

## **Solving the *Mysterion* of Morton Smith and the Secret Gospel of Mark**

Allan J. Pantuck, MD, MS, FACS  
Associate Professor of Urology  
David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA

I read with great interest the recent essay by Hershel Shanks, “First Person: Shakespeare, the Earl of Oxford and Morton Smith” in which Mr. Shanks drew a parallel between the “endless trench warfare” over whether or not Shakespeare wrote the Shakespeare plays and the longstanding scholarly battle over whether Morton Smith, the late, great Columbia University scholar of ancient history, forged a letter of Clement of Alexandria quoting excerpts from an expanded version of the Gospel of Mark, a document which has generally been referred to as the Secret Gospel of Mark.<sup>1</sup> In his essay, Shanks points to a recent paper by Francis Watson of the University of Durham published in the *Journal of Theological Studies*<sup>2</sup> as the most recent skirmish in the attempt to prove the case against Morton Smith to be “beyond reasonable doubt.” As a former student of Smith’s, and as a sometimes combatant who has previously volunteered for several tours of duty in this battle, I recognize that an armistice is probably still very far off, and I would like to offer a reply--so it is “once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more.” However, while Watson took 42 pages and 120 footnotes to make his case, I concur with Shakespeare that “brevity is the soul of wit,” and will therefore try to be brief in replying.

In particular, I will reply to two of Watson’s main arguments that Shanks appears to have found most persuasive. The first involves a critical book review that Smith wrote

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.bib-rch.org/bar/article.asp?PubID=BSBA&Volume=36&Issue=6&ArticleID=7>

<sup>2</sup> Watson, Francis: “Beyond Suspicion: On the Authorship of the Mar Saba Letter and the Secret Gospel of Mark,” *JTS* 61 (2010).

in the years prior to his discovery of the Secret Gospel (Smith's "Comments on Taylor's Commentary on Mark"<sup>3</sup>) that Watson argues includes an idiosyncratic analysis of the canonical Gospel of Mark by Smith that would later be "confirmed" by his discovery. The second revolves around some provocative similarities between the details of Smith's discovery of the Secret Gospel,<sup>4</sup> which occurred at the monastery of Mar Saba in 1958, and a novel titled *The Mystery of Mar Saba* published by James H. Hunter in 1940,<sup>5</sup> eighteen years before Smith's discovery.

The background: an excerpt from the Secret Gospel of Mark contained in the letter of Clement relates a story of the raising of a young man, who then came to Jesus at night, wearing only a linen cloth, to be taught the "mystery of the kingdom of God." This is the mystery introduced in canonical Mark 4:11 where Jesus says to his disciples "To you has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God; but to those outside, all things happen in parables, so that seeing they may see, and not perceive; and hearing they may hear, and not understand; lest at any time they should be converted, and their sins should be forgiven them." After five years of studying the Secret Gospel, Smith concluded that the "mystery of the kingdom of God" was a *secret baptismal rite*, a magic *ritual practice* that Jesus administered to his disciples; this rite was capable of giving them the experience of ascending into the heavens and entering the kingdom of God, which, Smith argued, freed them from the Mosaic Law. Watson rightly recognizes that Smith's pre-discovery understanding of the meaning of Mark 4:11 and his understanding of the term *mysterion* ("mystery") in that verse are highly relevant. Watson argues that Smith's

---

<sup>3</sup> Morton Smith, "Comments on Taylor's Commentary on Mark," *HTR* 48 (1955):21-64.

<sup>4</sup> Morton Smith, *The Secret Gospel: The Discovery and Interpretation of the Secret Gospel According to Mark* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973; repr., Clearlake, Calif.: Dawn Horse, 2005)

<sup>5</sup> James H. Hunter, *The Mystery of Mar Saba* (New York: Evangelical, 1940)

“Comments” outlined an idiosyncratic understanding of both that is embedded directly in the Secret Gospel.

