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*The Secret Gospel of Mark  
Unveiled: Imagined Rituals of  
Sex, Death, and Madness in a  
Biblical Forgery*

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THE SECRET GOSPEL OF MARK UNVEILED:  
REPLY TO SCOTT G. BROWN

by Peter Jeffery

Sometimes I wonder why I seem to be a magnet for unprecedentedly long, hit-em-with-all-ya-got book reviews that go on for dozens of pages; Scott Brown's is not the first one I've received.<sup>1</sup> Does all this attention imply that I'm too original a thinker, or too pugnacious a writer, or . . . just exasperatingly prone to being head-smackingly, hair-tearingly wrong? Maybe time will tell, and of course these and

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<sup>1</sup>[http://www.bookreviews.org/pdf/5627\\_5944.pdf](http://www.bookreviews.org/pdf/5627_5944.pdf) . My *Re-Envisioning Past Musical Cultures: Ethnomusicology in the Study of Gregorian Chant* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) was reviewed in Leo Treitler, "Sinners and Singers: A Morality Tale," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 47 (1994) 137-71, with my response in 49 (1996) 175-9.

other possibilities need not be mutually exclusive. But the length of Brown's review is fine with me, and not just because I'm used to this kind of thing. It's no longer than it needs to be, his material is interesting and apropos, and he has a lot at stake. Why not take advantage of the electronic medium that makes posting long reviews economical? What I find harder to understand is the fact that the *Review of Biblical Literature*, as a matter of policy, will not post replies to book reviews, even in this case. The economics are the same no matter who wrote the material, and computer storage keeps getting cheaper. If every author replied to every review, why would that be a problem? People with sufficient interest could read the replies; everyone else could ignore them.

But back to Prof. Brown's review. Where it does get into problems, I think, is in its tendency to miss the big picture, ignoring the main thrust of some of my arguments for the sake of scrutinizing the fine points. He does this for the best of reasons, of course, because he is trying to engage honestly and fully with what I actually wrote. Brown is not the sort who invents straw men or puts words in your mouth, fortunately. And he is absolutely right that minutiae matter. An argument not built up from small facts is resting on thin air. But when you're testing a foundation, it's a good idea to look up once in a while, to get a sense of the entire building.

For example, by insisting on a strict meaning for the word "cento," Brown thinks he can argue that neither the Secret Gospel, nor the letter of Clement to Theodore, nor Smith's book thereupon, is really a cento, properly speaking (43-44). But even if he is right that I used the wrong word, that does not necessarily discredit the argument I was actually making: Smith's "scattered indications" methodology—juxtaposing out-of-context passages from unrelated and misinterpreted ancient sources to create something that looks like a scholarly argument—uncannily resembles the way the Mar Saba author re-used gospel and Clementine material to create something that looks like an ancient text.

Again, in telling us what the term "extended double entendre" ought to mean, Brown relies on an overly exacting definition:

Double entendre is produced by *words* and *phrases* that have more than one recognizable meaning. Those words allow the whole discourse to mean two things *on a verbal level*. [The] L[onger] G[ospel of] M[ark, excerpt] 1 does not function this way as an extended double entendre, for only one of Jeffery's proposed secondary meanings ("coming") is actually a recognized double meaning that could produce ambiguity, and the substitution of this alternative meaning does not result in the narrative *as written* having two possible meanings for a reader (p. 28)

And so Brown sets about debunking my other secondary meanings: "prosekynēse" cannot mean "erotically kissed," "cheir" cannot mean "genitals," "mnēmeion" cannot mean "closet." A "neaniskos" would be the wrong age in any event (28-29, 32).

What Jeffery is describing as an extended double entendre is mostly a series of subjective visual associations that have no semantic grounding in ambiguous words and phrases that cause the sentences as written to have double meanings (29-30).

