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How a Papyrus Fragment Became a Sensation

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When the 'Jesus' Wife' fragment was first made public at a conference for Coptic Studies, it generated worldwide media interest but met with increasingly sceptical responses from scholars with expertise in the most directly relevant fields. A summary of the grounds for scepticism, written shortly after the conference, is here published for the first time. Since then the collaborative efforts of a number of scholars have confirmed that the case against an ancient origin is overwhelming.

Keywords: *Gospel of Jesus' Wife*, *Gospel of Judas*, Coptic, forgery

Shock and awe was running through the audience when in September 2012 the re-emergence of an ancient papyrus fragment was announced at the quadrennial International Conference of Coptic Studies in Rome. The way the event was staged, however, also invited suspicion. The surprise announcement by Karen King was coupled with a prearranged press conference and a press release,[1] together with the posting of the fragment, including its transcription and translation, on the internet, complete with a Q&A section in which King summarised her positions.[2] It was also accompanied by a 52-page commentary, flashily entitled '"Jesus said to them, 'My wife …'": A New Coptic Gospel Papyrus'[3] and followed up by numerous interviews All this came after months, if not years, of utter silence and secrecy. Moreover, King did not disclose the origin of the fragment, contending that the current owner was adamant in keeping his anonymity. Therefore, after a deep breath, irritation spread and sceptical reactions began to

1 See the *Harvard Magazine* report, http://harvardmagazine.com/2012/09/new-gospel, 18 September 2012.

2 Cf. http://www.hds.harvard.edu/faculty-research/research-projects/the-gospel-of-jesuss-wife&post=1362955_673 September 2012. Henceforth referred to as First Q&A.

3 K. L. King with contributions by AnneMarie Luijendijk, '"Jesus said to them, 'My Wife …'": A New Coptic Gospel Papyrus', http://www.hds.harvard.edu/sites/hds.harvard.edu/files/attachments/faculty-research/research-projects/the-gospel-of-jesuss-wife/29813/King_JesusSaidToThem_draft_0917.pdf, or http://www.bethinking.org/Media/PDF/King_JesusSaidToThem_draft_0917.pdf. This will be referred to as Draft.

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circulate. The initial response was superseded by voices expressing doubt about the authenticity of the fragment, since in papyrological research unconditional and timely disclosure of all relevant material as well as advance peer review are essential for any confidence in a new discovery or acquisition.

The sensationalising manner of the presentation recalled the unveiling and subsequent dismantling of another resurfaced ancient text six years prior to the announcement in Rome: the *Gospel of Judas* (*GosJud*).[4] The media coverage at that time generated similar insinuations, namely that the church was wrong all along and would now have to rethink its doctrine. In the case of *GosJud*, the assertion was that the discovered text shows Judas to be Jesus' best friend, a model for everybody who wanted to be his disciple, and that he was awarded his own ascension to heaven for his assistance in the salvation event. This sensationalistic assessment was proven unambiguously wrong by additional fragments that later came to light.[5] King herself was among those whose judgement was at fault here.[6] Unlike the newly introduced fragment, however, *GosJud* is part of a preserved codex (*Codex Tchacos*), and its title was already mentioned as well as its context alluded to by Irenaeus.

By contrast, nobody had ever heard of an ancient writing in which Jesus refers to his wife, spiritually or otherwise, to which this fragment (*GJW*) could belong. One might ask why a text with this significance was not referred to anywhere in the vast Christian literary remains of all sorts, especially since King gives the date of its original composition as second century CE and its translation into Coptic as fourth century CE.[7] She is careful, however, not to overplay her hand and cautions that the fragment should not be taken as proof for an actual marriage of the historical Jesus. But she claims that it provides evidence that some early Christians believed that Jesus was married and that there was a tradition in early Christianity according to which Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene.[8] To be sure, it would not have been uncommon for a young man at the age of

4 One only has to compare the two National Geographic editions to detect the revisions and partial retractions in the second (paperback) edition. See R. Kasser, M. Meyer, G. Wurst, in collaboration with F. Gaudard, *The Gospel of Judas: From Codex Tchacos* (Washington, DC: National Geographic, 2006, and 2008[2]), with additional commentary by B. Ehrman, C. Evans and G. Schenke Robinson.

5 See A. Suciu, 'Newly Found Fragments from Codex Tchacos' (Patristics, Apocrypha, Coptic Literature and Manuscripts), http://alinsuciu.com/2012/10/10/newly-found-fragments-of-codex-tchacos/, October 2012; and G. Schenke Robinson, 'An Update on the *Gospel of Judas* after Additional Fragments Resurfaced', ZNW 102 (2011) 110–29.

6 E. Pagels and K. L. King, *Reading Judas: The Gospel of Judas and the Shaping of Christianity* (New York: Viking 2007), esp. 164, where King supports the idea that Judas, instead of Jesus, entered the cloud and rose up to heaven: Judas 'is now able to enter into the luminous cloud'.

7 Cf. First Q&A and Draft, 1.

8 See First Q&A, answer to Question 3, and Draft, 1, 22, 33, 34, 35, 47, 51.

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Jesus to be married, and a marriage of his in itself should not shock anybody since it would have no impact on his message anyway. But certainly neither his marriage nor a group of Christians believing in it would have gone completely unnoticed for centuries.