While Watson acknowledges that there would be nothing unusual in finding some points of continuity between Smith’s prior views and his later interpretation of the Secret Gospel, he finds a scenario where these views themselves coincide so closely to the contents of the letter as to be suspicious. However, he does not consider how one should view significant *discontinuities* between Smith’s pre-discovery views, the contents of the letter, and Smith’s subsequent post-discovery interpretation. Yet, contra Watson, it is such discontinuities that we in fact find, lending support to the notion that Smith’s discovery led him to reevaluate and alter his prior views in significant ways.

Then, as now, the term *mysterion* was a subject of some controversy, including over the variety of possible meanings encompassed by the term, and which meanings were most relevant to particular historical eras and specific cultural and religious contexts.<sup>6</sup> Originally, *mysterion* was a technical term referring to pagan secret rituals such as the Eleusinian mysteries. In this context, the “mysteries” involved proprietary rites of initiation through which the initiate joined a privileged and unique group that possesses secret knowledge of divine things. In later Jewish usage as seen in the LXX, the word *mysterion* was used to translate the Aramaic word *raz*, which was “almost a technical term in apocalyptic for the ‘secrets’ of God, in the sense of God’s ultimate purposes which were revealed only to a privileged seer or a privileged people.”<sup>7</sup> Biblical scholars have been inclined to believe that in some cases *mysterion* also simply meant “secret” in a secular sense betraying no connection with the mysteries religions. The widespread

---

<sup>6</sup> Reviewed by many including A. E. Harvey, “The Use of Mystery Language in the Bible,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 31 (1980): 320–36.

<sup>7</sup> Harvey, “Mystery Language,” 326.

dogma in the 1950s was that *mysterion*, in the New Testament, including Mark 4:11, expressed an eschatological meaning that relies directly on the apocalyptic applications in the LXX, with no mystery religion connotations.<sup>8</sup> In order to further dissociate these mysteries from the pagan rituals, scholars of a more apologetic bent tended to press the idea that these mysteries about God's design were only formerly secret but were now, unlike the pagan mysteries, being revealed openly to everyone. However, that idea does not fit with all of the New Testament uses, and today fewer scholars push this idea as far as their predecessors. But the majority still agrees that during the first two centuries of Christianity, "mystery" referred to something taught, not to progressive rites of initiation or to a single ritual that was performed. Only later in Christianity was the term used to designate rituals such as baptism or the Eucharist, when the Latin translation of the term became *sacramentum* (= sacrament), a term also used on occasion to refer to pagan rites or beliefs.<sup>9</sup>

Smith's understanding of Mark 4:11 was always predicated upon his understanding of the meaning of the term *mysterion*. Prior to his discovery, Smith appears to have been dependent for both on the traditional eschatological understanding, but did not subscribe to the view that these mysteries were open to all. It is on this basis that Smith took issue with Taylor in 1955. In his "Comments," Smith quotes Taylor on Mark 4:11 that *mysterion* in the New Testament "means an 'open secret' made known by God, and is used of the Gospel, or the inclusion of the Gentiles. There is no case in which it connotes secret rites or esoteric knowledge communicated to 'initiates.' In the present

---

<sup>8</sup> E.g., R. E. Brown, "The Semitic Background of the N.T. Mysterion," *Biblica* 39 (1958): 426–48; 40 (1959): 70–89.

<sup>9</sup> A.D. Nock, "Hellenistic Mysteries and Christian Sacraments," *Mnemosyne*, 4th ser., vol. 5 (1952): 177–213.

passage and its parallels, it is used of a knowledge concerning the Kingdom of God which has been imparted to the disciples, but not to the people in general.” Smith wondered how something could be both an “open secret” and a knowledge that was restricted only to an inner group, and remarked, “this looks self-contradictory.”<sup>10</sup>

