

In my last post I made an off-the-cuff comment about an article about Christmas that I wrote for Newsweek four years ago (2012). Someone asked for more information, and I see now that I never posted the article on the blog. So I'll post it here in two parts. Here is the first half:

This past September, Harvard University professor Karen King unveiled a newly discovered Gospel fragment that she entitled "The Gospel of Jesus' Wife." This wisp of a papyrus has stirred up a hornet's nest and raised anew questions about what we can know about the historical Jesus of Nazareth, and about whether there are other Gospels outside the New Testament that can contribute valuable information. Few questions could be more timely, here in the season that celebrates Jesus' birth.

The fragment is just a scrap - the size of a credit card - written in Coptic, the language of ancient Egypt. It contains only eight broken lines of writing, but in one of these Jesus speaks of "my wife." Conspiracy theorists immediately leaped on the news as if it were a revelation from on high and claimed that it vindicates the views of Jesus' matrimonial state set forth by that inestimable authority, Dan Brown, in his blockbuster novel, [The Da Vinci Code](#). Conservative Christians cried "foul" and insisted that such an insignificant piece of papyrus proves nothing. King and her colleagues have taken the middle ground and argued that since the fragment is to be dated to the fourth Christian century, some three hundred years after Jesus and any of his relatives passed from the scene, it can tell us what later Christians believed about Jesus, but not what actually happened during his life.

As it turns out, most experts of early Christianity have come to think the fragment is a hoax, a forgery produced in recent years by an amateur who, unlike King and scholars of her stature, was not well-versed in the niceties of Coptic grammar and so was unable to cover up the traces of his own deceit. The final verdict is not yet in: we are still to learn the results from the scientific analysis of the ink, to see if it is in fact ancient or modern. But even if, as appears likely, the text is a fake, it does once again alert us to the fact that there are Gospels about Jesus that have come down to us from the ancient world, which present information at odds with widely held views.

As Christians around the world now remember Jesus' birth, it is worth considering that ...

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