In 1960, Morton Smith announced the discovery of an 18th century handwritten transcription of a letter written by Clement of Alexandria in the late 2nd or early 3rd century. Clement’s letter was a response to an inquiry about a previously unknown version of the Gospel of Mark. Since the letter’s unveiling, it has been the subject of an ever escalating partisan madness, including accusations of forgery, academic fraud, postulated rituals of sex and death, and wildly imagined claims about the sexual predilections of the letter’s discoverer.

In this essay, an excerpt from the Secret Gospel of Mark quoted in Clement’s letter to Theodore, is compared to passages extracted from the Tanakh. The narrative sequence in the Secret Mark excerpt has multiple parallels to the descriptions of the installation rites for high priest. This suggests the claims that the long excerpt from the Secret Gospel of Mark has a homoerotic content are unfounded misinterpretations of the text 1.

The following passage was excerpted from Clement’s Letter to Theodore 2. Phrases from the Secret Gospel of Mark that have parallels in the Tanakh have been color coded or noted with a special font (See below for parallel passages from the Tanakh).

“... And a certain woman whose brother had died [ἀπέθανεν] was there. ... And Jesus, ... , went off with her into the garden where the tomb was, and straightway, going in to where the youth was, he stretched forth his hand and raised him [ηγείρεν] (from the dead 3) ... And going out of the tomb they came into the house of the youth, for he was rich. And after six days 4 Jesus told [ἐπέταξεν] him what to do and in the evening the youth comes to him, wearing a linen cloth [σινδόνα] over his naked body [ἐπὶ γυμνοῦ]. And he remained with him that night, for Jesus taught him the mystery of the Kingdom of God. ...”

Compare the excerpt from the Secret Gospel of Mark to these passages from the Tanakh:

Exodus 28:41-43, “41 And thou shalt put them upon Aaron thy brother, and his sons with him; and shalt anoint them, and consecrate them, and sanctify them, that they may minister unto me in the priest's office. 42 And thou shalt make them linen breeches to cover their nakedness; from the loins even unto the thighs they shall reach: 43 And they shall be upon
Aaron, and upon his sons, when they come in unto the tabernacle of the congregation, or when they come near unto the altar to minister in the holy place; that they bear not iniquity, and die: ... 5"

Ezekiel 44:18, “They are to wear linen turbans 6 on their heads and linen undergarments around their waists. They must not wear anything that makes them perspire.”

Leviticus 16:4 (Douay-Rheims 1899 American Edition (DRA), “4 He shall be vested with a linen tunick, he shall cover his nakedness  with linen breeches: he shall be girded with a linen girdle, and he shall put a linen mitre 6 upon his head: for these are holy vestments: all which he shall put on, after he is washed.”

or,

Leviticus 16:4 (International Standard Version (©2012), “He is to wear a sacred linen tunic and linen undergarments that will cover his genitals. He is to clothe himself with a sash and wrap his head with a linen turban 6. Because they are sacred garments, he is to wash himself with water before putting them on.”

Leviticus 16:23, “23 Then Aaron is and take off the linen garments he put on before he entered the Most Holy Place, and he is to leave them there.

Exodus 20:26; “And you must not go up by steps to my altar, so that your nakedness is not exposed”

Exodus 30:20 (New International Version (©2011)), “Whenever they enter the tent of meeting, they shall wash with water so that they will not die. Also, when they approach the altar to minister by presenting a food offering to the LORD,”

Leviticus 8:33-35: “Do not leave the entrance to the tent of meeting for seven days, until the days of your ordination are completed, for your ordination will last seven days. 34 What has been done today was commanded by the Lord to make atonement for you. 35 You must stay at the entrance to the tent of meeting day and night for seven days and do what the Lord requires, so you will not die; for that is what I have been commanded.”

Ezekiel 44:25-26, “A priest must not defile himself by going near a dead person; however, if the dead person was his father or mother, son or daughter, brother or unmarried sister, then he may defile himself. 26 After he is cleansed, he must wait seven days.”

Comparison of extracts from Secret Mark with extracts from the Tanakh. All the examples are drawn from the above texts.

Secret Gospel of Mark: wearing a linen cloth over his naked body
Exodus 28: 41-42 “linen breeches to cover their nakedness”

Ezekiel 44:19, “They are to wear linen turbans on their heads and linen undergarments around their waists”


Leviticus 16:23, “linen garments”

Secret Gospel of Mark: And a certain woman whose brother had died was there.

Ezekiel 44:25, “A priest must not defile himself by going near a dead person; however, if the dead person was his father or mother, son or daughter, brother or unmarried sister, then he may defile himself.

Secret Gospel of Mark: “and raised him (from the dead)”

Leviticus 8:33; “so you will not die”

Exodus 30:20; (New International Version (©2011)), “so that they will not die.”

Secret Gospel of Mark: “Jesus told him what to do”

Leviticus 8:34: “What has been done today was commanded by the Lord … that is what I have been commanded.”

Secret Gospel of Mark: “And after six days”

Leviticus 8:33-35: “… seven days, … your ordination will last seven days. … 35 … seven days … ”

Ezekiel 44:25-26, “… he must wait seven days.”

Secret Gospel of Mark: “naked body”

Exodus 28:42, “nakedness”


Exodus 20:26; “… nakedness … ”

Secret Gospel of Mark: “And going out of the tomb they came into the house of the youth, for he was rich. And after six days.”
Leviticus 8:33-35: “Do not leave the entrance to the tent of meeting for seven days, … 35
You must stay at the entrance to the tent of meeting day and night for seven days …”

The “house of the youth” where he stayed for six or seven days prior to his meeting with Jesus, seems to play the role of the tent of meeting where the high priest elect stayed prior to the final installation ceremony.

