

<b>Institution: Durham University</b>
<b>Unit of Assessment: Theology and Religion/33</b>
<b>Title of case study: The Case of the Forged Gospel Fragment (CS1)</b>
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact</b></p> <p>On 18 September 2012 a newly-discovered Coptic gospel fragment, purportedly dating from the 4<sup>th</sup> century, was announced in Rome. It generated worldwide publicity: for in it, Jesus refers to ‘my wife’. Three days later, Professor Francis Watson posted a short paper online, in which he used a form of compositional analysis which he has pioneered to argue that the fragment is most probably a recent forgery. Watson’s paper was very extensively read and reported, and widely regarded as conclusive. An imminent TV documentary on the fragment was promptly postponed indefinitely. Watson’s research transformed the way that this fragment was perceived by an international public. As such, it prevented a serious scholarly error from becoming lodged in the public consciousness. More importantly, it also stymied the process by which unwarranted conclusions about the origins of Christianity were being drawn from that error. It is an example of the power of a timely web-enabled intervention by a scholar in a fast-moving news story.</p>
<p><b>2. Underpinning research</b></p> <p>The key research insight underpinning this case study is that all early Christian gospel literature – ‘canonical’ and ‘apocryphal’ alike – is interrelated in certain specifiable ways. This inter-relatedness is a well-known phenomenon within the ‘synoptic gospels’ (Matthew, Mark, Luke), but Professor Francis Watson’s research breaks new ground in showing that it applies equally to non-canonical gospel literature. In this respect at least, the canonical / non-canonical boundary is irrelevant. Establishing this point required careful analysis of early gospel compositional practices, work that had been proceeding for some years and was eventually published as Watson 2013.</p> <p>Such compositional analysis played a major part in Watson’s comprehensive demonstration that the extracts from a so-called <i>Secret Gospel of Mark</i>, allegedly discovered in 1958, are a modern forgery (Watson 2010). The extracts had been composed out of genuine phrases from Mark’s Gospel, taken from their contexts and assembled collage-like to create a new narrative. There is no clear analogy to such a compositional practice in ancient gospel literature.</p> <p>This method of analysis was not conceived with the ‘Jesus’ Wife’ papyrus in mind, but Watson’s experience meant that he was able swiftly to apply that method to the new fragment. Watson 2012a demonstrated that in this case a similar collage technique had been employed, and that the fragment drew virtually its entire text from passages in the Coptic <i>Gospel of Thomas</i>. Such a technique is much more plausibly attributed to a modern writer, lacking facility in Coptic composition, than to an ancient one.</p> <p>An ‘Addendum’ (Watson 2012b) advanced a further argument for inauthenticity. The seven lines of the ‘Jesus’ Wife’ fragment each contain around 19 surviving letters, the beginnings and endings of each line being lost. Extensive sampling of 4th and 5th century Coptic gospel-related manuscripts indicated that line-lengths normally fell within the range of 16-28 letters. If the lines of an allegedly 4th century ‘Jesus’ Wife’ papyrus originally contained an additional 6-10 letters, this lost material could not have sufficed to make coherent sense out of the fragmentary sentences that remain. The text must therefore have been composed in its present incomplete form, designed to mimic a ‘lost original’ that in fact never existed.</p> <p>Watson took up his post at Durham University in 2008. The sections of Watson 2013 relating to Coptic texts (especially the <i>Gospel of Thomas</i> and the <i>Apocryphon of John</i>) were researched and drafted in 2009-10. Work on the (Greek) <i>Secret Gospel of Mark</i> was undertaken in 2009. On the basis of expertise developed in preparing this material, the research underpinning the online ‘Jesus’ Wife’ articles could be carried out very rapidly, following online publication of the previously unknown Coptic fragment on 18 September 2012. Watson 2012a and Watson 2012b were posted online on 21 and 23 September respectively (with revised versions on 26 September). The speed of this response was crucial for ensuring maximum impact.</p>
<p><b>3. References to the research</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Watson 2010: ‘Beyond Suspicion: On the Authorship of the Mar Saba Letter and the Secret Gospel of Mark’, <a href="#">Journal of Theological Studies 61, 128-70</a> (included in REF 2)</li> <li>2. Watson 2012a: ‘The Gospel of Jesus’ Wife: how a fake Gospel was composed’ <a href="#">Click here</a></li> <li>3. Watson 2012b: ‘Addendum: The End of the Line?’ (<a href="http://markgoodacre.org/Watson3.pdf">http://markgoodacre.org/Watson3.pdf</a>)</li> </ol>

