THE GOSPEL OF JESUS' WIFE: AN OPEN LETTER TO BIBLICAL HISTORIANS

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The web is blowing up (April 2014) with articles and blog posts on the topic of the *Gospel of Jesus' Wife* (GJW), discussions prompted by the recent publication of the latest issue of the *Harvard Theological Review*, which features the official publication of and scientific reports on the GJW. I have known about this papyrus since it was introduced in 2012 and have repeatedly been asked to respond to claims being made in the media, but I have refrained, until now. Today, I wish to address the provocative GJW but I shall avoid making claims about its authenticity or inauthenticity. Rather, I wish to address the scholarly enterprise around this piece in the hopes that it will create a momentary space for disciplinary self-reflection. Toward that end, I shall speak to two things: 1) historiography and 2) Western intellectualism and power differentials. Before I turn to these topics, however, I shall say a few introductory remarks about the "discovery" of this piece.

On 18 September 2012, Professor Karen King of Harvard University announced at a conference in Rome that she had identified a papyrus fragment smaller than a credit card which she called *The Gospel of Jesus' Wife*.[1] Purported to be a "gospel" by King—an egregious assumption, given the lack of context—this tiny fragment contains the provocative phrase (in Coptic), "and Jesus said to them, 'My wife…" (line 4). The

[1] The conference was the International Association of Coptic Studies, which took place at Sapienza Università di Roma, 17-22 September 2012.

announcement immediately sparked interest world-wide: it made the headlines in virtually every media outlet around the globe. Harvard featured the papyrus on an extension of their university website[2] created specially for the papyrus, and it was announced that a major historical documentary was also in the works.[3] All of the hype, however, was tempered with the burgeoning theory that this text was not ancient, but a modern forgery. On the basis of the odd hand writing and close linguistic parallels with an online interlinear Coptic-English text of the *Gospel of Thomas*, some scholars judged it to be a fake. Moreover, the provenance of the piece was questioned, since King claims that it is in the possession of a "private" collector. From day one, it was announced that the critical edition of this papyrus would be published in the prestigious *Harvard Theological Review*, but the publication was put on hold, pending the outcome of "scientific" tests on the papyrus and ink to ensure its authenticity. Finally, in the April 2014 issue of *Harvard Theological Review*, the GJW was the subject of eight, separate articles, which put the fragment back into public conversation. The debates among scholars at the present moment are fiercer than they were following the announcement in 2012, not least because the tests carried out on the papyrus and ink were not 100% conclusive, leaving room for doubt as to the fragment's authenticity. But let us leave aside the question of authenticity and turn to a few other important issues.

The famous French scholar Michel de Certeau contended that the past becomes comprehensible to us only through the historian's *discourse* of "facts." The sine qua non

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[2] http://gospelofjesusswife.hds.harvard.edu

[3] This documentary was aired in March 2014 on the History Channel's (Canada) mini series *Treasures Decoded*.

of making history is, according to de Certeau, "an endless labor of differentiation" between a former period and the present. That is, the production of meaning results from the process of negotiating the past and present. Such differentiation, according to de Certeau, takes place "along the margins which join a society with its past and with the very act of separating itself from that past."[4] It is only when accounts of the past and their interpretation in the present meet that something new is created. It is a "back and forth" between two poles of the "real." The goal of historiography for de Certeau is the relocation of the past (preserved) into the conceptual (and narrative) framework of *present discourse* that unfolds or resuscitates the lost through labors of differentiation.

The idea of the past rupturing into the present is nothing new of course; it is largely a critique of positivist history so dominant in the 18th and 19th centuries. But what interests me is the way in which narratives of or about the past shape our own identities. In other words, there is a *social role* of narratives concerning the past. Frank Ankersmit questions why it is that "our relationship to the past has become 'privatized' in the sense that it primarily is an attribute of the individual historian and no longer of a collective disciplinary historical subject."[5] We are now more than ever invested in retrieving the past because it is tied—whether consciously or unconsciously—to our search for personal identity. This is what Pierre Nora means by "modern memory" when he writes: "Modern memory, is, above all, archival. Fear of a rapid and final disappearance combines with anxiety about the *meaning of the present* and uncertainty

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[4] De Certeau, *The Writing of History*, 37.

