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Table of Contents

Forty Years after Seminex: Reflections on Social and Theological Factors Leading to the Walkout Lawrence R. Rast Jr.	195
<i>Satis est</i>: AC VII as the Hermeneutical Key to the Augsburg Confession Albert B. Collver	217
Slaves to God, Slaves to One Another: Testing an Idea Biblically John G. Nordling	231
Waiting and Waiters: Isaiah 30:18 in Light of the Motif of Human Waiting in Isaiah 8 and 25 Ryan M. Tietz	251
Michael as Christ in the Lutheran Exegetical Tradition: An Analysis Christian A. Preus	257
Justification: Set Up Where It Ought Not to Be David P. Scaer	269
Culture and the Vocation of the Theologian Roland Ziegler	287

American Lutherans and the Problem of Pre-World War II Germany	
John P. Hellwege, Jr.....	309
Research Notes	333
The <i>Gospel of Jesus' Wife</i> : An Obituary for a Forgery	
Apology of the Augsburg Confession Comparison Chart	
Theological Observer	341
Lutherans and the Lure of Eastern Orthodoxy	
Showing the Mercy of Christ as a Deaconess	
David's Son	
Book Reviews	365
Books Received	379
Indices for Volume 80	381

Research Notes

The Gospel of Jesus' Wife: An Obituary for a Forgery

From time to time, sensational news and fiction about Jesus and the Bible appear in the media. Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code*, for example, misled and confused some Christians. A more serious and seemingly scholarly article published in a Harvard journal argued for the legitimacy of a text that mentioned "Jesus' wife." This "find" has since been debunked by scholars, and now the story of how this historical fiction developed has been told.

On 18 September 2012, the discovery of a small papyrus fragment with a Coptic text was announced, which came to be entitled *Gospel of Jesus' Wife* (GJW) and which garnered world-wide media attention. Not long after that, I wrote a short response which argued that the manuscript was a modern forgery on an ancient piece of papyrus.¹ Because subsequent research and articles confirming that it is indeed a forgery have not received much attention by the news media here or abroad, this short update on research related to this text may help shed more light on the evolving saga surrounding this fragment.

In spite of serious doubts about the authenticity of *Gospel of Jesus' Wife* that were expressed by numerous scholars, *Harvard Theological Review* went ahead in April 2014 with publishing the article written by Karen L. King, the Harvard Divinity School scholar who announced the manuscript in 2012 with much fanfare.² *Harvard Theological Review* also published two accompanying pieces by scholars whom King had called upon to substantiate the authenticity of the papyrus and ink.³ To the credit of

¹ Charles A. Gieschen, "The *Gospel of Jesus' Wife*: A Modern Forgery?" *CTQ* 76 (2012): 334–337. I follow the practice of rendering the possessive form of "Jesus" as Jesus' (rather than Jesus's as in some of the works cited below); see William Struck Jr. and E.B. White, *The Elements of Style*, 3rd ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 1. Rendering the possessive form as Jesus's is especially problematic in oral communication (e.g., as heard in some sermons).

² Karen L. King, "Jesus said to them, 'My wife . . .': A New Coptic Fragment," *Harvard Theological Review* 107 (2014): 131–159.

³ Malcolm Choat, "The *Gospel of Jesus's Wife*: A Preliminary Paleographical Assessment," *Harvard Theological Review* 107 (2014): 160–164; Joseph M. Azzarelli, John B. Goods, and Timothy M. Swager, "Study of Two Papyrus Fragments with Fourier

Harvard Theological Review, they also published an article by Leo Depuydt of Brown University in the same issue which challenges and critiques King's position that the fragment could be from an ancient Gnostic Gospel.⁴ He concludes "it is out of the question that the so-called *Gospel of Jesus's Wife*, also known as the Wife of Jesus Fragment, is an authentic source."⁵ King, however, was given the last word in her response printed immediately following the Depuydt article. She concludes with this reaffirmation of her position that the fragment is authentic: "Depuydt's essay does not offer any substantial evidence or persuasive argument, let alone unequivocal surety, that the *GJW* fragment is a modern fabrication (forgery)."⁶

It is noteworthy that several articles related to the *Gospel of Jesus' Wife* were published in a 2015 issue of the journal *New Testament Studies*.⁷ Even though a widespread scholarly consensus had already developed by the end of 2012 that the *Gospel of Jesus' Wife* was not authentic, it is commendable that *New Testament Studies* invited six authors to contribute articles concerning or related to the fragment, some of whom had done research on it in the months after its announcement, in order to have careful studies in print that expose it convincingly as a forgery. The *New Testament Studies* editorial introducing these articles expressed this purpose:

[I]t is now widely accepted that the Jesus' Wife fragment is in reality a recent forgery. That is the view taken by contributors to this issue of

Transform Infrared Microspectroscopy," *Harvard Theological Review* 107 (2014): 165–171.