Immediately following the posting of digital photographs on the Harvard Divinity School website (HDS), a flurry of blogs as well as various articles with critical examinations of the Coptic text ensued on different websites.[9] Many of them considered the fragment to be a modern forgery. Opposing voices caused the *Harvard Theological Review* (*HTR*) to defer publishing King's paper until testing of the papyrus and the ink could be carried out.[10] When applicable tests were completed, *HTR* decided to publish a revised version of King's article after all,[11] even though the radiocarbon testing is completely irrelevant since it was never in doubt that the papyrus itself is ancient. It would indeed require a very naive forger to write on modern papyrus. Moreover, in terms of dating, the testing of the ink, carried out by James Yardley and Alexis Hagedorn of Columbia,[12] is also inconclusive since it resulted only in revealing the chemical composition of the so-called carbon lamp black ink.[13] Ink with ingredients used in antiquity and mixed according to ancient practice is probably not all that hard to come by.[14] Therefore, the new press release with its eye-catching headline is utterly deceptive.[15] This triggered a renewed firestorm of activities in the media and

9 For the bibliographical references, see notes 20–1, 27–9 and 32 below.

10 See e.g. Draft, 3 and the online *Harvard Magazine* report.

11 K. L. King, '"Jesus said to them, 'My Wife': A New Coptic Papyrus Fragment', *HTR* 107 (2014) 131–59, and online: http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayFulltext, DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0017816014000133. Henceforth it will be referred to as Edition. The Edition defensively takes into account the critical reflections and analyses done by various colleagues since 2012. Also the Draft's commentary is considerably shortened in the Edition, leaving out the most egregious claims.

12 Cf. Edition, 132.

13 See the report by Y. T. Yardley and A. Hagadorn, 'Ink Study of two Ancient Fragments through Micro-Raman Spectroscopy', https://s3.amazonaws.com/hds-high-traffic-assets/YardleyHarvardFragmentReportRev07.pdf, May 2014. See also Edition, 132 and 154–5, as well as the 2014 update with King's 'Introduction, "The Gospel of Jesus's Wife: Scientific Testing and Imaging as of March 2014",' http://gospelofjesusswife.hds.harvard.edu/introduction, accompanied by a press release and a revised Q&A to which I will refer as Second Q&A, http://gospelofjesusswife.hds.harvard.edu/QA.

14 King herself now concedes that 'hypothetically' a forger could buy papyrus scraps at the antiquities market and acquire ink made with components of and according to ancient practices; cf. Edition, 154.

15 J. Beasley, 'Testing Indicates "Gospel of Jesus's Wife" Papyrus Fragment to be Ancient', http://gospelofjesusswife.hds.harvard.edu/testing-indicates-gospel-jesuss-wife-papyrus-fragment-be-ancient, April 2014. A strong condemnation of the pretence is expressed by F. Watson, 'Jesus' Wife Attempts a Comeback: Initial Response', http://ntweblog.blogspot.com/2014/04/jesus-wife-attempts-comeback-initial.html, April 2014.

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the blogosphere.[16] Since King's article has now been published in a peer-reviewed journal, more cautious and sceptical scholars have no choice but again to respond to the particulars of various assertions and contentions, as they had responded to the first claim of the fragment's authenticity.

My own instant reaction after the announcement in Rome was a one-page rebuttal, created on 22 September 2012, which I sent to Karen King and other colleagues:

Rebuttal of the presentation of a *Gospel of Jesus' Wife*

Gesine Schenke Robinson

My objections to the claim of an ancient manuscript fragment and my reasons for regarding it a modern forgery are manifold:

1. Claiming to possess an ancient fragment without knowing its provenance is unfortunate enough, but without giving the current owner is highly suspicious.
2. Even the square format of the papyrus piece with its neat edges suggests that this, at best, is scrap-material, not a preserved manuscript fragment.
3. The papyrus itself may actually be ancient (though this cannot be determined by simply 'carefully examining' it, as was maintained), since at least the vertical side gives a rather genuine impression, but the handwriting on the horizontal side is very different, especially with regard to the space between letters and between the lines.
4. On paleographical grounds, the handwriting cannot come from the 4th century; especially judging from the way the T is written, for instance; there is little resemblance to the other known fourth-century texts.
5. Miraculously, there are always full phrases preserved, something that hardly happens on a small single fragment.
6. Furthermore, it seems amazing that, according to King, on this small piece there are allusions not only to one but even to two of the more well-known non-biblical gospels preserved, the *Gospel of Mary* and the *Gospel of Thomas*.
7. In terms of the language, only the simplest vocabulary is used and only simple constructions are employed, as if the writer were afraid to make a grammatical mistake.
8. Therefore, the rather rare phrase ⲡⲉϫⲉ ⲓⲥ (though frequently used in the *Gospel of Thomas* since we have to do there with a collection of Jesus' sayings) is used even in both instances of speaking, instead of the form ⲡⲉϫⲁϥ (+ pronominal/nominal object) + ⲛⲑⲓ + subject, which is more common in dialogues or other literary texts. On the fragment at hand one would expect in the first instance something like ⲡⲉϫⲁⲩ ⲛ̄ⲓⲥ + ⲛⲑⲓ ⲛⲙⲁⲑⲏⲧⲏⲥ, and in the second instance ⲡⲉϫⲁϥ ⲛⲁⲩ ⲛⲑⲓ ⲓⲥ, or since Jesus answers the disciples, even ⲁϥⲟⲩⲱϣ̄ⲃ̄ ⲛⲑⲓ ⲓⲥ + ⲡⲉϫⲁϥ ⲛⲁⲩ ϫⲉ. It seems a cautious and perhaps unsure modern Coptologist was at work here.

16 For the previous discussions as well as the ongoing developments, see Mark Goodacre's NTweb blog, http://ntweblog.blogspot.com.

