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Article on 'Jesus' wife' papyrus delayed for more testing

David Gibson Religion News Service | Jan. 4, 2013

The Harvard Theological Review is postponing publication of a major article on the papyrus fragment in which Jesus seems to refer to his wife, raising further doubts about a discovery that was set to turn Christian history on its head when it was announced in September.

The article by Harvard Divinity School professor Karen King was scheduled for the review's January edition. It was expected to provide answers to questions raised about the relic's authenticity soon after King announced the discovery to select national media and at an international conference of biblical scholars in Rome.

King told CNN, which reported the latest development Thursday, that the article has been delayed because testing on the fragment is not complete.

A spokesperson for Harvard Divinity School, Kathryn Dodgson, said in an email Friday that the owner of the papyrus -- whose identity has not been disclosed -- "has been making arrangements for further testing and analysis of the fragment, including testing by independent laboratories with the resources and specific expertise necessary to produce and interpret reliable results."

Dodgson said the Harvard Theological Review is still planning to publish King's article "after conclusion of all the testing so that the results may be incorporated."

"Until testing is complete, there is nothing more to say at this point."

King has said the fragment is from a fourth-century codex written in Coptic that may have come from an earlier, unknown Gospel. The receipt-sized slip of papyrus contains just 33 words spread across 14 incomplete lines and quotes Jesus referring to "my wife" before the sentence is cut off.

It is the only extant text in which Jesus is explicitly portrayed as married, according to King, who dubbed the text "The Gospel of Jesus' Wife." King insisted that the fragment, even if authentic, would not prove that Jesus was married.

But experts said even the possibility that Jesus was betrothed could have upended Christian doctrine and theology and raised questions about the role of women in Christianity. And the media rollout for the discovery prompted a global wave of coverage that fostered a view that this fragment was akin to finding Jesus' marriage license.

But doubts about the fragment were raised almost immediately. Some critics said the text's importance was blown out of proportion -- there are countless fragments of ancient papyrus writings from the centuries after Christ -- while others objected to the secrecy surrounding the owner of the fragment and the lack of any documentation about its provenance.

Other experts subsequently alleged that the papyrus may be ancient but the writing was a modern forgery and

even included a typo.

The doubts led the Smithsonian Channel, which had been working with King for months on a documentary about the papyrus, to delay broadcast of the program, which had been set for October.

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