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4. Watson 2013: *Gospel Writing: A Canonical Perspective*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.  
(included in REF 2)

Evidence for the quality of this research may be seen in the award to Watson of a Leverhulme Trust Research Project Grant ('Gospels Canonical and Noncanonical', 2007-10, value £102,853), and an AHRC Research Grant ('The Fourfold Gospel and its Rivals', 2012-16, value £345,900). Watson 2010 is published in a leading peer-reviewed journal, and Watson 2013 by a major North American publisher of scholarly theological literature: both are submitted in REF2.

#### 4. Details of the impact

This case study turns on an intervention by Watson in a fast-moving news story which had attracted considerable international interest. This intervention, drawing directly on his research findings, decisively changed the direction of the public debate. It provides a striking example of how a well-judged online intervention by a scholar is able to disrupt a set-piece media narrative.

The events took place in a matter of days in late September 2012. On 18 September, Dr Karen King of Harvard University held a press conference to present a newly-discovered papyrus fragment of unknown provenance, which she had received from an anonymous private collector. Dr King argued that it is a 4th century text containing a Coptic translation of a 2nd century Greek original, and that it represented the beliefs of one strand of 2nd-century Christianity. The fragment includes a phrase in which Jesus says the words: 'my wife'. This was the basis for the media interest, which Dr King actively cultivated, and which Harvard University supported by simultaneous online publication of the text and of King's detailed scholarly analysis. The press conference was held in Rome; pre-announcement interviews had been given to the *New York Times* and *Boston Globe* [1, 2a]. A major 50-minute television documentary had already been commissioned by the Smithsonian Channel and was scheduled for broadcast on 30 September.

As expected, the announcement precipitated instant worldwide media interest. Much of the initial scholarly response was cautiously welcoming of King's claims about the fragment's origins. Predictably, however, the pre-cultivated media storm did not dwell on her argument about 2nd-century Christianity. Instead, the focus was on a simpler, factual question: as the headline used by the *Washington Post*, the *Chicago Tribune*, Fox News, CBS News, the BBC and others put it, 'Did Jesus Have a Wife?' [2b] The Smithsonian Channel's claim that this fragment was 'one of the most significant discoveries of all time' [3a] is typical of the hyperbole that was being generated around the text, but also reflects a widespread (if debateable) view that evidence of Jesus' having been married would profoundly challenge or even disprove core Christian claims. Moreover, the apparent reference to Jesus as married fitted into a series of contemporary narratives, from the well-marketed conspiracy theories which argue exactly that, to more widespread modern debates about Christianity and human sexuality. King explicitly distanced herself from the conspiracy theories, but also stated that there is 'no reliable historical evidence' that Jesus was *unmarried*, and that 'this new gospel *doesn't* prove that Jesus was married, but it tells us that the whole question only came up as part of vociferous debates about sexuality and marriage'. [2c]

Accordingly, most of the media coverage immediately (if illogically) tied the story to the issue of clerical celibacy in the Roman Catholic Church: the *Chicago Tribune's* story, for example, contained the subheader 'So can Catholic priests get married now?' [2d] In other words, the story had given new energy to a range of underlying arguments. As a *New York Times* blogger noted on 21 September, the story took form at 'the intersection of Biblical archaeology and media sensationalism', and was formed in particular by the 'desire to refashion Jesus of Nazareth in our own image'. [3b]

On the same day (as the same *NYT* blogger noticed), Watson published Watson 2012a, which used compositional analysis to argue that the fragment was in fact a forgery. This paper was published by the widely-used and respected *NT Weblog* (<http://ntweblog.blogspot.co.uk/>) of Mark Goodacre (Duke University). A summary for non-specialists (lacking the Coptic text) was posted on 22 September, followed by Watson 2012b on 23 September. In addition, Watson wrote a 3000-word article for the non-specialist reader, 'Inventing Jesus' Wife' (posted 24 September), at the invitation of the 'Bible and Interpretation' website, which aims to showcase Biblical scholarship for a wider public. Here and in the initial paper, the earlier debunking of the 'Secret Gospel of Mark' is argued to be a case parallel to the new text, and reference is made to Watson 2010 as supporting

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evidence for the claim about compositional technique.

