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THE GOSPEL OF JESUS' WIFE: A MODERN FAKE

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The so-called *Gospel of Jesus' Wife*, recently touted in sensational headlines as a new discovery that showed that the question of whether Jesus was married was intensely debated by early Christians,¹ is actually three lies rolled into one: it is not a Gospel, it does not tell us anything about the real Jesus, and it does not even show anything historical about early Christian beliefs. It is a modern forgery; almost certainly made after 2002! This is the view of many Coptic and Gnostic scholars at the time of the writing of this article, but if you haven't previously heard about it, don't be surprised. The "discovery" and what it "proved" were far more widely broadcast than the compelling evidence of the forgery—especially since the "Gospel" was announced by a respected Harvard University scholar, Dr. Karen King.²

THE SENSATIONAL PAPYRUS

Ironically, when King was first contacted by email in 2010 by the still undisclosed owner of a tiny papyrus with some explosive words, "Jesus said to them, my wife..." (then the text breaks off),³ she doubted its authenticity and did not pursue the matter. Only in late 2011 after she actually saw the credit-card-sized object in person, and compared its Coptic words and letters with those of the *Gospel of Thomas*, was she interested enough to have experts in ancient papyrus (papyrologists) check it out. Their initial verdict was positive, although scientific tests on the papyrus and ink were recommended for more definitive proof. Nevertheless, King made a translation, drafted a scholarly paper, and had photos of the papyrus made. All of these were released when she presented the paper in Rome on September 18, 2012.

The world thus heard of *The Gospel of Jesus' Wife*, a misleading name chosen by King, before such tests were made, and apparently before the peer reviewer for the *Harvard Theological Review*, was satisfied about the object's authenticity.⁴

The History Behind the Papyrus

The anonymous owner of the text claimed to have acquired it from a German collector, now deceased, who had supposedly purchased it in Egypt in 1982. That year is significant because an Egyptian law prohibiting such dealing in ancient objects was passed in 1983. Some other players who allegedly saw the papyrus before 2010 have

also passed away, and all prior history of its existence before that time remains unverified. But from the point of view of the current owner, King would have been the perfect person to approach for authentication, potentially providing the valuable “Harvard imprimatur,”⁵ or to arrange a direct sale to the university. King previously had published works on *Thomas*, a Coptic *Gospel of Mary*, and various other Gnostic texts that were part of a collection of codices found near Nag Hammadi in Egypt in 1945.

These authentic texts from the fourth century and later have provided the material for modern authors such as King to spin stories about a high status of women in Gnosticism, and to argue for a reinterpretation of the roles and status of women in the life and ministry of Jesus, and in the earliest church. King has specifically theorized that Jesus had a very close relationship with Mary Magdalene, likely one of husband and wife. Unfortunately for King, a fair reading of the early church fathers and the Gnostic texts shows neither high status nor positive roles for women in Gnosticism.⁶ Certainly no Nag Hammadi texts, or any other ancient sources, directly state that Jesus was married in a physical sense to anyone. Thus, an ancient text saying that Mary, or any other woman, was Jesus’ wife would have been exciting for King and Harvard.

The Perverse Skill of the Forger

After King disseminated photos of the small papyrus, a diverse group of Coptic experts and Gnostic scholars raised questions about its authenticity on Internet forums and blogs. Some complaints had already been considered by King and the papyrologists, Roger Bagnell and AnneMarie Luijendijk. They believed that the strange grammar, poorly shaped letters, odd gaps in the preservation of the manuscript, and other minor oddities noted by critics were outweighed by some “hard to forge” features. These included the faded but still partially visible letters on the side opposite from the sensational “wife” wording, and the presence of ink on its frayed edges.

Some other debated features were subject to interpretation. Bagnell, for example, said that “middling penmanship” explained the shaping of some letters, and concluded that this actually showed authenticity: “This wasn’t a high-class professional working with good tools. That is one of the things that tells you it’s real, because a modern scribe wouldn’t do that. You’d have to be really kind of perversely skilled to produce something like this as a fake.”⁷

Unfortunately for Bagnell and King, the modern forger seems to have had that kind of perverse skill, or possibly just clumsy penmanship, but the popular media essentially ignored initial qualifications and objections and presented the most fantastic interpretations of the new papyrus as completely true. A Yahoo News headline was typical: “Jesus had a wife, newly discovered gospel suggests.”⁸ The Smithsonian Channel website even said that the object was “one of the most significant discoveries of all time” (although this has now been deleted).⁹

The Irrelevance of Gnostic Texts

Several news outlets such as the BBC simply presumed that it was now a fact that Jesus had been married and discussed how this would affect current church issues such as the ordination of women!¹⁰ All these disregarded the inconvenient truth that even a genuine Gnostic text would, at best, be more than 125 years removed from the real events of the early first century, and would have no relevance for the historical Jesus at all. King, to her credit, had tried to make that clear: “This new gospel doesn’t prove that Jesus was married.”¹¹ But her warning was lost in the media hysteria.

Certainly Irenaeus, an orthodox opponent of various Gnostic sects in the late second century, knew that the Gnostics invented fictional stories in order to support their philosophical and theological distortions of apostolic teaching. Moreover, neither the various Gnostic groups themselves, nor the early orthodox Christians, would have used the term “Christian” to describe members of Gnostic factions.¹² In short, even if the *Gospel of Jesus’ Wife* had been a real Gnostic text, it only would have been an ancient rather than modern fabrication that still said nothing substantive about early “Christian” beliefs.

