem correspondence—, whose undeniable “purpose was to whitewash” Crowley.⁹⁴ Smith used this work to compile a relatively well-documented list of Crowley’s most significant achievements, which covers no fewer than fourteen lines of the printed letter. He even attempted to track him down after his expulsion from Italy subsequent to the accidental death, in 1923, of one of his disciples, where Stephensen’s book stops.

Smith’s concluding remarks are particularly enigmatic and intriguing:

Crowley was in England in the thirties when Stephenson’s [sic] book was published. When was the article you have about the Mittel-Danj [?] “zwischen Schopenhauer und Busch” written?

Why am I interested in a fool like him? I cannot say. I just am. He has a certain “Keckheit, Kühnheit und Grandiosität” (as Goethe said about Byron)⁹⁵ which I find lacking in your usual research student and your average Anglican minister.⁹⁶

Smith seems to establish a connection between Crowley’s presence “in England in the thirties” and a mysterious “Mittel-Danj”—the editor’s choice of not publishing the original Hebrew text

⁹² An interest already noticed by Peter Jeffery, “The Secret Gospel of Mark Revisited,” paper presented at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, New Orleans, La., 21 November 2009 (available at <http://www.music.princeton.edu/~jeffery/Psybibsession.pdf>). In this regard, we could add that Crowley and the poet Victor B. Neuburg (1883–1940), a young disciple of his initiated in the Algerian desert in 1909, had at that point a devastating experience which is not so far from the kind of homoerotic encounter that Smith presupposed behind the rite described in the first excerpt of *Secret Mark*. See Alex Owen, “The Sorcerer and His Apprentice: Aleister Crowley and the Magical Exploration of Edwardian Subjectivity,” *The Journal of British Studies* 36 (1997) 99–133 (repr. in eadem, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of Modern* [Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2004], 186–220 and 297–304).

⁹³ Aleister Crowley, *Mortadello, or The Angel of Venice: A Comedy* (London: Wieland & Co., 1912).

⁹⁴ “Apparently either Crowley or one of his disciples had Stephenson [sic] write it when Crowley was growing old and wanted to return to England and quit his youthful ways” (letter 3 of 26 November 1945 [Stroumsa, *Correspondence*, 10]). See Percy R. Stephensen, *The Legend of Aleister Crowley: Being a Study of the Documentary Evidence Relating to a Campaign of Personal Vilification Unparalleled in Literary History*. 2nd ed., with an introduction by Israel Regardie (Saint Paul, Minn: Llewellyn, 1970).

⁹⁵ More precisely, “Byron’s Kühnheit, Keckheit und Grandiosität, ist das nicht alles bildend?” See Johann Peter Eckermann, *Gespräche mit Goethe in den letzten Jahren seines Lebens*, 2 vols. (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1836), 2:52 (after a conversation held on 16 December 1828).

⁹⁶ Letter 3 of 26 November 1945 (Stroumsa, *Correspondence*, 11).

of the letter makes any attempt to understand such a bizarre German-Slavic⁹⁷ (Yiddish?) expression even more difficult—, apparently a tragic-comic figure (“between Schopenhauer and Busch”) about whom Scholem had written an article earlier. It was not a secret, however, that self-proclaimed specialists of Kabbalah such as Eliphas Lévi (born Alphonse Louis Constant [1810–1875]) or Frater Perdurabo (i.e., Aleister Crowley) were, in the eyes of the greatest twentieth-century scholar of Jewish mysticism, but “charlatans and dreamers.”⁹⁸ Thus, Smith had to anticipate his correspondent’s possibly dismissive reaction and candidly confess his fascination for Crowley’s “boldness, audacity, and grandeur” à la Byron.

We have no means of ascertaining how long a figure as colorful and transgressive as Crowley retained Smith’s interest. Did Smith notice the superficial, but still evident parallels between the biography of the modern magician of Thelema and the life of the ancient miracle worker of Nazareth?⁹⁹ Did he dare to compare the declared goal of Stephensen’s booklet to “whitewash” Crowley from all of his detractors’ allegations to the gospels’ equally apologetic attempts to exonerate Jesus from all of his adversaries’ accusations? Although we cannot provide any definitive answer, the evolution of Smith’s career tends to demonstrate that those parallels were duly noticed and played a determinant role—consciously or unconsciously, we do not know—in his magical and libertine reconfiguration of a historical Jesus halfway between Sabbatai Tzevi and Aleister Crowley.

In conclusion, a plausible reconstruction based on circumstantial evidence suggests that, as early as 1940–1944, Smith was exposed to Scholem’s revolutionary theories about Jewish mysticism and Sabbatian/Frankist antinomian messianism and started thinking about the historical Jesus as a truly Jewish messiah à la Sabbatai Tzevi. Back to the United States, he pursued his work on *Hekhalot Rabbati* and discovered the dark side of Aleister Crowley’s magical practices. Since 1947, he carried out a series of studies on both primary (the writings of Clement of Alexandria and the Gospel of Mark) and secondary sources (“the lives of Jesus”). After the terrible disappointment of losing his position at Brown University, in 1955–1956 he intensified his research not only on the Jesus movement, but also on its Greco-Roman background and, more generally, the question of Hellenistic influences in Palestine, a topic to which he devoted his Harvard Th.D. dissertation in 1957.¹⁰⁰ Perhaps he also realized that, in order

⁹⁷ The word “Danj” sounds almost Slavic to my distinguished colleague Agatha Schwartz, who informs me that *dan* in various Slavic languages means “day” and suggests that “Mittel-Danj” could mean “in the middle of the day,” or the like.

