

Some three years ago now I discussed in several posts the newly “discovered” text called “The Gospel of Jesus’ Wife” (just search for “wife” and you’ll find the posts). A new development has occurred that makes it almost certain that this text is a modern forgery, done sometime in the last 20 years. The evidence has been uncovered by Andrew Bernhard, who was one of the first to establish other grounds for seeing the text as something quite fishy, and who has posted several times on the matter on Mark Goodacre’s blog (as Mark informed me a couple of nights ago at a reading group). I asked Andrew to come up with an explanation of the new evidence of foul-play (either by the person who gave the document to Harvard Professor Karen King or by the person who gave it to that other person). I am very grateful to him for having done so. Here is what he says:

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Confirmation that the *Gospel of Jesus’ Wife* is a Modern Forgery

By Andrew Bernhard

For nearly three years, there has been considerable controversy and confusion about whether a tiny papyrus fragment dubbed the *Gospel of Jesus’ Wife* is an authentic ancient artifact or not. We can now say with confidence that it is not: the release of a new document related to the *Gospel of Jesus’ Wife* papyrus fragment has confirmed that it was forged sometime after 1997.

The *Gospel of Jesus’ Wife* Papyrus Fragment

In September 2012, Karen King of Harvard Divinity School announced that a private manuscript collector had recently brought a remarkable papyrus fragment to her attention. The business-card sized papyrus fragment contained Coptic (a form of the ancient Egyptian language) text meaning, “Jesus said to them, ‘My Wife . . .’” For reference purposes, Professor King designated the purportedly ancient text as the *Gospel of Jesus’ Wife*.

The “Patchwork” Forgery Theory

Shortly after Professor King unveiled the *Gospel of Jesus’ Wife* at an academic conference in September 2012, a scholar named Francis Watson pointed out that the text appeared to be little more than a “patchwork” of words and short phrases culled from the lone surviving Coptic manuscript of the *Gospel of Thomas* in Coptic. Building on the work of Professor Watson and other scholars, I soon suggested that the *Gospel of Jesus’ Wife* could have been created by someone with limited knowledge of Coptic using an “interlinear translation” of the *Gospel of Thomas*.

An “interlinear translation” of the *Gospel of Thomas* presents every line of the Coptic text with corresponding English translations in between the lines.

I thought someone with virtually no knowledge of Coptic could have used an “interlinear translation” to create a seemingly ancient text out of snippets from the *Gospel of Thomas* (an *actual* ancient text). The forger would not have needed to know much about the ancient language because each Coptic word has an English translation right below it.

So I explored the possibility that the text of the *Gospel of Jesus’ Wife* had been prepared using the only Coptic/English “interlinear translation” I knew, an edition of the *Gospel of Thomas* by Michael W. Grondin that has been online in various formats since 1997. What I discovered shocked me: to create the *Gospel of Jesus’ Wife*, a forger would have needed to do little more than “cut and paste” text from *Grondin’s Interlinear*, switch a few pronouns (for example, “he” to “she” – a single letter change in Coptic), and place two key Coptic words (meaning “Mary” and “my wife”) into the “patchwork” text to give it “sensational” content.

In addition, I recognized a number of tell-tale signs of forgery. For example, the first line of the *Gospel of Jesus’ Wife* papyrus fragment shares a line break with the Coptic manuscript of the *Gospel of Thomas* (that is, both manuscripts split the same word in the same place between the end of one line of text and the start of the next), and it also appears to repeat a typographical error from the 2002 PDF version of *Grondin’s Interlinear*. I ultimately realized that both the similarities of the *Gospel of Jesus’ Wife* papyrus fragment to the only surviving Coptic manuscript of the *Gospel of Thomas* and all its suspicious grammatical features could be explained well as the result of a forger’s dependence on *Grondin’s Interlinear*!

“This” in the English translation given to Professor King

In April 2014, Mark Goodacre and I were reviewing information that had been published about the *Gospel of Jesus’ Wife* soon after it was first unveiled in 2012. Each of us noticed the following passage in the [first *Gospel of Jesus’ Wife* article published by Smithsonian](#):

[The owner of the papyrus fragment] sent along an electronic file of photographs and an unsigned translation with the bombshell phrase, “Jesus said **this** to them: My wife...” (King would refine the translation as “Jesus said to them, ‘My wife ... ’”) (emphasis added)

The appearance of the word “this” in the translation of the most notable line of the *Gospel of Jesus’ Wife* was odd because nothing in the Coptic text corresponded to it. After discussing the matter, Professor Goodacre and I realized that “this” was apparently a translation of an unexpectedly absent Coptic word in the *Gospel of Jesus’ Wife* . . . and it was a *mistranslation*, just as in *Grondin’s Interlinear*. We deduced that the “translation” of the *Gospel of Jesus’ Wife* that the owner of the papyrus fragment had given Professor King was almost certainly dependent on the English of *Grondin’s Interlinear*, just as the

papyrus fragment was on the Coptic.

Confirming Evidence of Forgery: The Release of the Owner's "Translation"

On August 27, 2015, Professor King generously released [the English "translation" that the owner had provided her](#), and it is undeniably dependent on the English of *Grondin's Interlinear* (just as we had predicted). The extensive verbal correspondence between the owner's "translation" and the English of *Grondin's Interlinear* cannot reasonably be attributed to anything but direct literary dependence.

For example, compare the pertinent passages in *Grondin's Interlinear* with the transcription of the first line of the owner's "translation" of the *Gospel of Thomas*: The English words and word order in both *Grondin's Interlinear* and the first line of the owner's "translation" are identical, **but they should not be**. The word that means "for" appears in the Coptic text of *Grondin's Interlinear*, but it does not appear in the owner's Coptic transcription of line 1 (or on the *Gospel of Jesus' Wife* papyrus fragment). Grondin has placed " - - - " beneath the word Ⲅⲁⲣⲓ (*gar*: "for") and inserted the English word "for" in parentheses before "my mother" in his translation, presumably because he preferred to use English (rather than Coptic) word order. The person responsible for the owner's "translation" has obviously did not actually translate a Coptic word in the *Gospel of Jesus' Wife* that isn't even present: the word "for" in the owner's "translation" must have been copied directly from the English of *Grondin's Interlinear*.

The owner's "translation" of the *Gospel of Jesus' Wife* displays evidence of dependence on *Grondin's Interlinear* in every line with more than a single word. It includes repeated English "translations" of Coptic words not even present on the papyrus fragment itself, incorrect translations of Coptic text, and distinctive translations as well - all of which can be traced back to *Grondin's Interlinear*. The owner's "translation" is not a real translation of the *Gospel of Jesus' Wife*; it was prepared by someone who copied directly from the English of *Grondin's Interlinear*.

Conclusion

There is no longer any doubt that the *Gospel of Jesus' Wife* was forged after 1997 by someone dependent on *Grondin's Interlinear*. Analysis of the Coptic of the *Gospel of Jesus' Wife* initially suggested that the text was dependent on *Grondin's Interlinear*, and this forgery theory has proved to have remarkable predictive value. On the basis of it (and the presence of the word "this" in a brief excerpt of the owner's "translation"), we were able predict that the owner's "translation" would turn out to be dependent on the English of *Grondin's Interlinear* - as we can now see it is. The *Gospel of Jesus' Wife* is a modern (and recent) forgery, a "patchwork" text in both Coptic and English. At last, the forgery debate has come to a decisive end.

[For more detailed information about the *Gospel of Jesus' Wife* papyrus fragment and "translation, please see [my website](#).]



[Debate in Dallas on Friday
Christ's Self-Ignorance](#)