⁴ Leo Depuydt, "The Alleged *Gospel of Jesus's Wife*: Assessment and Evaluation of Authenticity," *Harvard Theological Review* 107 (2014): 172–189.

⁵ Depuydt, "The Alleged *Gospel of Jesus's Wife*," 189.

⁶ Karen L. King, "Response to Leo Depuydt, 'The Alleged *Gospel of Jesus's Wife*: Assessment and Evaluation of Authenticity,'" *Harvard Theological Review* 107 (2014): 190–193.

⁷ Simon Gathercole, "The *Gospel of Jesus' Wife*: Constructing a Context," *New Testament Studies* 61 (2015): 292–313; Christian Askeland, "A Lycopolitan Forgery of John's Gospel," *New Testament Studies* 61 (2015): 314–334; Andrew Bernhard, "The *Gospel of Jesus' Wife*: Textual Evidence of a Modern Forgery," *New Testament Studies* 61 (2015): 335–355; Myriam Krutzsch, "Material Criteria and their Clues for Dating," *New Testament Studies* 61 (2015): 356–367; Christopher Jones, "The Jesus' Wife Papyrus in the History of Forgery," *New Testament Studies* 61 (2015): 368–378; and Gesine Schenke Robinson, "How a Papyrus Fragment Became a Sensation," *New Testament Studies* 61 (2015): 379–394. Bernhard's article is an expansion of his very significant earlier online article that I cited in Gieschen, "The *Gospel of Jesus' Wife*: A Modern Forgery?" 336.

the journal, not because they are predisposed to reject the papyrus fragment on ideological grounds but because of quite specific features which appear wholly incompatible with an ancient origin. Forgeries corrupt—and are intended to corrupt—the scholarly work of those who may be deceived by them, and they need to be exposed as conclusively as possible.⁸

Two of these articles are especially noteworthy. Andrew Bernhard, whose early research was already mentioned in my earlier research note,⁹ has demonstrated convincingly that the *Gospel of Jesus' Wife* is “undeniably dependent” on Coptic phrases from an interlinear version of the *Gospel of Thomas* that was posted online in 2002.¹⁰ He argues that the grammatically problematic features in the fragment “can be explained well by a forger’s reliance on the English of the same modern edition of the text” and the repetition of a typographical error that was made when creating the PDF version of the Coptic text of this online version *Gospel of Thomas*.¹¹ Second, Christian Askeland has examined images that Harvard posted of a supposed ancient Coptic fragment of the Gospel of John that arrived on 13 November 2012 from the same anonymous individual who gave Karen King the *Gospel of Jesus' Wife* fragment. Here is what Askeland discovered about the relationship between the *Gospel of Jesus' Wife* and this fragment of the Gospel of John to support his conclusion that both are modern forgeries:

The two Coptic fragments clearly shared the same ink, writing implement and scribal hand. The same artisan had created both essentially at the same time. The John fragment was in fact a crude but almost exact copy from Herbert Thomson’s 1924 publication of the Qua codex.¹²

If these and other critical assessments by scholars who looked at the fragment are not enough to judge this fragment as a forgery and remove it from study as an authentic ancient text, we can now read about the modern history of the fragment in a fascinating investigative article by Ariel

⁸ “Editorial,” *New Testament Studies* 61 (2015): 290.

⁹ Gieschen, “The *Gospel of Jesus' Wife*: A Modern Forgery?” 334–337.

¹⁰ Bernhard, “The *Gospel of Jesus' Wife*: Textual Evidence of a Modern Forgery,” 354.

¹¹ Bernhard, “The *Gospel of Jesus' Wife*: Textual Evidence of a Modern Forgery,” 355.

¹² Askeland, “A Lycopolitan Forgery of John’s Gospel,” 315.

