

Response to Agamemnon Tselikas on Morton Smith and the Manuscripts from Cephalonia

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John Adams: Facts are stubborn things; and whatever may be our wishes, our inclinations, the dictates of our passions, they cannot alter the state of facts and evidence.

As is now well known, in 1958 Morton Smith claimed to have discovered in the monastery of Mar Saba an 18th-century copy of a letter written by Clement of Alexandria that quotes excerpts from a “secret” version of the Gospel of Mark.¹ This discovery has subsequently been declared by some a forgery.² It was with great anticipation, therefore, that people were waiting for the opinion requested by BAR from Greek paleographer Agamemnon Tselikas on the authenticity of the Clement letter. While much of Tselikas’ thinking remains somewhat unclear to me following my reading of his multi-part report, one thing seems reasonably clear: Dr. Tselikas believes that although the handwriting of the Clement letter is consistent with that of the 18th-century it does not match the handwriting of any other scribe at the Mar Saba monastery, and he believes that the letter is a forged imitation of 18th century Greek script made by Smith using four 18th-century manuscripts from the Thematon monastery of the Greek island of Cephalonia as a model for the handwriting. According to Tselikas, the handwriting of these four Cephalonia manuscripts, which Smith had seen and catalogued while visiting Greece in 1951, is

¹ Morton Smith, *Clement of Alexandria and a Secret Gospel of Mark* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973).

² Stephen C. Carlson, *The Gospel Hoax: Morton Smith’s Invention of Secret Mark* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2005).

similar to the hand of the Clement letter. At the very least, here lies a theory which can be tested against known facts.³

Some background: while at Harvard Divinity School working on a Th.D degree from 1948 to 1950, Smith began a study of the textual tradition of the manuscripts of Saint Isidore of Pelusium, the fifth-century ascetic church father, under the guidance of Professors Arthur Darby Nock and Werner Jaeger. In 1950, having completed his formal course work, Smith applied for and was awarded a Fulbright Grant for a year of post-doctoral research in Greece to photograph manuscripts related to Isidore. After working from 1950 to 1951 as Instructor in Biblical Literature at Brown University, Smith was able to negotiate a one year's leave of absence from Brown, and Jaeger and Nock helped arrange for Smith to study at the American School of Classical Studies in Athens during 1951–1952. Smith left Providence in September of 1951, first passing through Oxford to deliver a talk on Saint Isidore at the International Conference on Patristic Studies. He then traveled in October through Beirut to East Jerusalem to attend the celebration of the 1500th Anniversary of the Jerusalem Greek Orthodox Patriarchate. At these celebrations, Smith delivered the results of a fund-raising drive by his American Friends group to the Patriarchy, and also obtained letters of introduction to be presented at the various monasteries he was interested in visiting in Greece.

Smith appears to have spent most of his time from 1951 to 1952 in Athens, though in addition to visiting Patmos and Mt. Athos, Smith went to visit a number of other locations. In Cephalonia, he visited the monasteries of Thematon and St Gerasimos, in Dimitsana he visited its Public Library, in Skiathos he visited both the monastery of

³ The author would like to thank Scott G. Brown, Charles W. Hedrick, Timo S. Paananen, and Roger Viklund for their helpful suggestions.

the Annunciation and the private library of G. Rigas, and in Epirus he visited the public Library of Zosimaia. In each instance, the locale appears to have been based on his “special concern” to find and photograph particular manuscripts related to Isidore that were mentioned in existing catalogues and were of interest to Smith. Ultimately, he was able to collect photographs of all the major Isidore-related manuscripts in western Europe, including 78 manuscripts, mainly in excerpts, from Greece. While visiting some of these smaller monasteries and libraries, which for the most part had small manuscript collections that were not well catalogued, Smith took the opportunity to take notes and/or photographs of items from these hitherto undescribed manuscript collections. Smith later decided to publish his notes⁴ on these collections after conferring with M. Richard, director of the French Institut de recherche et d’histoire des textes. Smith describes his visits to these monasteries as “extremely brief and hurried visits ... in none of which was it possible for me to do even a full day’s work” or even “to spare the time to count pages” of the manuscripts he examined.

A fundamental question at the heart of Tselikas’ hypothesis is whether Smith photographed the Cephalonia manuscripts in order to later study and develop the necessary fluency to copy the scribal hand in order to forge the Clement letter. In the year between 1951 and 1952, Smith took over 5,000 photographs of manuscripts in Greece, though interestingly it can be firmly established that he did not photograph even one of the four manuscripts from the Thematon monastery in Cephalonia that Tselikas believes are the models for the Clement letter. How can we be certain? There are actually not one but three ways to establish this fact. In Smith’s publication “Notes on Collections of

⁴ Morton Smith “Notes on Collections of Manuscripts in Greece,” *ΕΠΙΘΗΠΙΣ ΕΤΑΙΡΕΙΑΣ ΒΥΖΑΝΤΙΝΩΝ ΣΠΟΥΔΩΝ* 26 (1956): 380–93.

