

Addendum: The End of the Line?

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In my previous contribution I examined the relationship of the *Gospel of Jesus' Wife* fragment to the Coptic *Gospel of Thomas*, and concluded that this relationship may be more easily compatible with a modern origin than with an ancient, 4th century one. As Richard Bauckham has pointed out, *GJW*'s dependence on the Coptic *Thomas* creates serious difficulties for Karen King's proposal that the new text is a translation of a much earlier Greek original. The question, then, is whether Coptic *Thomas* – in exactly the form it takes in modern printed editions, as *GJW* line 1 seems to indicate – was consulted by the *GJW* compiler in the 4th century, or rather more recently.

I would now like to point to another problematic feature of *GJW* which may further strengthen the case for a recent origin. We must consider the gaps that separate the incomplete lines of the text.

The *GJW* fragment is a fairly regular rectangle, and the first seven lines are approximately the same length. The original margins have not been preserved, and there is missing material at the extremities of each line. These gaps between the end of one extant line and the beginning of the next must have been of about the same length, and in each case the missing material would have given coherence to the disjointed sense-units of the present text.

If *GJW* is of recent origin, postdating the publication of the Coptic *Thomas* in 1956, then it was probably written directly onto an old unused papyrus fragment. In that case, the text was designedly incomplete; the gaps between the lines were never anything other than gaps. If *GJW* is of 4th century origin, however, it must originally have formed a continuous narrative sequence.

Enough of the text survives to indicate that Jesus is speaking in line 1, the disciples in lines 2-4, and Jesus again in lines 4-8. Yet the logic of the individual utterances is hard to follow. In lines 2-3, what short sentence ending with “deny” could coherently precede the disciples' further statement about

¹ I have corrected a translation of line 6 that I now believe to be incorrect. Otherwise this “Addendum” remains virtually the same.

Mary's worthiness? The "deny" sentence would also have to contain a feminine antecedent of $\overline{\text{MMOC}}$, "[not worthy] *of it*." In line 4, Jesus' response opens with the words $\text{TAZIME } \overline{\text{MN}}$ (probably, "My wife with/and"): there is no explicit identification of his wife with the MARIAM of line 3. (One would have expected something like $\text{TAZIME } \overline{\text{NTOC TE}}$, "She is my wife...", followed perhaps by an expression of shock and horror on the part of the male disciples.) Why does Jesus' the reference to the "wicked man" intervene between his statement about his wife's discipleship (line 5), and his explanation that "I am with her in order to..." (line 7)? It is such difficulties as these that would be resolved by the material missing from both ends of the line – if this is indeed an ancient text.

How extensive were the gaps? In many damaged manuscripts entire lines are missing, or so damaged as to be unintelligible. That is not the case with *GJW* 1-7, where the line-sequence is unbroken but where only the middle of the line has been preserved. How many letters will have been lost at either end? How much space is available to join the disconnected fragments of utterances into a coherent whole? The smaller the available space, the harder it will be to imagine convincing connections.

As transcribed by King, lines 1-7 of *GJW* contain between 17 and 20 letters each, with, perhaps surprisingly, no less than five of them containing 19 letters. Some samples of line lengths from 4th century Coptic manuscripts may give a general impression of the number of letters lost, between the lines, from *GJW*. Samples of intact seven-line passages from different Nag Hammadi codices produce the following figures:

	<i>Range</i>	<i>Median</i>
<i>Codex I</i> , p. 47, ll. 5-11	16-20 letters	19 letters
<i>Codex II</i> , p. 99, ll. 18-24	22-29 letters	26 letters
<i>Codex III</i> , p. 120, ll. 19-25	20-23 letters	21 letters
<i>Codex V</i> , p. 21, ll. 10-16	17-21 letters	19 letters
<i>Codex XIII</i> , p. 35, ll. 19-25	24-28 letters	26 letters

While these figures are broadly representative of line-lengths in the Nag Hammadi codices, it is quite possible that much longer lines could be found in other ancient Coptic manuscripts. If the Nag Hammadi sample is anywhere near the norm, however, then the putative gaps between *GJW*'s mostly

19 letter lines will have been strictly limited. If a hypothetical intact *GJW* contained lines of around 25 letters, this would make space for an additional 3 letters at either end of the extant lines, and the connecting passages would then be confined to around 6 letters each. One might of course double the available space by envisaging longer lines of around 31 letters; but even 12 additional letters might not be enough to close the gap between Jesus' defence of his wife's discipleship and his condemning an unnamed evildoer to an inflationary future.

If that is the case, then *GJW* has never been anything other than a damaged fragment. Or rather: it was designed *to resemble or impersonate* a damaged fragment. The gaps between the extant lines may have been there from the start.

Neither these considerations nor the ones identified in my previous essay make it in any way *certain* that *GJW* is a modern fake. Rather, they highlight issues that would need to be resolved before the text could be accepted as genuine. It is not impossible that, at some later day, further fragments of the same text might come to light (as in the case of the Egerton gospel), or even a complete text (as in the case of *P.Oxy.1, 654, 655* in relation to the Coptic *Thomas*). It is possible that scientific analysis might be able to determine both the composition of *GJW*'s ink and its antiquity, demonstrating an origin in the 4th century (rather than *c.* 1975) by way of procedures so transparent and incontestable as to silence even the most determined sceptic. And it is not impossible that a 4th century *GJW* might somehow preserve an authentic recollection of Jesus' marital status. All of these things are within the bounds of possibility. For the present, though, scepticism seems a safer option than credulity.