



**You have downloaded a document from
RE-BUŚ
repository of the University of Silesia in Katowice**

Title: Mechanism of Mystification and Demystification at the Point of Contact between the Humanities and Science : Case Study of the Gospel of Jesus' Wife

Author: Przemysław Piwowarczyk

Citation style: Piwowarczyk Przemysław. (2020). Mechanism of Mystification and Demystification at the Point of Contact between the Humanities and Science : Case Study of the Gospel of Jesus' Wife. W: B. Bokus, E. Kosowska (ed.), "Truth and falsehood in science and the arts" (S. 36-45). Warszawa : Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego



Uznanie autorstwa - Licencja ta pozwala na kopiowanie, zmienianie, rozprowadzanie, przedstawianie i wykonywanie utworu jedynie pod warunkiem oznaczenia autorstwa.



UNIwersYTET ŚLĄSKI
W KATOWICACH



Biblioteka
Uniwersytetu Śląskiego



Ministerstwo Nauki
i Szkolnictwa Wyższego

Przemysław Piwowarczyk

ORCID 0000-0002-5812-6672

Faculty of the Humanities, University of Silesia in Katowice

Mechanism of Mystification and Demystification at the Point of Contact between the Humanities and Science: Case Study of the *Gospel of Jesus' Wife*

Abstract

The case of the so-called *Gospel of Jesus' Wife* lays bare all the problems of research on early Christian manuscripts. We have here a manuscript of unknown provenance, a private collector wishing to protect his anonymity, an academic institution hungry for media interest, and, last but not least, the ideological bias of a scholar. In the end, the manuscript proved to be a modern forgery. However, we know this without any serious doubt not thanks to laboratory analyses and more traditional paleographic or historical studies. The issue was not resolved until a professional journalist conducted a journalistic investigation. If this method of verification of manuscript authenticity joins the others, it would be an undisputable benefit of this whole four-year-long saga.

Keywords: Gospel of Jesus' Wife, Karen King, papyrology

Introduction

Almost all the most important manuscripts that bring us knowledge about the religion and culture of late ancient Egypt came to light not in the course of systematic and duly documented excavations but via the antiquarian market, which means uncontrolled digging (sometimes close to plundering) and a chain of agents. Examples include the Nag Hammadi codices (Robinson 2014, pp. 1–119), the Codex Tchacos (Myszor, 2006, pp. 9–12; Nongbri, 2018, pp. 95–96), the Cologne Mani Codex (Koenen, 1973), the Manichaean codices from Medinet Madi (Gardner, Lieu, 1996, p. 148), the library of the White Monastery etc.

When lack of knowledge about the provenance of a manuscript is the standard rather than the exception, forgeries are much easier to procure. The falsification of ancient papyri has its origin at the very dawn of modern papyrology and codicology. We can find biblical papyri forged by Constantinos Simonides (Jones, 2015, 369–373) already in the 1860s, but the problem of forgeries is still one of the most heatedly debated. In November 2018, many scholars published an open letter to Brill publishing house regarding a 2016 volume containing biblical fragments (bought by private collectors in the years 2009–2014) allegedly found in the Dead Sea area. So far, five of them have already been identified as modern forgeries (Mazza, 2018). In the light of such facts, it has become urgently necessary to diagnose the weak points in academia that forgers target. Success depends on the application of procedures that allow effective identification of forgeries. For these challenges, a case study of the so-called *Gospel of Jesus' Wife* (GJW) seems particularly instructive.

Outline of the saga

In July 2010, a private collector who wanted to protect his identity contacted Karen King, a professor at Harvard Divinity School, and informed her about a papyrus in his possession which mentions the married status of Jesus. In 2011, he renewed his proposal with a suggestion that he had already found a willing buyer but preferred to give the manuscript to an academic institution. The owner never claimed the manuscript was authentic. He even asked for its authenticity to be verified. He said he had purchased a lot comprising six Coptic papyri in November 1999 from Hans-Ulrich Laukamp, who reportedly bought them in Potsdam in 1963. The proof of the transaction was a photocopy of a sale agreement. The owner also gave King further documentation:

- a copy of a letter from H.-U. Laukamp to Peter Munro from 1982. Munro, an Egyptologist himself, relates in the letter his consultation with Gebhard Fecht who had recognized a fragment of the Gospel according to John among the papyri;
- an undated note by Munro who, once again referring to Fecht, mentions a piece of papyrus containing the words said by Jesus: ‘my wife’;

– a graphic file with an interlinear translation of the Coptic text into English (presented in public in August 2015).

