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Questions persist after testing of 'Jesus Wife' papyrus

David Gibson Religion News Service | Apr. 11, 2014

A year and a half after unveiling a slip of papyrus that she dubbed "The Gospel of Jesus's Wife," Harvard Bible scholar Karen King on Thursday released the results of long-delayed testing on the controversial fragment that appear to show it is not a modern forgery.

But a host of questions remain, with some experts still wondering whether it is a fake and others questioning the value of the tests. Still others are asking whether the "gospel" and its suggestion that Jesus could have had a flesh-and-blood wife have any bearing on Christian doctrine.

King said she feels vindicated because the tests show the fragment, which is about the size of a business card, and the writing on it are ancient and therefore authentic.

"I'm hoping now that we can turn away from the question of forgery and talk much, much more about the historical significance of the fragment and precisely how it fit into the history of Christianity and questions about family and marriage and sexuality and Jesus," King told reporters.

Those theological questions have indeed stirred controversy since King presented the fragment at a conference in Rome in September 2012, and continued to do so in the wake of this latest announcement.

"Nearly every scholar believes that Jesus was unmarried. So do I," Jesuit Fr. James Martin, the author of a new book on Jesus, wrote on the website of *America* magazine [1]. "My faith," Martin added, "does not rest on his being unmarried -- but my reason tells me that he was."

Martin listed some of the reasons Jesus was likely not married -- one, it would be odd for the accounts of his life not to mention a wife if he had one, and the newly discovered papyrus was written centuries after the original Gospels.

The fragment consists of just eight lines and 33 words of an interrupted conversation likely snipped from a larger papyrus.

At two points Jesus speaks of his mother, his wife and a female disciple, one of whom may be identified as "Mary," though it's not clear if she would be Mary Magdalene, as some speculate, or another Mary. When the disciples discuss whether Mary is worthy, Jesus states that "she can be my disciple," an intriguing statement that might challenge Catholic doctrine about women as priests.

King has stressed that the fragment does not prove that Jesus was married, and she says the text is not in fact focused on that issue.

"The main topic of the fragment is to affirm that women who are mothers and wives can be disciples of Jesus -- a topic that was hotly debated in early Christianity as celibate virginity increasingly became highly valued," King explained.

But beyond the debates over faith and history, the latest news about the papyrus continued to prompt questions about its validity. Not everyone was satisfied with the answers.

"The papyrus fragment seems ripe for a Monty Python sketch," Leo Depuydt, an Egyptologist at Brown University, writes in a blistering rebuttal to King. His analysis is in one of a series of articles on the papyrus published in the new edition of the *Harvard Theological Review*.

Depuydt also continues to maintain that the Coptic language used in the papyrus contains "a couple of fatal grammatical blunders" that render it "patently fake."

Critics also say the fragment violates the "too good to be true" rule of biblical archaeology: that if a relic emerges that seems to address exactly the concerns of a modern audience -- such as sex and women in Christianity -- then skepticism is warranted.

They point to other outstanding issues as well:

- The testing indicates that the papyrus could be as recent as 859, which is 400 years later than King first thought and much later than the accounts from the New Testament;
- Tests on the composition of the ink showed that it was of a type used between 400 B.C. and as late as A.D. 800, a very wide window;
- While the ink appears to be of a type and pattern used by ancient writers, the ink itself could not be tested without destroying the papyrus;
- The language Jesus uses about a wife could be metaphorical and may indicate he was referring to the church as his bride, not a real woman.

Speaking to reporters Thursday, King acknowledged those criticisms but said they did not affect the validity or import of the fragment.

She said the later dating did not matter too much because she has always believed the writing was copied from a much earlier document, probably from the second or third century. She said an analysis of the writing showed it falls in the range of the papyrus itself, and she said there are other examples of similar grammatical errors in other ancient writings.

"There's a limited amount of takeaway you can do from something that small," she said.

King also acknowledged that the uncertain sourcing of the document was unfortunate but could not be helped. The owner of the fragment remains anonymous; he only told her that he bought it and five other papyri in 1999 from a collector who said he acquired them in what was then communist East Germany in 1963.

King said Thursday that Harvard Divinity School has the papyrus and that over the weekend the owner ? who will not reveal his identity ? wrote her an email proposing that it remain there on permanent loan. Harvard is considering the idea, she said.

King originally unveiled the papyrus at a scholarly conference in Rome, the Vatican's backyard, as it were, and by dubbing it the "Gospel of Jesus's Wife" she practically guaranteed the kind of viral coverage that the discovery received.

But she said she was still surprised at the public fascination with the topic and did not account for how quickly the media "wave" would run with the story before all the testing and deliberation could take place. Her original research article on the fragment was put on hold, as was a Smithsonian Channel documentary, which will now air with updated information.

"My intent from the beginning was to do this in a responsible way," King said. But, she continued, "I'm not sure it" ? the controversy ? "could have been avoided, actually."

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[1] http://americamagazine.org/content/all-things/did-jesus-have-wife-no