In his three-page critique, Smith never makes a case for *mysterion* meaning secret *rites*, but argues instead that the commonsense reading of Mark 4:11 is that it represents Jesus as *teaching* in secret. According to Smith’s explanation, “Mk. 4.11–12 is probably an answer to Jewish polemic. The Jews are saying, ‘Jesus was not the Messiah, because if he had been he would have been recognized by our scholars. He was heard and rejected.’ The Christian answer is, ‘They never heard his true teaching. He revealed the mysteries of the Kingdom of God only to his disciples; for outsiders he had only parables. Thus, he fulfilled God’s command to prevent the Jews from believing.’”<sup>11</sup> In Smith’s judgment Taylor was missing the obvious meaning of the passage by supposing “Jesus’ parabolic teaching” was “intended, not to conceal anything, but ‘to elucidate His message by prompting reflection.’” To Smith, Taylor was making an apologetic and theological rather than a historical argument, postulating “a double misunderstanding” of this saying by Mark to avoid contradicting “modern notions of what Jesus should have done.”<sup>12</sup> So, contra Watson, the pre-discovery Smith, like many scholars, thought that the *mysterion* of the kingdom of God concerned secret teachings and not secret rites. And what did the pre-discovery Smith have to say about the Kingdom of God? He said “‘receiving the Kingdom’ is a rabbinic idiom of which the connotations are determined by its fuller form,

---

<sup>10</sup> Smith, “Comments,” 29.

<sup>11</sup> Smith, “Comments,” 29–30.

<sup>12</sup> Smith, “Comments,” 30–31.

‘receiving the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven’...This means acknowledging the rulership of God.”<sup>13</sup>

So, in 1955, the pre-discovery Smith appears to be reading Mark 4:11 as secret *teachings* for the disciples that *placed* them under the rulership of God, not as secret *rites* that *freed* them from the demands of God’s law. That Smith was thinking of Mark 4:11 in terms of secret *teaching* and not of secret *rites* was clear to Arthur Darby Nock, the internationally renowned professor of the history of religion at Harvard University for whom Smith served as a research assistant while working on his Th.D. degree from Harvard Divinity School between 1948 and 1950. In 1952, Nock referenced a discussion from Smith’s first book, *Tannaitic Parallels*,<sup>14</sup> written in Hebrew in 1944 to fulfill his Ph.D. thesis requirement but later published in English in 1952, where Smith was drawing a parallel between Mark 4:11 and rabbinic teachings. Said Nock, the Christian idea “that there were some truths which were not to be communicated even to all believers...had analogies in Judaism (M. Smith, *Tannaitic Parallels*, 156).”<sup>15</sup> Finally, there is an interesting exchange of letters, also from 1955, between Smith and Erwin Goodenough, another of Smith’s closest friends and colleagues, and scholar in the history of religion at Yale best known for his multiple volume book *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period*. Goodenough defended himself from Smith, whom Goodenough included along with Nock and Bruce Metzger as scholars who criticized him for taking arguments too far that Judaism was a mystery religion and a religion of initiations, using the language of mystery religions to express salvation and to describe the Jewish Sabbath

---

<sup>13</sup> Smith, “Comments,” 45.

<sup>14</sup> Morton Smith, *Tannaitic Parallels to the Gospels* (JBLMS 6; Philadelphia: Society of Biblical Literature, 1951).

<sup>15</sup> Nock, *Hellenistic Mysteries*, 207.

and Festivals in much the same way Christians later used the language to describe baptism and the Eucharist. In reply, on December 7, 1955, Smith wrote Goodenough “I am glad to have the statement of your theory revised. Where I got the notion that you thought most of Judaism was practicing a mystery, I don’t know for sure. It may have been from Nock...from the implications of some or your arguments in *Symbols*, I remember your arguing from the floorplans of synagogues that the sequences of rooms suggested grades of initiation. Anyhow, I’m glad to know I was mistaken, since I thought this the weakest part of your interpretation.”<sup>16</sup> Contrast this with the post-discovery Smith, who in his scholarly book on Secret Mark declared that “the common dogma,” exemplified by Nock, that *mysterion* can never mean “secret rite,” was “false” and, in one aspect, “incredible.”<sup>17</sup> Clearly, in the intervening years, the discovery of Secret Mark, with its use of *mysterion* in a context that appeared to him to be ritualistic, had forced Smith to fundamentally alter his view on Mark 4:11 and *mysterion*.