Before making any public announcement about the papyrus, King consulted with some of the most eminent scholars on papyrology and the Coptic language: Roger Bagnall, AnneMarie Luijendijk, and Ariel Shisha-Halevy.

On September 18, 2012, during the International Congress of Coptic Studies held in Rome, King delivered a paper under the title “A New Coptic Gospel Fragment” which, although it might spark interest among specialists, did not suggest any wider attention outside that circle. The scrap of papyrus has no title, but King labelled it provocatively as the *Gospel of Jesus’ Wife*. At the time, a draft of her paper was published on the Harvard Divinity School website. The final text did not appear in the conference proceedings but was published in the *Harvard Theological Review* in 2014 (King, 2014a).

Before the discovery was announced to academics at the congress, Harvard Divinity School informed the media: *The New York Times*, *The Boston Globe* and *Smithsonian* magazine. The Smithsonian Channel planned to produce a one-hour-long documentary about the papyrus with the intention of broadcasting it on September 30. Since severe doubts about the authenticity of the manuscript appeared, the broadcast was cancelled, but work on it had definitely started before September 18. Ariel Sabar, a freelance journalist, interviewed King already two weeks ahead of the Roman congress (Lied, 2016, p. 5); the interview was published on the *Smithsonian* magazine website already on September 17. The day after the official presentation of the discovery, a special press conference was organized in Rome. From the very beginning, the press tried to interpret King’s paper in line with political implications, suggesting that Rome was not chosen for the place of the announcement by mere chance (Sabar, 2012b). Such active involvement of the media, exploring new and unexpected aspects of the case, enabled Liv Ingeborg Lied to call the whole process a “saga” (Lied, 2016, pp. 2–3).

Mechanism of mystification

Following the story of the *Gospel of Jesus’ Wife*, we can clearly recognize that a skilled forger is not enough to ensure an effective mystification. At least three elements are required:

1. A forger. Now revealed as the owner of the papyrus, Walter Fritz never confessed to fabricating it, and his case was never put before a court, but abundant circumstantial evidence gathered in the course of a journalistic investigation by Ariel Sabar (2016) is very convincing. Fritz graduated in Egyptology in Germany and was a PhD student, so he knew enough to produce a successful forgery. Although his possible motives remain unclear, he had a few good reasons to launch a mystification (financial profits, revenge for personal failures, popularization of his ideas; for each of them there is enough support in the documentation provided by Sabar; see also Depuydt, 2014, 176–177).

2. A scholar. Karen King was deeply engaged in feminist interpretation of early Christianity. She highlighted the vital role of women in the early decades of the new religion, later relegated to the margins by patriarchal clericalism (King, 1988; King, 1997; King, 2003). She was by no means isolated in her interpretations, despite the fact that part of public opinion regarded such views as ideologically biased: “Mary Magdalene has become a project for a certain kind of ideologically committed feminist scholarship” (Woodward, 2003). Already the first reactions to her paper noted that the papyrus as a potential forgery might be a deliberate attempt to compromise the feminist approach.

3. An institution. Media coverage of the discovery and the creation of an ‘event’ restricted to selected media as a piece of exclusive news would be virtually impossible without the involvement of an academic institution like Harvard Divinity School. King’s role in this process remains unknown. This dynamic between academia and the media resulted in a strategy of promotion that had the label “the Gospel of Jesus’ wife” at its center – a title without a doubt chosen with full awareness of its reception in the media.

Mechanisms of demystification

From the very moment of the public presentation of the papyrus, its authenticity was put into question. We can point to three approaches taken to verify or negate the genuineness of the manuscript.

