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. 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 from the Coptic *Gospel of Thomas* (*GTh*), especially Sayings 30, 45, 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* 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 and *GJW*. An asterisk (*) indicates a departure from King’s translation. Readers without Coptic will I hope find the argument easy enough to follow.

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1 This article has been revised to incorporate and respond to further suggestions about the origin of the new papyrus. For these suggestions I am grateful to Simon Gathercole, Oli Homron, Leo Depuydt, Mark Goodacre, and Richard Bauckham. I would draw attention to (1) the new treatment of lines 6 and 7, which show that the *Gospel of Jesus’ Wife* (*GJW*) is wholly derived from the *Gospel of Thomas* (*GTh*); (2) the further evidence of the poor quality of the compiler’s Coptic; and (3) the new point about the impossibility of a 2nd century Greek original, central to King’s construction of an ancient *Sitz im Leben* for her text. Andrew Bernhard too has provided detailed support for my claims about dependence on *GTh*: see his synopsis and essay at [http://www.gospels.net/giw/](http://www.gospels.net/giw/).

2 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-jesuss-wife](http://www.hds.harvard.edu/faculty-research/research-projects/the-gospel-of-jesuss-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 ἀγω πεταμμτος πεξ(ειωτ ΑN M) "% τεκ
GTh 49.35 Μάαγ Ανταςε ξναωφ Μ[αιοθςε Να]
GTh 49.36 ει Ανι Ταμαςγ γαρ Αντας ......
GTh 50.1 [..] ΟΛ τα[μαα]γδε μμε ακτ Ναει μτων2 [

(“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 ειανταμααγ (GTh 49.36; GJW 1r). In both cases, a line ends with a letter-sequence that differs at only one point: ακτναει<Μ>πων2 (GTh 50.1; GJW 1).³ 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.⁴

³ GJW’s omission of the object marker Μ– is an error, as Leo Depuydt has reminded me. Depuydt (an Egyptologist at Brown University) wrote to me: “I first saw the article in electronic preprint Tuesday late when a student sent it and I wrote back at that time that the grammar ‘stinks.’”

This precise phrase does not occur in the canonical gospels, where the nearest equivalents are expressions such as, “And the disciples say to him” (καὶ λέγουσιν αὐτῷ οἱ μαθηταί),⁵ “And his disciples were saying to him” (καὶ ἐλεγον αὐτῷ οἱ μαθηταί αὐτοῦ),⁶ and, “So the disciples said to him ( ἔπαιν σοῦ οἱ μαθηταί αὐτοῦ).⁷ “The disciples said to Jesus” does, however, occur three times in GTh, in Sayings 12, 18, and 20,⁸ 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 ΙΣ takes the same form as in the Thomas examples.

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

\[ \text{GJW 3-4} \text{ ].den[y. Mary is not worthy of it...[ ]} \]

ἀπόλα, “deny”, occurs twice in GTh in the injunctive form, ΜΑΡΕΘΑΡΝΑ, “let him deny” (GTh 81; 114).⁹ In the second case, the object of renunciation is “the world” (ΠΚΟΣΜΟΣ); in the first, the verb is unqualified: “Let the one who has power deny [ΜΑΡΕΘΑΡΝΑ]”. While the gap preceding ἀπόλα in GJW 3 might be filled with the injunctive and pronominal prefixes (ΜΑΡΕΘ- or ΜΑΡΕΣ-), 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:

\[ \text{GTh 51.18} \text{ ΠΕΣΕ ΣΙΜΩΝ ΠΕΤΡΟΣ} \]

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5 Mt.15.33, 19.10; Jn.11.8 (without the καί).
6 Mk.5.31.
7 Jn.11.12.
8 = GTh 34.25; 36.9; 36.26.
9 = GTh 47.17; 51.5.
(Simon Peter said / to them, “Let Mary leave us, for women are not worthy of life.” Jesus said...”)

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” (*T*αιμέ). \(^{10}\)

(*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 prononimal suffix (*-ης* or *-ες* : third singular masculine altered to third singular feminine), a first future prefix (*−οι*), an auxiliary verb denoting ability (*ειπ*), and a main verb (*πληρο* which in conjunction with the loanword *μαθητής* means “to be or become a disciple”. The

\(^{10}\) *T*αιμέ is one of a number of variant spellings listed under *C*αιμέ in W. E. Crum, *A Coptic Dictionary*, Oxford: OUP, 1939, 385a. There are also variant spellings of the plural, of which Thomas’s *C*αιμέ is one.
phrase as a whole is a Coptic equivalent of the Lukan ὀ δύναται εἶναι 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. The origin of the verbal phrase in GJW 5 appears to lie in GTh 101, along with GJW 1.