⁹⁸ See Scholem, *Major Trends*, 2 and 353, n. 3; idem, *Kabbalah*, 203; idem, *Alchemy and Kabbalah*, trans. Klaus Hottmann (Putnam, Conn.: Spring, 2006), 12–13.

⁹⁹ As Stephensen certainly did, when he wrote that Crowley “laid himself open to the ridiculous charge of establishing a ‘love cult’ or a ‘free love’ colony. Women, it should be noted, including Mary Magdalene, formed part of the entourage of an earlier Master, whose word was ‘God is Love’ ” (*The Legend of Aleister Crowley*, 27).

¹⁰⁰ Revised and published later as *Palestinian Parties and Politics That Shaped the Old Testament*, Lectures on the History of Religions 9 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971). Interestingly enough, the original impetus of such a study probably lies in a discussion with Nock in the summer of 1955. The latter was not convinced by Smith’s hypothesis that “the group which put together [the] collection [of miracle stories recycled in the Gospel of Mark] conceived Jesus as a healing god, by analogy with Asclepius and Sarapis.” According to Nock, “the miracle stories unquestionably come mostly from Galilee, and . . . the Galilean Jewry of Jesus’ time was so thoroughly cut off from gentile influence that any such conception or influence was highly improbable” (letter 40 of 1 August 1955 [Stroumsa, *Correspondence*, 81]; see also letter 42 of 27 October 1955 [ibid., 85]). In the following years Smith published two substantial studies on the Hellenization of Second Temple and early Rabbinic Judaism: “Palestinian

to make a stronger proposal about the historical Jesus as a miracle worker/magician, he was in need of more consistent proof. He finally found such “evidence” in 1958, when he discovered the truncated fragment of the *Letter to Theodore* at Mar Saba.

Contrary to the overly simplistic view held by those who believe that Smith crafted, so to speak, the biblical hoax of the century in order to fool his naïve colleagues, we should conclude that the overwhelming evidence points towards the making of an extremely sophisticated forgery “used by Smith as a tool for promoting ideas that existed beforehand in his own head.”¹⁰¹ If this was—as I believe it really was—the case, in doing so Smith would have been guilty of the most inexcusable act of professional misconduct that a scholar could perpetrate. However, the ideas that he was trying to promote were extremely innovative and far in advance of his time. They paved the way for, among others, Ed Parish Sanders’s full reevaluation of Jesus’ Jewishness¹⁰² and, more recently, Bruce Chilton’s depiction of Jesus as a Kabbalah *chasisid*.¹⁰³ They eventually contributed to a radical change in Jewish Christian relations. Thus, in the end a more plausible and noble explanation for Smith’s hypothetical forgery would be that, in doing so, he decided to perform the best possible *ma’aseh zar*, “strange—i.e., antinomian—deed,” available to him *le-taqqen ‘olam*, “in order to repair the world”—the small world of early Christian studies or the entire universe, we do not know.

Then, What Are We Supposed to Do with a Discovery Such as This?

Recently, Timo Paananen, a young and enthusiastic Finnish student, wrote in his Master’s thesis on the *Letter to Theodore* in contemporary scholarly debate and controversy, “If Smith performed *the best possible hoax* with the Theodore-letter, the Academy can do nothing but use the Secret Gospel of Mark as a valid historical source, as is appropriate for the current paradigm in the field of Biblical studies.”¹⁰⁴ I must confess that I find such a position extremely debatable

Judaism in the First Century,” in *Israel: Its Role in Civilization*, ed. Moshe Davis (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1956), 67–81 (repr. in idem, *Studies*, 1:104–15), and “The Image of God: Notes on the Hellenization of Judaism, with Special Reference to Goodenough’s Work on Jewish Symbols,” *BJRL* 40 (1958) 473–512 (repr. in idem, *Studies*, 1:116–49).

¹⁰¹ Per Beskow, *Strange Tales about Jesus: A Survey of Unfamiliar Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 103.

¹⁰² As explicitly acknowledged by Sanders (*Jesus and Judaism*, 6). To the bibliography cited by Piovanelli, “L’Évangile secret de Marc,” 253, n. 100, we need to add now Pierpaolo Bertalotto, *Il Gesù storico. Guida alla ricerca contemporanea*, Quality Paperbacks 299 (Rome: Carocci, 2010), 53–60.

¹⁰³ See Bruce Chilton, *Rabbi Jesus: An Intimate Biography* (New York: Doubleday, 2000). In his latest, more popular book on Jesus, *The Way of Jesus: To Repair and Renew the World* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2010), Chilton is even more explicit when he (anachronistically) evokes the Kabbalistic (Lurianic) notion of *tiqqun*. As for Smith’s groundbreaking role in the recovering of Jewish and Christian mystical practices, see, e.g., Moshe Idel, *Ascensions on High in Jewish Mysticism: Pillars, Lines, Ladders*, Past Incorporated 2 (Budapest and New York: Central European University Press, 2005), 27–28, 58 and 60.