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9. In addition, even though in Coptic dictionaries the translation of ⲥϩⲓⲙⲉ is given as 'woman, wife, female and ϩⲓⲙⲉ as 'wife', ϩⲓⲙⲉ is almost never used in comparable literary texts, not for the wife of Adam, Jacob, or any other male figures.[17]
10. In the 2nd century, the time when the Greek original is claimed to have been composed, an author would never have let Jesus simply say, 'my wife', existent or not. Women were relegated to the household as soon as Christian communities ventured out into the public sphere. In case of a disciple married to Jesus, the author would perhaps have explained in a dependent sentence the married status, like 'Mary Magdalene, my wife, …' The plain phrase 'my wife' betrays modern thinking.

Finally let me express how deeply saddened and troubled I am by the latest trend in manuscript research. There seems to be a new integrity problem, starting with Marvin Meyer's 'no comment' (regarding the *Gospel of Judas*) to J. M. Robinson who had worked tirelessly for openness in textual research,[18] up to the newest and most blatant example in Rome. Again secrecy was used as a means to maximize the sensational effect. For that reason, everything was orchestrated in a way that assured this intended outcome. It was freely admitted that the posting on the Harvard website as well as the arrival of the press at the conference in Rome at the same moment of the introduction of the fragment were coordinated to that end. I am concerned that henceforth new manuscript discoveries will be widely assessed by experts in the field as something that individual scholars can exploit for their own benefit.

Scholarship always profits from letting colleagues know about current work, from having open discussions of individual research projects at conventions, or from peer reviews prior to publications – something that would have been very beneficial especially in this current instance. Instead it was chosen to hide information from peers and introduce something with so much fanfare and speculation that it surely has to be backtracked one day, just as the evaluation of the *Gospel of Judas* by the first editors had to be reversed.

To this day I have not heard or read anything that would cause me to rethink my position, even though I was not able, at that time, to do extensive further research.

17 This can already be realised by a passing view of the indices of published critical editions of Nag Hammadi texts. The occurrence is so rare that King later could only find three examples, all of them in Codex II; cf. B. Layton, ed., *Nag Hammadi Codex II,2–7, vol. 1* (Nah Hammadi Studies 20; Leiden: Brill, 1989) 52–93. Crum's dictionary does not have an independent entry for ϩⲓⲙⲉ; there and in other dictionaries it is correctly listed under the lemma ⲱϩⲓⲙⲉ (Crum, 385A; Lambdin, 277; Westendorf, 211). In editing Codex II, however, Layton found that ϩⲓⲙⲉ deserves its own index entry since it seems to be an idiolect of this particular codex. See B. Layton, 'The Text and Orthography of the Coptic *Hypotasis of the Archons* (CG II,4)', *ZPE* 11(1973) 173–200. Thus far only Richard Smith has followed Layton and lists both forms independently in his dictionary (30 and 49).

18 National Geographic (NG) had obligated the team selected to work on the manuscript to complete silence until the discovery of the Codex Tchacos was broadcasted on NG's own channel. With his answer to Robinson's inquiry regarding the status of the manuscript Meyer completely complied with the obligation.

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Other scholars, however, did analyse the text more diligently and methodically. What they found out was truly remarkable. They could prove that the text on the fragment is nothing but copied snippets from a modern edition of the *Gospel of Thomas* (*GosThom*), the second tractate of Nag Hammadi Codex II.

Especially important was the excellent investigative work of Francis Watson, posted on Mark Goodacre's academic blog on 21 September 2012,[19] and revised on 26 September 2012.[20] As far as I know, he was the first to show convincingly the fragment's verbal agreement with *GosThom*, and in one instance even line-division agreement with a modern printed edition of *GosThom*.[21] He brought to light that, with minor deviations, six of the eight lines on the fragment's horizontal-fibre side were so closely related especially to the sayings 101 and 114 of *GosThom* 'as to make dependence virtually certain'.[22] One only has to get out Bentley Layton's edition of Codex II, look up the fragment's words in the edition's index and underline the matching phrases in order to see the extent of the patchwork that makes up the fragment's wording.

King's reply to this revelation is a terse reference to the interdependence of the Synoptic Gospels as evidence for the ancient practice of 'combining literary dependence with redactional change'.[23] Everybody who works with ancient texts, however, can see that the extent of phrases copied from *GosThom* to the very exclusion of any independent phrase goes far beyond what is known about compositional literary dependence. Yes, those are simple phrases of 'common vocabulary', as King notes now in her defence,[24] but agreement of all phrases, word order and line division is too much to dismiss as peripheral. The forger was obviously not versed enough in Coptic to provide an independent composition. But the attempt to avoid mistakes still did not quite succeed, as Watson was able to demonstrate and Leo Depuydt later brought to the fore in more detail.[25] Mark Goodacre soon added to Watson's finding that line 7, which Watson had compared to Matthew, also is extracted from *GosThom*[26] and therefore every line and practically almost every word is excerpted. Although the ancient practice of unacknowledged copying from other literary works certainly

19 F. Watson, 'The *Gospel of Jesus' Wife*: How a Fake Gospel-Fragment was Composed', http://markgoodacre.org/Watson.pdf, September 2012.

20 F. Watson, 'Addendum: End of the Line?', http://ntweblog.blogspot.com/2012/09/francis-watson-addendum-end-of-line.html, September 2012. Watson later added the article 'Inventing Jesus' Wife' that summarises the results of his analysis for the broader public, http://bibleinterp.com/articles/wat368023.shtml, September 2012.

