

Beyond Reasonable Doubt: A Response to Allan J. Pantuck

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Dr. Pantuck notes that my article on the authorship of the Mar Saba letter and the Secret Gospel of Mark occupies 42 pages (*sic*) and 120 footnotes.¹ In contrast to this scholarly prolixity, he will “try to be brief in replying.” Since his critique of my article addresses just two issues—or rather, selected elements within two issues—occupying a total of around five of my 43 pages, I too can promise to be brief.² I would point out, however, that my argument that Morton Smith’s authorship can be established “beyond reasonable doubt” needs to be considered in full, and that some of the most conclusive evidence is to be found buried within those 120 footnotes. The argument is inevitably complex at times, no doubt requiring a patient and informed reader with experience in handling intricate textual issues within New Testament and patristic scholarship. Simply isolating two of the more accessible bits of this argument, and then speculating on the probability or otherwise of striking coincidences, does little to further the debate.

Pantuck’s first point responds to my demonstration that there are strong continuities between

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- 1 Francis Watson, “Beyond Suspicion: On the Authorship of the Mar Saba Letter and the Secret Gospel of Mark”, *JTS* n.s. 61 (2010), pp. 128-70. I make that 43 pages.
 - 2 Dr. Pantuck’s selected issues coincide with those highlighted by Hershel Shanks in his “First Person” contribution to the issue of this journal for November/December 2010, entitled “Shakespeare, the Earl of Oxford and Morton Smith”. I am grateful to Mr. Shanks for drawing attention to my article and for the invitation to contribute this response to Dr. Pantuck. In passing, I would like to point out that the claim that my article recycles an already-refuted argument about Morton Smith and Morton Salt is not correct. That is the argument of Stephen C. Carlson (*The Gospel Hoax: Morton’s Smith’s Invention of Secret Mark* [Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2005], p. 59). While I am happy to acknowledge the stimulus of Carlson’s work, I provide a rather different account of the embedding of Morton Smith’s name in the text of the Mar Saba letter; see “Beyond Suspicion,” pp. 152–155.

Smith's idiosyncratic views on secrecy within earliest Christianity, prior to his alleged discovery, and the content of the discovered letter itself. If I may be permitted to quote myself at some length:

Before Smith left for his visit to Mar Saba in the summer of 1958, many of the elements that comprise the letter to Theodore were already present in his published work. These elements do not simply recur in Smith's *interpretation* of the letter, as one would expect; rather, they are embedded *within the letter itself*. By 1958 Smith already saw Clement as articulating a tradition according to which Jesus taught higher truths in secret; a tradition summed up in the Markan 'mystery of the kingdom of God'. He had already surmised that Mark may have omitted or censored material present in the older authentic tradition he inherited—tradition shared in part with the Fourth Evangelist. In the letter to Theodore, all this finds its confirmation. Only in retrospect, in the light of the letter, can these undeveloped points from Smith's earlier work be reassembled into a pattern. Yet, given the content of the letter, the pattern is compelling evidence that the discoverer of this remarkable text is actually its author.³

In response to this, Pantuck argues that Smith's view of the "mystery of the kingdom of God" was actually changed by his discovery. Pre-discovery, he understood this Markan expression to refer to secret *teaching*; post-discovery, he placed the emphasis on secret *rites*. There is indeed a shift of emphasis at this point, but it does not amount to much. For one thing, the Secret Gospel still has Jesus

3 "Beyond Suspicion", pp. 160–161; italics original. Pantuck challenges my claim that the pre-discovery view of the relation of Mark to John corresponds broadly to the Secret Gospel's Johannine affinities—denied by Smith himself. Whatever Smith may have claimed, it remains the case that the Johannine or pre-Johannine stories of Lazarus (Jn.11) and Nicodemus (Jn.3) provide the framework for the Secret Gospel's tale of the brother who was raised from the dead and who came to Jesus by night. Pre-discovery, Smith claims that Mark uses a source with "many points of contact with Jn.", displaying "characteristics of Jn.'s style" and "other Johannine traits" (Morton Smith, "Comments on Taylor's Commentary on Mark," *HTR* 48 [1955], pp. 21-64; p. 26). Given that John postdates Mark, a Markan source with pronounced Johannine affinities is by definition also some kind of Johannine source.

teaching the mystery of the kingdom of God, even though the nocturnal setting and the partial or complete nudity of the two male participants hint at “rites” of a strictly private nature. In addition, my argument does not assert or require a *total* continuity between Smith’s views pre- and post-discovery, only a *high degree* of continuity. The full force of this point is only evident if one grasps how unusual Smith’s esotericism is within the context of New Testament scholarship in the 1950s and indeed today.

The other main point that Dr. Pantuck chooses to discuss has to do with the coincidences between Smith’s account of his “discovery” and the earlier novel by James H. Hunter.⁴ In the novel, a text forged by a malevolent Nazi scholar seems to threaten the fabric of Christianity-as-we-know-it. It is discovered at the Mar Saba monastery, near Jerusalem, and is titled “The Shred of Nicodemus” by its innocent British discoverer. It runs as follows:

I, Nicodemus, in company with Joseph of Arimathea in early morn of the first day of the week removed the body of Jesus. Coming forth we found the tomb opened and the stone rolled away after the earthquake. We left the linen cloths in the tomb, and carried Him forth lest profane hands desecrate His body. We buried Him in the sepulchre near the garden over the Kedron where standeth the pillar Absalom reared for himself in the King’s Dale.⁵

A Greek text is also provided, and a reader with a New Testament scholarly training (Morton Smith, for example) will naturally want to know how it has been constructed. As I show in my article, the “Shred” proves to be a collage of scripturally derived materials just like the main Secret Gospel fragment:

4 James H. Hunter, *The Mystery of Mar Saba* (New York and Toronto: Evangelical Publishers, 1940).

5 The translation is found on the frontispiece, below the artist’s rendering of the Greek manuscript, and again on p. 283.