Sabar, appropriately titled “The Unbelievable Tale of Jesus’s Wife.”¹³ In spite of Karen King honoring the owner of the fragment’s request to remain anonymous, Sabar was able to use the few details about the prior history of the fragment that were provided in King’s article in order to identify and track down the owner, Walter Fritz. In her investigative odyssey, she discovered a host of things raising red flags that would cause one to doubt the authenticity of this scrap of papyrus without even looking at it. These assorted details included Fritz’s previous academic training in Coptic, the discrepancies related to Fritz’s account of the prior ownership of the fragment in the twentieth century, his anger towards the Roman Catholic church because he was allegedly raped by a priest when he was a nine-year old boy, his opinion that the Gnostic Gospels are better witnesses to the historical Jesus than the canonical Gospels, and his desire to have an entertaining book written about Mary Magdalene that would uncover the suppressed female element in the church and promote the priority of the Gnostic Gospels.¹⁴ This journalist did the careful research on the previous ownership of *Gospel of Jesus’ Wife* that the Harvard scholar should have insisted be done before her sensational announcement of the manuscript.

The positive news four years later is that the *Gospel of Jesus’ Wife* fragment was exposed as a modern forgery before it garnered much of a following. It is neither from an ancient “Gospel” nor does it contain authentic testimony about anything, much less Jesus’ marital status. In spite of these findings, there is at least one instance in print where the *Gospel of Jesus’ Wife* fragment has already been used to support the unfounded thesis that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene.¹⁵ Karen King’s approach of keeping the manuscript out of the sight of other scholars before its announcement to the public and preserving the anonymity of the owner has totally backfired. She should have sought input from other scholars on the fragment and thoroughly researched its provenance (i.e., history of ownership) *before* it was given global publicity. Because we cannot turn back the clock to 18 September 2012, I agree with the following suggestions made by Gesine Schenke Robinson:

It is time for Harvard to offer an official statement of disavowal. Also necessary is the unconditional disclosure of all relevant materials,

¹³ Ariel Sabar, “The Unbelievable Tale of Jesus’s Wife,” *The Atlantic* (July/August 2016), accessed 2 November 2016, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/07/the-unbelievable-tale-of-jesus-wife/485573/>.

¹⁴ Sabar, “The Unbelievable Tale of Jesus’s Wife,” 41–46.

¹⁵ Simcha Jacobovici and Barrie Wilson, *The Lost Gospel: Decoding the Ancient Text that Reveals Jesus’ Marriage to Mary the Magdalene* (New York: Pegasus, 2014), 294.

including the document allegedly proving a valid acquisition. If there is an owner who purchased several fragments, his or her identity has to be revealed and all the fragments made available to the public. As Depuydt stated, “not doing so is an act of obstruction.” We have wasted enough time due to all the covertness and wrongly applied confidentiality. And last but not least, the media should no longer be manipulated into taking up this affair every Easter, when it is ready for a new sensation no matter how ludicrous.¹⁶

Charles A. Gieschen

Apology of the Augsburg Confession Comparison Chart

Most parts of the Book of Concord have a numbering system for articles and paragraphs that is uniform, no matter what edition or translation is used. But the Apology of the Augsburg Confession is different. A Bible study or reading group on the Apology could be confusing if different translations are used, because the numbering systems vary from one edition to the next. The following chart shows how the enumerations of the Apology in the two major English traditions of the Book of Concord (Dau-Bente and Tappert) relate.¹⁷

The enumeration of articles and paragraphs for the Apology of the Augsburg Confession has changed over time. The *Book of Concord* (German 1580, Latin 1584) had no article or paragraph numbers at all in the Apology, only subtitles. By 1677, the Apology had been divided up into fourteen articles, but these articles did not correspond with the Augsburg Confession’s articles.¹⁸ By 1827, paragraph numbers had been added.¹⁹ By 1848, a new system of numbering the articles had been introduced, a system that tried to match the articles of the Apology with the articles of

¹⁶ Robinson, “How a Papyrus Fragment Became a Sensation,” 394.

¹⁷ W. H. T. Dau and F. Bente, eds., *Triglot Concordia: The Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, German-Latin-English* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921); Theodore G. Tappert, ed., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959).

¹⁸ Adam Rechenberg, ed., *Concordia. Pia Et Unanimi consensu Repitita Confessio Fidei Et Doctrinae Electorum, Principum Et Ordinum Imperii . . . Qui Augustanam Confessionem amplectuntur . . . accessit Declaratio . . . Cum Appendice Tripartita Et Novis Indicibus* (Lipsiae: Grossius, 1677).

¹⁹ Carolus Augustus Hase, ed., *Libri Symbolici Ecclesiae Evangelicae Sive Concordia*, vol. 1 (Lipsiae: sumtibus Joannis Suehringii, 1827).