

Jesus' Wife Attempts a Comeback: Initial Response

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In its latest issue, the *Harvard Theological Review* has published a revised version of an article entitled, “ ‘Jesus said to them, My wife...’: A New Coptic Papyrus Fragment”, by Dr Karen King of Harvard Divinity School, first published online in September 2012. The same issue contains multidisciplinary studies of the “Jesus’ Wife” fragment all of which are concerned with the question whether the fragment is ancient in origin or a modern forgery.

Accompanying the publication of this issue of the journal is a press release from Harvard Divinity School headed, “Testing Indicates ‘Gospel of Jesus’ Wife’ Fragment to be Ancient”. This fairly represents the conclusion that Dr King herself draws from her fellow-contributors’ analyses, but it wilfully misrepresents the analyses themselves. It has never been doubted that the Jesus’ Wife fragment may well have been written on a piece of genuinely ancient papyrus, using ink whose composition followed ancient practice. In his trenchant critique of Dr King’s article, the Egyptologist Leo Depuydt comments as follows on this point:

I am personally 100% certain that the Wife of Jesus Fragment is a forgery. I have otherwise never deemed ink or papyrus tests necessary or relevant in light of the evidence set forth below. I will make three brief observations, however. First, the ink tests show chemical composition, in this case carbon-based “lamp black,” not age. Carbon-based ink is exactly the type that I would have used if I had been the forger. Second, as for the papyrus, nothing is more common than for forged paintings to be painted on an old piece of wood. And third, in a letter of July 19, 2013, accompanying his report, the principal investigator of the radiocarbon dating test, Professor Greg Hodgins, states that certain stable isotope measurements “[cast] doubt upon the validity of the radiocarbon date.”¹

The third point is a useful reminder that the results of scientific analysis are just as likely to be ambiguous or inconclusive as other kinds of disciplined scholarly analysis. The first and second points show that analyses of the ink and the papyrus are of limited value here. These analyses do not demonstrate that the text is a fake, but nor do they “indicate” it “to be ancient” as the Divinity School’s press release claims. Even the headline to a press release ought to be capable of observing this distinction.

It is also hard to see how the conclusion drawn by papyrologist Malcolm Choat is compatible with the Divinity School’s endorsement of the fragment. Choat writes:

¹ Leo Depuydt, “The Alleged *Gospel of Jesus’ Wife*: Assessment and Evaluation of Authenticity”, *HTR* 107 (2014), 172-89.

Overall, if the general appearance of the papyrus prompts some suspicion, it is difficult to falsify by a strictly paleographical examination. This should not be taken as proof that the papyrus is genuine, simply that its handwriting and the manner in which it has been written do not provide definitive grounds for proving otherwise.²

In claiming that “Testing Indicates ‘Gospel of Jesus’ Wife’ Fragment to be Ancient”, the press release clearly does not have Dr Choat in mind. Dr Depuydt is out of the picture entirely: he, after all, is “100% certain that the Wife of Jesus fragment is a forgery”. If the papyrus and ink tests are irrelevant, it is hard to see what the supposed indications of an ancient origin amount to.

A press release that accurately represented the analyses published in the *Harvard Theological Review* might have been entitled: “Testing of Jesus’ Wife Fragment Yields Inconclusive Results”. That would not have attracted much attention, but it would at least be truthful.

A postscript to these brief initial reflections. In her article Dr King refers to my own arguments for the likelihood of a modern origin, and claims that the collage-like compositional technique I analyze is just as likely to stem from an ancient author as from a modern forger.³ In September 2012 I showed that

the text has been constructed out of small pieces – words or phrases – culled from the Coptic *Gospel of Thomas (GTh)*, especially Sayings 30, 45, 101 and 114, and set in new contexts... 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.⁴

I do not see anything in Dr King’s response to cause me to retract that last sentence. Furthermore, I pointed out that the very first line of the fragment

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 [the Jesus’ wife fragment] may have drawn his Thomas material from a modern printed edition.

² Malcolm Choat, *The Gospel of Jesus’ Wife@ A Preliminary Paleographical Assessment*”, *HTR* 107 (2014), 160-62: 162.

³ Karen King, “Jesus said to them, ‘My wife...’”: A New Coptic Papyrus Fragment”, *HTR* 107 (2014), 131-59: 156-57.

⁴ My contributions to the initial debate may be found at: http://ntweblog.blogspot.co.uk/2012_09_01_archive.html, and <http://bibleinterp.com/articles/wat368023.shtml>.

Other scholars made equally damaging criticisms of the fragment following its initial publication. The question is whether there is anything in Harvard's belated response to cause those of us who reacted negatively to the new papyrus fragment to think again. Perhaps there is. But it is not obvious how even the most scientifically rigorous investigations of the age of the papyrus or the composition of the ink take the debate forward.