

The *Gospel of Jesus' Wife*: How a fake Gospel-Fragment was composed

INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY

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INTRODUCTION

On 18 September, Dr Karen King of Harvard University announced the discovery of a controversial new gospel-fragment at a Vatican-sponsored conference in Rome. Dr King believes that the papyrus fragment comes from a 4th century copy of an unknown gospel that may itself go back to the 2nd century. While only a few incomplete lines have survived, the fragment has become instantly famous on account of line 4, where we read: *And Jesus said to them, "My wife..."* This gives the text its proposed title: *The Gospel of Jesus' Wife* (*GJW*). According to Dr King, the reference to Jesus' marital status is probably not an item of genuine historical information; rather, it takes us into the world of his later followers and their debates about issues of sexuality and gender.¹

The *GJW* fragment is written in Coptic, a later form of the language of ancient Egypt. In translation (my own rather than Dr King's), it runs as follows:

- 1 "... [can]not be my [disciple]. My mother gave me life..."
- 2 ... The disciples said to Jesus, "...
- 3 ... deny. Mary is not worthy of it...
- 4 ..." Jesus said to them, "My wife...
- 5 ... she can be my disciple...
- 6 ... Let [the] wicked man bring [forth...
- 7 ... I am with her, so as to...
- 8 ... an image..."

¹ Extensive introductory material is provided at <http://www.hds.harvard.edu/faculty-research/research-projects/the-gospel-of-jesus-wife>

On the reverse side of the papyrus fragment, only a few individual words and letters have been preserved.

The papyrus fragment itself may well be very old. The question is whether the ink is also old. If chemical tests are carried out to establish the composition of the ink, these might show that a modern ink has been used and so prove the text to be a modern forgery. Whether tests could reliably show that an ink *compatible* with ancient origin is *actually* ancient is less certain. Meanwhile, it's important to look very closely at the text itself – and especially to investigate how it was put together.

SUMMARY

In my article, I argue that the *GJW* fragment may be a modern fake. Virtually all of its individual phrases are taken directly from the Coptic version of the *Gospel of Thomas* – the best-known and most complete of the ancient gospel texts that have come to light over the past century or so. The author has used a kind of “collage” technique to assemble the items selected from *Thomas* into a new composition. While this is a very unlikely way for an ancient author to compose a text, it's what might be expected of a modern forger with limited facility in the Coptic language.

Whether ancient or modern, the compiler has used his collage technique as follows:

(1) **Lines 1 and 5** of *GJW* are based on Thomas's Saying 101 (itself based on Luke 14.26). Phrases borrowed by the *GJW* compiler are underlined:

Jesus said: “Whoever does not hate his father and his mother in my way cannot be my disciple. And whoever does not love his father and his mother in my way cannot be my disciple. For my mother... [text missing]... but my true [mother] gave me life.” (*GThos* 101)

From this raw material *GJW* has created the lines:

1 “... [can]not be my [disciple]. My mother gave me life...”

5 “... she can be my disciple...”

It's interesting that line 1 begins in the middle of a word, at exactly the same place as in the equivalent passage in the one surviving *Gospel of Thomas* manuscript. And line 1 ends with the same ending as the following line in *Thomas*. This is quite a coincidence, and it suggests that the author of *GTW* may have drawn his Thomas material from a modern printed edition.

(2) **Line 2** consists in the introductory formula, "The disciples said to Jesus". This formula does not occur in the New Testament gospels, but it's found three times in the *Gospel of Thomas*:

The disciples said to Jesus, "We know that you will depart from us. Who is to be our leader?"

The disciples said to Jesus, "Tell us how our end will be."

The disciples said to Jesus, "Tell us what the kingdom of heaven is like." (*GosTh* 12, 18, 20)

Here *GJW* also follows *Thomas* in abbreviating Jesus' name to its first and last letters (IC in both Coptic and Greek).

(3) **Lines 3 and 4** draw from the conclusion of the *Gospel of Thomas*, notorious for Jesus' promise to turn Mary Magdalene into an honorary male:

Simon Peter said to them, "Let Mary leave us, for women are not worthy of life." Jesus said, "Behold, I shall lead her so as to make her male..." (*GThos* 114)

The English language differentiates "woman" from "wife", but Coptic does not. Simon Peter's nasty reference to the unworthiness of "women" may underlie the *GJW* Jesus' "my wife", or "my woman".

3 ... [] Mary is not worthy of it...

4 ..." Jesus said to them, "My wife/woman..."

(4) **Line 6**, "Let the wicked man bring [forth]" is derived, yet again, from *Thomas*, with a couple of small modifications which should be clear from the translations:

“A good man brings forth good from his storehouse; a *b[ad]* man brings forth evil things from his evil storehouse” (*GTh* 45)

(5) **Line 7**, “I am with her, so as to...”. It’s no surprise now that this too comes from *Thomas*:

“Jesus said: Where there are three gods, they are gods. Where there are two or one, I am with him” (*GTh* 30)

(6) **Line 8**, “an image” – one of *Thomas*’s favourite words.

It’s hard to see close ancient analogies to the *GJW* compiler’s collage technique. The nearest analogy is with the well-known passages from the so-called *Secret Gospel of Mark*, almost certainly composed by an American scholar in the 1950s out of phrases culled from Mark’s Gospel. (I have discussed this at length in a recent article.) In *GJW*, it seems that the disinhibited homosexual Jesus of the *Secret Gospel* has been replaced by a heterosexual figure whose marriage to Mary Magdalene ensures her salvation.