Although there are clear parallels in the translations, the Secret Gospel of Mark is written in Greek and the Tanakh passages in Hebrew. In the Greek translation of the Tanakh, the Septuagint, the nakedness is expressed in words like χρωτὸς (skin or body) and ἀσχημοσύνη (shame, that which is unseemly) while Secret Mark has the expression ἐπὶ γυμνοῦ (on his bare body). Secret Mark has σινδόνα (linen cloth) while the Septuagint has λίνος (linen) combined with the article of clothing. Both use the same word for “to die” (ἀποθνῄσκω) but different words for commanding (ἐπιτάσσω and ἐντέλλομαι), etcetera.

Accordingly comparison of the text of the Secret Gospel of Mark to selected texts from the Tanakh demonstrate a similar vocabulary if translation effect is taken into account. The latter texts describe how to perform the ritual for instructing and sanctifying a new high priest. There is no hint of eroticism in the passages from the Tanakh. Both the Tanakh and the Secret Gospel of Mark state that the person undergoing instruction wore a linen (under)garment. In the Tanakh they did so in order to preserve their modesty and there is every reason to suppose that this was the motive also in the Secret Mark scene. Based on the language shared by the Tanakh and the Secret Gospel of Mark there is no reason to assume that the passage from the Secret Gospel of Mark describes a homoerotic ritual. Furthermore, the transmitter of the excerpt from the Secret Gospel of Mark, Clement of Alexandria, does not ascribe any reprehensible properties to the text. Clement counsels Theodore, the recipient of his letter, that it is only the corrupted version used by the Carpocratians that is heretical and salacious ¹.

Additionally, it is hard to see why certain critics of the text assumed that the rich young man’s love for Jesus was homosexual in nature. The same terminology is used to describe Jesus’ affection for Lazarus ⁷, and for the disciple who allegedly composed the Gospel of John, the disciple Jesus loved ⁸. No mainstream bible interpreter has accused Jesus of harboring homosexual thoughts, in spite of his love for these two men. Peter also declared his love for Jesus ⁹, yet the mainstream theological literature has never accused him of lusting after Jesus. Thus it seems that the definition of the word “love” has been inconsistently applied by some of the critics of Secret Mark.

If one is to find a match in the ancient literature for the ritual the rich young man in the Secret Gospel of Mark underwent, a possible match is the ritual for installing a new high priest as set forth in the Tanakh. If this was actually the case, then the author of the Secret Gospel of Mark
was doing his best to keep the true nature of the ritual occult, or hidden from the casual reader. The text hints that Jesus had ordained a new High Priest to supplant the incumbent High Priest, Joseph ben Caiaphas, who was maintained in office by the Romans.

This supposititious ordination occurs at a point in the canonical Gospel of Mark’s narrative immediately before Jesus’ march on Jerusalem. Therefore, the suspicion is raised that Jesus had planned to overthrow the Romans and their quisling High Priest, and install a replacement High Priest who was more to his liking. Having an overtly political and militant Jesus as the nominal founder of Christianity would not have found favor with the rulers of the Roman Empire, so it is not surprising that the Secret Gospel of Mark was kept a secret.

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David Blocker
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On the other hand, Clement wrote to Theodore that the heretical Carpocratians had a spurious version of the text which did narrate unseemly carnal acts. The Carpocratian version of the Gospel of Mark apparently contained the phrase \(\gammaυμνός \gammaυμνώ\), “naked man with naked man”, which, according to Clement, was not found in the original version of the Secret Gospel of Mark.

Clement wrote this about the Carpocratian text:

“But since the foul demons are always devising destruction for the race of men, Carpocrates, instructed by them and using deceitful arts, so enslaved a certain presbyter of the church in Alexandria that he got from him a copy of the Secret Gospel, which he both interpreted according to his blasphemous and carnal doctrine and, moreover, polluted, mixing with the spotless and holy words utterly shameless lies. From this mixture is derived the teachings of the Carpocratians.”

The complete quotation of the Secret Mark excerpt:

“And they come into Bethany. And a certain woman whose brother had died was there. And, coming, she prostrated herself before Jesus and says 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 straightway, 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 comes 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.”

“from the dead” inserted for clarity. See John 11:44 from the Raising of Lazarus story, which parallels the Secret Gospel of Mart narrative.

If the day the young man emerged from the tomb is counted as day one instead of day zero, then the rich young man’s meeting with Jesus occurred seven days after he exited the tomb. This way of counting days seems to have been a contemporary practice. Jesus’ resurrection on the third day is another example of this style of counting (Mid day Friday to early Sunday morning is counted as (“three days”).

Presumably the fatal iniquity referred to in Exodus 28:43 is the priest inadvertently exposing his genitals when he approaches the altar. The linen undergarment described in Exodus 28:42 would prevent this dread event and preserve the high priest’s modesty. Exodus 20:26 prohibits exposing oneself when mounting the altar.

John 11:44 (New International Version (NIV)), “44 The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, ‘Take off the grave clothes and let him go’.”

7) John 11:5; “Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.” John 11:36; “Then the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” The word love (Greek: agapaô, phileô) is used to describe what Jesus called his friendship with Lazarus:

John 11:11; “After he had said this, he went on to tell them, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up.” ”


9) The disciple Peter also admitted his love for Jesus (John 21:15-17) but no mainstream Bible interpreter has ever imputed a homosexual underpinning to Peter’s love for Jesus.

10) Mark 11:7-11, Jesus’ so called Triumphant Entry into Jerusalem.