21 Cf. e.g. Layton, ed., *Nag Hammadi Codex II,2–7*.

22 Watson, 'Fake Gospel', 6.

23 Edition, 157.

24 Edition, 156.

25 See n. 33 below.

26 M. Goodacre, *Gospel of Jesus' Wife*: the last line is also from Thomas, http://ntweblog.blogspot.com/2012/09/gospel-of-jesus-wife-last-line-is-also.html.

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exists, the accumulation and exclusivity of parallel phrases from the same writing is highly unusual, if not unique.

In offering an alternative explanation for how the forged text could have been put together, Andrew Bernhard also went through each line of the fragment and effectively demonstrated that a modern author could have 'simply rearranged words and phrases from the Coptic *Gospel of Thomas*'.[27] To illustrate his finding, he offers a synopsis with the parallels between the fragment and *GosThom* placed side by side. In addition, he later makes the intriguing observation that the forger may have been dependent not only on a modern critical edition of *GosThom*,[28] but also on Michael Grondin's interlinear edition of *GosThom*.[29] Other scholars made similar observations and came to the same conclusion, as can be found on numerous websites and blogs.[30] All of these contributions to the debate make interesting reading that I can only highly recommend.

This brief review would not be complete without mentioning Leo Depuydt's erudite detailed grammatical analysis that was first submitted as an interim report in September 2012, subsequently revised, and finally published in *HTR*.[31] He independently of Watson also noted the fragment's complete dependence on *GosThom,* and then delivered a devastating assessment regarding the careless grammatical blunders of the forging copyist. Thereupon King submitted a rebuttal to his rebuttal,[32] which Depuydt countered again.[33] With the recurrent mistaken deviations from *GosThom* that Depuydt detected – ranging from the missing direct object marker in line 1, the omission of the letter *hori* in the name ⲙⲁⲣⲓϩⲁⲙ in line 3, the uncommon use of ϩⲓⲙⲉ instead of ⲥϩⲓⲙⲉ in line 4,[34] to the unusual

27 A. Bernhard, 'Could the *Gospel of Jesus' Wife* Be a "Collage" of Words and Phrases Culled Exclusively From the Coptic *Gospel of Thomas*?', on Goodacre's website, http://ntweblog.blogspot.com/2012/09/the-gospel-of-jesus-wife-latest-news.html, September 2012.

28 A. Bernhard, 'How the *Gospel of Jesus's Wife* Might Have Been Forged: A Tentative Proposal', http://www.gospels.net/gjw/mighthavebeenforged.pdf, October 2012.

29 M. W. Grondin, 'Interlinear Coptic–English Translation of the Gospel of Thomas', http://gospel-thomas.net/gtbypage_112702.pdf, November 2002.

30 See for instance http://evangelicaltextualcriticism.blogspot.com/2012/09/top-notch-coptologist-judges-gospel-of.html, or http://ntweblog.blogspot.com/2012/09/the-gospel-of-jesus-wife-latest-news.html.

31 L. Depuydt, 'The Alleged Gospel of Jesus' Wife: Assessment and Evaluation of Authenticity', *HTR* 107 (2014) 172–89, esp. 184–9. It is also published online, http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayAbstract?fromPage=online&aid=9226259, DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0017816014000194.

32 K. L. King, 'Response to Leo Depuydt, "The Alleged Gospel of Jesus' Wife: Assessment and Evaluation of Authenticity",' *HTR* 107 (2014) 190–3.

33 L. Depuydt, 'The Papyrus Fragment and the Crocodile: When Discerning a Blunder Is Itself …', http://markgoodacre.org/Depuydt.pdf, April 2014.

34 One cannot avoid the impression that the forger did not want to leave anything to chances since the usual form ⲧⲱϩⲓⲙⲉ could have resulted in a much less sensational interpretation; cf. note 17.

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and grammatically highly problematic use of the relative form ⲉⲃⲟⲟⲩ after the indefinite noun ⲣⲱⲙⲉ, and the obvious copying mistake of ϣⲁϥⲉⲛⲉ for ϣⲁϥⲉⲓⲛⲉ,[35] all three in line 6 – he rightly rejects any possibility that the fragment is authentic. Because of this scathing evaluation, King secured advice from several specialists in the field, who found rare attestations in other ancient writings where one of those instances also crops up.[36] This is fair enough, but never do so many rarities occur on so small a fragment with only a few incomplete lines. King's argument that the deviations from *GosThom* are not grammatical blunders or scribal errors but valid variants that prove that the fragment is not directly dependent on *GosThom* sounds like political spin. She is using to her advantage the fact that we are used to all sorts of literary variations, dialectal deviations and copying practices in the scribal traditions. Thus there is always a single instance that can serve as a point of reference. One can point all those out, but evidence for authenticity it is not. To be sure, the instances of peculiar linguistics alone probably would not suffice to derail King's claim altogether, but – in concert with the ironclad proof of a melange of phrases copied from *GosThom* – they add weight to the accumulation of other peculiarities that are still to be discussed.

