

EDITORIAL

The present issue of *New Testament Studies* breaks new ground for this journal by including a number of commissioned articles on a specific theme. The occasion for this was the publication in the April 2014 issue of the *Harvard Theological Review* of an article by Dr Karen King which ‘offers a critical edition of a papyrus fragment in Coptic ... in which Jesus speaks of “my wife”’. The hypothetical Greek original of this so-called ‘Gospel of Jesus’ Wife’ is tentatively dated to the second half of the second century. Widely respected for her work on the problematic concept of ‘Gnosticism’ and on specific texts such as the *Gospel of Mary* and the *Apocryphon of John*, Dr King has done much to bring previously marginalised strands in the diverse world of early Christianity into the mainstream of scholarly discussion. Rightly, her opinion on any text purporting to derive from that world carries weight. Yet, as Dr King acknowledges, her article ‘is not the last word on the subject of the *GJW* fragment’.

Much of the rest of the *HTR* issue was devoted to further assessment of the *GJW* fragment, including reports of the scientific analysis of the papyrus which showed that the ink does not contain any identifiably modern ingredients and that the papyrus itself probably dates from the middle of the eighth century – as does a second papyrus, also submitted for testing, which features a fragment of the Gospel of John in the Lycopolitan dialect of Coptic. There is a cautious assessment by the palaeographer Malcolm Choat, who concludes that, ‘if the general appearance of the papyrus prompts some suspicion, it is difficult to falsify by a strictly paleographical examination’. A fuller and more hostile assessment is presented by Leo Depuydt, to whose sharply worded criticisms Dr King responds.

The reasons for following the lead of our sister-journal in devoting space to this topic are four in number, and they are interrelated.

First, the *GJW* fragment has evoked extraordinary worldwide interest since it was published online in September 2012. Scholars and scholarly journals are accountable not just to their own research communities but also to a wider interested public.

Second, most of the debate generated by the initial online and subsequent print publication was itself conducted online. It is scattered across diverse

locations, it has in most cases not been subjected to rigorous peer review, and it may in future become increasingly difficult to access. A summative statement is therefore required which reflects the best of that debate and makes it available to present and future readers who may have a variety of reasons for taking an interest in the 'Jesus' Wife Controversy'.

Third, it 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 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.

Fourth, and on a more positive note, there is much to be learned from the debate – about texts and their ancient or modern contexts, but also about scholarship, its internal procedures, and its sometimes problematic relationship to a wider public. The interest and significance of the articles that follow goes well beyond the crucial but narrow issue of authenticity.

In the October 2013 issue of this journal (*NTS* 59.4), Dr King published an article on 'The Place of the *Gospel of Philip* in the Context of Early Christian Claims about Jesus' Marital Status'. This article drew extensively from the earlier online article in which the discovery of the new Coptic gospel papyrus was announced. In response, Simon Gathercole argues that the intimacy between Jesus and Mary Magdalene in texts such as the *Gospel of Philip* has to do with discipleship and revelation rather than marriage. Such texts do not provide a plausible context for a Jesus who speaks of 'my wife'. Turning to the generally acknowledged relationship between *GJW* and the *Gospel of Thomas*, Gathercole shows exactly why this is so damaging to the authenticity of the Coptic *GJW* and to the existence of a Greek original. *GJW* is dependent on the one Coptic text of *Thomas* that happens to have survived, and it is hard to imagine an ancient historical context for this.

Less well publicised than the *GJW* fragment was a second Coptic papyrus stemming from the same collection and containing a passage from the Gospel of John in the Lycopopolitan (sub-Akhmimic) dialect. In a decisive earlier contribution to the debate, Christian Askeland showed (1) that the scribal hand of *GJW* and HLJ (= Harvard Lycopopolitan John) is one and the same, and (2) that the wording, line breaks and other features are derived from the Coptic John manuscript known as the 'Qau Codex', published in 1924 and now available online. Askeland here presents the definitive version of his argument, setting it in the context of the Coptic manuscript tradition for the Fourth Gospel. Equally compelling evidence of the *GJW* scribe's dependence on modern resources is provided in Andrew Bernhard's meticulous demonstration that the forger has reproduced features specific to an online edition of the *Gospel of Thomas*, including, crucially, its

errors. Taken together, the articles of Gathercole, Askeland and Bernhard provide what would seem to be a conclusive source-critical demonstration of *GJW*'s recent rather than ancient origins.

Timed to coincide with the publication of Dr King's *HTR* article in April 2014, a press release was issued from Harvard Divinity School under the headline, 'Testing Indicates "Gospel of Jesus's Wife" Papyrus Fragment to be Ancient'. Here it was claimed that '[a] wide range of scientific testing indicates that a papyrus fragment containing the words, "Jesus said to them, my wife" is an ancient document, dating between the sixth to ninth centuries CE. Its contents may originally have been composed as early as the second to fourth centuries.' These claims do not appear to have been retracted. The widely held assumption that 'scientific testing' would prove decisive is criticised in the contribution by Myriam Krutzsch (Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung, Berlin) and Ira Rabin (Bundesanstalt für Materialforschung und -prüfung, Berlin). Quite apart from significant methodological flaws, the scientific tests carried out on the *GJW* and *HLJ* fragments could never have provided reliable information about when the pieces of eighth-century papyrus were inscribed with the two relevant texts.

The Jesus' Wife Controversy invites reflection about the nature of forgeries – not only the means by which they are carried out but also the cultural contexts in which they are created and to which they are addressed. Christopher Jones (Emeritus Professor of Classics and History at Harvard University) provides an instructive analysis of a range of historic forgeries dating mainly from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Forgers generally respond to contemporary concerns, playing on current obsessions or anxieties in order to attract maximum publicity for their work. They tend to make careless mistakes, in which some see irrefutable evidence of forgery while others continue to maintain authenticity. They find it hard to provide plausible accounts of provenance.

In the final article of this sequence, Gesine Schenke Robinson offers a narrative account of the Jesus' Wife Controversy, raising critical questions about the way the issue has been handled. Included here is her initial unpublished critique of the Jesus' Wife papyrus, drafted shortly after it was first made public in September 2012. The article concludes by expressing the hope that claims made for the Jesus' Wife fragment will be formally retracted, and that the veil of secrecy over its provenance will be lifted.