

## The *Gospel of Jesus' Wife*: How a fake Gospel-Fragment was composed

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A gospel or gospel-fragment might be regarded as “fake” whether its author belongs to the ancient or the modern world. In both cases, the aim would be to persuade as many readers as possible to take the new text seriously – as a window onto unknown aspects of Jesus’ life, or how it was perceived by his later followers. In her thorough and helpful analysis of the text that is coming to be known as the *Gospel of Jesus' Wife* (*GJW*), Karen King rightly points out that new items of information about the historical Jesus are not to be expected from it.<sup>1</sup> It can though provide valuable insights into early Christian debates about sexuality and gender. At least, it can do so *if* it is “genuine”, genuinely old. King admits to initial scepticism, but is now convinced that this papyrus fragment derives from a fourth century copy of a second century text.

I shall argue here that scepticism is exactly the right attitude. The text has been constructed out of small pieces – words or phrases – culled mostly from the Coptic *Gospel of Thomas* (*GTh*), Sayings 101 and 114, and set in new contexts. This is most probably the compositional procedure of a modern author who is not a native speaker of Coptic.

My line-by-line comparisons of *GJW* with *GTh* (and in one case with Matthew) will focus only on the recto side of the fragment that King has transcribed, translated and edited. Underlinings in Coptic texts and English translations highlight identical wording in Thomas (or Matthew) and *GJW*. An asterisk (\*) indicates a departure from King’s translation. Readers without Coptic will I hope find the argument easy enough to follow.

*GJW* 1 να|ει αν ταμααυ α† ναει πω|Ν2

]“not [to] me. My mother gave to me li[fe]...”

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<sup>1</sup> For King’s excellent images, transcriptions, translations, and the draft of her forthcoming article on this text, see <http://www.hds.harvard.edu/faculty-research/research-projects/the-gospel-of-jesus-wife>

Line 1 of the new gospel fragment opens with the letters **ΕΙ ΑΝ**, and King plausibly suggests that **ΕΙ** represents the last two letters of **ΝΑΕΙ**, “to me”, which recurs later in the same line. The letters **ΝΑ** will therefore have been found at the end of the preceding line. The present line is derived entirely from Logion 101 of *GTh* (page and line numbers refer to the original Coptic manuscript):

*GTh* 49.34 ΑΥΩ ΠΕΤΑΜΜΡ̄Ε ΠΕϣ[ΕΙΩΤ ΑΝ Μ] Ν̄ ΤΕϣ

*GTh* 49.35 ΜΑΑΥ Ν̄ΤΑΖΕ ϣΝΑϞ̄Ρ̄ Μ[ΑΘΗΤΗΣ ΝΑ]

*GTh* 49.36 ΕΙ ΑΝ ΤΑΜΑΑΥ ΓΑΡ Ν̄ΤΑϢ . . . . .

*GTh* 50.1 [..] ΟΛ ΤΑ[ΜΑΑ]ΥΔΕ Μ̄ΜΕ ΑϢΤ ΝΑΕΙ Μ̄ΠΩΝΖ [

(“And the one who does not love his father or his / mother in my way cannot become a disciple / to me. For my mother... / but my true mother gave to me life”, *GTh* 101.)

Line 1 of *GJW* reproduces not only the precise words from *GTh* 101 underlined above but also the line-division of the extant Coptic manuscript. In both cases, a line begins with the letter-sequence **ΕΙΑΝΤΑΜΑΑΥ** (*GTh* 49.36; *GJW* 1r). In both cases, a line ends with a letter-sequence that differs at only one point: **ΑϢΤΝΑΕΙ<Μ̄>ΠΩΝΖ** (*GTh* 50.1; *GJW* 1). The author or compiler of *GJW* is evidently dependent on the one extant manuscript of the Coptic *GTh*, the line-division of which he or she slavishly follows at this point. An obvious explanation is that the author has used a modern printed edition of the Coptic text, where the original line-divisions are preserved.<sup>2</sup>

