

April 16, 2014

Bedtime story for the budding little grammarian (and for all those eternally young of spirit). Set in larger font to accommodate the unformed inquisitive mind.

The Papyrus Fragment and the Crocodile: When Discerning a Blunder Is Itself a ...

By Leo Depuydt

I recently published an analysis in the Harvard Theological Review (HTR) of what has widely come to be known as the Wife of Jesus Fragment (WJF).(1) My conclusion is that it is 100% certain that the fragment is a forgery. Grammatical blunders committed by the forger play a central role in my analysis.

The main body of the analysis was on purpose completely self-contained in that it consisted in its entirety of independent observations that made no reference to anything else that anyone else has had to say on the matter. In this specific case, I exceptionally saw no need for outside references or scientific tests to fully meet the paper's design. And I still don't.

However, my analysis is now no longer free-standing. The same issue of HTR contains a response to it.(2) Asked a couple of days after its publication what I thought of it, I had a look. It took me about sixty seconds to diagnose another you-call-it-what-you-want, but not one of the forger's this time.

The response holds that I “incorrectly analyzed” the grammar of line →6 of WJF. What I had described as a “grammatical monstrosity” in that line is nothing but—thus the author of the response—an “error of analysis” on my part.(3)

It would be ironical that, after hurling the epithet “grammatical blunder” gingerly and repeatedly at a forger, my true opponent by the way, I would be guilty of one myself. That would be hubris. We haven’t had that recently. Or have we?

The author of the response relies mostly on experts for the evaluation of fine points of Coptic grammar. But no sooner did the same author just for once dip a toe into the strong Nile currents of Coptic grammar to embark on an independent foray than a crocodile lunged and grabbed it, dragging all attached down with it ☹. How so?

What is my alleged “incorrect analysis”? It is that I identified the Sahidic Coptic verbal auxiliary, or conjugation base (Polotsky), ⲙⲁⲣⲉ mare in the line in question as a negated aorist. In fact, no one has ever doubted that, in standard Sahidic Coptic, ⲙⲉⲣⲉ mere, not ⲙⲁⲣⲉ mare, is the conjugation base of the negated aorist. What is more, no one has ever doubted that ⲙⲁⲣⲉ mare is the verbal auxiliary of the affirmative jussive in all of Coptic. And that is how the author of the response under discussion identifies the instance of ⲙⲁⲣⲉ mare in question, as a jussive. So far so good.

Have I then, as the author implies, committed a blatant grammatical blunder by identifying ⲙⲁⲣⲉ mare as anything else but a jussive? In fact, I have not. How can this be?

It is a dirty little fact, as it were, of Coptic grammar not widely known even to Coptologists that—in the Gospel of Thomas (GT)—the form of the verbal auxiliary of the negated aorist is exceptionally not ⲙⲉⲣⲉ

mere, as most everywhere else, but $\mu\alpha\rho\epsilon$ mare. I do note this striking fact somewhere in my initial report.

In other words, in *GT*, the negated aorist $\mu\alpha\rho\epsilon$ mare is written exactly like the affirmative jussive $\mu\alpha\rho\epsilon$ mare. Identifying instances of $\mu\alpha\rho\epsilon$ mare in *GT* as a negated aorist is therefore altogether a legitimate option. Disenfranchising the grammarian from exercising this option is a clear are-you-thinking-what-I'm-thinking.

And since Professor Francis Watson of Durham University and I both independently discovered that *WJF* is but a patchwork of phrases from *GT*—totally clueless and error-ridden, I venture to add—nothing comes more natural than identifying certain instances of $\mu\alpha\rho\epsilon$ mare in *WJF* as a negated aorist.

What is more, as I show in detail in the initial report, the instance of $\mu\alpha\rho\epsilon$ mare under discussion and certain phrases in its immediate context are clearly taken from a passage in *GT* in which $\mu\alpha\rho\epsilon$ mare is undoubtedly the negated aorist and not the affirmative jussive.

So, my little friend, sleep soundly and dream sweetly because there has been no “error of analysis.”

And in the end, the story even has a happy ending ♪. The crocodile happened to be of the rare herbivorous kind ☺.

(1) L. Depuydt, "The Alleged Gospel of Jesus's Wife: Assessment and Evaluation of Authenticity," *Harvard Theological Review* 107 (2014), pp. 172-89.

(2) K. King, "Response to Leo Depuydt, 'The Alleged Gospel of Jesus's Wife: Assessment and Evaluation of Authenticity'," *Harvard Theological Review* 107 (2014), pp. 190-93.

(3) *Ibid.*, p. 191.