

The Gospel of Jesus's Wife: **Questions and Conversations**

Q: What is this hoopla about Jesus's wife?

A: A new fragment (about the size of an ATM card) of papyrus containing an early Christian text was announced and published on September 18 by Karen L. King, Hollis Professor of Divinity at Harvard Divinity School. The piece of papyrus is about the size of an ATM card and contains 8 lines of writing on one side and 6 lines on the other. The writing is Coptic, an Egyptian language used by Christians in the fourth century. Scholars think the text on this fragment is a translation of a second century Greek text. The piece of papyrus seems to have been torn or cut from a larger book. What is controversial about it is the content of the text. One line reads in part "Mary is worthy of it..." the following line reads, "...Jesus said to them, "My wife..." and the fifth line reads, "...she will be able to be my disciple..." Both sides of the text are cut, so that we do not know how the lines are connected to each other. It has been dubbed "The Gospel of Jesus's Wife" out of scholarly convention (the text's most distinctive feature is Jesus's reference to "my wife") rather than a claim about Jesus' marital status. Of course, the media has seized the sensationalism of the title and implied that the text tells us more than it does.

Q: Does the fragment prove that Jesus was married?

A: No. The text fragment cannot be used as evidence for the historical Jesus's marital status. We continue to have little or no historical evidence about whether Jesus was single or married. What this text *does* tell us is that ancient Christians in the second century were having conversations and even arguments about sex, marriage, and women's leadership. Our churches are having conversations and even arguments about these same topics!

Q: Why would early Christians write a text about Jesus's wife?

A: In the second century, expectations for telling stories about Jesus were not the same as ours. For early Christians, writing about Jesus' life 200 years after the crucifixion was one way of showing that Jesus was important. In the midst of debates about sex, marriage, and women's leadership, thinking with Jesus's life story was one way to remember and revere him. Remember, even if we don't agree with their beliefs, those who wrote these texts were trying to be faithful followers of Jesus, just like we are. They were trying to figure out who Jesus was and how his message transformed their lives, just like we are.

Q: Could this papyrus fragment be a forgery?

A: We are still waiting for the last chemical analysis of the ink to be interpreted, but most signs point toward its authenticity. The scholars who initially studied it began their studies assuming that it was a forgery (i.e. someone in modern times wrote a text that she knew would be inflammatory). After careful analysis, they determined that it was, indeed, a text from the 4th century.

Q: What does this discovery mean for the church?

A: This discovery helps us to broaden our picture of our own history. It helps us see that throughout our history, even in the earliest centuries, issues such as sex, marriage, and women's roles in the church have been debated.

Q: Who can see and read the text?

A: Anyone can see the fragment on the New York Times online story entitled ["Historian Says Piece of Papyrus Refers to Jesus' Wife"](#). The images are clear and can be magnified to see the text more clearly. Of course, you need to know Coptic, too! As the story evolves, there will be many, many more voices who weigh in on the fragment and its contents. Here is another response from Professor Deirdre Good of General Theological Seminary on the Episcopal Cafe: ["On the "Jesus's wife" Fragment"](#).

Professor Katherine A. Shaner is Assistant Professor of New Testament at General Theological Seminary. She is also an ELCA pastor.