

The Recent Coptic Jesus Fragment and Dr Karen L. King

Chrys C. Caragounis

During the conference of the International Association of Coptic Studies in September 2012 held in Rome, Professor Karen L. King, of Harvard, announced her forthcoming publication of a papyrus fragment in the Sahidic dialect of the Coptic language¹. The interest generated was immense, because in its fourth line this papyrus fragment contained the phrase “Jesus said to them, ‘My wife’”. The commotion created is explained by the fact that this is the first purportedly ancient document to contain such information.

Dr King has written a longish article, that is expected to be published in the *Harvard Theological Review* in January 2013. However, the text of this article has been electronically available, and scholars, particularly Coptic specialists, have, on the basis of the information released, offered their reactions, which, as a rule have been negative.

The remarks that I have read (only a tiny part of what has been written),—sometimes a little emotional—are concerned mainly with the question of the authenticity of the fragment, in which some formal objections about the formation of the letters and the ink have been mentioned. There is also an outcry as to why no information has been relea-

¹ The Coptic language was the final stage of the ancient Egyptian language, known to us from the hieroglyphic script in the pyramids, stelai, graves of pharaohs, and other Egyptian monuments and documents. In the seventh century B.C. the Demotic script came to be used for purposes other than religious texts (which used the hieratic script). During the Hellenic occupation of Egypt, the Greek element influenced also the language and its script. The Coptic script, from the I-II c. A.D. on, used the Greek alphabet, complementing it with seven letters from the Demotic script, to meet needs not covered by the Greek letters. Along with the script came also a considerable part of Greek loans into the Coptic language not least Christian terminology. The New Testament translation in Coptic date from the III c. A.D. on. Six dialects are recognized: Akhmimic, Asyutic (=Sub-Akhmimic), Bashmuric (a few glosses), Bohairic, Fayyumic, and Sahidic.

sed of the identity of the owner, of how he came to the possession of the fragment, where and when the fragment was discovered, etc. etc.

As I am not a Coptic scholar myself, I shall abstain from making linguistic judgments and evaluations about the actual Coptic text of the papyrus; I leave this to the Coptic specialists. Nevertheless, as a New Testament scholar, with a keen linguistic and historical interest in the ancient world, in general, I would like to comment on Dr King's argumentation, particularly on the way she goes about to establish her thesis. Needless to say, I consider Dr King's article remarkable in many respects.

1. Prof King's Analysis of the Papyrus and her Thesis

Dr King begins her article by saying "Just as Clement of Alexandria (d. Ca 215 C.E.) described some Christians who insisted Jesus was not married, this fragment suggests that other Christians of that period were claiming that he was married" (p. 1 of the electronic version). Then, she goes on to describe some circumstances as to how this fragment came to her and her consequent writing of the present article, following the remarks of three scholars (Dr Roger Bagnall, director of the Institute for the Study of the Ancient World in New York; Ariel Shisha-Halevy, Professor of Linguistics at the Hebrew University; and Associate Professor Anne-Marie Luijendijk, of Princeton), who collaborated in the effort. Next, she gives an account of the formal characteristics of the fragment, its script, etc. and places the date of the papyrus fragment to the second half of the fourth century A.D. and the original text to the second half of the second century A.D. She then offers the Coptic text of the fragment, followed by an English translation (14-15).

The English translation of the *recto* (front page) reads as follows:

- 1] "not [to] me. My mother gave to me li[fe ..."
- 2] The disciples said to Jesus, ".[
- 3] deny. Mary is worthy of it [
- 4] "Jesus said to them, 'My wife .. [
- 5] ... she will be able to be my disciple .. [

- 6] Let wicked people swell up ... [
 7] As for me, I dwell with her in order to . [
 8] an image [

The *verso* (back) side of the fragment contains the following words:

- 1] my moth[er
 2] three [
 3] ... [
 4] forth which ... [
 5] (illegible ink traces)
 6] (illegible ink traces)

The remainder of her study is concerned with a grammatical discussion of the text (16-20), its genre, which she thinks is that of a Gospel, to which she, using the privilege of the first editor, assigns the designation “The Gospel of Jesus’ Wife” (shortened to *Gos.JesWife*) (pp. 20-22). She then devotes the rest of her study to the interpretation of the fragment (pp. 22-45) and to a summary and conclusions (45-52).

With such a brief and badly mutilated text, exhibiting a few brief and unrelated clauses, it is practically impossible to offer any connected exegesis of the text. Dr King, however, tries to interpret the message of this fragment by bringing into her discussion other Coptic materials, such as the Nag Hammadi codices, and notably the *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Gospel of Philip*, and reading the fragment in the light of the teaching of those Coptic writings. Thus read, the fragment informs us that Jesus had a wife and that she was Mary Magdalene.

