

The Naked Man in the Garden and *The Secret Gospel of Mark*

There is a very odd little story—found only in Mark’s Gospel—that must have made sense to his original audience, but makes no sense at all to us. It is Mark’s footnote about a naked man in the Garden of Gethsemane. The story goes that when a “crowd” arrived to arrest Jesus, all of his disciples fled in fear. Then, “a young man followed him with nothing but a linen cloth about his body; and they seized him, but he left the linen cloth and ran away naked.” (*Mark* 14:51)

Who was this naked man, and why was he following Jesus? Why did Mark mention him in the context of Jesus’ arrest? Or, for that matter, why did Mark mention him at all? No other Gospel has this story, but the incident apparently had significance for Mark and his readers. Could the naked man in the Garden be the same young man dressed in a white robe who greeted the women in the empty tomb on Easter morning?

Something is missing from the Gospel of Mark, the key to understanding the meaning of the naked man with Jesus. This story has puzzled scholars for centuries. Someone must have edited something out of Mark’s Gospel, the very information that would give us the key Mark’s reference.

In fact, a lot of Mark was censored. Take, for instance, *Mark* 10:46, which now reads, “And they (Jesus and the disciples) came to Jericho; and as they were leaving Jericho . . .” Does this make sense? Why mention going to Jericho just to say that they left again? Where’s the story about what Jesus *did* in Jericho?

In a letter by the early Church father, Clement of Alexandria (which the scholar, the late Morton Smith, claims to have found discovered among the ancient texts of the monastery of Mar Saba), fills in the missing passage: “And the sister of the youth Jesus loved and his mother and Salome were there, and Jesus did not receive them.”

But those words alone don’t tell us why Jesus refused to meet with the women. Nor do they tell us why the words were removed. But Clement’s letter goes on to quote the entire missing passage, and it’s easy to see why any Christian copyist would have wanted to censor it:

“And they came into Bethany, and a certain woman, whose brother had died, was there. And coming, she prostrated herself before Jesus and said to him, ‘Son of David, have mercy on me.’ But the disciples rebuked her. And Jesus, being angered, went off with her into the garden where the tomb was, and straightaway a great cry was heard from the tomb. And going near, Jesus rolled away the stone from the door of the tomb. And straightaway, going in where the youth was, he stretched forth his hand and raised him, seizing his hand. But the youth, looking upon him, loved him and began to beseech him that he might be with him. And going out of the tomb they came into the house of the youth, for he was rich. And after six days Jesus told him what to do and in the evening the youth came to him, wearing a linen cloth over [his] naked [body.] And he remained

with him that night, for Jesus taught him the mystery of the kingdom of God. And thence, arising, he returned to the other side of the Jordan.”

Scholars are still debating whether this passage is authentic or whether it is a forgery; whether Clement wrote the words (and if he did, are they authentic to Mark’s Gospel?), or whether Morton Smith himself wrote them. This debate over *The Secret Gospel of Mark* has been going on in academia since 1973, when Smith published his research. Many scholars now believe the words to be authentic, but they don’t have the means to prove it. The original manuscript of Clement’s letter mysteriously disappeared years ago.

Scholars can study the photograph of the manuscript that Smith published, but they cannot carbon date the paper or the ink without having the actual the manuscript. Worse, Morton Smith is no among the living, so he can’t defend himself or his research.

While many contemporary scholars believe that the document is probably historical, they cannot prove it beyond a reasonable doubt. And even if they could prove that Clement’s letter was authentic, that wouldn’t necessarily prove that the passage he quoted was once part of Mark’s Gospel.

As for the possibility that Morton Smith forged this manuscript, Brad D. Ehrman, in his recent book, *Lost Christianities* discusses various forgeries that scholars have perpetrated over the years, so Smith wouldn’t be the first academician to defraud the public. Still, it’s hard to believe that a highly respected scholar and professor of ancient history at Columbia University would risk his career and reputation by creating such a forgery . . . unless he had a very important, and very personal, reason for doing so.

This brings us to the potentially shocking content of the “Secret Gospel” itself. There is, of course, a fairly innocent explanation. The text claims that Jesus conducted secret, nocturnal, initiation rites in which he taught special disciples the “mysteries” of the kingdom of God. Inasmuch as the canonical version of Mark tells us that Jesus taught select disciples in secret, it wouldn’t be a huge surprise to discover that he conducted secret initiation ceremonies as well. We know very little about the initiation ceremonies of the ancient Greek and Roman mystery religions precisely because those ceremonies were conducted in secret, and their liturgies were never written down. Likewise, wearing a white linen cloth over a naked body was the dress de jour for baptisms and initiation ceremonies in Jesus’ time.

For all of that, we cannot deny the homoerotic overtones of this passage from *Secret Mark*. Scholars will also point out the parallels between this story in the secret Gospel and the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead in *The Gospel of John*, and in John’s many references to the “disciple whom Jesus loved.”

In recent times there has been much written about the possibility of Jesus being married to Mary Magdalene. If there was any evidence of that (which there isn’t) it would shock to the world of academia because Jesus preached celibacy! But this New Age myth is not

nearly as scandalous as the proposition that Jesus was gay! Those who argue that this passage from *Secret Mark* is a hoax point out that Morton Smith was gay.

Since no one can solve this puzzle, and the debate rages on, one thing seems certain about Mark's strange little footnote. Mark is hinting that Jesus was not in the Garden just to pray but to initiate a new member of his order. A white linen robe is precisely what an initiate of the times would wear, and it's clear that the man was *wearing* it when the attempted arrest was made. Of course, all of this is meaningless if the story about Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane is a myth to begin with.