New tests show no evidence of forgery in ‘Gospel of Jesus’s Wife’
New tests show no evidence of forgery in ancient papyrus

By Lisa Wangsness
| Globe staff   April 10, 2014

New scientific tests have turned up no evidence of modern forgery in a text written on ancient Egyptian papyrus that refers to Jesus as being married, according to a long-awaited article to be published Thursday in the Harvard Theological Review.

The findings support the argument of Harvard professor Karen L. King that the controversial text, the first-known explicit reference to a married Jesus, is almost certainly an authentic document.

The “Gospel of Jesus’s Wife” was introduced to the world by King at a conference in Rome 18 months ago. The announcement made headlines around the world, and many of King’s academic peers, as well as the Vatican newspaper, swiftly dismissed it as a fake.

King maintains the document was probably part of a debate among early Christians about the role of women, family, and celibacy in spiritual life.

The results of a carbon dating test found that the papyrus probably dates to eighth-century Egypt, about 400 years later than King originally thought, but still in ancient times.

Other tests found the ink’s chemical composition consistent with carbon-based inks used by ancient Egyptians. And microscopic imaging revealed none of the suspicious ink pooling that critics thought they saw in lower-resolution photographs of the fragment. Such pooling could have offered evidence that the ink was applied in modern times.

“‘I’m basically hoping that we can move past the issue of forgery to questions about the significance of this fragment for the history of Christianity, for thinking about questions like, ‘Why does Jesus being married, or not, even matter? Why is it that people had such an incredible reaction to this?’ ’” King said in an interview.

King has never argued that the fragment is evidence that Jesus was actually married. It would have been composed much later than the gospels of the New Testament, which are regarded as the earliest and most reliable sources on the historical Jesus and which are silent on that question.

Still, the latest tests do not prove definitively that the text was written in ancient times. Specialists said, hypothetically, that a highly skilled modern forger could have obtained the right kind of ink and meticulously applied it to a blank piece of ancient papyrus.

Determining the age of the ink using conventional testing methods would destroy the tiny document, roughly the size of a business card. Groundbreaking work by Columbia University
researchers may soon uncover a way to date the ink without harming the fragment, which would offer a more definitive verdict about its authenticity.

Meanwhile, the controversy over the fragment seems likely to continue.

Critics have dismissed the fragment as a ham-handed pastiche of bits of the Gospel of Thomas, a noncanonical gospel, mashed together by someone with an elementary grasp of Coptic. One scholar found that the fragment seemed to contain a typo found in an online edition of the Gospel of Thomas, a discovery that some academics said offered powerful evidence of a forgery.

Leo Depuydt, an Egyptologist at Brown University who offers a rebuttal to King’s thesis in the new edition of the Harvard Theological Review, said none of the test results alter his view that the document is a fraud, a modern-day cut-and-paste job with several glaring grammatical blunders that a native speaker of Coptic would never commit.

He believes the forger may have “wanted to put his or her own spin on modern theological issues,” such as the role of women and celibacy in Christianity.

“Heing nothing is going to change my mind,” he said in an interview this week. “As a forgery, it is bad to the point of being farcical or fobbish. . . . I don’t buy the argument that this is sophisticated. I think it could be done in an afternoon by an undergraduate student.”

Harvard Divinity School granted the Globe, The New York Times, and Harvard Magazine advance access to the forthcoming Harvard Theological Review articles. The three news organizations were allowed to contact researchers involved with the articles, on the condition that they hold publication until Thursday morning, when the Theological Review will be published online, and that they contact no outside sources for comment beforehand.

King began examining the fragment in 2011 at the request of its owner, who wishes to remain anonymous. Its provenance remains mysterious; the owner told King he bought it and five other papyri in 1999 from a collector who said he acquired them in the 1960s in East Germany. An undated, unsigned photocopied note in German accompanying the fragment said that a professor Fecht had examined the papyrus and thought it could be the only text in which Jesus speaks of having a wife.

The fragment appears to be cut from the middle of a larger document; it contains just eight partial lines, written in a crude hand, one of which says, “And Jesus said to them, ‘My wife,’ ” The next says, “She will be able to be my disciple.”

The first line, according to King’s translation, says in part: “My mother gave me life.”

King believes the document may have been copied from a much earlier Greek text, perhaps composed in the second century, and sees it as an important addition to the study of the development of Christianity as it spread through the Mediterranean world.
King said in the interview this week that her thinking about the meaning of the document has evolved somewhat. She originally hypothesized it concerned debates about discipleship, and whether becoming a Christian meant giving up one’s family to join a spiritual family. But in researching what early Christians said about whether Jesus was married or not, she recognized the importance of early Christian controversies about the spiritual advantages of celibacy. If Jesus were celibate, were Christians who were married or sexually active less fully human, or lesser in the eyes of God?

“Now when I come back and read the fragment, it seems the major issue being talked about was that Jesus was affirming that wives and mothers can be his disciples,” King said.

In her Theological Review article, the publication of which was delayed by some 15 months amid a storm of criticism and pending the results of scientific tests, King answers some of the major issues raised by critics.

Depuydt makes the case that there is only an infinitesimal possibility that the similarities between the Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of Jesus’s Wife are coincidental.

But King replies that the parallels are not nearly as close as Depuydt and others contend, and that some overlap is not surprising because they address similar topics and because many ancient Christian texts relied upon and responded to one another.

Depuydt says the grammatical blunders he sees in the text could not have been made by a Coptic speaker. One line, he said, appears to read, “An evil man does not he brings.”

“You can’t make sense of it as a fluent Coptic text,” he said. “Then you find out it’s all coming from Gospel of Thomas. Well, case closed.”

But King argues that the grammatical issues Depuydt raises are either errors of his own analysis or that similar grammatical constructions, including the same mistake as the apparent typo in the online Gospel of Thomas, exist in other Coptic texts whose authenticity is undisputed.

In sum, King said, it does not make sense that a forger with poor Coptic and scribal skills could also manage to acquire the right kind of papyrus and ink, and leave no ink out of place at the microscopic level. “In my judgment, such a combination of bumbling and sophistication seems extremely unlikely,” she wrote in her article.

The Theological Review was supposed to have published King’s findings in January 2013. King said it took longer than expected to complete the testing, particularly because she had no budget.

The original carbon-dating test of the papyrus, conducted by the University of Arizona Accelerator Mass Spectrometry Laboratory, gave a date of 400 to 200 years before the birth of Jesus. Researchers concluded that the result may be unreliable because the sample size was too small.
A second carbon-dating test was conducted by Noreen Tuross of Harvard and produced a mean date of 741 A.D.

The ink testing was done by a team of Columbia University researchers using a technique called micro-Raman spectroscopy to investigate the ink’s chemical composition. The researchers have also studied the ink in many of the ancient papyri in Columbia’s vast collection.

“This looks qualitatively virtually like every other papyrus manuscript we’ve looked at,” said James Yardley, a professor of electrical engineering who helped lead the team.

Roger Bagnall, director of New York University’s Institute for the Study of the Ancient World and one of the world’s top papyrologists, assisted King with her initial analysis of the fragment.

“I haven’t seen any argument that I find at all compelling that would indicate that it’s not genuine, it’s not ancient,” he said.

Bill Greene/Globe Staff

Harvard professor Karen L. King introduced her finding in Rome 18 months ago. Her paper is being published Thursday.