*GJW* 2 ]Ϣ ΠΕϤΕ Μ̄ΜΑΘΗΤΗΣ Ν̄ΙϢ ϤΕ Ϣ[

] The disciples said to Jesus, “ [

This precise phrase does not occur in the canonical gospels, where the nearest equivalents are

<sup>2</sup> E.g. *Nag Hammadi Codex II,2-7*, vol. 1, ed. Bentley Layton, Nag Hammadi Studies XX, Leiden: Brill, 1989 (the text used here); *The Gospel according to Thomas: Coptic Text Established and Translated*, ed. A. Guillaumont et al., Leiden: Brill, 2001.

expressions such as, “And the disciples say to him” (καὶ λέγουσιν αὐτῷ οἱ μαθηταί),<sup>3</sup> “And his disciples were saying to him” (καὶ ἔλεγον αὐτῷ οἱ μαθηταὶ αὐτοῦ),<sup>4</sup> and, “So the disciples said to him (εἶπαν οὖν οἱ μαθηταὶ αὐτῷ).<sup>5</sup> “The disciples said to Jesus” does, however, occur three times in *GTh*, in Sayings 12, 18, and 20,<sup>6</sup> where it introduces questions about, respectively, leadership, the end, and the kingdom of heaven. In *GJW* the abbreviation of Jesus’ name (the *nomen sacrum*) to  $\bar{\text{IC}}$  takes the same form as in the Thomas examples.

It will be convenient to take lines 3 and 4 of *GJW* together:

*GJW* 3-4 ] ΑΡΝΑ ΜΑΡΙΑΜ ΜΠΩΑ ΜΜΟC Α[N? ] . . . . . / ΠΕΧΕ IC ΤΑΖΙΜΕ ΜΝI  
 ] “deny. Mary is n[ot]\* worthy of it...” [ ] . . . . . Jesus said, “My wife and\*... [

$\alpha\rho\nu\alpha$ , “deny”, occurs twice in *GTh* in the injunctive form,  $\mu\alpha\rho\epsilon\upsilon\alpha\rho\nu\alpha$ , “let him deny” (*GTh* 81; 114).<sup>7</sup> In the second case, the object of renunciation is “the world” ( $\pi\kappa\omicron\sigma\mu\omicron\varsigma$ ); in the first, the verb is unqualified: “Let the one who has power deny [ $\mu\alpha\rho\epsilon\upsilon\alpha\rho\nu\alpha$ ]”. While the gap preceding  $\alpha\rho\nu\alpha$  in *GJW* 3 might be filled with the injunctive and pronominal prefixes ( $\mu\alpha\rho\epsilon\upsilon-$  or  $\mu\alpha\rho\epsilon\varsigma-$ ), it is unclear how that would make sense when it is the disciples who are speaking, rather than Jesus himself.

The primary model for lines 3-4 is *GTh* 114:

*GTh* 51.18 ΠΕΧΕ CΙΜΩΝ ΠΕΤΡΟC

*GTh* 51.19 ΝΑΥ ΧΕ ΜΑΡΕ ΜΑΡΙΖΑΜ ΕΙ ΕΒΟΛ ΝΖΗΤΝ

*GTh* 51.20 ΧΕ ΝCΖΙΟΜΕ ΜΠΩΑ ΑΝ ΜΠΩΝΖ ΠΕΧΕ IC

(Simon Peter said / to them, “Let Mary leave us, for women are not worthy of life.” Jesus said...”)

3 Mt.15.33, 19.10; Jn.11.8 (without the καί).

4 Mk.5.31.

5 Jn.11.12.

6 = *GTh* 34.25; 36.9; 36.26.

7 = *GTh* 47.17; 51.5.