¹⁰⁴ Timo S. Paananen, “A Conspiracy of the Secret Evangelist: Recent Debate Concerning Clement of Alexandria’s Letter to Theodore” (University of Helsinki, Faculty of Theology, Department of Biblical Studies, 2009), available in translation on his blog Salainen evankelista (posted 3 June 3 2009), n. p. Online: <http://salainenevankelista.blogspot.com/2009/06/masters-thesis-conspiracy-of-secret.html>. The full text of the Finnish original is available at <https://helda.helsinki.fi/handle/10138/21710>. For the quotation here see Paananen, “A Conspiracy of the Secret Evangelist,” Salainen evankelista (posted 22 February 2010), n. p. Online: <http://salainenevankelista.blogspot.com/2010/02/masters-thesis-chapter-51-stephen-c.html>.

because the cumulative amount of circumstantial evidence mentioned above—the wrong document, at the wrong place, discovered by the wrong person, who was, moreover, in need of exactly that kind of new evidence to promote new, unconventional ideas—raises the worst suspicions about the authenticity of Smith’s finding. Biblical studies are not an exception and do not escape the general rule of historical and literary studies that specifies that the scientific value of any reconstruction which relies on dubious evidence is, in turn, unreliable too. Therefore, at this point we should agree that, in the case of a text as dubious as the *Letter to Theodore*, the only possible scholarly attitude to adopt is simply not to use it in any reconstruction of the history of early Christian traditions, texts, individuals, and groups, be they the Gospel of Mark, the historical Jesus, Alexandrian Christians, the Carpocratians, or Clement of Alexandria. Paraphrasing legal terminology, the recommendation I would give to my students is, “You shall not rely on any information, materials, opinions or content found on or delivered through the so-called *Letter to Theodore*.”

Certainly, it would be naïve to imagine that this and other contemporary learned forgeries that have achieved such an iconic status, both in academia and in popular culture, will suddenly disappear from the screen of our scholarly radars. As the comparable cases of other successful falsifications abundantly testify,¹⁰⁵ rare are the specialists who dare to challenge the authenticity of supposed masterpieces of the past on which entire new fields of research have been built, while other colleagues are caught in the Gordian knot of personal and/or political loyalties that impair their freedom of judgment. It takes a certain time to put things into perspective. Be that as it may, my personal wish is that in the future specialists will meet less frequently to discuss the *Letter to Theodore* and *Secret Mark*. Instead, I would like to see more conferences devoted to the emergence of early Jewish mysticism and the historical Jesus in which the positive role that Morton Smith played in the development of such studies would finally be acknowledged and taken into due account.

¹⁰⁵ I am especially thinking here of some controversial artistic and cultural artifacts widely talked about in academic milieus and medias: the Ludovisi and Boston Thrones (possibly the work of sculptors Santo Varni [1807–1885] or Adolf von Hildebrand [1847–1921]), the Artemidorus Papyrus (attributed to the Greek forger Constantine Simonides [1820–1867?]), and the writings of the seventeenth-century Ethiopian philosopher Zär’a Ya‘qob (actually written by the Italian missionary Giusto da Urbino [1814–1856]). On these highly instructive cases, see Emilia Franco, *Falso d’autore. Simulazione di un processo creativo—Il Trono Ludovisi. Un’analisi comparata*, *Historiae* 63 (Locri: Pancallo, 2009); Luciano Canfora, *The True History of the So-called Artemidorus Papyrus* (Bari: Edizioni di Pagina, 2007); idem, *Il viaggio di Artemidoro. Vita e avventure di un grande esploratore dell’antichità* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2010); idem, *La meravigliosa storia del falso Artemidoro*, *La memoria* 855 (Palermo: Sellerio, 2011); Kai Brodersen and Jaś Elsner, eds., *Images and Texts on the “Artemidorus Papyrus”: Working Papers on P.Artemid.* (*St. John’s College Oxford*, 2008), *Historia, Einzelschriften* 214 (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2009); Federico Condello, “‘Artemidoro’ 2006–2011: l’ultima vita, in breve,” *Quaderni di storia* 74 (2011) 161–248 (kindly brought to my attention by Claudio Zamagni); Nicola Trozzi, *Lo Hatata Zar-a Yaiqob we-Walda Hiywat e P. Giusto da Urbino* (Chieti: Solfanelli, 1986); Ute Pietruschka and Alessandro Bausi, “Urbino, Giusto da,” *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica* 4 (2010) 1043–45. For another intriguing case and a promising new method to detect modern forgeries which could be applied to the Mar Saba letter as well, see Kevin Kiernan, “The Source of the Napier Fragment of Alfred’s Boethius,” *Digital Medievalist* 1.1 (posted Spring 2005), n. p. Online: <http://www.digitalmedievalist.org/journal/1.1/kiernan/>.