Response to Charles Hedrick's Stalemate

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Journal of Early Christian Studies
Johns Hopkins University Press
Volume 11, Number 2, Summer 2003
pp. 155-163
10.1353/earl.2003.0023
ARTICLE

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Charles Hedrick has produced a useful overview of some of the important issues in the ongoing discussions of the Mar Saba letter of Clement of Alexandria, especially as these pertain to the so-called "Secret Gospel of Mark." [1] I take the burden of his discussion to be that (a) we should accept the Clementine letter as authentic and leave off discussing it as a possible (modern) forgery, for example, by Smith himself; and (b) once we have done so we will have additional evidence for both the wide diversity of the gospel traditions of the second century and the high instability of the texts that preserve them.

Guy Stroumsa's intriguing tale of how he too once saw the manuscript of the Mar Saba letter shows that he agrees with Hedrick on both points. I will use this response to express my concerns about them. I should stress at the outset, however, that there is no dispute among the three of us concerning the diversity of early Christianity and the instability of its texts. These views hold true, however, regardless of one's position on *Secret Mark.*

Before addressing the larger issues, I would like to reflect on several details raised in or by Hedrick's article. To begin with, I find it a bit one-sided to lament the poor treatment that Smith received at the hands of his reviewers. On this score, as Hedrick acknowledges, Smith was famous for giving as well as he received. Almost no one could be as vitriolic and ad hominem, given the opportunity. And there were plenty of opportunities, especially with respect to the back-and-forth on the Secret Gospel. As Bruce Metzger noted—to pick just one instance—Smith once pointed out that two of the scholars who reviewed his work negatively (these were **[End Page 155]** good scholars: Paul Achtemeier and Joseph Fitzmyer) both had names that rhymed with "liar." [2] The back-and-forth was not a case of an entire cadre of homophobic neutestamentlers (as Hedrick seems to suggest) maliciously attacking a defenseless and unsullied opponent. There was plenty of dirt spread on both sides by those competent to do so.

And it should not be overlooked (a point somewhat de-emphasized by Hedrick) that a number of the responses to Smith were sober, learned, and erudite. Included among the respondents were some who had no qualms in arguing that the Clementine letter was a modern forgery. A striking example was Charles Murgia, a superb classicist at the University of California at Berkeley, who respectfully and even appreciatively pointed out, on the basis of a broad experience with falsified documents, the kinds of "fingerprints" that, in his judgment, the forger had left on his own handiwork. [3] Some of Murgia's objections to the letter have never, to my knowledge, been answered. He concluded on technical grounds, to which I will return below, that the letter transcribed into the back of Voss's edition of Ignatius must have been an *autograph.* A rather serious claim not to address.

As I have intimated, Hedrick suggests that the widespread vitriol found its root in a homophobia in the academy. I too do not know if this is true, but I certainly would like to see some *evidence* of it, if this in fact is what he wants to claim. For it is a rather serious charge—raised precisely by Hedrick's stated reluctance to raise it!—and not one that we should allow into general discourse without some supporting argument.

One point that Hedrick does want to make explicit is that since the homoerotic interpretation of Clement's first citation of *Secret Mark* is not a central component of Smith's reconstruction it should not have played so large a role in the debate over the letter. In my opinion this is a misconstrual of the situation. For much of Smith's entire work on the Secret Gospel does indeed...

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1. He deals with many of the same issues in another recent *status quaestionis*, "Secret Mark: New Photographs, New Witnesses," *The Fourth R: An Advocate for Religious Literacy* 13 (2000): 3–17. This is a journal put out by the Westar Institute.

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