A second example of Watson finding Smith’s ideas embedded directly in the content of the Secret Gospel relates to Smith’s ideas concerning the relationship of the Gospels of Mark and John. Post-discovery Smith argued that an older common source lay behind the Gospels of Mark and John, that “an original Aramaic gospel had been twice translated into Greek; John had used one translation, Mark another...Mark was then variously expanded—by Matthew, by Luke, and by the author of Secret Mark, who imitated Mark’s style, but added episodes from the old Greek translation.”<sup>18</sup> Watson suggests that the same theory appears in Smith’s “Comments,” where he discusses the

---

<sup>16</sup> Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library.

<sup>17</sup> Morton Smith, *Clement of Alexandria and a Secret Gospel of Mark* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973), 180.

<sup>18</sup> Morton Smith, “Clement of Alexandria and Secret Mark: The Score at the End of the First Decade,” *HTR* 75 (1982): p. 452.

Johannine characteristics that appear in Mark 2:1–3:6. According to Watson, Smith was arguing that “the points of contact between John and this particular section may derive from a common source.”<sup>19</sup> In fact, what Smith there argued was that these stories in Mark have a few characteristics of John’s style, essentially that Mark was dependent on a source that had Johannine traits,<sup>20</sup> not that Mark and John shared a common source.

The Secret Mark excerpts in the letter do not fit the pattern that Smith described in Mark 2:1–3:6, for, as Smith showed in detail, they *completely lack Johannine traits*.<sup>21</sup> In fact, Smith’s post-discovery theory that Mark and John rely on an earlier source was devised to account for a different phenomenon, “parallelism in the order of events which appears between the latter halves of Mk. and Jn. once the longer text [i.e., Secret Mark] is put in its place in Mk.” Smith cannot include Mark 2:1–3:6 as part of this evidence, for the contacts with John in that passage do not concern parallels in the order of occurrences but random Johannine qualities within a specific section. What we have here, then, are two different kinds of parallels between Mark and John that require different source theories to account for them.

Smith’s preserved correspondence on this issue similarly sheds additional light on Watson’s assertion. Following Smith’s first public announcement of the Secret Gospel at the 1960 meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, Cyril Richardson, professor of church history and director of graduate studies at Union Theological Seminary, initiated a close study of the Secret Gospel with Smith. For more than three years, Smith and Richardson met regularly to discuss the problems and issues of Secret Mark, and in 1963 they discussed for several months how to explain the linguistic and geographical

---

<sup>19</sup> Watson, “Beyond,” p. 157.

<sup>20</sup> Smith, “Comments,” p. 26.

<sup>21</sup> Smith, *Secret Gospel*, 53–55.



similarities between Secret Mark and John. From their letters,<sup>22</sup> it becomes clear that Smith did not actually come to propose a common source being behind Mark and John as the best way to explain the similarities until June 1963 (Richardson himself did not find this explanation persuasive). That Smith first raised this possibility five years after his discovery and close to the completion of his first draft of his book speaks against the possibility that this was an idiosyncratic pet theory of Smith's that was so important to him that he embedded it within a forged manuscript discovery.

Watson's second main argument revolves around various similarities he detects between the details of Smith's discovery of the Secret Gospel, which occurred at the monastery of Mar Saba in 1958, and a novel titled *The Mystery of Mar Saba* published by Canadian author James H. Hunter in 1940. The plot of *The Mystery of Mar Saba* involves a Nazi conspiracy to disparage Christianity, undermining the British will to wage war. The Nazis blackmail a Greek scholar to forge a previously unknown document called the Shred of Nicodemus, an account by Nicodemus and Josephus of Arimathea describing how they moved the body of Christ from his burial tomb to another location after the crucifixion. The forged manuscript, which undermines traditional beliefs about the resurrection, is then planted at Mar Saba, and by further machinations later discovered by Sir William Bracebridge, a manuscript hunter who has arrived in Jerusalem in search of rare manuscripts on behalf of the British Museum. In a general way, then, *The Mystery of Mar Saba* and Secret Mark share some similarities in that both involve the discovery of an ancient, Christian tradition-challenging manuscript at the monastery of Mar Saba. However, considering many of the particular points of similarity that Watson finds, some