From the beginning King relied on the initial assessment of the papyrologists Roger Bagnall and the linguist Ariel Shisha-Halevi.[37] To Bagnall she ascribes the observation that the way the ink was chemically absorbed, 'especially in the damaged and faded areas', could not have come from modern times.[38] The damaged areas consist mainly of the side with the vertical papyrus fibre of the fragment, or what in analogy to parchment is called the verso, and a small strip of papyrus on the left as well as the lower edge of the horizontal fibre side, or recto. But these are exactly the places that apparently remained untouched by the forger who only wrote on the recto. The verso possibly still exhibits original writing that the forger may have tried to match. The same could be true for the lower edge of the recto, at least to a certain extent. And indeed, the testing of the ink on either side identified 'some systematic difference between the ink for the recto and verso'.[39] King herself concedes that on each side both the handwriting and the ink are similar but not quite identical.[40] The damage on the left side of the recto is hard to assess from a photograph, but this edge too could present original writing with fibres partially covering some letters that are, therefore,

35 The forging copyist appeared to have realised that he/she forgot the iota and tried to change the epsilon into a iota since ⲓⲛⲉ would just be a common spelling variant of the verb ⲉⲓⲛⲉ 'to bring (forth)'. The correction attempt was not very successful, but good fortune had it that ϣⲁϥⲉ is an existing, though rather rare, verb.

36 Cf. especially Edition, 139–42, with nn. 49–52; cf. also King, 'Response', 191.

37 See First Q&A; Draft, 4.

38 As part of her answer to the second question of First Q&A.

39 See Yardley and Hagadorn, 'Ink Study', 24 and 26.

40 See Edition, 135 and 137.

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unreadable. If those parts are still in an unaltered state, they could easily provide evidence of the 'original ink penetration', 'discontinued strokes with missing ink' and 'dislocated fibers' that King points out as evidence of authenticity.[41] On the other hand, a determined forger should not have too much difficulty in folding protruding papyrus fibres over just written letters, sticking a fibre on still wet letters, or even subsequently removing a fibre or two in order to purport deterioration. Anyone who deals with papyrus fragments knows how many fibres are often loose and sticking out. It is true that we do know a range of scrap papyri in all states of preservation, mainly coming from trash heaps in Egypt, but they lack the other oddities found with *GJW*.

I assume that the vertical fibre side had been inscribed in ancient times, but most of the letters are now faded or rubbed away, while the horizontal fibre side was in all probability originally devoid of any letters. King notes that 'the top edge is clean and seems to have been cut',[42] suggesting that this happened in antiquity or was done by a dealer. Yet the cut exactly above the now existing first line looks too exact, or the other way around, the complete preservation of full letters starting neatly right below a cut (or break) is unparalleled. Therefore one may not entirely rule out the possibility that the fragment was cut by the forger to eliminate undesired text above a blank part of papyrus. To be fair, there can only be educated guesses either way, but it is the accumulation of solecisms that makes one wonder.

The other expert cited by King, Ariel Shisha-Halevy, is well versed in Coptic grammar; his positive assessment concerning the fragment is therefore all the more surprising. On the other hand, he apparently only said that the language itself would not offer evidence for forgery.[43] Of course, he did not know by then that the 'language itself' simply consists of excerpts from *GosThom*. Consequently, he could not have taken the time and occasion to compare the parallel phrases and see the deviations that led to the errors later pointed out by many experts. Coptologists are used to scribes who are anything but infallible. They have seen too many and various kinds of mistakes and inaccuracies, so that anybody would be careful to prove or disprove authenticity solely on the base of the lettering. Again, it is the accumulation of undue occurrences that should give us pause. Also the crude and rugged handwriting alone would not prove or disprove anything. As King rightly points out, 'it fits within the lower standards of a large group of crude and idiosyncratic writings containing magical texts or school exercises'.[44] Although accurate in that regard, this statement contradicts

41 A. Bernhard, 'On the Possible Relationship between *The Gospel of Jesus' Wife* and *The Gospel of Thomas*', http://www.gospels.net/gjw/GJW-GThRelationship.pdf, September 2012.

42 Edition, 134 and n. 11.

43 See King's answer to her second question in Second Q&A; Draft, 4; Edition, 156 n. 113.

44 Cf. Second Q&A; Edition, 137.

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her own claim that the fragment is part of a second-century gospel that testifies to discussions in early Christianity about sexuality, marriage and reproduction.[45]

Even though Bagnall's and Shisha-Halevy's appraisal might have been accurately reported, there is no way of knowing how many dissensions were uttered, conflicting points raised, disclaimers voiced, or disagreements and contentions expressed. It should be noticed that neither Bagnall nor Shisha-Halevi ever commented publicly on this issue, either at the time when they examined the fragment or in response to scholarly objections. As long as it is not known what either of them actually said and what was meant by what they said, it is hard to question their judgement. It is revealing, however, that *HTR* initially decided against publishing King's essay because already during the course of the external review process, two of the three mandatory reviewers raised questions about the authenticity of the fragment, and the third commented on the problems and difficulties concerning the text's grammar and palaeography.[46]

In dealing with fragmentary writings one often has to suggest conjectural reconstructions of text lost in the lacunae. But here it is impossible to reconstruct a continuous text from the fragment's given phrases. King herself offered no suggestion as to what could originally have been written on either side of the fragment before the breaks occurred. As Watson noticed in the 'Addendum' to his initial article,[47] the gaps that separate one incomplete line from the other to produce a coherent text must have been of approximately equal length. To find out how many letters one would need to fill the gaps, he looked at some samples of line-length in the Nag Hammadi Codices since King initially alleged that the fragment comes from a codex of the same time. According to his estimation, only a minimal amount of letters could have been missing at either end of each line,[48] given the nineteen letters preserved on most lines of the fragment. Experienced in reconstructing a codex and filling in text lost in lacunae,[49] I tried in vain to restore complete lines in order to re-establish a relatively coherent narrative under any imaginable circumstances. Even if the fragment were part of a somewhat larger codex with more lost letters per line, it is not possible to produce a cogent dialogue. How wide should we have to believe the codex was, given that it must also have had adequate side margins? Therefore, viewing the fragment merely as 'an excerpt from a longer work'

45 Cf. e.g. King's answer to her third question in Second Q&A.

46 Cf. Draft, 3.

47 Watson, 'Addendum'.

48 Watson talks about three letters on either side, or six altogether. He allows twelve to fifteen letters for a larger codex; cf. 'Addendum'.