1. Laboratory analyses

The papyrus was subjected to various laboratory tests and could be counted among the scientifically best analyzed manuscripts

in history. The decision of Harvard Divinity School deserves appreciation, because the owners of ancient manuscripts (including institutions) often do not allow destructive analyses (such as radiocarbon dating) for fear of the early dating of objects in their possession being challenged (Nongbri, 2018, 270). On the other hand, however, the official website devoted to the Gospel (<https://gospelofjesusswife.hds.harvard.edu/>) contains no other results besides these scientific analyses, as if laboratory tests alone could resolve the issue once and for all.

a. Radiocarbon analysis resulted in dates ranging from the 7th to the 9th century AD (Tuross, 2014; Cf. King, 2014, p. 135)

b. Raman analysis proved that the ink used on the papyrus does not differ from ancient ink recipes (King, 2014, pp. 134–135)

c. Fourier-transform infrared microspectroscopy proved the homogeneity of the chemical composition of the papyrus in all its parts and showed that the patterns of oxidation are compatible with ancient manuscripts.

d. Scrutiny of the damaged area of the papyrus did not prove the presence of ink on the lower layer of the fibers, which would indicate that the ink was put on previously damaged material (Choat, 2014, p. 160–161).

As long as the discussion on the manuscript's authenticity only centered on scientific methods, no definitive conclusion could be reached. Although there was no proof against the physical authenticity of the papyrus, nevertheless forgery of the texts was not excluded. We need to bear in mind that a skilled forger is fully aware of standard scientific procedures (and we indeed know that Fritz used to apply infrared to read pharaonic papyri, Sabar, 2016), and that even an amateur can buy an ancient scrap of blank papyrus online and produce an imitation of an ancient ink at home. Indeed, it turns out to be relatively easy to fabricate a fake that would positively pass laboratory examination. In such a case, the cult of hard science would make demystification even more difficult.

2. "Traditional" methods of verification

Already in September 2012, a draft of King's paper appeared online. Also, another scrap bought together with the *GJW*, containing a fragment of the Gospel according to John, was also publicized and relatively quickly identified as a forgery (Bąk,

2016b). The text of the Gospel was immediately caught in a heavy crossfire of criticism. Interestingly, a detailed discussion took place not only (even not predominantly) in peer-review journals but on scholarly blogs.

Paleographic analyses did not unanimously prove whether this was a modern forgery. When some scholars pointed to the untypical ductus of the writing and the application of a brush instead of a pen (*kalamos*) (Lundhaug, Suciu, 2012), others gave examples of authentic papyri featuring the same specification (Choat, 2014). In the case of paleography, the lack of definitive conclusions is indeed the rule rather than the exception.

The accumulation of meaningful phrases on such a tiny and mutilated scrap of papyrus also fell under suspicion. Hugo Lundhaug and Alin Suciu write that “we welcome anyone to try to cut out a piece of this size from any literary codex from late antiquity and get a result that is as easy as this one to make sense of and interpret” (Lundhaug, Suciu, 2012). But also in this case, other scholars disagree, accentuating the difficulty of putting the separate phrases together into coherent passages that would fit into the limited space of the lost parts of the papyrus (Watson, 2012b).

Textual relations between the *GJW* and the *Gospel of Thomas* (preserved in the second codex from Nag Hammadi) were evident to scholars from the beginning of the discussion. Nevertheless, they differ in the conclusions drawn from that fact. For some, the *Gospel of Thomas* was the source of textual excerpts used to fabricate a patchwork (Depuydt, 2014; Bağ, 2016a, pp. 74–82), for King the dependence was only on a literary level – nothing unexpected in the Christian Apocrypha (King, 2014a, p. 157; King, 2014b, p. 193).

More intriguing was the fact that the pattern of the lines of text in the *Gospel of Jesus' Wife* is the same as in the Nag Hammadi manuscript (and editions) of the *Gospel of Thomas* (Watson, 2012a). Especially striking is the first line, which begins and ends in almost perfect accordance with the divisions in the Nag Hammadi codex (NHC II 49,36 – 50,1 = *GosThom* log. 101,1–2, Gathercole, 2015, 304–305). Besides this, the *GJW* has many orthographic and syntactical peculiarities that cannot be explained by purely literary interdependence between the two texts. The only possible solution was the direct dependence of King's manuscript on the Nag Hammadi codex, which appears

extremely unlikely, especially since we would have to assume a very faithful tradition of the *GJW* text throughout the four centuries after the Nag Hammadi codex was buried in the 4th (or 5th) century (Gathercole, 2015, 302–312).

It was even possible to trace that the forger used an interlinear translation by Mike Grondin published online as a pdf file in 2002. The *Gospel of Jesus' Wife* duplicates a typographical error making the Coptic text grammatically incorrect (Gathercole, 2015, 304–305). Similarly, the English translation provided by the owner of the papyrus comes from the same edition. It is reasonable to think that the forger reassembled the phrases isolated from their original context in the Coptic as well as in the English text (Bernhard, 2017). Although some errors occur in the translation, they might have been made deliberately to suggest a lack of language expertise (according to the owner, the translation was made by a Coptic priest).