---

<sup>22</sup> The Burke Library Archives at Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York, C.C. Richardson Papers Series 1, box 5, f9: Correspondence CCR/Morton Smith.

are too generic to be persuasive while others are just too artful, Watson seems to be trying too hard to find anachronisms, leaving the impression that “the lady doth protest too much, methinks.” How much should we make, for example, of the fact that both documents were written in Greek and later translated in English? How much weight are we to give to Watson’s comparison that in the Secret Gospel the young man comes to visit Jesus by night, while in the Shred of Nicodemus, Nicodemus visits Jesus’ tomb in the early morning—but in John 19:39, Nicodemus is described as visiting Jesus at night. Considering the acrobatics necessary to make this work, one gets the impression Watson is playing the Six Degrees of Morton Smith game, a way of tying Smith to anything by six degrees of separation.

In Shanks’ opinion, Watson’s *coup de grâce* is a comparison of two passages, one from the novel and the other from Morton Smith’s book. In the novel, the professor observes that “most of [the manuscripts] were removed [from Mar Saba], but I have always had the feeling that some might have been overlooked and hidden away. My supposition proved correct.” In his book Morton Smith wrote: “I had not expected much from the Mar Saba manuscripts, since I knew that almost all of them had been carried off to Jerusalem ... But there was always the chance that something had been missed.” To Watson, it is remarkable that both Smith and Bracebridge should “visit the Mar Saba monastery with exactly the same expectation.”<sup>23</sup> But wait, there’s more: while Bracebridge reports that “I was prepared to leave Mar Saba, *reconciled* [italics mine] to the negative results of my search”<sup>24</sup>, Smith reports that he was “gradually *reconciling* [italics mine] myself to my worst expectations and repeating every day that I should

---

<sup>23</sup> Watson, *Beyond*, p. 165

<sup>24</sup> Hunter, *Mystery*, p. 293

discover nothing of importance.”<sup>25</sup> In Watson’s estimation, given the startling nature of the similarities, “there is no alternative but to conclude that Smith is dependent on the novel.”<sup>26</sup>

While these similarities are certainly provocative, surely one can at least conceive, propose, and test other alternatives than causation to explain these associations. One way to explain how both Smith and Bracebridge might have come to visit Mar Saba “with exactly the same expectation” is that the expectations of both men were predicated on the expectations of the Manuscript Hunter. The actual Smith and the fictional Bracebridge were both self-described “manuscript hunters,” men who were part scholar and part adventurer in the style of Tischendorf and Curzon, scouring the holy lands for Greek papyri containing rare and unknown manuscripts representing lost originals of the church fathers, Apocrypha, or Pseudepigrapha that they hoped would impact on our understanding of early Christianity. It was under the influence of Werner Jaeger that Smith became interested in Greek manuscripts and manuscript hunting,<sup>27</sup> and like the fictional Bracebridge who visited “scores of monasteries along the Mediterranean seaboard, in Syria, and in Palestine,”<sup>28</sup> Smith spent a year from 1951 to 1952 visiting minor Greek monasteries to catalogue their manuscript holdings, several months in 1958 in Palestine and Turkey during which he discovered Secret Mark, and in 1966 time in Syria searching for Hebrew manuscripts. The late nineteenth century had seen formal scientific excavations undertaken purely for the discovery of Greek manuscripts, and these efforts at locating, cataloguing, and consolidating manuscripts into large collections

---

<sup>25</sup> Smith, *Secret Gospel*, p. 12

<sup>26</sup> Watson, *Beyond*, p. 170.

<sup>27</sup> Smith, *Secret Gospel*, p. 8

<sup>28</sup> Hunter, *Mystery*, p. 292

were so successful that by the 1950s the general consensus was that what was left to find consisted primarily of comparatively modern manuscripts that were not of great interest to scholars of the ancient world.