[5] Ankersmit, *Historical Representation*, 153.

about the future to give even the most humble testimony, the most modest vestige, the potential dignity of the memorable."[6]

All of this has much relevance for the appraisal of cultural artifacts such as the GJW, and particularly those cultural artifacts which impinge on one's religious identity. In this case of the GJW, the question about whether or not Jesus was married cannot simply be reduced to a concern about history; it is a religious question disguised as a historical one. So why is the question of Jesus' marriage important anyway? Because it seeks to anchor one's beliefs in a material reality. This is how history is often used. But it is also not just about Jesus or religion in general. Even those scholars who admit that the GJW says nothing about the historical Jesus are participating in a discourse that is going nowhere. But why is it that scholars are so concerned about whether this text was written in the 2nd century, the 8th, or the 21st? Why have we privileged this text over against all the other texts on papyrus that get identified on a daily basis?

That brings me to my second point. Western intellectualism has often been described in terms of hegemonic discourse that privileges knowledge produced by the intellectual elite over against the kinds of knowledge produced outside of the academy. Feminist and post-colonial scholars have done a lot to advance this idea, and I believe it is very relevant to the current discussion. I hasten to agree with Hector Avalos, when he says:

> Relevant knowledge must be grounded in an awareness of how knowledge is used to create class distinctions and power differentials. Biblical scholars, for example, are almost solely devoted to maintaining the cultural significance of the Bible not because any knowledge it

[6] Nora, "Between Memory and History," 13 (italics mine).

> provides is relevant to our world but because of the self-serving drive to protect the power position of the biblical studies profession.[7]

But not everyone is ready to admit that power differentials are at play in biblical studies. When I posted a draft of this paper on my personal website, one highly prominent New Testament scholar responded by saying, "I'm afraid that your blog-posting isn't really about this fragment but is instead your musings about "history/historians" in the light of the (somewhat simplistic) outlook of Avalos (et al)." But therein lies the problem. This discussion has *everything* to do with the GJW! It just so happens that some scholars are not prepared and/or willing to evaluate critically their profession and their own role within it.[8] It is time we stop and reflect on the extent to which the discussions about the GJW are a product of Western political, economic, and social interests (on this point, see Spivak's *Can the Subaltern Speak?*). Why has a first-rate academic journal devoted almost an entire issue to a piece of papyrus whose authenticity is questionable? And why is this issue—and only this issue—"open access"? Why are scholars so vehement about answering the question of its authenticity? Why are certain scholars given space to voice their view while others are silenced? What are the motives behind those producing blog posts and articles concerning this cultural artifact? Why did Harvard University create a website specifically for the GJW? Why was a historical documentary on the GJW produced so soon after its discovery (and before its publication!)?

I am currently editing, among other things, an unpublished Coptic papyrus fragment right now housed in an Ivy League institution that contains an unknown text

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[7] Hector Avalos, *The End of Biblical Studies* (Amherst: Prometheus, 2007), 23.

[8] This is particularly a problem in biblical studies, a field that is largely driven by theological loyalties and concerns. See the exceptional, forthcoming critique by William Arnal, "Biblical Studies: The Future of an Anachronism" (to be presented at the Annual Society of Biblical Literature, San Diego, November 2014).

that mentions Jesus, his cross, disciples, and cites a verse from the New Testament. Should the history channel run a documentary on this? Should *Harvard Theological Review* devote nearly a entire issue to *this* papyrus fragment? Should my institution create a website for it? We as historians should think long and hard about the production and dissemination of knowledge and the potential effects it might have on society as a whole. Is what we are doing relevant and meaningful for society and human progress? Are we encouraging and promoting intellectual hegemony through our own discourses about history (in this case, the GJW)?

It is also extremely interesting to me that the GJW has been submitted for such drawn-out testing. Yet no one expects these procedures for any other ancient document. It has always been the practice of papyrologists (those who study ancient texts and writing materials) to make judgments based on observation, but when it comes to highly religious texts (e.g., Gospel of Judas, Secret Gospel of Mark), we must test them "scientifically." As one of my colleagues so astutely averred recently, "it also raises questions about our own scientific expertise: we're not able, any more, apparently, to decide if those things are genuine, with our own Wissenschaft: we have to call on the 'real' scientists" (personal correspondence). But perhaps the need to consult the "real" scientists in the case of the GJW is a reflection of the uneasiness and lack of confidence among historians concerning the discipline as a whole. Ankersmit may therefore be correct in saying that

> historians feel more insecure about the scientific status of their discipline than the practitioners of any other field of scholarly research. They are painfully aware that historical debate rarely leads to conclusive results and that such regrettable things as intellectual fashions or political preference may strongly color their opinions about the past. In short, deep in their hearts historians know that, in spite of all their emphasis on the duties of accurate investigation of

> sources and of prudent and responsible interpretation, history ranks lowest of all the disciplines that are taught at a university.[9]

The lack of conclusive results within modern historical discourse is both proven and exacerbated by the fact that results vary from one historian to the next, and the case of the GJW is no exception.

