

Jesus' wife? Questions about a Coptic fragment

by [Daniel Burke](#), [David Gibson](#) and [John Dart](#)

This article appears in the [October 17, 2012](#) issue.

In an announcement from Rome that seemed scripted by *The Da Vinci Code* novelist Dan Brown, a Harvard professor stated that an ancient scrap of papyrus mentions Jesus' wife. The fourth-century fragment written in Coptic contains part of a dialogue between Jesus and his disciples, said Karen King, a historian of early Christianity at Harvard Divinity School.

According to King, one broken-off sentence says, "Jesus said to them, 'My wife . . .'" Also in the fragment, Jesus refers to "my mother [who] gave me life" and to a "Mary" who is called either "worthy" or "not worthy" by the disciples (the translation is uncertain). King said it's possible that Jesus cites his wife to confirm that Mary "is able to be my disciple."

King made the September 18 announcement in Rome and on the same day presented a paper on the find at the tenth International Congress of Coptic Studies, which meets every four years and was hosted this year by a Vatican academic institution. King and collaborator AnneMarie Luijendijk of Princeton University named the text that contained the fragment the Gospel of Jesus's Wife, for reference purposes.

The discovery that some ancient Christians thought Jesus had a wife could shake up centuries-old Christian traditions, King suggested. Experts at New York University and Jerusalem's Hebrew University told her that they believed the fragment was authentic. King said she would seek further analyses from specialists.

Within days of her announcement, some scholars voiced questions about the small scrap—even its grammar—which contains just 33 words. Among the questions raised were the following.

Where did the papyrus come from?

King says that “nothing is known about the circumstances of its discovery”—an admission that always raises red flags for scholars. The papyrus is owned by an anonymous collector who asked King to analyze it. She brushed him off in 2010. But she relented in December 2011 and showed it to three scholars who discounted the possibility that the fragment is a forgery. Further tests will be conducted on the ink, she said.

Francis Watson of Durham University in England published online a paper arguing that a modern forger combined parts of sayings nos. 101 and 114 from the Coptic Gospel of Thomas and added “my wife” to the mix.

Roland Meynet, a biblical scholar at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, recalled the excitement in 2002 over the apparent discovery of an ossuary with an inscription indicating that it held the bones of James, the brother of Jesus. It was later widely judged to be a forgery. “That made a lot of noise in newspapers, but was then revealed as a fraud.”

Is this proof that Jesus was married?

No. King says the fragment is a fourth-century translation of a late second-century Greek text. She believes it shows that some early Christians thought he was married. “The earliest and most historically reliable evidence is entirely silent about Jesus’ marital status,” she said. King said it is possible that Jesus was described as speaking figuratively about “my wife.” The words “my mother” may refer to the Holy Spirit—as is the case in the noncanonical Gospel of the Hebrews, said Deirdre Good, a New Testament expert at General Theological Seminary in Manhattan.

What do other ancient texts say about Jesus’ relationships with women?

The oldest New Testament Gospel, Mark, identifies three women who went to Jesus’ tomb: his mother Mary and followers Salome and Mary Magdalene. The latter two appear in apocryphal texts that were written as dialogues between Jesus and disciples, such as the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Mary and the Gospel of the Egyptians—the latter known only by quotes from church fathers. Peter says in the Gospel of Mary that Jesus loved Mary more than all the other women, but asks why Jesus would reveal secrets to her and not to male disciples. Mary Magdalene also is called a companion of Jesus in the Gnostic Gospel of Philip, which describes a “bridal chamber” for initiation rites that were intimate but perhaps in nonsexual ways.

Will this change contemporary Christianity?

King said the discovery could cause believers to rethink their assumptions about early Christian debates over marriage, celibacy and family.

This article was edited on October 2, 2012.