Manuscripts in Greece,” the manuscripts he numbers as 3, 4, 5, and 6 from Cephalonia are the same manuscripts that Tselikas believes Smith used to later forge the hand of Secret Mark. All four manuscripts, according to both Smith and Tselikas, are written in the same scribal hand and are dated to the 1740s. In Smith’s publication “Notes on Collections of Manuscripts in Greece,” he places an asterisk to indicate which manuscripts he had photographed. In this publication, none of the Cephalonia MSS has an asterisk (**Figure 1**). Second, Brown University has a list of all the prints and negatives (**Figure 2**) that Smith deposited with its library (Brown paid over \$2,000 to develop all these pictures, quite a bit of money in 1953 when an Assistant Professor such as Smith was making only \$5,000 per year in salary). This library catalogue list, which matches what Smith indicated with asterisks in his “Notes on Collections,” also lists no photographs of manuscripts from Cephalonia. Finally, and most important, Smith kept his own personal list of all the exposures, negatives, prints, and rolls he took that indicates just which manuscripts he had photographed on his trip to Greece (**Figure 3**). This list is the most definitive and complete, and includes more information than the Brown catalogue since it also describes and lists photographs and negatives that Smith had taken and agreed to send back to Greece when he was done studying them. Smith’s own personal list also indicates that no photographs were taken of any manuscript from Cephalonia. Without pictures to study at leisure at a future date, there is simply no way that Smith or a collaborator could have used these manuscripts as the basis to forge the Clement letter.

What about the handwriting in the Clement letter? According to Tselikas, the handwriting appears, at least superficially, to be native Greek writing from the 18th

century; he says that the ductus of the letter formation (direction, sequence, and speed of the strokes) is consistent, he sees that the letters themselves have a type of natural variation expected for the time period, and even notes that there are some unusual features to some of the letter forms. His conclusion: this is a sophisticated forgery but one in which the forger has made some mistakes. He envisions Smith using (we now know non-existent) photographs of the 18th-century manuscripts as a model to create a forged handwriting. So, where do the unusual letter forms come from if they are not from the manuscripts that are being copied? Why should the *Letter to Theodore* not be written in an authentic 18th-century handwriting reflecting the individual characteristics of a particular scribe's way of writing? Tselikas has not explained in a comprehensive manner just what is "uncommon" about these features, but in light of the less-than-satisfactory linking of Secret Mark to the Cephalonia manuscripts, a fuller report on his findings appears to be warranted.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that the handwriting of the four Cephalonia manuscripts itself does not actually appear to be particularly similar to the handwriting of the Clement letter. **Figure 4** shows four examples of handwriting, including three from manuscripts purported to be from the 18th-century: the first is from the Clement letter usually dated to the mid-18th-century, the second from one of Tselikas' Cephalonia manuscripts internally dated to the 1740s, the third is from another mid-18th-century manuscript⁵ from Zagora in eastern Greece that has no connection to Smith. The fourth hand is from Smith's own Greek writing. With even such a limited comparison, it is clear that these are four different hands and that the handwriting in the Cephalonia manuscripts is not even as similar to the Clement letter as the completely unrelated handwriting from

⁵ With thanks to Scott G. Brown.

Zagora. The differences are particularly obvious with the appearance of the *betas* and the *lambdas*, confounding the expectation that a copy conform closely to the model from which it was copied. The comparisons seem to show only that some of the paleographic features in the Clement letter appear in other manuscripts from the period.

Tselikas himself notes only six similarities in the handwriting of the four manuscripts from Cephalonia and the writing of the Clement letter. In other words, the resemblance is minimal, no more than one might expect to find by chance between two Greek hands from the same era. The overall lack of similarity between the two hands raises the question: Why does Tselikas suggest that the latter imitates the former? The fact that in 1982 Tselikas himself published a paper on precisely these four manuscripts from Cephalonia,⁶ complete with photographs, makes the choice of these *particular* manuscripts as the basis for the letter's handwriting remarkable. Tselikas' theory of imitation appears to be dictated by the desire to connect the Clement letter to manuscripts that Smith is known to have seen. The facts, however, stubbornly refuse to cooperate. Future efforts to reconstruct the history of the origins of Secret Mark should attempt to find a basis not in opinions of historical possibility, but instead in the bounds set by easily verified historical evidence.