Smith's own expectations in the 1950s can be judged by his 1959 paper "Monasteries and Their Manuscripts,"<sup>29</sup> where he describes how the "Classical texts of the monasteries were systematically hunted out by both eastern and western European collectors or dealers" and how "a great deal of comparatively worthless material must be gone through in the hope of finding a few things of value." Mar Saba itself was a fifth-century monastery, the largest in the Judean desert, considered to be one of the oldest inhabited monasteries in the world, and for Smith, along with St. Catherine's in Sinai, "one of the two great monasteries in the Orthodox Church."<sup>30</sup> It was well known that almost all of its early manuscripts had been brought to Jerusalem in the mid-nineteenth century by order of the Patriarch, so if Smith had high hopes but low expectations of a major discovery in 1958, it would be understandable. It is easy to picture Smith, having spent weeks going through hundreds of seventeenth-century and later liturgical books, gradually resigning himself to accepting that he would not find anything of "importance" at Mar Saba but hoping against hope that something had been missed.

Therefore, one could argue that the general expectations of the historical Smith and the fictional Bracebridge were aligned because they reflected the actual facts on the ground of manuscript hunting in the mid-twentieth century. The more pertinent question we should ask ourselves about Watson's claim, however, is this: if we were to take any event in modern history and tried to find a novel written before that event with a content

---

<sup>29</sup> Morton Smith, "Monasteries and Their Manuscripts," *Archaeology* 13 (1960).

<sup>30</sup> Smith, *Secret Gospel*, p. 2.

that resembles it in various more specific details, what are the odds we could come up with a parallel? To what extent does real life ever imitate art, and if it does, how closely? In keeping with my promise to be brief, I will describe only five such events.

In the nineteenth century, Edgar Allan Poe wrote *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, a story about four survivors of a shipwreck who were stranded on an open boat for many days before they decided to kill and eat the cabin boy whose name was Richard Parker. Some years later, in 1884, an actual boat named the *Mignonette* sank a thousand miles off the coast of the Cape of Good Hope, with only four survivors, who were in an open boat for many days.<sup>31</sup> Eventually the three senior members of the crew killed and ate the cabin boy who was also named Richard Parker. The similarities between the Poe story and the killing of the actual Richard Parker 40 years later were amazingly accurate. I know of nobody, however, who has suggested that the crewmembers of the *Mignonette*, who were later prosecuted in a legal case that established the precedent that necessity is no defense against a charge of murder, perpetrated their acts of cannibalism as an *homage* to Poe.

*Futility, or the Wreck of the Titan* was a novel written by Morgan Robertson in 1898. The story features a ship named the *Titan*, which sinks after striking an iceberg. Although the novel was written before the real-life *Titanic* had even been designed, the *Titan* and its sinking have been noted to have numerous astonishing points of similarity to the *Titanic*, which sank fourteen years later.<sup>32</sup> For example, both ships sank in April in the North Atlantic. There are also similarities between their size (800 ft long for *Titan* versus 882 ft long for the *Titanic*), and speed (25 knots for *Titan*, 21 knots for *Titanic*).

---

<sup>31</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard\\_Parker\\_\(shipwrecked\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_Parker_(shipwrecked))

<sup>32</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Futility,\\_or\\_the\\_Wreck\\_of\\_the\\_Titan](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Futility,_or_the_Wreck_of_the_Titan)

Further similarities between *Titanic* and *Titan* include that they both had too few lifeboats for the number of passengers on board, and both sank after striking an iceberg despite being described as unsinkable.

