

"From the cowardice that shrinks from new truth, from the laziness that is content with half-truths, from the arrogance that thinks it knows all truth, O, God of Truth, deliver us."



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George L. Faull, Editor

The Gospel of Jesus' Wife

--By Terry Carter

In the May/June issue of *Biblical Archaeology Review*, there was a very interesting article by Hershel Shanks called "The Saga of 'The Gospel of Jesus' Wife'". It recounts the recent drama surrounding a papyrus fragment about the size of a business card dubbed "The Gospel of Jesus' Wife".

This story was both interesting and informative. It illustrates a number of important lessons for us to keep in mind about scholarly claims. I will summarize the important part of the story below and follow this with a few lessons we can draw from it. The fragment itself is written in the Coptic language. It has eight partial lines on one side and six unreadable lines on the other.

Why such a small fragment is considered so important? The answer has to do with the changing culture in which we live. Due to the claims of feminists and popular works like *The Da Vinci Code*, there is a lot of interest in whether Jesus was married. This fragment has Jesus saying the words, "my wife". If genuine, this would be the only ancient manuscript that has Jesus saying such a thing.

In September, 2012, Karen King presented a paper on this newly discovered manuscript fragment that had been given to her by an anonymous collector, along with some other papyrus fragments. The location where these fragments were supposedly found is not known. King is a professor at Harvard Divinity School and the chair of her department. *Newsweek* called her "an authority on women's roles in the early church". It is likely you have seen her if you have ever watched a documentary on *The Da Vinci Code*, women Bible times, etc.

She has written books like *The Gospel of Mary Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle*, and *Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism (Studies in Antiquity & Christianity)*. She is also a member of the notoriously liberal Jesus Seminar.

King was convinced that this fragment was genuine and she believed it was from the fourth century. She believed it to be a copy of an original from the second century. To her credit, she did say that this "provides no reliable historical information" concerning whether Jesus was actually married. She said this only shows that some

early Christians depicted Him as married and that this gives us insight into how they viewed human sexuality. This is exactly the discovery for which many had been waiting.

To the feminists, this was an indication that women had an important place in the leadership of the early church.

To conspiracy theorists, it was evidence that the marriage of Jesus had been covered up by the Catholic Church.

To liberals it was an indication that Jesus was merely a man and not God.

However, to some scholars it was all a bit too convenient. They reasoned that if it was too good to be true, perhaps it was not true. It was just too much of a coincidence that a fragment appears at just the right time to shed light on one of the hottest topics of our times. Furthermore it just happened to come into the hands of someone who is on the front lines of this issue. As they say in the detective stories, "It was all just a bit too neat to believe".

One of the critics was a Coptic scholar from Brown University named Leo Depuydt. The *Harvard Theological Review* was all set to publish King's analysis in the January 2013 issue. But after Depuydt's declared it to be an obvious fraud they delayed its publication. He was very adamant that it was a terrible forgery and that there was not even any need for further analysis or testing to prove it.

At this point the fragment was subjected to more testing and study. Two carbon-14 tests determined that the papyrus was from the eighth century, four centuries later than King has dated it. Of course, the age of the papyrus does not tell us when the writing on it was done. After all the additional tests and analysis were complete, King was convinced that it was ancient. However, Depuydt was unimpressed with the results and was still adamant that it was a fake.

Karen King updated her original article and *Harvard Theological Review* published it in April 2014 despite the questions surrounding the fragment's authenticity. However, they also published both Depuydt's objections and King's response to him. Meanwhile the Smithsonian Institution had made an hour long TV documentary about

the fragment. They delayed airing it until King's article was published. However, just a short time after this, new evidence emerged that has convinced most scholars that the fragment is in fact a fraud. The anonymous collector who gave this fragment to King had also given her another fragment of the Gnostic Gospel of John, also written in Coptic.

A Coptic scholar named Christian Askeland from Indiana Wesleyan University was studying this fragment when he discovered something interesting. He was familiar with an internet copy of the Codex Qau. This copy on the internet had a typo that was only found there. This fragment he was studying was simply a copy of every other line of that internet copy of Codex Qau including the typo found only there.

The fragment was clearly a modern fraud. But the Gospel of Jesus' Wife was written with the same hand and with the same instrument as this fraud. This leaves no room for any doubt that the Gospel of Jesus' Wife is also a modern fraud. It is not from the fourth century or even the eighth century. It is not a copy of an original from the second century.

In short, everything King believed about this fragment was simply not true. Unfortunately I still see the Gospel of Jesus' Wife referred to as though it is valid evidence that Jesus was married.

What lessons can we learn from this whole story?

1. Just because somebody is considered a scholar does not mean they are always right.
2. This is especially true when they have a personal agenda involved in their findings.
3. Even the top academic people can be fooled into accepting what seems to be evidence of what they want to believe is true.
4. The faculties of Ivy League schools, with big reputations, do not necessarily know more than the faculty from smaller less prestigious schools about any particular question.
5. Even the most sophisticated tests of technology can give flawed results when not applied properly.
6. We should never let our faith be shaken by what the scholars so confidently affirm.
7. Many conclusions of scholars are based on assumptions, many of which are not stated when they present their opinions.
8. Even known frauds tend to die hard when they feed into what many want to believe.
9. If the experts can be so wrong about such relatively recent history, why do we blindly accept their conclusions about the origins of man, the earth, and the universe?
10. If we did this poorly about one or two thousand years ago, why are we so confident about tens of thousands, millions, or billions of years ago?