

## ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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### *Did Jesus Have a Wife?*

Recently a Harvard Divinity School scholar, Karen L. King, published a paper, provocatively entitled, “The Gospel of Jesus’ Wife,” on a 4<sup>th</sup> century 1 ½ by 3 inch Coptic papyrus scrap that, she argues, contains the phrase, “Jesus said to them, ‘My wife. . . .’” Indeed, she announced her research in the Vatican’s front yard at a Coptic Studies conference at the Catholic Church’s Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum in Rome. [The papyrus is roughly rectangular, torn on all four sides, so that each line of text is incomplete; 33 words spread across 14 incomplete lines.] Laurie Goodstein of the *New York Times* correctly observes that the title of her paper was “attention-getting . . . as if it had equal weight to other, lengthier texts that are known as the Gospels.” She has submitted the paper to the *Harvard Theological Review* (scheduled to be published in January 2013), which asked three scholars to review it. According to Goodstein, two questioned its authenticity, but they had seen only low-resolution photographs of the fragment and one of the two questioned the grammar, translation and interpretation. Further, the ink on the papyrus has not been submitted for a spectrum analysis, which would confirm that the ink’s chemistry is compatible with inks from antiquity. [King has promised to do so in the very near future.] In addition, as King admits, if authentic, the fragment was written 350 years after Jesus’ death, burial and resurrection and does not prove that Jesus was married. Adding to the controversy of this fragment is that its owner, who collects Greek, Coptic and Arabic papyri, is not willing to be identified either by name, nationality or location. Further, when, where and how the fragment was discovered is not known. Dr. King received the fragment from the owner in 2011. Written in Coptic, an Egyptian language that uses Greek letters, the fragment is in the opinion of several scholars who have seen it, not a forgery. [King believes that the fragment was originally written in Greek and then translated into Coptic.] Others are not so sure. What should we make of this papyrus scrap? Does it provide evidence that Jesus did indeed have a wife? How should we think about this provocative thesis? King is not necessarily arguing categorically for this thesis, but, with the provocative title of her paper, the suggestion is clear. Several thoughts.

- First, who is Karen King? Karen L. King is the Hollis professor of divinity at Harvard, the oldest endowed chair in the United States and one of the most prestigious chairs in religious studies. [The divinity school at Harvard was established in 1816 and has become one of the more controversial divinity schools in the US, promoting scholarship that challenges historical, biblical Christianity, among many other things.] Along with Princeton’s Elaine Pagels, among others, King has been on the forefront of challenging the history of biblical Christianity. They have written that “the traditional history of Christianity is written almost solely from the viewpoint of the side that won, which was remarkably successful in silencing or distorting other voices, destroying their writings, and suppressing any who disagreed with them as dangerous and obstinate ‘heretics.’” Both Pagels and King reject biblical Christianity and have championed heterodoxy over orthodoxy. In a recent article in *The*

*Smithsonian*, King is described as representing a “scholarship [that] has been kind of a sustained critique of what she calls the ‘master story’ of Christianity: a narrative that casts the canonical texts of the New Testament as divine revelation that passed through Jesus in ‘an unbroken chain’ to the apostles and their successors—church fathers, ministers, priests and bishops who carried these truths into the present day. According to this ‘myth of origins,’ as she called it, followers of Jesus who accepted the New Testament—chiefly the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, written roughly between AD 65 and AD 95, or at least 35 years after Jesus’ death—were true Christians. Followers of Jesus inspired by noncanonical gospels were heretics hornswoggled by the devil.” King’s 2003 book, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle*, argued, among other things, that Mary was the very model of apostleship. King sees the Coptic fragment as fresh evidence of the diversity of voices in early Christianity. Despite her provocative title about the Coptic fragment, King suggests that “This new gospel doesn’t prove that Jesus was married, but it tells us that the whole question only came up as part of vociferous debates about sexuality and marriage.” If Jesus was married, King does not argue that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene.

- Second, what does all this mean? Certainly the way the national press has handled King’s announcement, theologian Albert Mohler’s comments that this is “sensationalism as scholarship” seems appropriate. This small fragment does not prove Jesus was married at all. If it is indeed proven to be authentic and the spectrum analysis of the ink confirms this, this fragment probably says more about Gnosticism than it does biblical Christianity. King and Pagels look very enthusiastically upon the Gnostic texts, which, since the Nag Hammadi discovery, have come down to us from the ancient world. [In 1945, 52 ancient texts were discovered near the town of Nag Hammadi in Egypt. The texts are Gnostic texts, including the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Philip and the Secret Revelation of John, among many others.] These texts have been used by Pagels and King to make the case that there was an alternative version of Christianity that indicated a great deal more diversity in the early centuries of Christianity. Those movements promoted the superiority of female leadership over men, in some cases, and that the moral prohibitions concerning sexuality, especially homosexuality, were part of this forced orthodoxy of the 4<sup>th</sup> century through emperor Constantine. In most of these Gnostic texts, Jesus was human, not divine, and Christianity was not a message of “salvation through faith in a divine Jesus who saves sinners through the atonement He accomplished in His death and resurrection.” Correctly, Mohler concludes that “Those arguing for the superiority of the Gnostic texts deny the divine inspiration of the New Testament and prefer the heterodox teachings of the Gnostic heretics. Hauntingly, the worldview of the ancient Gnostics is very similar, in many respects, to various worldviews and spiritualities around us today.” The Gnostic texts were all written by anonymous authors sometimes centuries after Jesus’ death, burial and resurrection. Yet, King and others are asking us to trust the veracity of these texts over against the four Gospels, all of which were written in the 1<sup>st</sup> century; in the case of Mark, only two or three decades after the events of Jesus’ life. The entire thesis of King about an “alternative” Christianity of the first three centuries that was suppressed by the power of Constantine is arguably controversial. But she is unwilling to admit that the argument of these centuries was really about heretical teachings. As it was in the first three centuries, this is a debate about heresy versus orthodoxy, truth versus error.

See Laurie Goodstein in the *New York Times* (19 and 21 September 2012); Daniel Burke, [www.ChristianityToday.com](http://www.ChristianityToday.com) (20 September 2012); [www.AlbertMohler.com](http://www.AlbertMohler.com) (20 September 2012); Ariel Sabar, "The Inside Story of a Controversial New Text About Jesus," *The Smithsonian* (18 September 2012).