49 See the efforts made by Hans-Martin Schenke and myself in reconstructing the so-called *Berlin Coptic Book*: G. Schenke Robinson, in collaboration with H.-M. Schenke und U.-K. Plisch, *Das Berliner Koptische Buch: Eine wiederhergestellte frühchristlich-theologische Abhandlung*, CSCO 611 (SCT 50, Leuven: Peeters, 2004).

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does not solve the problem,[50] since it would originally still need to have had a consistent text. King's suggestion that it could have been an amulet seems still less likely under those conditions.[51] Apart from fitting neither the size nor the appearance of an amulet, it would also go against the gospel claim advertised with so much fanfare.[52] Amulets predominantly tend to contain magical papyri, not gospel texts. Admittedly, codex sizes vary greatly, but to judge from known papyrus leaves, where more or less wide margins again have to be considered, there is no way that an author could have presented the necessary words fitting to the phrases given on the fragment. Watson rightly concludes that the fragment, from the start, was designed to look like a damaged fragment. The forger had obviously wasted no thought on the gaps between the extant lines.[53]

As stated above, King also asserted from the beginning that the fragment not only belongs to a longer gospel text, but that it was originally composed in Greek in the second century and translated as well as copied in the fourth century.[54] So ancient a text, even if ever so tiny but genuine, would, of course, be a sensational find. But the reason stated for those dates was mainly the wished-for similarities with the gospels of the Nag Hammadi find, especially *GosThom*, *GosMary* and *GosPhil*.[55] To be sure, these are the three best-known and well-researched gospels that deal with Jesus' relationship to Mary Magdalene as well as to the other disciples. They are indeed fourth-century Coptic translations of second-century Greek texts. But they could only give credence to the date and genre of *GJW* if it were also (part of) a genuine dialogue gospel. Therefore the papyrus was carbon-tested by Greg Hodgins in Arizona, yet strangely enough, the test result pointed to almost pharaonic times (405 to 209 BCE). This outcome was, of course, highly unsatisfactory while hardly believable. So the papyrus was tested again, this time nearer to home by Noreen Tuross in Harvard. This test brought about a more appropriate date (741 CE),[56] but with that arose a new problem:

50 See Edition, 138.

51 Though King herself already dismissed the notion because of the fragment's dimension; cf. Edition, 138 with n. 35.

52 Repeated in Edition, 143.

53 Watson, 'Addendum'.

54 With some variations from her first posting on HSD and Draft, 13, up until now (e.g. Edition, 139 and 158), and subsequently repeated by blogs and media *ad nauseam*. When discussing the crude and unpractised script, King offers magic texts, private use or even school exercise (Edition, 137) as parallels, but she then turns around and talks about a wider circulation in Christian communities (Edition, 158).

55 E.g. Draft, 13. In her answer to her tenth question in Second Q&A, King states, 'It could date as early as the second half of the second century, because it shows close connections to other gospels which were written during that time, in particular the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Mary, and the Gospel of Philip.'

56 See Edition, 135 and 154.

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what about the fourth-century gospel? King had to modify her earlier view.[57] Versed in papyrology, she could now easily suggest that *GJW* 'may be a copy of an earlier copy in Coptic',[58] that is to say, a copy of a copy of the fourth-century script. Though this is a well-known phenomenon in the world of manuscripts – after all, we have only copies of copies of the New Testament Gospels – the argument sounds rather desperate. If somebody in the eighth century commissioned a copy of such a rather remarkable gospel as claimed, it seems even more peculiar that nothing was known for centuries about a writing referring to Jesus' marital state. Moreover, as King points out, 'The initial estimation of a fourth-century CE date ... was based on paleography.'[59] Not only is this argument no longer valid,[60] but the script of the fragment is even less grounded in eighth century-palaeography.[61] In other words, the handwriting has no similarity to any of the texts of this period whatsoever. Handwriting and test date are simply mutually exclusive. This, of course, is understandable since the fragment's handwriting attempts to simulate the script of the Nag Hammadi writings, which is so familiar to all of us in the field. It is almost amusing to think that the forger did it without realising that the papyrus itself was not so ancient after all.

The testing of *GJW*, however, produced another, quite unexpected, outcome. Thus far, scholars believed that it could be genuine because it was allegedly sold together with another fragment with unquestionable content.[62] That fragment (*JnFragm*) consists of words from the canonical Gospel of John: on its recto from John 5.26–30 and on its verso from John 6.11–14. The *JnFragm* was also radiocarbon-tested and, as the result, dated to the seventh to eighth centuries,[63] therefore fitting right into the timeframe of *GJW*. Moreover, according to the micro-Raman spectra study, the ink used on both fragments is very similar.[64] Both fragments were allegedly purchased by the same undisclosed current

57 In Edition, 155, King solely states, 'A later date is indicated by the age of the papyrus.' Tellingly, she also changed the subtitle of her essay: the 'Gospel Papyrus' (Draft) became a 'Papyrus Fragment' (Edition). Nonetheless, the reasoning for viewing the fragment as part of a gospel is retained, but in much softer form compared to the sensational overtones in the Draft.