It contains 71 Greek words, of which 28 occur in five phrases of three or more words drawn from Mark, John or the Septuagint. The first Secret Gospel fragment contains 157 words, of which 66 occur in thirteen phrases of three or more words drawn from Mark or the other synoptists.⁶

Within the wider context of a remarkable series of parallels between the novel and Smith's discovery narrative, it is surely plausible that the novelist's collage technique has been noted and imitated by Smith in the composition of the pseudo-Markan fragments. It is just the technique one would expect from any modern author trying to construct a piece of fake Biblical literature.

Pantuck's response to all this is interesting. Initially he claims that my parallels "are too generic to be persuasive" or "just too artful", reporting his personal impression that "the lady doth protest too much, methinks." (Which lady? What has Hamlet to do with Morton Smith? What is so excessive about her protestations?) Later, Pantuck concedes that "these similarities are certainly provocative"—but that alternative hypotheses may still be possible. It is unusual for Smith's defenders to concede any merit at all to his and their critics, so this is a moment to cherish. But what does Pantuck mean by "provocative"? Does he mean that the parallels amount to rather a strong argument, one that cannot be lightly dismissed and that might even prove persuasive? Recovering himself, he proceeds to meditate on the likelihood that real or fictional manuscript hunters may have similar experiences and describe them in similar ways (an argument too generic to be persuasive), before recounting a series of striking real life coincidences.

Turning for a moment from confrontation to cooperation, I would like to add a further complex coincidence to Pantuck's collection, one that he himself has missed. Smith, he tells us, became a

⁶ Watson, "Beyond Suspicion," p. 169.

“manuscript hunter” under the influence of Werner Jaeger. “Jaeger” is German for “hunter.” Hunter is also the name of the novelist whose tale of manuscript hunting Smith wittingly or unwittingly re-enacted. “Jaeger” was also the name of a German friend and professional associate of Edward Elgar, immortalized in the *Enigma Variations* as “Nimrod”, the “mighty hunter before the Lord” (Genesis 10:9). An intriguing pattern emerges: five hunters, an association with mysteries or enigmas, and a series of pairings between males of Anglo-American and Germanic ethnicity. I agree, then, that coincidences do happen in real life, defying the odds that might seem to be stacked against them in advance.

Yet we should not accept all alleged coincidences uncritically. To take a hypothetical example, let us suppose that a novel was published in the year 1895 in which an amateur archaeologist and fossil hunter claims to have unearthed some bone fragments from a gravel pit in Sussex, England, which, when reassembled by the appropriate experts, appear to prove the Darwinian theory that humans are descended from ape-like ancestors. Let us also suppose that the author of this novel is an ardent creationist, and that his equally creationist hero (let him be an American) undertakes to prove that the alleged discovery is fraudulent, finally succeeding after years of opposition from the scientific establishment. If such a novel had been published in c. 1895, the partial parallels with the Piltdown Man hoax of 1912 would have been very striking. Scholarly defenders of the discoverer (Charles Dawson) could hardly object if his critics drew skeptical conclusions from those parallels. Arguments to the effect that the critics protested too much, and that the parallels (though certainly provocative) were merely generic, would be unavailing in view of the *prima facie* evidence that Dawson’s hoax had been inspired by the novel.

That, I suggest, is more or less Morton Smith’s position in relation to the novelistic precedent. Yet exposure of the Piltdown Man hoax did not need the assistance of an incriminatory work of fiction.

What it required was the application of specialized and rigorous scientific methods, and it took 40 years to get the methods and the application right and to convince those who had assumed authenticity that they were wrong to do so.⁷ If something similar turns out to be the fate of the Mar Saba hoax, we would have a further coincidence to add to Dr. Pantuck's collection.⁸

While discussion of the Secret Gospel will no doubt continue, my hope and expectation is that it will be increasingly ignored by scholars who fear, with good reason, that their work will be corrupted by association with it.

7 An article in *Time* magazine, published in November 1953, is generally regarded as the end of the road for Piltdown Man, "the first Englishman". In the Mar Saba case, the methods in question are primarily those of New Testament and patristic scholarship. I am not convinced that handwriting analysis has a major contribution to make here. In her report on this issue, featured by this journal, Venetia Anastasopoulou concludes that Smith's "level of ability concerning his Greek language handwriting characteristics is like that of young school children who have not started to use writing in a practical way of expressing thoughts and ideas". These conclusions are based on writing samples dating from 1951 till at least 1984. Like any other non-native scholar working with ancient Greek texts, Smith will have gained considerable experience in the use of written Greek for scholarly purposes that have nothing whatever in common with the first writing attempts of young school children. Ms Anastasopoulou has not taken into account Smith's level of highly specialized expertise.

8 While the "discovery" of the Mar Saba letter occurred in 1958, it first became generally accessible with the publication in 1973 of Smith's two contrasting but equally bizarre books (Morton Smith, *Clement of Alexandria and a Secret Gospel of Mark* [Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1973]; *The Secret Gospel: The Discovery and Interpretation of the Secret Gospel according to Mark*, New York: Harper & Row, 1973).