At the very outset of her paper, Dr King underlines that the fragment in question “Does *not* ... provide evidence that the historical Jesus was married” (p.1) and at its conclusion she expresses herself thus:

Indeed, it appears that the issue of Jesus’ marital status first arose only a century [she supposes that the text of the 4th century fragment was actually composed in the second century] or more after his death ... Although the earliest witnesses are silent about whether Jesus married or not, that silence has proven pregnant with possibility for other voices to enter in and fill up its empty void with imagination—and controversy. Might not *Gos.JesWife*’s explicit reference to the marital status of Jesus have been

thrown onto a garbage heap, not (only?) because the papyrus itself was worn or damaged, but because the ideas it contained flowed so strongly against the ascetic currents of the tides in which Christian practices and understandings of marriage and sexual intercourse were surging? Perhaps. We will probably never know for sure.

2. A Critical Assessment of Dr King's Article

The first disconcerting thing about this fragment and Dr King's article is that information which is normally deemed absolutely necessary in assessing the integrity and genuineness of the fragment—such as when, where, and by whom the fragment was discovered—has been entirely withheld, and not with very good reasons. Some esoteric correspondence is mentioned, but the persons involved all died a few years before the fragment surfaced. It is thus not unjustifiable that this lack of information has been viewed with some suspicion. My criticism is material and focuses on the following points:

Dr King prejudices the whole discussion already on the first page of her article, where she writes:

Nevertheless, *if* the second century date of the composition is correct, the fragment does provide direct evidence that claims about Jesus's marital status first arose over a century after the death of Jesus in the context of intra-Christian controversies over sexuality, marriage, and discipleship. Just as Clement of Alexandria (d. Ca 215 C.E.) described some Christians who insisted Jesus was not married, this fragment suggests that other Christians of that period were claiming that he was married (my emphasis).

For the above claim about what Clement described, Dr King refers to *Stromateis* III.6.49. In this text, Clement polemicizes against certain heretics (cf. *Strom.* III. 5.1: ἀπάσας τὰς αἰρέσεις), writing:

Εἰσὶν θ' οἱ πορνείαν ἄντικρυς τὸν γάμον λέγουσι καὶ ὑπὸ τοῦ διαβόλου ταύτην παραδεδοσθαι δογματίζουσι, μιμῆσθαι δ' αὐτοὺς οἱ μεγάλαυχοι φασι τὸν κύριον μήτε γήμαντα μήτε τι ἐν κόσμῳ κτησάμενον

And there are those who say that marriage is altogether like fornication and they teach that it was handed down by the devil. These big mouths say

that they ought to imitate the Lord who was neither married nor did he possess anything in the world

First, Dr King has misrepresented Clement. Clement did not “describe some Christians who insisted Jesus was not married”, thus leaving room for Dr King to supply “other Christians of that period” who “were claiming that he was married”. Clement himself, in harmony with the entire Christian Church, held that Jesus was not married. In the present passage, Clement reacted toward certain heretics, who were misusing the fact of the non-marital state of Jesus to promulgate their heretical teaching, namely, that marriage was evil and of the devil.

Second, Dr King lumps Christians and heretics together, because this is convenient for her in presenting her fragment as another voice within the Christian Church. The point raised here is of the greatest significance for the contextualization of the fragment, because, if the fragment in question is seen as another Christian voice, it is related differently to the New Testament information about Jesus than if it seen as an outside, heretical voice, consciously polemicizing the Christian faith.

Third, connected with the above, is the fact that while Dr King uses the term ‘Christian’ (including a few instances of ‘Christianity’) no fewer than 65 times, she never once uses the term ‘Gnostic’!² Thus, the disinformation is complete. Yet it is well-known that the Nag Hammadi library, containing the *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Gospel of Philip*, of which she makes so much, are Gnostic texts and that the Gnostics were enemies of the Christian faith, as it was handed down by Jesus and the Apostles. With what right, then, do we place the tenets of heretical texts—texts that clearly had another theology than the traditional and historically established theology of the Christian faith—side by side with the information and theology of the New Testament, and call such writings another Christian voice, and speak of “intra-Christian controversies”? This procedure is very deceptive. The Christian Church did not recognize these writings as Christian. “Another Christian voice” could be applicable to differences, for example, between the Church of Corinth and the Church of Rome, just as we could speak today of diffe-

² Thus, the uninitiated reader (for example, mass media reporters) is led to think that here we have to do with different groups within the Christian Church.

rences between the Lutheran and the Anglican Churches, or between the Baptist and the Methodist denominations. In the case of all these we could speak of “another Christian voice”, because all them share the same basic Christian theology. But we would hardly call the Mormon teaching another Christian voice, even though there was originally a certain connection.