Here the author or compiler of *GJW* has taken four elements from *GTh* 114, reversing the order of the third and fourth of them. “Mary” is directly linked to “not worthy of...”, and the intervening reference to “women” now follows the introductory formula, “Jesus said”, where it is changed to “my woman”, = “my wife” (ΤΑΖΙΜΕ).<sup>8</sup>

*GJW* 5 ] . . . ϸΝΑΩΡ̄ΜΑΘΗΤΗϸ ΝΑΕΙ ΑΥΩ [

] “. . . she will be able to be disciple to me and\* [

Here we revert again to *GTh* 101, where closely similar language appears twice:

*GTh* 49.32-36 ΠΕΤΑΜΕϸΤΕ ΠΕϸΕΙ[ΩΤ] ΑΝ Μ̄ ΤΕϸ||ΜΑΑΥ Ν̄ΤΑΖΕ ϸΝΑΩΡ̄Μ[ΑΘΗΤ]Ηϸ

ΝΑΕΙ Α(N) | ΑΥΩ ΠΕΤΑΜ̄Ρ̄Ε ΠΕϸ[ΕΙΩΤ ΑΝ Μ]̄ ΤΕϸ||ΜΑΑΥ Ν̄ΤΑΖΕ ϸΝΑΩΡ̄Μ[ΑΘΗΤΗϸ

ΝΑ||ΕΙ ΑΝ.

(“The one who does not hate his father and his mother in my way will not be able to be disciple to me and the one who does not love his father and his mother in my way will not be able to be disciple to me.”)

The relevant verbal forms comprise a pronominal suffix (ϸ- or ϸ-: third singular masculine altered to third singular feminine), a first future prefix (-ΝΑ-), an auxiliary verb denoting ability (Ω-), and a main verb (Ρ-) which in conjunction with the loanword ΜΑΘΗΤΗϸ means “to be or become a disciple”. The phrase as a whole is a Coptic equivalent of the Lukan οὐ δύναται εἶναί μου μαθητής (Lk.14.26, cf. vv. 27, 33), which the *GTh* passage probably echoes. In Luke, however, the Coptic text uses different although synonymous formulations.<sup>9</sup> The origin of the verbal phrase in *GJW* 5 appears to lie in *GTh* 101, along with *GJW* 1.

<sup>8</sup> ΖΙΜΕ is one of a number of variant spellings listed under ϸΖΙΜΕ in W. E. Crum, *A Coptic Dictionary*, Oxford: OUP, 1939, 385a. There are also variant spellings of the plural, of which Thomas’s ϸΖΙΟΜΕ is one.

<sup>9</sup> Μ̄ΜΝΩϸΟΜ ΕΤΡΕϸΡ̄ΜΑΘΗΤΗϸ ΝΑΙ (Lk.14.26); Μ̄ΜΝΩϸΟΜ ΕΤΡΕϸΩΠΤΕ ΝΑΙ Μ̄ΜΑΘΗΤΗϸ (Lk.14.27); ΜΜΝΩϸΟΜ Μ̄ΜΟϸ ΕΤΡΕϸΩΠΤΕ ΝΑΙ Μ̄ΜΑΘΗΤΗϸ (Lk.14.33).

*GJW* 6 ] Ι ΜΑΡΕΡΩΜΕ ΕΘΟΟΥ ΨΑΦΕ ΝΕ [

] Let the wicked man\* swell up... [

A curse of this kind is unusual in the Jesus tradition, at least as directed towards a person (cf. Mk.11.14). The passage might conceivably echo Papias's unpleasant description of Judas Iscariot's grossly swollen body.<sup>10</sup> The Coptic verb may however mean "be destroyed."<sup>11</sup>

*GJW* 7 ]. ΑΝΟΚ †ΨΟΟΠ ΝΜΜΑϸ ΕΤΒΕ Π [

]. \*I am with her on account of [

Here the first three Coptic words derive not from *GTh* but from Matthew 28.20b, with an adjustment of the pronominal suffix from "with you" to "with her":