Well, let me explain. "Extended double entendre" is not something I made up. It is a technical term used since the 1940s in the scholarly study of folklore, and it designates a specific literary genre. Jokes,

whether oral or written, represent an important category of folklore, as rewarding of serious study as folk tales, folk songs (a subject I teach), and folk art. “Jokelore” (as the subfield is sometimes jestingly called) has its own techniques and terminology, which I employed correctly in showing that the Secret Gospel fits very well into humorous folklore traditions that circulated among academic Anglophone homosexuals in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But Scott Brown, who has had no exposure to folklore studies (though he could have looked up the bibliography I cited on p. 270 n. 96, pp. 286-87 n. 4), is simply guessing incorrectly when he says that extended double entendres operate “*on a verbal level*” (italics his). If they did, his analysis would be correct. But according to the definition published by folklorists Alan Dundes and Carl R. Pagter (which I quoted, p. 270 n. 96), extended double entendres operate on the *narrative* level (italics mine): “A double entendre is, of course, a word or expression with two meanings, one of which is usually risqué. By extended double entendre, we refer to whole stories rather than single words or expressions.”<sup>2</sup> I agree we could use a better term for this phenomenon.

Here is what Dundes and Pagter call “a classic example of the extended double entendre,” a text which circulated in written media from at least the 1940s to the 1960s. It presents itself as a speech by a feminist to a women’s organization. But on closer reading, it would appear actually to have been written by a male opponent of feminism.

We must have what man has. It may not be much but we mean to have it. If we cannot get it through our organization then we will get it through our combination.

We refuse to be placed in the gallery any longer and insist on being placed on the floor of the house.

We are willing to look up to man, but don’t always want to be forced or held down without making a few motions of our own. We want to hold up our ends and show our possibilities whenever anything rises that fills our expectations. Nothing that comes can be too hard for us.

We are willing to work under men who have been above us in the past even to the point of exhaustion, if necessary, but are beginning to become disgusted with failings and short comings.

Never, when anything arose that required our presence and attention, have we failed to come again if the occasion required it, but too often have our hopes and striving been met with feeble performances that have left us disappointed and dissatisfied.

How often have our efforts to push forward with our ends been met with a cry, “Down with Petticoats!” and now I say, “Up with Petticoats” and “Down with Pants!” Then we shall see things in their true light.

As long as women are split the way they are, the men will always be on top.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Alan Dundes and Carl R. Pagter, *Urban Folklore from the Paperwork Empire*, Publications of the American Folklore Society: Memoir Series 62 (Austin, Texas: American Folklore Society, 1975) reprinted as *Work Hard and You Shall Be Rewarded: Urban Folklore from the Paperwork Empire* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1992) 196.

<sup>3</sup> Dundes and Pagter, *Work Hard* pp. 209-10. On the sources and transmission of such texts, see p. xxi. This kind of research is continued into the era of affirmative action in Danielle M. Roemer, “Photocopy Lore and the Naturalization of the Corporate Body,” *Journal of American Folklore* 107 (1994) 121-38.

This classic example would fail Brown's test in the same way my interpretation of the Secret Gospel does. Every single word has an everyday meaning. None of these words, with the exception of "come" and maybe "on top," would be on anyone's list of known twentieth-century sexual euphemisms. Every phrase that could be read as double-meaning has an obvious mundane explanation—one that is unexceptional in twentieth-century American political speech. Obviously, "the gallery" and "the floor of the house" refer to the U.S. House of Representatives or to a state legislature, where "making a few motions of our own" would simply mean proposing legislation that advances feminist goals. Phrases like "what man has may not be much," and "we are willing to look up to man" are perfectly ordinary, while "hold up our ends" is close to the expression "hold up our end of the bargain." There is simply no clue at the verbal level that a second, risqué meaning is intended for the text as written.

Therefore we can easily imagine a historian in the thirtieth century (let's call her Tryphaena) arguing as Brown does: anyone who perceives double meanings here is simply reading things into the text. No doubt, Tryphaena would assure us, this text is just what it appears to be: a political speech by an unknown American feminist of the mid-twentieth century. Therefore if Tryphaena's esteemed opponent (let's call her Tryphosa) wants to argue that this text is an extended double entendre, then Tryphosa is simply engaging in eisegesis. As I wrote in my book, though (p. 93), this kind of problem is intrinsic to the genre. One of the key characteristics of extended double entendres is deniability. Much of the humor lies not so much in the double meaning itself, as in the fact that the joker is able to feign propriety and accuse his listeners or readers of having "a dirty mind"—of reading things into the text that are not there.

