

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.² 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/gjw/>.
 - 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>

GJW 1 ΝΑ|ΕΙ ΑΝ ΤΑΜΑΑΥ ΑC† ΝΑΕΙ ΠΩ|Ν2

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

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 ΠΕΤΑΜΜΡΕ ΠΕΥ[ΕΙΩΤ ΑΝ Μ] Ν ΤΕΥ

GTh 49.35 ΜΑΑΥ ΝΤΑ2Ε 4ΝΑΩΡ Μ[ΑΘΗΤΗC ΝΑ]

GTh 49.36 ΕΙ ΑΝ ΤΑΜΑΑΥ ΓΑΡ ΝΤΑC

GTh 50.1 [..]ΟΛ ΤΑ[ΜΑΑ]ΥΔΕ ΜΜΕ ΑC† ΝΑΕΙ ΜΠΩΝ2 [

(“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: **ΑC†ΝΑΕΙ<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.’”

4 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.

GTh 51.19 **ⲛⲁⲓ ⲭⲉ ⲙⲁⲣⲉ ⲙⲁⲣⲓⲛⲁⲙ ⲉⲓ ⲉⲃⲟⲗ ⲛⲛⲉⲧⲏⲛ**

GTh 51.20 **ⲭⲉ ⲛⲥⲛⲓⲟⲙⲉ ⲙⲓⲡⲱⲗ ⲁⲛ ⲙⲓⲡⲱⲛⲛⲓ ⲡⲉⲭⲉ ⲓⲥ**

(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” (**ⲧⲁⲛⲓⲙⲉ**).¹⁰

GJW 5] . . . **ⲥⲛⲁⲱⲡⲙⲁⲑⲏⲧⲏⲥ ⲛⲁⲉⲓ ⲁⲓⲱ** [

] “ . . . 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 **ⲡⲉⲧⲁⲙⲉⲥⲧⲉ ⲡⲉⲥⲉⲓⲱⲧⲓ ⲁⲛ ⲙⲛ̄ ⲧⲉⲥⲓⲙⲁⲁⲓ ⲛⲧⲁⲛⲉ ⲥⲛⲁⲱⲡⲙⲓⲱⲧⲏⲧⲏⲥ**

ⲛⲁⲉⲓ ⲁⲛⲓⲱⲧⲓ ⲡⲉⲧⲁⲙⲡⲉⲥⲉⲥⲉⲓⲱⲧⲓ ⲁⲛ ⲙⲛ̄ ⲧⲉⲥⲓⲙⲁⲁⲓ ⲛⲧⲁⲛⲉ ⲥⲛⲁⲱⲡⲙⲓⲱⲧⲏⲧⲏⲥ
ⲛⲁⲓⲱⲧⲓ ⲁⲛ.

(“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 (ⲥ- or ⲥ-: third singular masculine altered to third singular feminine), a first future prefix (**-ⲛⲁ-**), an auxiliary verb denoting ability (**ⲱ-**), and a main verb (**ⲡ-**) which in conjunction with the loanword **ⲙⲁⲑⲏⲧⲏⲥ** means “to be or become a disciple”. The

¹⁰ **ⲛⲓⲙⲉ** is one of a number of variant spellings listed under **ⲥⲛⲓⲙⲉ** in W. E. Crum, *A Coptic Dictionary*, Oxford: OUP, 1939, 385a. There are also variant spellings of the plural, of which Thomas’s **ⲥⲛⲓⲟⲙⲉ** is one.

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.¹¹ The origin of the verbal phrase in *GJW* 5 appears to lie in *GTh* 101, along with *GJW* 1.

GJW 6] I ΜΑΡΕΡΩΜΕ ΕΘΟΟΥ ΩΛΛΕΝΕ[ΕΒΟΛ

] *Let [the] wicked man bring [forth]...¹²

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

GTh 41.1-2 ΟΥ ΚΑ[ΚΟC] ΠΡΩΜΕ ΩΛΛΕΙΝΕ ΝΖΝΠΟΝΖΡΟΝ ΕΒΟΛ

(“A *b[ad]* man brings forth evil things”)

Here *GJW* adds the injunctive prefix **ΜΑΡΕ-** to the habitual **ΩΛΛΕ[Ι]ΝΕ**. While the resultant **ΜΑΡΕ...** **ΩΛΛΕΝΕ** 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 **Ι** 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 **ΚΑΚΟC** with a vernacular equivalent, **ΕΘΟΟΥ**.

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

11 **ΜΜΝΩCΟΜ** **ΕΤΡΕΦΜΑΘΗΤΗΣ** **ΝΑΙ** (Lk.14.26); **ΜΜΝΩCΟΜ** **ΕΤΡΕΦΩΠΕ** **ΝΑΙ** **ΜΜΑΘΗΤΗΣ** (Lk.14.27); **ΜΜΝΩCΟΜ** **ΜΜΟC** **ΕΤΡΕΦΩΠΕ** **ΝΑΙ** **ΜΜΑΘΗΤΗΣ** (Lk.14.33).

12 Dr King reads this line as]I **ΜΑΡΕΡΩΜΕ** **ΕΘΟΟΥ** **ΩΛΛΕ** **ΝΕ**[, which she translates as, “Let wicked people swell up”, Her translation assumes (1) that a plural definite article **Ρ-** has been assimilated to **ΡΩΜΕ**, and (2) that the word-division in **ΩΛΛΕΝΕ** occurs after **ΩΛΛΕ**, “swell”. (My original translation, “Let the wicked man swell up”, took **ΡΩΜΕ** as an irregular singular, without article.) I am indebted to Simon Gathercole and Oli Homron for the suggestion that **ΩΛΛΕΝΕ** actually represents **ΩΛΛΕ[Ι]ΝΕ**, “bring” (habitual), and that this line derives from *GTh* 41.2-3.

13 See Bentley Layton, *A Coptic Grammar with Crestomathy and Glossary: Sahidic Dialect*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2004, §§337, 340.

14 Crum, 78b.

things”), where the Coptic translator uses the verb **ΤΑΥΟ** for “bring forth” rather than the **Ε[Ι]ΝΕ[ΕΒΟΛ]** 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 ΜΠΟΝΗΡΟC** rather than the **ΡΩΜΕ ΕΘΟΟΥ** of *GJW*. That *GJW* 6 is wholly derived from *GTh* is confirmed by its differences from these synoptic parallels.

GJW 7]. ΑΝΟΚ †ΩΟΟΠ ΝΜΜΑC ΕΤΒΕ Π [

] . *I am with her on account of [¹⁵

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 ΙC ΧΕ ΠΜΑ ΕΥΝ̄ ΩΟΜΤ ΝΝΟΥΤΕ ΜΜΑΥ ΖΝΝΟΥΤΕ ΝΕ. ΠΜΑ ΕΥΝ̄
CΝΑΥ Η ΟΥΑ ΑΝΟΚ †ΩΟΟΠ ΝΜΜΑC.

(“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] ΟΥΖΙΚΩΝ [

] an image [

The term εἰκών (“image”) is attested only once in the canonical gospels¹⁷ 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* 8.¹⁸

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.¹⁹ 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.²⁰ 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).²¹ 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

19 My thanks to Richard Bauckham for emphasizing this point.

20 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.

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

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.