The Smoking Gun Proving the Forgery

Unfortunately for those touting the importance of the new papyrus, the skeptics soon proved that the Coptic lettering and wording on the new papyrus were far too dependent on the Coptic *Gospel of Thomas*. In fact, the new text now appears to be just an assortment of words and phrases, slightly jumbled, that have been cut and pasted from *Thomas* sayings 18, 30, 45, 101, and 114!¹³

Even more significantly, one line of the new manuscript breaks off at the same place that it does in *Thomas*; that is, the modern forger copied both the wording and a line break from *Thomas*.¹⁴ Finally, incontrovertible evidence of the forgery has been provided by Coptic expert Andrew Barnard in collaboration with Mark Goodacre and others.¹⁵ Barnard proved that the modern forger penned the Coptic words on the papyrus based on a downloadable PDF version of *The Gospel of Thomas*, which only became available after 2002.¹⁶ The decisive evidence is that the new papyrus reproduces an error, a missing letter that does not exist in any physical copy of the Coptic *Gospel of Thomas*. The PDF error, essentially a typo, is explained and illustrated in detail on Goodacre’s blog.¹⁷ Clearly, the new papyrus makes an error that an ancient scribe, competent in Coptic, would not have made, since it results in strange, incorrect spelling. On the other hand, it is just the kind of error that a modern forger, using the PDF version of *Thomas*, could make without realizing it. In short, the new text is dependent on a slightly mistaken version of *Thomas* only available after 2002, and so it cannot be ancient.

REACTIONS AND LESSONS FROM THE FORGERY

One might hope that major TV news channels would trumpet the deception and renounce the attempts to use it as established fact to challenge or undermine traditional Christian teachings, but, as of early January 2013, nothing of the sort has occurred. The King research paper slated for publication in the *Harvard Theological Review* and a

Smithsonian documentary have been quietly delayed awaiting “verification tests.”¹⁸ Aside from sporadic news articles,¹⁹ there has been little in the major media about the forgery. Some might argue that firm pronouncements should await test results on the papyrus or the ink. These test results were once promised for October 2012, but have been delayed past December. It makes little difference. If the papyrus or ink are modern, it would merely add to the evidence of forgery. If tests prove that the papyrus itself is ancient, it would prove nothing of importance. Ancient scraps of papyrus are not hard to acquire.

Making ink that would not betray a modern origin would be more difficult, but not impossible, perhaps by deriving it from ancient ink on old papyri.²⁰

Indeed, one lesson from this fake is that making credible forgeries is not nearly as difficult as commonly imagined with the wealth of Internet material now available. On the other hand, because King published good photos early, the Internet also allowed scholars to find the forgery very quickly, and even pinpoint when it was probably done—after 2002. This was also about the time that the fictional *DaVinci Code* book (2003) and later movie (2006) popularized the notion that Jesus and Mary were married, had children, and so forth. The market for a supposedly ancient papyrus saying that Jesus had a wife would clearly have been better in a post-*DaVinci Code* world.

A Double Standard

Another lesson that probably does not need much elaboration for JOURNAL readers is that false claims about Jesus and early Christianity will receive popular acclaim, while evidence of errors and distortions, deliberate or otherwise, in such claims will be minimized. In other words, there is a double standard.

One recent example is with the so-called *Gospel of Judas*²¹ where the actual, authentic manuscript was kept under tight control until after a National Geographic documentary and related books were released, probably to maximize their sales. But after the text was independently analyzed, it was discovered that the National Geographic translation first released contained significant mistakes. For example, it had Jesus saying to Judas, “In the last days, *they will curse your ascent to the holy generation*” but the final amended translation, put out more than a year later, said of Judas, “*You will not ascend on high to the holy generation,*”²² a pretty significant difference! Coincidentally, the original mistakes all supported the now-discredited National Geographic hype that *Judas* portrayed the historical Judas as a hero and not a traitor. Still, there was little or no outcry as would have likely been the case if evangelical Christians had made such mistakes or distortions.

Thoughtful Christians nevertheless should realize that the situation might be reversed and we should be wary of sensational finds that seem to *support* the Bible, especially in cases where the origin of the object cannot be verified. The Bible does not need false props! Uncritical acceptance of archaeological finds that are later discredited, such as the James Ossuary, are not helpful for the Christian cause.²³ Christians or institutions that trumpet false claims could end up with the same egg on their faces that

Harvard and King now have—and the media probably would not look the other way in that case.

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NOTES

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- 3 <http://www.hds.harvard.edu/faculty-research/research-projects/the-gospel-of-jesus-wife>.
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- 5 Ibid.
- 6 See Daniel Hoffman, *The Status of Women and Gnosticism in Irenaeus and Tertullian* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1995).
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- 9 Doug Stanglin, "Smithsonian Delays 'Jesus Wife' Film as Doubts Mount," *USA Today*, September 28, 2012, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/ondeadline/2012/09/28/smithsonian-channel-jesus-wife-papyrus-vatican/1600457/>.
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- 13 <http://markgoodacre.org/Watson.pdf>.
- 14 Williams, "Jesus's 'Wife' Found Dead" (see note 10).
- 15 <http://ntweblog.blogspot.com/2012/10/gospel-of-jesus-wife-fragment.html>. This blog is the key site for research on this subject and is periodically updated.
- 16 <http://www.gospels.net/gjw/mighthavebeenforged.pdf>.
- 17 See note 15 above.
- 18 Thomas L. MacDonald, "Simthsonian Yanks 'Jesus's Wife,'" September 28, 2012, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/godandthemachine/2012/09/smithsonian-yanks-jesus-wife/>.
- 19 Most notably, Andrew Brown, "The Gospel of Jesus's Wife a Very Modern Fake," *theguardian* and *Gaurdian.co.uk*, Tuesday, October 16, 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/belief/2012/oct/16/gospel-jesus-wife-modern-fake-typo>.
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