Besides many doubts raised by the text itself, King's interpretation of the fragmentarily preserved lines was based on a formula unattested in any other early Christian text. Undeniably, some Christians were interested in the special role of Mary Magdalene in the circle of Jesus' disciples, some texts even testified that she was thought to be initiated in a special way into his salvific mission. However, not a single text recognizes Mary Magdalene as Jesus' wife; not one even suggests that Jesus was married at all (Myszor, 2013, 170–172; Gathercole, 2015, 294–302). Meanwhile, this is the path King's interpretation follows, and it is no wonder that far-reaching speculation exploded in some media and among a wider audience (Sabar, 2012b), though King never suggested that the papyrus could contribute something to our knowledge about the historical Jesus.

3. Journalistic investigation

Although the heated discussion among biblical scholars and papyrologists provided solid premises for forgery, arguments based on the laboratory tests, as being founded on hard science, were put forward all the time against evaluation based on paleography (which actually was not unequivocal), content and historical probability. The involvement of a professional journalist was crucial for breaking this stalemate. Ariel Sabar had covered the saga from its start and, when the suspicion of forgery was

raised, conducted a thorough investigation in the United States and Germany (Sabar, 2016). There is no place or need here to summarize the whole story. His article in *The Atlantic* is worth reading not only because of the facts but also for its admirable journalistic methodology. The reconstructed history behind the *GJW* turns out to be exceptionally sensational. Sabar used many methods to obtain information. He combined online resources (starting from web browsing, through searching publicly available databases on persons and companies, to research on porn fora, which also yielded some important pieces of the puzzle), personal interviews (with members of families, former employees and familiars of persons mentioned in the documents given to King and others deduced from them), verification of the authenticity of modern documentation, and even reading *The Da Vinci Code* (this – it appears – might have been the forger's inspiration). None of these methods belongs to the repertoire of a biblical scholar or papyrologist.

Conclusions

Some more general conclusions can be drawn from the whole discussion over the authenticity of the *GJW*. On the one hand, it is very clear now that neither traditional judgements based on the experience and intuition of scholars nor laboratory tests (which is especially worth underlining) are able to provide definitive arguments when we are dealing with a tangle of personal, institutional and media business interests. This is especially the case when the truth about a given artefact lies not only in itself but also in the complicated biographies and shady transactions that contributed to its creation. It seems that the space for journalists in the process of discovering the past has become much wider than before. In September 2016, at a conference focused on manuscript forgeries, besides scholars the speakers were also journalists participating on equal terms: Ariel Sabar and Nina Burleigh who worked on another infamous fake of recent years, the so-called ossuary of James, brother of Jesus (Mazza, 2016).

On the other hand, academia should be more cautious when collaborating with the media, especially in profiling its message to fit promotional strategies. All in all, the whole affair with the *GJW* was the effect of scholarly debate being obstructed by media involvement.