58 See e.g. King's answer to her tenth question in Second Q&A.

59 Edition, 155.

60 King tries to defend her miscalculation by simply stating that 'his method has significant limitations given the current state of the field'. See Edition, 155.

61 Accordingly, the palaeographical description that was presented in great detail as evidence for an earlier date (Draft, 5–7) is rendered much shorter in Edition (136–7) and mainly refers to the testimony of AnneMarie Luijendijk.

62 Edition, 154 n. 107.

63 Cf. Edition, 135.

64 The report states, 'ink or inks used in GJW are similar to, but distinct from, the ink used for the GosJohn manuscript'. See Yardley/Hagadorn, 'Ink Study', 26. It is suggested that the ink could have come from different batches.

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owner and are temporarily on loan to Harvard University.[65] Unfortunately, however, the *JnFragm* was not accessible for a long time and was only recently made available to the public. As soon as it was posted online, Christian Askeland became aware of the posting and found out that the fragment was written in the Coptic dialect L_5, called Lycopolitan.[66] With input from Alin Suciu[67] and Mark Goodacre,[68] he discovered that every line was copied from the only extant Lycopolitan version of the Gospel of John, published in 1924 by Sir Herbert Thompson.[69] Not only are almost all of the line divisions identical with his publication but every other line is omitted.[70] Moreover, the Lycopolitan ⲁⲃⲁⲗ was changed to the Sahidic ⲉⲃⲟⲗ, whereas the other distinct dialectic features are retained. Also, as with the omitted objective marker ⲙ- in *GJW*, here the word ϫⲣⲓⲛⲉ was probably unintentionally omitted, rendering the phrase completely meaningless. And to top it all, in the fourth century Lycopolitan was used throughout Upper Egypt, but since Sahidic was then favoured in the mainly monastic scriptoria, Lycopolitan together with other local sub-dialects was basically not in use any longer and died out after the fifth century. Askeland, therefore, has proven beyond reasonable doubt that the *JnFragm* is a hoax. And since – according to Gregg Schwendner's detailed analysis of the handwriting of the *JnFragm* as well as *GJW* – both fragments not only betray the same hand and ink but probably were produced using the same writing tool,[71] there can hardly be any alternative to the conclusion that both are modern forgeries.

This brings us to the very serious matter of the undisclosed ownership. Since the field of papyrology is admittedly quite intricate, King is able to use real or perceived uncertainties in manuscript research to her advantage. By pointing out that irregularities in terms of palaeography, grammar, scribal hand, copying process,

65 Already since November 2012; cf. Edition, 154 n. 107. It would have saved a lot of time and effort were this fragment disclosed right away, as should have been the case.

66 C. Askeland, 'Jesus Had a Sister-in-Law', http://evangelicaltextualcriticism.blogspot.de/2014/04/jesus-had-ugly-sister-in-law.html, April 2014; and id., 'The Forgery of the Lycopolitan Gospel of John', http://evangelicaltextualcriticism.blogspot.de/2014/04/the-forgery-of-lycopolitan-gospel-of.html, April 2014.

67 A. Suciu, 'Christian Askeland Finds the "Smoking Gun"', http://alinsuciu.com/2014/04/24/christian-askeland-finds-the-smoking-gun/, April 2014; and id., 'The Gospel of Jesus' Wife Papyrus: Final Considerations', http://alinsuciu.com/2014/04/26/the-gospel-of-jesus-wife-papyrus-final-considerations/, April 2014.

68 M. Goodacre, 'Illustrating the Forgery of Jesus's Wife's Sister Fragment' http://ntweblog.blogspot.de/2014/04/illustrating-forgery-of-jesus-wifes.html, April 2014.

69 Sir H. Thompson, *The Gospel of John according to the Earliest Coptic Manuscript* (London: British School of Archaeology in Egypt, 1924).

70 See Christian Askeland's contribution to this issue for the explanation of these curious omissions.

71 G. W. Schwendner, 'Chart Comparing the Letter Forms of GJW and the Simulated John', http://www.academia.edu/6893096/Chart_comparing_the_letter_forms_in_GJW_and_the_Simulated_GJohn.

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state of preservation and so on can also be found elsewhere, she quotes those rare instances against her opponents. Yes, papyrologists have seen it all. Yet it becomes disingenuous when the same line of argument is employed regarding the fact that often we cannot identify the origin of a fragment.[72] For even when there is no indication of where a manuscript originated, the current owner – be it a private holder, a collection or a museum – is commonly disclosed. That nothing is known about the provenance of either *GJW* or *JnFragm* is not too surprising in itself since the antiquity market feeds on illicit procurement and illegal trading of ancient artefacts. In our case, however, it is not the lack of but rather the unwillingness to impart information, a situation that does not lend credibility to either the artefact itself or its origin.

As supporting evidence for an imaginary trail leading somehow back to Egypt from where Coptic papyri naturally originate, King repeatedly cites photocopies of three documents that are meant to illustrate an actual purchase of six Coptic fragments.[73] The first one is a copy of a 'contract' (with the purchasing price whited out!), according to which the current owner acquired the fragments in 1999 from Hans-Ulrich Laukamp, who, in turn, had acquired them in Potsdam (which is situated in the outskirts of Berlin) in 1963. The other two documents are merely scanned copies of photocopies, one of which is of a paltry handwritten (!) note, allegedly by Gerhard Fecht, an Egyptologist at the Freie Universität in former West Berlin. It is said to consist of remarks pertaining to a fragment where Jesus refers to his wife. The other scan is of a typed letter from Peter Munro, also an Egyptologist at the Freie Universität, addressed to Laukamp and dated 15 July 1985, in which he reports that Fecht had identified a small papyrus fragment as containing text from the Gospel of John.[74]

Apart from the fact that all three named 'witnesses' have been dead for quite some time,[75] it is proven by now not only that Laukamp had nothing to do with nor any interest in antiquities,[76] but also that he lived in former West Berlin and therefore, at that time, is unlikely to have crossed over to Potsdam since it was then part of East Germany, to which West Berlin citizens were not admitted.[77]

72 Cf. e.g. Edition, 153 and n. 103.

73 King explicitly quotes a letter as stating that the current owner bought '6 Coptic papyrus fragments, one believed to be a Gospel' (Edition, 153), whereas before she talked about 'a batch of six Coptic and Greek papyri' (Draft, 2).

