What Does the Coptic Fragment Entitled the *Gospel of Jesus’ Wife* Tell Us?

Two newspaper articles published on September 18, 2012, one by Laurie Goodstein in the *New York Times* and one by Lisa Wangsness in the *Boston Globe*, broke a story that has prompted a lot of buzz in the media. Karen King, the Hollis Professor of Divinity at Harvard Divinity School and a specialist in Gnosticism, shared evidence with both the general public and scholars about a small fragment of papyrus, dated to the 4th century A.D. and measuring about 1.5 inches by 3 inches, that has a Coptic text on it which includes a supposed statement of Jesus to His disciples that reads (when translated): “Jesus said to them, ‘My wife...’” The fragment, which King provocatively titled the *Gospel of Jesus’ Wife*, has set off some speculation that Jesus was indeed married (e.g., Simcha Jacobovici of *The Lost Tomb of Jesus* fame) or at least some “early Christians” taught so. Before jumping to such conclusions, it is important to evaluate the authenticity of this fragment and what it does or does not tell us.

To her credit and unlike the shroud of secrecy surrounding the announcement of the *Gospel of Judas* just a few years ago, King has released a high-resolution photograph of the fragment and the pre-publication version of an extensive article detailing her research that is scheduled to be published in *Harvard Theological Review* 106:1 (January 2013). It is noteworthy that the third sentence of her article addresses speculation head-on: “It [this fragment] does not, however, provide evidence that the historical Jesus was married, given the late date of the fragment and the probable date of original composition only in the second half of the second century” (p. 1; emphasis original). The release of this information to the general public coincided with her announcement of the find to the Tenth International Congress of Coptic Studies that was meeting in Rome. Based upon the information that has been released, what can we reliably know?

First, although the dating of this papyrus fragment to the 4th century A.D. has been confirmed by two papyrologists, the ink has not been tested to confirm that it is consistent with ink used in documents of a similar age and hardly anything is known about the history of this fragment. With some finds like the Dead Sea Scrolls or the Nag Hammadi Codices, the manuscripts that came to the attention of scholars could be traced back to where they were actually discovered. What is known about this fragment’s history prior to an antiquities dealer delivering it to King for evaluation in December 2011 is that its previous owner apparently had it examined by a German scholar in the early 1980s. That information is not of much help in understanding the history of this fragment, except that it does not appear to be a forgery done in the past three decades. It is noteworthy that some of the scholars of Coptic at the international congress who examined the fragment had serious doubts about its authenticity; even a non-specialist like me is suspicious when the Coptic proclitic pronoun translated “my” in “my wife” appears darker than the rest of the text. It is surprising that more has not yet been done to confirm its authenticity. If the ink can be dated to the age of the papyrus on which it is written, however, the logical conclusion would be that it was originally from Egypt where Coptic, which is a language that developed from Greek and Middle Egyptian, was widely used on papyrus.
Second, it is important to emphasize that it is very difficult to interpret this small amount of text without a context. All we have is eight partial lines of Coptic that have been cut off on both sides, which means that it is even difficult to see how the eight lines are related. From the few phrases that we have, we can gather that the text contains a supposed conversation between Jesus and His disciples about “Mary” (Mary Magdalene or his mother?) and “my wife” being worthy to be among His disciples. This text does not match the text of any extant biblical or extra-biblical writing. Because the fragment contains a supposed conversation of Jesus, it has been theorized that it is from an unknown Gospel, yet King herself states: “With a fragment this small, it is impossible to claim too firm a conclusion regarding the question of genre” (p. 20). The limited amount of text without any context prevents firm conclusions from being drawn on the meaning of the few lines that we do have, including the meaning of the phrase “Jesus’ wife.”

Third, even with this limited amount of text, it is certainly appropriate to theorize about the source of the ideas set forth in this fragment and to conclude, as King does, that this fragment may have been part of a Gnostic document. Gnosticism is a broad label given to the teaching of various sectarian “Christians” who denied central truths of Christianity such as Jesus’ death for the atonement of sins and in its place taught, among other things, salvation through esoteric knowledge (“gnosis”) supposedly given by Jesus but often drawn in part from Platonic philosophy. The teachings and writings of various Gnostic groups posed a significant challenge in the 2nd to the 4th century and were regularly condemned as heretical by Christian leaders familiar with their teachings, such as Irenaeus who wrote primarily in the last three decades of the 2nd century. The discussion concerning the worthiness of “Mary” to be a disciple of Jesus in the Gospel of Jesus’ Wife does seem similar to texts found in some Gnostic documents also written in Coptic, like the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Mary, and the Gospel of Philip. King demonstrates a probable relationship between the ideas expressed in this fragment with the ideas expressed in these Gnostic Gospels. This fragment, therefore, may assist us in understanding the teaching of a Gnostic group concerning Jesus and His marital status, but it does not help us to understand the teaching of the historical Jesus or His actual marital status.

Then where should we look for reliable historical evidence about Jesus, including His marital status? There are four first century Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke and John—whose testimony was proclaimed and written while eyewitnesses were still alive and whose Greek text is widely attested by many 2nd-7th century papyri manuscripts as well as some 4th-5th century parchment manuscripts that contain the complete text or most of the text of these books. These Gospels testify prominently to many aspects of Jesus’ humanity, including that He was known as Joseph’s son, had a mother, had brothers, attended weddings, supported life-long marriage and had several women who were among His wider group of disciples but not one of the 12 apostles (see especially Richard Bauckham, Gospel Women: Studies of the Named Women in the Gospels, Eerdmans, 2002). There is no historical evidence in these Gospels, however, that Jesus was married to a woman. If He would have been, the result would have been a wife and children who would have attracted significant attention after His resurrection and ascension. Instead, it
appears historically probable that the only “bride” Jesus has ever had is the church (Ephesians 5:25-32).

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