

# Wings

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*“Those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength;  
they shall mount up with wings like eagles.”  
Isaiah 40:31*



October 21, 2012

## Jesus' Wife?

The news of an ancient papyrus fragment that quotes Jesus as having a wife provides us with a good opportunity to re-examine the documentary foundation of our faith.

In mid-September, Dr. Karen King (no relation), a professor at Harvard Divinity School, released information regarding a small fragment of papyrus containing a reference to Jesus having a wife. One line in the Coptic text read, “Jesus said to them, ‘My wife . . .’” This fragmentary text was enough to make front-page news. A few writers—especially those with a strong feminist agenda—were quick to pounce on this as proof that women played a much more active role in early Christian ministry than commonly believed. One author even suggested that this finding could “rock the foundations of Christianity as we know it” (Mary Sharratt, *Wall Street Journal*). For the record, Prof. King was careful not to make any such claims about the meaning of the fragment.

As is always the case in such matters, other scholars are getting involved, poring over this fragment to verify its authenticity. Tests are being conducted on the papyrus and the ink to establish the dating of the piece. But initial investigation has already uncovered a number of problems with this fragment that call

into question the breathtaking claims being made for it.

First, as King herself pointed out, at best this fragment can be dated to no earlier than the 4th century AD, much too late to provide any meaningful evidence about Jesus' love life. In the absence of any corroborating evidence, this single late fragment is far too fragile a strand of evidence upon which to hang such a ground-breaking claim.

More significantly, experts in the Coptic language and other early Christian writings have discovered a number of errors and other oddities that raise eyebrows. For example, the wording is taken almost entirely from sections of a Coptic version of *The Gospel of Thomas*, a well-known apocryphal account of Jesus' life, with key changes made to alter the meaning (including the “wife” reference). The smoking gun, however, is the replication of a typo that appears in a 2002 online PDF version of *The Gospel of Thomas*. Either an ancient author just happened to make exactly the same typo at exactly the same place, or a clumsy forger, not too familiar with

the Coptic language, used the 2002 typeset version as his primary source. (More information on these and other problems with this fragment is available on the blog of Mark Goodacre, associate professor of Religion at Duke University, at <http://ntweblog.blogspot.com>.)

More information will come out as work progresses on this fragment (although I doubt that it will receive nearly the exposure of the original announcement). But this episode provides two lessons for our benefit:

First, we need to maintain a healthy skepticism about amazing new revelations reported in the popular press. There is a lot of deception in this field, and reporters don't always do a good job of sifting out the fakes.

Second, the amount of attention being devoted to this little fragment highlights the thoroughness that accompanies the modern science of textual criticism. Although representing a wide spectrum of theological belief, scholars in this discipline produce work that, taken as a whole, ultimately strengthens the integrity of the Biblical text.

– David King