

THE POLITICS OF “JESUS’ WIFE”

In 2007, the media were agog over the claim by “Titanic” director James Cameron and TV-director Simcha Jacobovici that the Jesus family tomb had been found. Cameron declared that it had been determined “beyond any reasonable doubt” that the tomb of Jesus and his family had been found. It didn’t take long before it was revealed to be a hoax.

In 2012, the media were hyperventilating over the claim by Harvard Divinity School professor Karen King that Jesus may have had a wife. Speaking of the papyrus fragment that is the basis of her claim, King said at the time, “If it’s a forgery, it’s a career breaker.” Now that it has been revealed to be a hoax, neither Karen King nor Harvard are speaking.

Why are the media so easily seduced by such tales? To be sure, such extraordinary claims from apparently credible sources cannot be ignored. But there is something else that is going on as well.

Quite frankly, there is an ideological need to discredit the history of Christianity. If anyone doubts this to be true, all that needs to be done is to examine what happens almost every Easter season: Television, Internet, newspaper, and magazine stories abound with questions over the “real” Jesus. Was he divine? Or was he just a happy carpenter? Sowing the seeds of doubt is the name of the game, making it understandable why claims about Jesus’ family tomb and/or his wife are irresistible. But don’t look for similar stories on the “real” Muhammad.

On September 29, 2012, an editorial in the Vatican newspaper, *L’Osservatore Romano*, called the papyrus fragment an “inept forgery.” In April, three Coptic experts named Christian Askeland, Mark Goodacre, and Alin Suciu, independently concluded that the fragment was a fake. So have several

Egyptologists from the United States and Europe.

It's just a matter of time before someone else claims that Jesus had a wife, or the Resurrection never happened. The politics involved are weighty, and the fanaticism of the players is palpable.

WHAT KING AND EXPERTS SAID INITIALLY

Karen King:

- It casts doubt "on the whole Catholic claim of a celibate priesthood based on Jesus' celibacy. They always say, 'This is the tradition, this is the tradition.' Now we see that this alternative tradition has been silenced." (*Smithsonian Magazine*, "The Inside Story of a Controversial New Text about Jesus," 9/18/12)
- "I think the fragment itself is discussing issues about discipleship and family. But certainly the fact that this is the first unequivocal statement we have that claims Jesus had a wife, is of great interest" (*Chicago Tribune*, "Was Jesus married? Scholar hopes for debate," 9/20/12)
- Evidence of authenticity was strong enough to make her think it was time to invite other scholars to weigh in. In any case, she added, she stood to gain little if she was wrong. "This is not a career maker," said King, a tenured professor at Harvard. "If it's a forgery, it's a career breaker." (*Boston Globe*, "Hint of a married Jesus; Harvard historian's finding may bear on modern Christianity" 9/19/12)
- King conceded to [the reporter] the possibility that the ink tests could yet expose the piece as a forgery. More likely, she said, it "will be the cherry on the cake." (*Smithsonian Magazine*, "The Inside Story of a Controversial New Text about Jesus," 9/18/12)

AnneMarie Luijendijk, Princeton professor and authority on Coptic papyri and sacred scriptures:

- "It would be impossible to forge," said Dr. Luijendijk, who contributed to Dr. King's paper. (*New York Times*, "A Faded Piece of Papyrus Refers to Jesus' Wife," 9/19/12)

Ariel Shisha-Halevy, professor of linguistics at Hebrew University, Jerusalem, who was asked to examine the authenticity:

- "I believe—on the basis of language and grammar—the text is authentic. That is to say, all its grammatical 'noteworthy' features, separately or conjointly, do not warrant condemning it as forgery." (CNN Wire, "Newly revealed Coptic fragment has Jesus making reference to 'my wife,'" 9/19/12)

Roger Bagnall, director of the Institute for the Study of the Ancient World, at New York University:

- "It's hard to construct a scenario that is at all plausible in which somebody fakes something like this. The world is not really crawling with crooked papyrologists," Dr. Bagnall said. (*New York Times*, "A Faded Piece of Papyrus Refers to Jesus' Wife," 9/19/12)

Carl R. Holladay, Professor of New Testament studies at Emory University and Church of Christ minister:

- "It's obviously an important find." (Laurie Goodstein, "Coptic Scholars Doubt and Hail a Reference to Jesus' Wife," 9/21/12)