Already the New Testament gave directions on what the attitude of Christians to heretics was to be:

A heretic, after a first and a second admonition, reject, knowing that this man is perverted and sins, being self-condemned (Tit 3:10-11)³.

If any one comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your home and do not say to him welcome; for he who welcomes him, participates in his evils works (2 Jn 10)⁴.

And in his First Epistle, John spoke of certain heretics—calling them “antichrists”!—who had gone forth from them, but who were not and had never been part of the Christian Church:

They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had really belonged to us, they would have remained with us. But [this happened so] that it might be made manifest that none of them belonged to us (1 Jn 1:19)⁵.

Docetic Gnosis was rejected in Col 2:16-23, while in 1 Tim 6:20, Christians were warned against early Gnostic tendencies:

Turn away from the profane chatter and opposing arguments of that which is falsely called Knowledge (γνῶσις = Gnosis), which some have professed and as a result have gone astray in regard to the faith⁶.

³ αἰρετικὸν ἄνθρωπον μετὰ μίαν καὶ δευτέραν νουθεσίαν παραιτοῦ, εἰδὼς ὅτι ἐξέστραπται ὁ τοιοῦτος καὶ ἁμαρτάνει ὡν αὐτοκατάκριτος.

⁴ εἴ τις ἔρχεται πρὸς ὑμᾶς καὶ ταύτην τὴν διδαχὴν οὐ φέρει, μὴ λαμβάνετε αὐτὸν εἰς οἰκίαν καὶ χαίρειν μὴ αὐτῷ λέγητε· ὁ λέγων γὰρ αὐτῷ χαίρειν κοινωνεῖ τοῖς ἔργοις αὐτοῦ τοῖς πονηροῖς.

⁵ ἐξ ἡμῶν ἐξῆλθαν ἀλλ' οὐκ ἦσαν ἐξ ὑμῶν· εἰ γὰρ ἐξ ὑμῶν ἦσαν, μεμενῆκεσαν ἂν μεθ' ἡμῶν· ἀλλ' ἵνα φανερωθῶσιν ὅτι οὐκ εἰσὶν πάντες ἐξ ἡμῶν.

⁶ ἐκτρεπόμενος τὰς βεβήλους κενοφωνίας καὶ ἀντιθέσεις τῆς ψευδωνύμου γνώσεως, ἣν τινες ἐπαγγελλόμενοι περὶ τὴν πίστιν ἠστόχησαν.

The historical truth is that the controversies of the Christians against the Gnostics, far from being disputes among people, who shared certain basics, were downright polemical confrontations, and, from the Christian side, a rejection of Gnostic ideas. Here, again, then, Dr King has misrepresented the historical situation.

Fourth, the extreme brevity of the text on this fragment makes it impossible to decide its genre. Yet Dr King, buoyed by the existence of a series of ‘gospels’ among the Gnostic writings, did not hesitate to call her fragment not only a ‘Gospel’, but, somewhat provocatively, the “*Gospel of Jesus’ Wife*”, and, in the spirit of Dan Brown (whom she mentions), to identify her with Mary Magdalene, by a tortuous argumentation through the Gnostic Gospels, while at the same time throwing the door open as to whether Jesus was married, by downplaying the clear NT evidence in order to conclude “the issue cannot be settled definitely given the silence of the earliest and most historically reliable sources for the historical Jesus” (p. 33, n. 74). This is the first step to lead the reader in the desired direction.

Fifth, Dr King’s grammatical comments on the Coptic text—even to one not versed in Coptic grammar and syntax, but familiar with grammatical and syntactical problems within the Greek language—leave the uncomfortable feeling that the adopted understanding of the text is not unproblematic. To achieve the translation and esp. interpretation offered by Dr King, involves—by her own admission—often accepting what lies at the very fringe of possibilities.

Sixth, the exegesis of the text, particularly in the light of the *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Gospel of Philip*, constitutes a series of positions, where the structure is erected in such a way that every next tier is depended on the possibility, probability, or plausibility of the previous tier on which it is based. And if all of the possible, probable, or plausible matters are as they are presumed to be, then we have the result that is offered here.

