

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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The “Gospel of Jesus’ Wife” Coptic Fragment and Media Hype

Nearly two years ago, a well-known historian of early Christianity from Harvard Divinity School, Karen L. King, argued that a scrap of papyrus of a Coptic gospel text [30 Coptic words in eight fragmentary lines of writing] was authentic and raised the possibility that Jesus was married. The fragment contained the phrase, “Jesus said to them, ‘My wife . . .’” [*The Harvard Theological Review* (HTR) recently published a series of articles by various experts who examined the papyrus fragment and found no apparent evidence of forgery.] King had presented a scholarly paper in September 2012 at a conference of Coptic scholars meeting in Rome. She focused on two phrases in the papyrus scrap (smaller than a business card): “Jesus said to them, ‘My wife . . .’” and “she will be able to be my disciple.” She argued that the Coptic fragment was dated from the 4th century. After her presentation in Rome, skeptics, most of them scholars, raised serious concerns about the papyrus fragment, suggesting that it was a forgery. Dr. King therefore took the fragment, encased in glass, to the University of Arizona, Columbia University, Harvard and MIT for testing—on the papyrus itself and the ink on the fragment. The HTR article stated that radiocarbon tests on the papyrus suggested a date of between AD 659 and 859. In addition, a technique known as micro-Raman spectroscopy determined that the ink matched that of papyrus dated from the 1st to 8th centuries. The HTR article seemed to confirm what King had been arguing.

However, Dr. Christian Askeland, professor at Indiana Wesleyan University and affiliated with the Green Scholars Initiative, which studies biblical artifacts and which is funded by the Green family of Hobby Lobby, has presented rather compelling evidence that the Coptic fragment that Dr. King has been studying is a forgery. Askeland discovered among the papers published in the HTR a photograph of a small tattered square of papyrus called the “Gospel of John,” which has strikingly similar handwriting in Coptic to the “Jesus’ wife” fragment. [This fragment came from the same anonymous source that produced the “Jesus’ Wife” papyrus fragment.] He discovered that this Gospel of John fragment had been directly copied from a 1924 publication. Askeland argues rather persuasively that the “Gospel of Jesus’ Wife” is a forgery. There are two lines of evidence he presents:

1. The fragment shared the same line breaks as the 1924 publication and was written by the same hand that wrote the “Jesus’ wife” fragment.
2. The fragment contained a peculiar dialect of Coptic called Lycopolitan, which fell out of use during or before the 6th century. Jerry Pattengale, Executive Director of the Green Scholars Initiative, summarizes that “[Dr.] King had done two radiometric tests and ‘concluded that the papyrus plants used for this fragment had been harvested in

the seventh to ninth centuries.’ In other words, the fragment that came from the same material as the ‘Jesus’ wife’ fragment was written in a dialect that didn’t exist when the papyrus it appears on was made.”

Mark Goodacre, New Testament Professor and Coptic expert at Duke University, declared about the Gospel of John fragment: “It is beyond reasonable doubt that this is a fake, and this conclusion means that the Jesus’ Wife fragment is a fake too.” In addition, Alin Suci, Research Associate at the University of Hamburg in Germany, concluded that “Given that the evidence of the forgery is now overwhelming, I consider the polemic surrounding the Gospel of Jesus’ Wife papyrus over.” Even Dr. Karen King, who began the controversy with her scholarly paper, says of Askeland’s work, “This is substantive, it’s worth taking seriously, and it may point in the direction of forgery. . . This is one option that should receive serious consideration, but I don’t think it’s a done deal.”

Other scholars have raised serious concerns about the authenticity of the Jesus’ Wife fragment. Brown University theologian Leo Depuydt (writing in the same edition of the HTR) argues that there are grammatical issues that are “fatal blunders.” He also cites the curious fact that the fragment’s author used bold letters when referring to Jesus’ wife. He described this as “almost hilarious. . . How could this not have been designed to some extent to convey a certain comic effect?” Depuydt argues as well that he has never seen bold used in any other Coptic texts: “The effect is something like: **MY** wife. Get it? **MY** wife. You heard that right.’ The papyrus fragment seems ripe for a Monty Python sketch . . . If the forger had used italics in addition, one might be in danger of losing one’s copyright.”

In conclusion, what is the significance of the “Gospel of Jesus’ Wife” Coptic papyrus fragment? Askeland has presented a compelling case that it is a forgery. Even Dr. King admits that this needs to be considered as a possibility. Askeland’s evidence will not go away, but you probably did not hear about his evidence or his arguments on the evening news. All you heard on the evening news was that scholars have found some evidence that Jesus may have had a wife! For several days in 2012 and now after the HTR articles in 2014 headlines and news reports on TV touted the thesis of Jesus and his wife. Pattengale makes this astute observation: “What is harder to understand was the rush by the media and others to embrace the idea that Jesus had a wife and that Christian beliefs have been mistaken for centuries. No evidence for Jesus having been married exists in any of the thousands of orthodox biblical writings dating to antiquity.” In other words, media hype seems to be more important than truth!

One additional thought: Dr. Karen King has openly admitted that she rejects Christian orthodoxy. Along with other scholars such as Elaine Pagels of Princeton University, who also rejects genuine, biblical Christianity, King has turned time and again to ancient Gnostic documents to “argue that early Christianity marginalized some theological voices and standardized doctrinal orthodoxy in order to maintain doctrinal purity.” Indeed, as theologian Albert Mohler demonstrates, the apostles were indeed doing just that, for “they unapologetically rejected false teachings about Christ and argued for what the Apostle Paul called the ‘pattern of sound words.’” The Gospel of Jesus’ Wife is a

forgery but even if it were not, it tells us nothing about Jesus, and very little, if anything, about early Christianity. [Remember, even if it is not a forgery, King argues it was from the 4th century AD, over three hundred years after Jesus walked on planet earth.] In fact, it is a metaphor about the state of modern scholarship. It also illustrates the penchant for media hype so pervasive in our culture.

See Jerry Pattengale in the *Wall Street Journal* (2 May 2014); Laurie Goodstein in the *New York Times* (5 May 2014); Terrence McCoy in the *Washington Post* (5 May 2014); and www.albertmohler.com (14 April 2014).