The terms "forgery" and "fake" are also worth reflecting on in light of the discussion. Why are some (most?) scholars inclined to discount an object's significance simply because it might be a forgery or fake? It is because we privilege what is historically "real" and "pure" and disregard those things which do not fit the bill. But modern forgeries are also very significant because they reflect our own, present historical imaginations and representations, even if the goal of the forger is to deceive. If we think of it in this sense, almost every early Christian text (including the New Testament) is a forgery, insofar as these authors sought to legitimatize their theological claims by contextualizing them within a narrative framework that is often highly imaginative. So why are *ancient* historical imaginations privileged over *modern* ones? It is because we are most interested in the foreign realities and minds of the past. This is a clear case of academic "othering" and intellectual elitism.

I would be remiss to conclude this discussion without commenting on the questions concerning the publication, provenance, and acquisition of cultural artifacts like the GJW. In her astute blog post of April 17th, 2014 titled "Papyri, Private Collectors and Academics: Why the Wife of Jesus and Sappho Matter," historian Roberta Mazza raises many relevant questions concerning the publication of the GJW as well as some new

[9] Ankersmit, *Historical Representation*, 153.

poems by Sappho, both of which are kept in the hands of private collectors.[10] In the recent publications of these two papyri, details concerning provenance and acquisition were either omitted altogether or left extremely unclear. Mazza's blog post raises awareness of the illegal ownership of antiquities:

> "Does my word, the word of an academic, or that of a publisher or a journal's editorial board suffice for the public to be assured that the provenance of a papyrus is legal? […] I trust my colleagues, but should our professional practices rely only on academic trust and our good behaviours? In other words, what kind of data should we provide in publications on the acquisition of such papyri?"

This is a hot topic in the field of papyrology, because the exportation of papyri from Egypt is illegal, yet many still continue to do it, whether locally through the antiquities markets, or globally through online consumer corporations like eBay. Many of these papyri have come into collections (both public and private) and they are getting published in scholarly journals; yet there is often a bold silence concerning the provenance of such items. The Supreme Council of Antiquities in Egypt has imposed sanctions on those participating in the illegal exportation of antiquities from Egypt, but they are not always successful in finding the guilty parties. In America, and elsewhere I am sure, there is a growing interest in ancient papyri, and the motivation for such desires is an interesting (psychological? social?) phenomenon in and of itself.

But this should be pressed further. Deliberately concealing data about provenance and acquisition of antiquities in scholarly publications has ethical implications, yet it seems that this practice is becoming more and more tolerable.[11] There is also the more

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[10] http://facesandvoices.wordpress.com/2014/04/17/papyri-private-collectors-and-academics-why-the-wife-of-jesus-and-sappho-matter/

[11] By provenance here I mean modern provenance (i.e., where an object was found or purchased) versus original or ancient provenance (i.e., place of origin).

critical question concerning the causes and effects of the translocation and absorption of Egyptian cultural artifacts within private and public systems in the western world. Such displaced objects are given alternative "homes" and the meaning of those objects is necessarily transformed. When we conceal or do not carefully pursue details of provenance, we demonstrate our own position of power over the culture from which objects were amassed.

Indeed, there are analogies with practices in 19th century colonialism. Bernard Cohn has shown that "[i]t was the British who, in the nineteenth century, defined in an authoritative and effective fashion how the value and meaning of the objects produced or found in India were determined."[12] The British employed individuals—chief among them was colonel Colin Mackenzie—to travel throughout India to collect objects, texts, inscriptions, and even historical information. While the motivation of the procuration of Indian cultural objects was putatively to introduce India to the west, their translocation resulted in their becoming symbols of power of the empire, or trophies or war. As Cohn says, "Once again loot poured into England to be treasured as memorabilia of families, symbolizing the privation and sense of triumph generated by the war. Eventually these objects or relics found their way into [Western] public repositories."[13]

In closing, I would simply like to suggest that we as historians stop *over*-privileging historical artifacts like the GJW. The question about the papyrus' authenticity is less important, in my opinion, than the agendas and socio-political realities that drive

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[12]Bernard Cohn, *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge*, 77.

[13] Bernard Cohn, *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge*, 105.

the question itself. We want firm answers about the GJW, but we will not get the "facts" we want unless a living forger comes forward or the dead (ancient or modern) author comes back to life to tell the complete story. This is precisely how the writing of all history works and we should respect the "fragile and necessary boundary between a past object and a current praxis."[14] Let us move on as historians to other historical ideas, topics and artifacts instead of continuing to find ways to make the debate around the GJW more and more relevant.

[14] De Certeau, *The Writing of History*, 37.