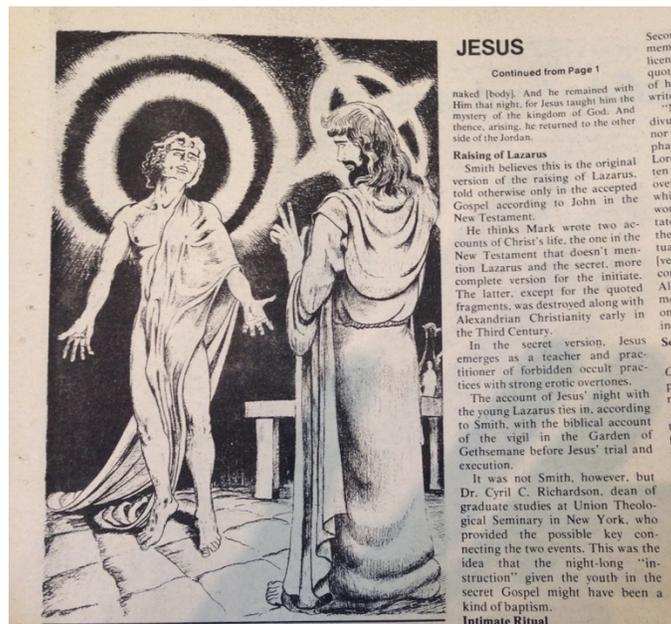


The *Secret Gospel of Mark's* “Unspeakable Teachings”:
Feelings and Fantasies in the Making of Christian Histories

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From “Jesus Christ... Supergay?” (review of *The Secret Gospel* in *The Advocate*, July 1974)

The reception history of the *Secret Gospel of Mark* is, among those who know anything about it, famously controversial. Thick with mystery and rumor, rife with volatile accusations, betrayals, and defensiveness, it is an affective history *par excellence*. This scrap of text—discovered or constructed by Morton Smith in 1958—has been classified in many ways: as evidence of the earliest surviving Markan gospel and a previously unknown letter of Clement, an eighteenth-century fabrication or a second-century

forgery, a modern hoax inspired by twentieth-century pulp mystery novels, or—with its possible hints of Jesus’s homoerotic teachings—an “ironic gay joke,” or even “the most grandiose and reticulated ‘Fuck You’ ever perpetrated in the long and vituperative history of scholarship.” In the last fifty or so years since its discovery, no clear consensus has been reached on the gospel’s status as “authentic” or “forged,” although impassioned arguments have been mounted from both sides. Whether or not Smith forged it, however, the document has since become an object of longing and repulsion, a marker and maker of alternative narratives—be they ancient and “authentically historical” or modern fictions—of early Christian traditions, as well as an incitement to emotionally charged debates about methods and ethics in reconstructing the past. Scholars on both sides hold out hope that stabilizing the reputation of *Secret Mark* as definitively forged or authentic will shut down uncomfortable uncertainties and, perhaps, alleviate anxiety about their own imaginative, even perverse, relations with the past.

In this paper, I read *Secret Mark* and its reception history alongside queer historiographical projects in order to chart some alternative approaches to how we might handle (our feelings about) the early Christian past. Taking the collection of scholarly, popular and personal material on *Secret Mark* as a rather queer archive of feelings, I tease out some ways in which historical evidence acts as a cover—and a medium—for the transmission of affective and theological investments and anxieties regarding how much we can actually know about “what really happened” in the past. I also want to highlight the role references to (homo)sexuality play in this fraught debate about authenticity. As those who work with queer archives and as *Secret Mark*’s reception demonstrate equally

well, sexuality is intimately entangled with investments in the authority of (certain versions of) the historical past.