References

- Bąk, T. (2016a). „Jezus rzekł do nich: Moja żona”. Znaczenie kontrowersyjnego manuskryptu koptyjskiego w świetle współczesnej wiedzy i polemiki [“Jesus said to them: My wife.” The significance of the controversial Coptic manuscript in the light of contemporary knowledge]. *Collectanea Theologica*, 86, 61–83.
- Bąk, T. (2016b). Harvard Lycopolitan John - kolejne fałszerstwo? Koptyjski manuskrypt w świetle Ewangelii Żony Jezusa i współczesnych badań [Harvard Lycopolitan John: Another forgery? A Coptic manuscript in the light of the Gospel of Jesus’ wife and its contemporary examinations]. *The Biblical Annals*, 6, 227–249.
- Bernhard, A. (2017). Postscript: A final note about the origin of the Gospel of Jesus’ wife. *New Testament Studies*, 63, 305–317.
- Choat, M. (2014) The Gospel of Jesus’s wife: A preliminary paleographical assessment. *Harvard Theological Review*, 107, 160–162.
- Depuydt, L. (2014). The alleged Gospel of Jesus’s wife: Assessment and evaluation of authenticity. *Harvard Theological Review*, 107, 172–189.
- Gardner, I., Lieu, S. (1996). From Narmouthis (Medinet Madi) to Kellis (Ismant El-Kharab): Manichaean documents from Roman Egypt. *Journal of Roman Studies*, 86, 146–169.
- Gathercole, S. (2015). The Gospel of Jesus’ wife: Constructing a context. *New Testament Studies*, 61, 292–313.
- Jones, Ch. (2015). The Jesus’ wife papyrus in the history of forgery. *New Testament Studies*, 61, 368–378.
- King, K. (1988). *Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.
- King, K. (1997). *Women and Goddess Traditions: In Antiquity and Today*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- King, K. (2003). *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle*. Santa Rosa: Polebridge.
- King, K. (2014a). “Jesus said to them, ‘My wife...’”: A new Coptic papyrus fragment. *Harvard Theological Review*, 107, 131–159.
- King, K. (2014b). Response to Leo Depuydt, “The alleged Gospel of Jesus’s wife: Assessment and evaluation of authenticity”. *Harvard Theological Review*, 107, 190–193.
- Koenen, L. (1973). Zur Herkunft des Kölner Mani-Codex. *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik*, 11, 240–241.
- Lied, L.I. (2016). Media Dynamics and Academic Knowledge Production: Tracing the Role of the Media in the Gospel of Jesus’ Wife Saga. Retrieved from http://www.academia.edu/28624547/Media_Dynamics_and_Academic_Knowledge_Production_Tracing_the_Role_of_the_Media_in_the_Gospel_of_Jesus_Wife_Saga.
- Lundhaug, H., Suciú, A. (2012). On the So-Called Gospel of Jesus’s Wife. Some Preliminary Thoughts. Retrieved from <https://alinsuciú.com/2012/09/26/on-the-so-called-gospel-of-jesus-wife-some-preliminary-thoughts-by-hugo-lundhaug-and-alin-suciú/>.

- Mazza, R. (2016). Fragments of an Unbelievable Past? Constructions of Provenance, Narratives of Forgery. A Report. Retrieved from <https://facesandvoices.wordpress.com/2016/09/19/fragments-of-an-unbelievable-past-constructions-of-provenance-narratives-of-forgery-a-report/>.
- Mazza, R. (2018). *Open letter to Brill: Fake and unprovenanced manuscripts*. Retrieved from <https://facesandvoices.wordpress.com/2018/11/05/open-letter-to-brill-fake-and-unprovenanced-manuscripts/>.
- Myszor, W. (2006). *Ewangelia Judasza* [The Gospel of Judas]. Katowice: Księgarnia Św. Jacka.
- Myszor, W. (2013). Koptyjska „żona Jezusa” [The Coptic “wife of Jesus”]. *Śląskie Studia Historyczno-Teologiczne*, 46, 168–172.
- Nongbri, B. (2018). *God’s Library. The Archaeology of the Earliest Christian Manuscripts*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Robinson, J.M. (2014). *The Nag Hammadi Story*, vol. 1, *The Discovery and Monopoly*. Leiden: Brill.
- Sabar, A. (2012a). The Inside Story of a Controversial New Text About Jesus. Retrieved from <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/the-inside-story-of-a-controversial-new-text-about-jesus-41078791/>.
- Sabar, A. (2012b). Update: The Reaction to Karen King’s Gospel Discovery. Retrieved from <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/update-the-reaction-to-karen-kings-gospel-discovery-84250942/>.
- Sabar, A. (2016). The Unbelievable Tale of Jesus’s Wife. Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/07/the-unbelievable-tale-of-jesus-wife/485573/>.
- Tuross, N. (2014). Accelerated mass spectrometry radiocarbon determination of papyrus samples. *Harvard Theological Review*, 107, 170–171.
- Watson, F. (2012a). The Gospel of Jesus’ Wife: How a Fake Gospel-Fragment Was Composed. Introduction and Summary. Retrieved from <http://ntweblog.blogspot.com/2012/09/the-gospel-of-jesus-wife-how-fake.html>.
- Watson, F. (2012b). Addendum: The End of the Line? Retrieved from <http://ntweblog.blogspot.com/2012/09/francis-watson-addendum-end-of-line.html>.
- Woodward, K. (2003). A Quite Contrary Mary. Like Jesus, Mary Magdalene is now the subject of a cultural makeover. What agenda do feminist scholars have in mind? Retrieved from <https://www.beliefnet.com/entertainment/movies/the-da-vinci-code/a-quite-contrary-mary.aspx>.