To us, who still have a native understanding of twentieth-century North American English (and humor), it is obvious that Tryphaena is wrong: this text *is* a joke. But how could Tryphosa prove it at her late date? Both the jokes and the political speeches of the twentieth century will have become obscure, archaic genres, difficult for thirtieth-century people to understand. Though Tryphaena and Tryphosa will have invested years of study to learn the native tongue of the twentieth-century United States, neither could ever acquire the natural "feel" for the language that even an uneducated twentieth-century American would have had.

But all is not lost. There are arguments Tryphosa could use, even in the thirtieth century, to show that this twentieth-century speech ascribed to an anonymous feminist is an extended double entendre after all. Here are four possible lines of reasoning:

(1) Frequency: Since every single clause can be read with a double meaning, there are simply too many of them for this to be an ordinary text. Take any randomly-selected text for comparison: the potential for reading a risqué secondary meaning into it will be less pervasive.

(2) Transmission: The sources that are extant in the thirtieth century, fragmentary though they are, imply that this text did not circulate in contexts where we might expect to find speeches by feminists. It was not published in the *Congressional Record* or preserved in the records of any state legislature. Neither the speech itself nor the slogans it apparently quotes, "Up with Petticoats" and "Down with Pants," are quoted or mentioned in any known feminist writing or archive that survives from the twentieth century. On the contrary, the existing copies of this speech were preserved in proximity to more obviously humorous material that should surely be classified as "copylore": jokes that were reproduced and passed

around by means of the office photocopy machine—a quaint twentieth-century invention with a fascinating social history that need not detain us here.

(3) Lack of a clear historical context: If the feminist speech is what it appears to be, it is actually surprisingly vacuous. It does not mention any particular twentieth-century event, such as the Second World War or the 1963 Equal Pay Act. It does not demand anything specific, such as the reform of laws dealing with employment, divorce, jury duty for women, or contraception. It seems oddly insubstantial and disconnected from the known history of twentieth-century feminism.

(4) Intelligibility. Certain oddly worded passages make the most sense if the risqué interpretation actually was the author's intention. "We will get it through our combination" is hard to understand as political rhetoric, but can easily refer to "getting it" by way of coupling. The phrase "whenever anything rises that fills our expectations" seems like a corruption of "whenever anything arises that fulfills our expectations," suggesting an author of modest literacy. But "rises" and "fills" work well enough or better as double entendres. A twentieth-century speaker might not have said "show our possibilities," but that is what tends to happen when we "hold up our ends." The entire speech simply makes more sense if it is read as intentionally humorous.

Thus my use of the technical term "extended double entendre" is a way of saying that the Mar Saba "Letter to Theodore" belongs to the same literary genre as the fake feminist speech. The apparent manifesto of a woman activist is actually a parody of feminism written by a male chauvinist pig, expressing his opinion that feminists are really just sex-starved nymphomaniacs. In the same way, the Mar Saba letter is apparently the self-righteous fulmination of a Christian leader against a group of shocking libertines, but it is actually a lampoon of homophobic clergymen. The libertines are really the good guys, who (as Smith informed us) have preserved the true tradition going back to Jesus. Among the many arguments for this interpretation are some that resemble the four that Tryphosa could use in the thirtieth century to prove the apparently feminist speech is really a send-up by an opponent.

(1) Frequency: Features capable of being read humorously are simply too frequent in the Mar Saba letter, relative to the canonical gospels and Clement's authentic writings. They also tend to resemble Smith's own sense of humor, as in his infamous interpretation of Mark 14:51-52: "Holy man arrested . . . naked youth escapes." I don't know what he used to tell his classes, but his written references to this joke are true to the genre of extended double entendre: Smith is always supposing that other ancient and modern readers will perceive the homosexual interpretation, while crediting himself with more cautious and sophisticated exegesis—so that we don't notice he is the one who keeps bringing this up.<sup>4</sup>

(2) Transmission: The transmission of the text—a gospel interpolation inside a handwritten letter inside an early printed book inside an ancient monastery, is unusual and unlike the transmission of Clement's

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<sup>4</sup> Morton Smith, "Clement of Alexandria and Secret Mark: The Score at the End of the First Decade," *Harvard Theological Review* 75 (1982) 449-61, see 458 in n. 19. Scott G. Brown, "The Question of Motive in the Case Against Morton Smith," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 125 (2006) 351-83, see 360. Scott G. Brown, "Factualizing the Folklore: Stephen Carlson's Case against Morton Smith," *Harvard Theological Review* 99 (2006) 291-327, see 321-22.

other works. Even the book seems out of place in the library where it was allegedly found.<sup>5</sup>

(3) Lack of historical context: Despite its apparent references to initiation rites, the text cannot be made to fit into the known history of Alexandrian liturgy, lectionaries, or sacramental theology.