Seven, Although Dr King repeatedly denies that this fragment has any direct bearing on the question of whether the historical Jesus was married, or married to Mary of Magdala (e.g. p. 22),—how could one claim such a thing without losing one’s scholarly integrity?—yet the way she strains at everything to push this thesis of marriage and marri-

age to Mary of Magdala, makes one wonder whether the method is not more sophisticated, i.e. advancing a controversial thesis by absolving herself of the responsibility. The lip service paid is fairly thin in the light of the warmth with which she espouses the Gnostic cause in her “Interpretation”, presenting it as the other Christian voice that suffered defeat at the hands of traditional Christianity and had its literature thrown into the garbage. Certainly, the mode of argumentation does not discourage such a suspicion.

Eight, assuming that this fragment is genuine, that is, that it was written in the IVth century A.D. and that this is a copy of an original going back to the IInd century A.D. and assuming, moreover, that the translation made by Dr King reflects correctly what stood in that papyrus before it was damaged (if it ever existed), what significance does this papyrus have for Jesus’ status, or for the Christian Faith’s historical accuracy or otherwise? None at all!

This is not the first time that the Gnostics made preposterous statements about Jesus that were contrary to the original and established historical facts of the New Testament.

The Gnostic systems had drawn freely and out of context elements from Greek mythology and philosophy mixing them with some oriental and Old Testament ingredients with some smatterings from the New Testament, and using their own phantasy, had created highly imaginative systems—systems that bore no semblance whatsoever to genuine Christianity, other than the superficial use of such names as Jesus, Savior, Holy Spirit, and some of the Christian motives, presented in their own way. For example, the Valentinians held that the aeon Jesus did not descend on the Savior until his baptism and left him when brought before Pilate, returning to the Pleroma, leaving the psychic element (i.e. what Christians thought it was Jesus) to suffer. Ascended into the Pleroma, the aeon Jesus takes Hachamoth to wife! “The Valentinian Gnosis”, says Louis Duchesne, “is throughout a nuptial Gnosticism. From the first abstract aeon to the end, there are perpetual syzygies, marriages, and generations”⁷. Perhaps this is where Dr King’s fragment belongs.

⁷ L. Duchesne, *The Early History of the Church*, 3 Vols., rp. London 1960-65, Vol. I, p. 124

Quite opposite to the sexual system of Valentinus, Basilides' system was 'celibate', though later they, too, were accused of immorality. With regard to Jesus, Basilides said that the real Jesus having transferred his form to Simon of Cyrene, withdrew, leaving Simon to be crucified in his place. Both of these Gnostics had worked in Egypt.

Without going further into the vagaries of their teachings, as well as that of the other Gnostic schools, it appears that to confuse Gnosticism and Christianity shows either lack of critical judgement or purposeful blurring of the distinctive character of each. Under no circumstances can we speak of the Gnostics as "other Christians" and of their polemics as "intra-Christian controversies". This is a perversion of history.

Nine, there is the theological issue. Dr King, while showing such zeal and energy trying to find supportive material in Gnostic literature for her reconstruction, does not seem to ask about the theological implications of an eventual marriage of Jesus to whatever woman. In the exegesis of the New Testament we may not allow theological beliefs to color the interpretation of the historical evidence. The historical evidence must be treated independently and objectively. Theology builds on historical facts, not the other way round. However, when this has been done, history must be brought vis á vis theology, in order to test the veracity of theology. For example, if Valentinus and Basilides were correct in having the Christ, that is, the Messiah, Savior or Redeemer leave the body of the earthly Jesus—a sort of de-carnation—so that the one who suffered on the cross was a mere man and not the Son of God, would not this have any consequences for the Christian faith? Is it at all conceivable that in the light of the way Jesus is presented in the New Testament, his nature and character, his mission, death and resurrection, that he could have had a human wife, just like the rest? Does the theology of the New Testament, based on the historical Jesus, allow such a possibility? And if it does not, how can we speak of Gnostics, who denied, for example, the very basic Christian tenet of resurrection, as "other Christians"? In 1 Cor 15:12-19 Paul discusses the implications for man of Christ's resurrection or non-resurrection. If Christ was not risen, then their faith is empty and in vain. The argument here is not that Christ must have been raised, otherwise the Christians would have believed in vain, but that just because Christ was raised historically and

factually, does the Christian message have meaning. Thus, I ask: Could a group that denied the resurrection of Christ be called “Christian”?

10. Finally, whatever this fragment—if it is authentic and early—claims about Jesus’ marriage, whether it be to Mary of Magdala or to any other woman, it is of no significance to the Christian Faith, since it comes from a well-known and openly hostile circle, from which analogical statements about Jesus have been frequently made.