Perhaps more relevant to the issue at hand is an interesting story about a discovery of manuscript material for which no other copy exists that occurred in 1975 in the Sinai monastery of St. Catherine's. Here is the first paragraph:

On May 25, 1975, Archimandrite Sophronius, then the Skevophylax of the monastery, discovered a cache of manuscript leaves and fragments in the tower on the north wall of the monastery. The room where they were discovered had been used to store manuscripts in earlier centuries, and when the manuscripts were transferred to a new location in the early eighteenth century, these damaged leaves and fragments had been left behind. These were subsequently hidden when the floor above the room gave way during an earthquake. They were recovered during the renovation of the tower. When the mass of leaves and fragments had been gathered and sorted, they were found to reflect the diverse languages found in the library: the majority of the manuscripts were in Greek, with the majority of the others in Arabic, Syriac, Slavonic, and Georgian. There were also texts in Hebrew, Latin, and Ethiopian.<sup>33</sup>

Numerous similarities between the story relating this manuscript discovery and Smith's are evident: the discovery of overlooked manuscripts occurs in a Near East, Orthodox, Greek desert monastery tower library; there had been a transfer of manuscripts

---

<sup>33</sup> <http://www.sinaimonastery.com/en/index.php?lid=106>

from one monastic location to another in the eighteenth century; a disaster (a fire at Mar Saba, an earthquake at St. Catherine's) leaves manuscript pages and fragments written in diverse languages including Greek, Latin, Hebrew, Georgian floating freely; both accounts mention saints named John (the Sinai description discusses St. John Climacus, Smith discusses St. John of Damascus). In a final twist of fate, the name of the Sinai manuscript discoverer was Sophronius, a Latinized Greek name meaning self-controlled, prudent, or sensible. The name Modestos, a Latin version of the name Sophronius and meaning moderate, sober, or restrained, has already been contended<sup>34</sup> to be the probable name for Madiotes, which was previously proposed by Stephen Carlson<sup>35</sup> to be a pseudonym for Morton Smith and meaning bald swindler. I have to assume these similarities are coincidental; otherwise I would be forced to conclude that Sophronius fashioned the details of this story based on Smith's own account. I have no doubt that if Sophronius' discovery had occurred before Smith's, Watson or someone else would claim that Smith modeled his story after it, either to cleverly give his account additional credence, or as a "deliberate clue." The parallels here are more substantial than those Watson proposes, and this underscores the point that accounts of manuscript discoveries are bound to have some commonalities that seem surprising to us but make sense in light of the similar settings. Six Degrees of Morton Smith—anyone can play.

By way of conclusion, I would like to report two remarkable letter discoveries of my own, real-life stories that certainly strain one's credulity. In hunting through the

---

<sup>34</sup> Allan J. Pantuck and Scott G. Brown, "Morton Smith as M. Madiotes: Stephen Carlson's Attribution of Secret Mark to a Bald Swindler," *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 6: 106–25.

<sup>35</sup> Stephen C. Carlson, *The Gospel Hoax: Morton Smith's Invention of Secret Mark* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2005).

Smith archives at the Jewish Theological Seminary, I found a letter written in 1968 that Smith had saved from an editor for Macmillan's Publishing Company who wanted to publish a collection of Smith's papers. The name of the editor? Clement Alexandre! What are the odds that I should discover in a seminary library a previously unknown letter of Clement Alexandre requesting permission to publish the writings of Morton Smith, the man who became famous for publishing a previously unknown letter of Clement of Alexandria found in a monastic library? I would not even begin to know how to calculate the odds, but I would hazard a guess that they are infinitesimally less than the odds that both Smith and Hunter used the word "reconcile."

A final example: while researching Smith's five years at Brown University as Assistant Professor of Biblical Literature, I searched the archives of Barnaby Keeney, the president of Brown University from 1955 to 1966, looking for any correspondence between the two. I ended up finding a letter from Morton Smith of Providence, Rhode Island, to Keeney, but it was not from Brown's Assistant Professor of Biblical Literature but instead from Keeney's life insurance salesman of the same name. What are the odds of there being a second Morton Smith living in Providence, Rhode Island, at the same time, writing letters to Barnaby Keeney? Again, the odds seem incalculable, but knowing that there were two Morton Smiths running around Brown University reminds me of the old joke we used to repeat about the Shakespeare authorship controversy, that Shakespeare's plays were probably not written by William Shakespeare but by another man of the same name. In future battles, therefore, it will probably be necessary not only to argue that Morton Smith did not forge the Secret Gospel of Mark, but also that it was not forged by another man of the same name.