(4) Intelligibility: The Mar Saba letter contains many details that are hard to understand. Why does Clement instruct Theodore to swear a false oath rather than admit knowledge of the Secret Gospel? Would any ancient author use an expression like “the true truth,” as if rejecting modern perspectivism? Why is there a cry from the tomb *before* Jesus raises the youth from the dead? Why is the word “hand” repeated twice? What was Jesus doing in the youth’s house for six days? Why does the young man *arrive* wearing the linen sheet, *before* being initiated by Jesus, whereas special baptismal garments were put on *after* emerging from the water? (And where, by the way, is the water?) Each of these problems might be explained individually, and to varying extents they have been—but with difficulty, in a piecemeal fashion, and with no particular benefit to the whole. On the other hand, all the problems disappear, indeed the entire text comes to life (as it were), if we read it as one of the Wildean satires of Christianity that circulated in certain early twentieth-century homosexual communities. An unmistakably coherent message emerges, even if we disagree with it or refuse to be amused by it. In fact the major characters—lying Clement, decapitating Salome, the young “kinaidos” pursuing a willing Jesus—are attested elsewhere in the writings and folklore of the same community, at least some of which was known to Smith.

I don’t want to make too much of the fact that Brown is unfamiliar with the genre of extended double entendre. The real limitation here is in Biblical studies itself, the field in which he is so well trained. Every Bible scholar recognizes that Biblical and other ancient texts were shaped by folklore processes, ritual processes, pedagogical processes, individual and group religious experiences, and so on. Brown himself has written that “The formulaic nature of pre-synoptic oral tradition finds a ready analogy in [modern] joke telling.”<sup>6</sup> Yet too little effort has been made by Bible researchers in general to develop constructive conversations with people working in fields where you can actually watch folklore, ritual, and similar processes happening before your eyes. That is why, when Morton Smith exploited so extensively this weakness in modern Biblical studies, New Testament experts could not figure out what he had done, even after thirty years. And it is why New Testament studies is probably the worst vantage point for seeing what is wrong with the Secret Gospel. That was the area where Smith knew what he was doing and made the fewest mistakes. When he wrote about rituals and trance experiences, on the other hand, he simply piled up absurdities until people were too intimidated to question his statements or check his references. But more about that farther on, when I have to deal with some of Brown’s other objections.

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<sup>5</sup> Stephen C. Carlson, *The Gospel Hoax: Morton Smith’s Invention of Secret Mark* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2005) 37-40.

<sup>6</sup> Scott G. Brown, *Mark’s Other Gospel: Rethinking Morton Smith’s Controversial Discovery*, Studies in Christianity and Judaism 15 (Waterloo, Ontario: Canadian Corporation for Studies in Religion / Wilfrid Laurier Press, 2005) 77.

I could bring forth other examples of how Scott Brown misses the real argument by focusing on small points. Since I am posting this rebuttal on my own web site, I could allot myself all the space I would need. But if I follow Brown into the thicket of detail—with a lengthy, point-for-point, blow-by-blow rebuttal—it would only perpetuate the pattern of missing the forest. It would be better, as well as briefer, if I simply draw attention back to the really important issues, of which I see approximately three. I will call them The Core Issue (Is it possible to explain the text without reference to Smith's interpretation of it? What happens if we ascribe it to Clement?), The Non-Issue (What's wrong with discussing ancient Greek views of homosexuality in connection with a Greek text that mentions "carnal sins" and naked men? Nothing about the historical Jesus or his milieu need be implied thereby), and the Most Complex Issue (What is the appropriate standard of fairness and courtesy to Smith given the information that is publicly available?).

[To be continued as I have time.]

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