ΕΙϸ ΖΗΗΤΕ ΑΝΟΚ †ΨΟΟΠ ΝΜΜΗΤΝ ΝΝΕΖΟΟΥ ΤΗΡΟΥ

"Behold, I am with you always..."<sup>12</sup>

*GJW* 8 ] ΟΥΖΙΚΩΝ [

] an image [

The term εἰκών ("image") is attested only once in the canonical gospels<sup>13</sup> but seven times in the Coptic *GTh* in the form of the loanword, ΖΙΚΩΝ. In one of these occurrences it is accompanied by the indefinite article, as here in *GJW* 8.<sup>14</sup>

10 For Greek and English texts, see *Apostolic Fathers II*, ed. Bart D. Ehrman, Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003, 104-7. The passage is attributed to Papias by Apollinaris of Laodicea.

11 Crum, 609b-610b.

12 The Matthean derivation is unclear in King's translation of line 7: "As for me, I dwell with her in order to..."

13 Mt.22.20=Mk.12.16=Lk.20.24 ("Whose image and superscription is it?").

14 *GTh*.37.34 (Logion 22); cf. 42.1 (Logion 50); 47.20, 22, 23 (Logion 83), 47.27 (Logion 84).

*Summary* Six of the eight incomplete lines of *GJW* recto are so closely related to the Coptic *GTh*, especially to Sayings 101 and 114, as to make dependence virtually certain. A further line is derived from Matthew; just one is left unaccounted for. The author has used a “collage” or “patchwork” compositional technique, and this level of dependence on extant pieces of Coptic text is more plausibly attributed to a modern author, with limited facility in Coptic, than to an ancient one. Indeed, the *GJW* fragment may be designedly incomplete, its lacunae built into it from the outset. It does not seem possible to fill these lacunae with *GTh* material contiguous to the fragments cited. The impression of modernity is reinforced by the case in line 1 of dependence on the line-division of the one surviving Coptic manuscript, easily accessible in modern printed editions. Unless this impression of modernity is countered by further investigations and fresh considerations, it seems unlikely that *GJW* will establish itself as a “genuine” product of early gospel writing.

*Postscript* A modern parallel to the author’s collage technique may be seen in the composition of the *Secret Gospel of Mark* passages which – as I have argued at length elsewhere – are to be attributed, along with the letter in which they are embedded, to their alleged discoverer, Morton Smith.<sup>15</sup> As I have shown, Smith’s composition is itself inspired by an explicitly fictional gospel fragment known as the *Shred of Nicodemus* which features in an otherwise forgotten novel by James M. Hunter, *The Mar Saba Mystery* (1940).<sup>16</sup> Both the American scholar and the Canadian novelist create their fake gospel texts from fragments of genuine texts: Mark in the one case, Mark, John and the Old Testament in the other. Perhaps the author of *GJW* was inspired by the *Secret Gospel’s* compositional procedure, which was noted soon after its publication although the correct conclusion was rarely drawn from it.

The Jesus of the *Secret Gospel* likes to consort naked with young men at night, while seeming hostile to women.<sup>17</sup> By contrast, the new gospel fragment has Jesus speak disconcertingly of “my wife”. Has this new heterosexual Jesus been created to complement Smith’s homosexual one?

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15 Francis Watson, “Beyond Suspicion: On the Authorship of the Mar Saba Letter and the *Secret Gospel of Mark*”, *JTS* 61 (2010), 128-70, esp. 139-42, 167-69. See also Stephen C. Carlson, *The Gospel Hoax: Morton Smith’s Invention of Secret Mark*, Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2005. For the full text of the Clementine letter that incorporates the secret gospel excerpts, see Morton Smith, *Clement of Alexandria and the Secret Gospel of Mark*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973.

16 F. Watson, “Beyond Suspicion”, 161-70.

17 *Mar Saba Letter*, II.23-III.14; III.14-17 (references are to page and line numbers); see F. Watson, “Beyond Suspicion”, 135-36.