74 Edition, 154 n. 107. Of course, if that is true, Fecht could have referred to a completely different Gospel of John fragment than the *JnFragm* in question.

75 Laukamp died in 2002, Fecht in 2006, and Munro in 2009.

76 See the Live Science report by O. Jarus, '"Gospel of Jesus's Wife": Doubts Raised about Ancient Text', http://www.livescience.com/45020-gospel-of-jesus-wife-questioned.html, April 2014.

77 Cf. the Life Science investigation, as well as Jarus, '"Gospel of Jesus's Wife" Looks more and more like a fake', http://www.livescience.com/45328-gospel-of-jesus-wife-may-be-fake.html, April 2014.

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I imagine it will not take long until more is found out about the alleged involvement (or non-involvement) of the two professors of Egyptology. It would also be of great interest to know whether the documents have an official letterhead or include anything else that gives confidence that nothing on them is manipulated. As long as they are not fully disclosed, there can only be speculation about whether they are genuine, altered, or also outright fakes. For the time being, my response to King's implied question whether 'the statements and documentation provided by the owner are also false or forged' has to be a resounding 'yes'.[78]

The utter secrecy and the precariousness of the matter raise the question of the relationship between the anonymous owner and the forger. In addition, there is the uncertainty about whether the fragment was purchased already in this forged state or was obtained by the forger in its original state and thus emanated via another avenue. It is intriguing that all three supporting documents are connected to Berlin. This city, of course, houses the famous Egyptian Museum with its tremendous Papyrus Collection. Many scholars involved in the Nag Hammadi texts and others in the field have worked in its large archive, often completely unsupervised. While labouring there on the numerous fragments of the so-called Coptic Book,[79] I observed the unfettered access visiting scholars were granted to unlisted and unidentified fragments that were sometimes inscribed, sometimes just pieces from the margins, randomly lying in tin boxes almost for the taking.[80] Only fragments subsequently conserved were provided with a number and entered in the book of acquisitions.[81] For an enthusiast, such a treasure trove of unlisted papyrus scraps may have been hard to resist.

78 Edition, 156. Assuming there is some truth in all of this—although we do not know yet where it lies—my educated guess would be that the typed letter signed by Munro, in which he reports Fecht's identification of a small fragment as containing text from the Gospel of John, might be the only real document. Whatever the reason may have been for addressing it to Laukamp and however the letter may have been procured, it could have given the forger the idea of a contract between Laukamp as seller and an as yet unidentified buyer. The handwritten note with Fecht's alleged remarks about *GJW*, on the other hand, can hardly be taken seriously.

79 See n. 49 above.

80 According to the archives of the Egyptian Museum, which I researched while working on my book, such tin boxes were brought to Berlin from major digs in Egypt, executed at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century, a time when archaeologists cared more for pharaonic artefacts, or at best for classical literature, not for Coptic remnants. The boxes often were just labelled 'Greek and Coptic Fragments', and the like.

81 Indeed, on one occasion the so-called *Gospel of the Savior* was discovered, almost accidentally. During one summer month, Paul Mirecki was given the task of unrolling, flattening and putting between glass sheets some papyrus scraps from one of the tin boxes. When he came across a larger parchment fragment, he showed it to Charles Hedrick, who then realised its importance. Both subsequently published the text: C. W. Hedrick and P. Mirecki, *Gospel of the Savior: A New Ancient Gospel* (Salem, OR: Polebridge, 1999).

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Conclusion

Of course, each argument can be met with a counter-argument, and each odd instance in itself may be defensible. It would be a terrible forger if no case for authenticity could be made. It is indeed true that fragments come in all shapes and sizes, with scribal errors and grammatical blunders; at times they seem to convey outright nonsense, at least according to our modern understanding. Sometimes, however, they are simply forgeries, though thus far with less spectacular content. What makes *GJW* and its circumstances so unique is that here all those peculiarities apparently occur at once. This accumulation of idiosyncrasies is harder to dismiss: starting with the initial presentation (staged performance, undisclosed owner), the fragment's appearance (square as though intended for a picture frame), its semantics (simple phrases copied out of *GosThom*), its grammar (too many blunders), its handwriting (not fitting the papyrus date), supporting documents (lack of credibility), up to its several connections to the forged *JnFragm*.

It is time for Harvard to offer an official statement of disavowal. Also necessary is the unconditional disclosure of all relevant materials, including the documents allegedly proving a valid acquisition. If there is an owner who purchased several fragments, his or her identity has to be revealed and all the fragments made available to the public. As Depuydt stated, 'not doing so is an act of obstruction'.[82] We have wasted enough time due to all the covertness and wrongly applied confidentiality. And last but not least, the media should no longer be manipulated into taking up this affair every Easter, when it is ready for a new sensation no matter how ludicrous.

82 In an email from 4 May 2014.

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