GJW 6 ] i MAPERWME EEOOY WACEN[E] EBOL
   ] *Let [the] wicked man bring [forth... 12

Italics indicate a synonym. The line derives from GTh 45:

GTh 41.1-2 OY KA[KOC] PPWME WACENE N3ΠΠΟΝΗΠΟΝ EBOL
(“A b[ad] man brings forth evil things”)

Here GJW adds the injunctive prefix ΜΑΡΕ- to the habitual ΨΑΧΕ[Δ]ΝΕ. While the resultant ΜΑΡΕ... ΨΑΧΕΝΕ is grammatically impossible, 13 the GTh parallel is so close that this must be the right reading. Also problematic grammatically is the omission of the article from Thomas’s ΠΡΩΜΕ. If so, the omission of the I from ΕΙΝΕ is probably simply a copying error (although the variant spelling is attested in genuine Coptic texts). 14 GJW also replaces the Greek loan-word ΚΑΚΟΙΣ with a vernacular equivalent, ΕΘΟΟΥ.

The Thomas passage is itself closely related to Matthew 12.35, ὁ πονηρὸς ἀνθρώπος ἐκ τοῦ πονηροῦ θησαυροῦ ἐξβάλλει πονηρά (“the evil man from his wicked heart brings forth wicked

11 ΜΝΝΨΘΟΟΜ ΕΤΡΕΨΜΑΘΗΣ ΝΑΙ (Lk.14.26); ΜΝΝΨΘΟΟΜ ΕΤΡΕΨΨΨΨΤΕ ΝΑΙ ΜΜΑΘΗΣ (Lk.14.27); ΜΝΝΨΘΟΟΜ ΜΜΟΥ ΕΤΡΕΨΨΨΤΕ ΝΑΙ ΜΜΑΘΗΣ (Lk.14.33).
12 Dr King reads this line as ]i MAPERWME EEOOY WACNE NE[, which she translates as, “Let wicked people swell up”, Her translation assumes (1) that a plural definite article – has been assimilated to τΟΜΕ, and (2) that the word-division in ΨΑΧΕΝΕ occurs after ΨΑΧΕ, “swell”. (My original translation, “Let the wicked man swell up”, took ΠΡΩΜΕ as an irregular singular, without article.) I am indebted to Simon Gathercole and Oli Homron for the suggestion that ΨΑΧΕΝΕ actually represents ΨΑΧΕ[Ι]ΝΕ, “bring” (habitual), and that this line derives from GTh 41.2-3.
14 Crum, 78b.
things”), where the Coptic translator uses the verb ΤΑΥΟ for “bring forth” rather than the 
ΕΙΝΕΚΕΒΟΛΑ of GJW 6 and Thomas. The same is true of the parallel passage in Luke 6.45. In both 
synoptic cases, the “evil man” is ΠΡΩΜΕ ΜΠΩΝΗΡΟΣ rather than the ΠΡΩΜΕ ΕΘΟΟΥ of GJW. That 
GJW 6 is wholly derived from GTh is confirmed by its differences from these synoptic parallels.

GJW 7 []. ΑΝΟΚ ΤΨΟΩΠ ΝΜΜΑΣ ΕΤΒΕ Π [ 
]. *I am with her on account of [ 

Here the first three Coptic words derive from GTh 30, with an adjustment of the pronominal suffix 
from “with him” to “with her”:16

GTh 39.1-5 ΠΕΞΕ ΙϹ ΧΕ ΠΜΑ ΕΥΝ ΩΜΤ ΝΝΟΥΤΕ ΝΜΑΥ ΝΝΟΥΤΕ ΝΕ. ΠΜΑ ΕΥΝ ΚΝΑΥ Η ΟΥΑ ΑΝΟΚ ΤΨΟΩΠ ΝΜΜΑΗ.

(“Jesus said: Where there are three gods, they are gods. Where there are two or one, I am with 
him.”)

While similar wording occurs in Matthew 28.20b (“I am with you...”), a further Thomas derivation is 
much more likely.

GJW 8 [ΟΥΣΙΚΩΝ [ 

] an image [ 

The term ΕΙΚΩΝ (“image”) is attested only once in the canonical gospels17 but seven times in the Coptic 
GTh in the form of the loanword, 2ΙΚΩΝ. In one of these occurrences it is accompanied by the 
indefinite article, as here in GJW 8.18

15 This translation of line 7 is preferable to King’s, “As for me, I dwell with her in order to...” 
16 This improvement on my earlier appeal to Matthew 28.20b was suggested by Mark Goodacre. 
17 Mt.22.20=Mk.12.16=Lk.20.24 (“Whose image and superscription is it?”). 
18 GTh.37.34 (Logion 22); cf. 42.1 (Logion 50); 47.20, 22, 23 (Logion 83), 47.27 (Logion 84).
Summary  The eight lines of GJW recto are derived from the Coptic GTh, virtually in their entirety, making dependence certain – a highly unusual form of dependence on words more than sense. The compiler 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.

Even if GJW were to be accepted as a 4th century Coptic text, Dr King’s claim that it derives from a Greek original from the 2nd century would be impossible to sustain, along with her attempt to reconstruct an original historical context for it. Where a text is so manifestly dependent on another text in translation, it makes no sense to postulate dependence on an earlier original. In my view, however, a 4th century Coptic origin is equally unlikely.

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. 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). 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

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19 My thanks to Richard Bauckham for emphasizing this point.
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.²² 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?

²² *Mar Saba Letter*, II.23-III.14; III.14-17 (references are to page and line numbers); see F. Watson, “Beyond Suspicion”, 135-36.