⁶ Agamemnon Tselikas, "ΤΑ ΧΕΙΡΟΓΡΑΦΑ ΤΗΣ ΜΟΝΗΣ ΤΩΝ ΘΕΜΑΤΩΝ ΣΤΗΝ ΚΕΦΑΛΟΝΙΑ," *ΚΕΦΑΛΛΗΝΙΚΑ ΧΡΟΝΙΚΑ* (Athens: Argostoli, 1982): 184-192.

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NOTES ON COLLECTIONS OF MANUSCRIPTS IN GREECE

The following notes were made during a visit to Greece in 1951-2. All are based on extremely brief and hurried visits to the libraries described, in none of which was it possible for me to do even a full day's work. Consequently it was often impossible for me to spare the time to count pages, and none of my estimates of date is more than a snap judgment. If an apology be required for the publi-

¹ Asterisks indicate MSS of which I have photographed specimen pages. These photographs are now available in the Brown University Library, Providence, R.I.

Hiera Mone tōn Themátōn (Hyperagias Theotokou):

3. XVIII c., paper, 295×200, 264 ff. Beautiful hand. τοῦ σοφιστῆ-
του κληίου Θεοφύλου τοῦ Κορυδαλλίου εἰς φιλοσοφίαν ἀποδοκίμασις (sic).
Last page reads ἔλος τῶν δ'αὐτῶν τῆς ἀρσικῆς διαπόσειως βιβλίων, ἐτελειώθη
ἐν ἔτει αὐτῶν (= 1746).

4. XVIII c., paper, 295×200, c. 200 ff., same hand as above.
Title page lost; first f. numbered 2. It contains a diagram illustrating
the divisions of the ψυχικὴ δύναμις (αὶ μὲν φρονικαί, αὶ δὲ λογικαὶ καὶ
ἀρετικαὶ, αὶ δὲ γνωστικαὶ καὶ διανοητικαί).
Last page reads ἐτελειώθη ἐν ἔτει αὐτῶν.

5. XVIII c., paper, 295×200, c. 200 ff., same hand as above.
Beginning lost. Last page reads ἔλος τῶν τριῶν τῆς... κ.ε. ψυχῆς ἀνα-
γνωστῶν βιβλίων, ἐτελειώθη κατὰ τὸ αὐτῶν ἔτος.

6. XVIII c., paper, 295×200, c. 150 ff., same hand as above.
Beginning lost, first f. numbered 4.

BR63	Smith, Morton, comp.	
-85	[Selections from Greek manuscripts... 1952]	(Page 4)
	Tracings of analytics	
10	Anastasius Sinaita, Saint. [Selected pages from his Quaestiones et responsiones de variis argumentis CLIV. 12th cent.]	
11	Athanasios Parios, 1725-1813. [Scholia on Isidore. 18th cent.]	
12 pt.1	Athos (Monasteries)--Dionysiou--Ms.163--Selections. [Selected pages from a patristic anthology. 17th century]	

MANUSCRIPTS OF WHICH I HAVE NEGATIVES:

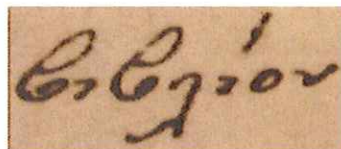
(For notes, see last page.)

Amorgos 83, paper, Sermons of Philotheos, XIV c, 1 exp, table of contents.
" 36, paper, Ascetic anthology, XV c, 3 exp., selection from St. Alypius.

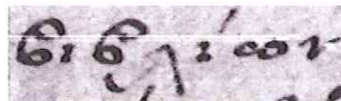
Skiathos, Evangelismos 11, paper, Patristic anthology, XII/XIII cs, 20 exp., quote from Isidore & table of contents. parch

(Athens, Benaki 133, paper, Letters of Isidore of Pelusium, XV c, 51 folia. This and the following 169 I was permitted to photograph on condition that I would return the negatives to the Benaki Museum after enlargements were made. These negatives, therefore, I cannot dispose of, but I include them in this list for completeness.)

4, sic. The catalogue is in error. The catalogues are so often in error that, apart from this note and one or two question marks I have not bothered to insist on the fact. On the other hand, this list has not been carefully proof-read and may contain some inadvertent differences from the catalogues.



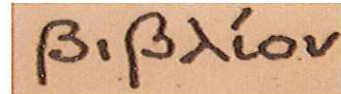
Mar Saba 65 (the Clement letter)



Cephalonia 3



Zagora



Smith (1958)