Watson's was the first significant voice to challenge the initial announcement, and his interventions rapidly changed the direction of the media storm. In the week beginning 21 September, he gave a series of interviews which led to major articles in the *Guardian*, then the *Boston Globe* (which had first broken the story), the *Weekly Standard* (USA), *Sonntagsblick* (Switzerland's most popular Sunday newspaper), and the *Tovima* Sunday colour supplement (Greece).[3c] A further interview, with Reuters' Rome correspondent, featured in Reuters' 28 September coverage of the argument that the fragment was forged.[4a] The substance of the *Guardian* and Reuters articles was widely reproduced in international coverage of the forgery claim. Coverage has been traced in news outlets from Austria, the Czech Republic, Dubai, France, Germany, India, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russia, Slovakia, South Korea, Spain and Turkey. In every case, Watson's argument that the text was forged marked a decisive turning-point in the news story. On 28 September, the Vatican endorsed the view that the fragment was forged; but before then (and in Reuters' coverage of the Vatican statement) the argument was traced back exclusively or primarily to Watson.

A report from the Romanian news outlet *Ziare* is typical of many others: 'Recently a professor at Harvard University claimed to have discovered a papyrus which said that Jesus Christ was married. Now an expert on the New Testament says that this evidence is just a modern forgery. Professor Francis Watson from Durham University has published a paper showing that [the] fragments of papyri contain the Coptic text of the Gospel of Thomas...'[4b]

The Austrian daily *Kurier*, under the headline 'Text about Mrs. Jesus only a fake? A researcher from England questions the recently discovered papyrus', wrote: 'The English scholar Francis Watson, of the University of Durham, is convinced, however, that the papyrus is a modern forgery. Watson claimed that all sentence fragments on the sheet are copied and rearranged from those found in the Coptic Gospel of Thomas.' [4c]

The online service of the Russian television station *Rossiya 1* wrote: 'British scholar Francis Watson has denied the authenticity of the papyrus, which allegedly contains new details of the earthly life of Jesus Christ. After analyzing the text, the professor at the University of Durham has concluded that it is "virtually certain" that the fragment which caused widespread debate in academic and public circles is not genuine.' [4d]

The Italian newspaper *Lettera43* had a simpler response: 'Elementare, Watson.' [4e] And by the time the *Weekly Standard* published its interview with Watson on 8 October, the headline was damning: 'Jesus' Ex-Wife'. [4f]

Since the publication of Watson's papers, no significant challenge to the forgery argument has been forthcoming. In consequence the story was virtually dead within two weeks of the original announcement. The clearest sign of this was that the Smithsonian Channel's planned TV documentary was first delayed, and then, on 1 October, deferred indefinitely, with the channel's general manager citing 'the academic response to the initial announcement'. A fresh broadcast date was promised within weeks [3a], but as at October 2013 nothing further has been heard, beyond a credit on the director's personal website.[5]

The impact, therefore, was a matter not only of publicly correcting a very public scholarly error, but also of cutting the ground out from underneath the frenzy of media speculation and misinformation which had been built on that error.

The scale of the impact was undoubtedly global, but in its nature this cannot be precisely quantified. Substantial articles on Watson's intervention were carried in mass-circulation newspapers around the world: for example, *Tovima* has a circulation of 130,000; *Sonntagsblick*, around 250,000.[6a, 6b] The actual download figures for the online articles are perhaps more significant. During the period 21-30 September, when the controversy was live, Watson 2012a was downloaded 20,335 times, and the later papers on the NT Weblog a further 4,885 times (around 100 downloads per hour); there were a further 3,900 downloads in October. In addition, the article 'Inventing Jesus' Wife' was downloaded around 4,000 times by the end of October, giving an overall figure in the region of 33,000.[6c] These figures indicate both the very high level of public interest in a controversial new gospel fragment, and the impact of scholarly but accessible work that showed the claims made about it to be without foundation.

Responses within the blogosphere give a more qualitative sense of how Watson's intervention had

changed the story. His arguments did not, of course, command universal agreement: in the world of new media such a thing is not to be had. The responses from widely-read bloggers on Biblical topics ranged from scepticism ('Watson appears to have built a coalition of naysayers') to hyperbolic praise ('Watson offers a piece with the general audience in mind ... it's brilliant. Seriously brilliant. Inassailably brilliant'). Naturally, many bloggers hijacked the story to suit their own pre-existing views ('Watson notes ... that this is not the first time that fake manuscripts have surfaced that promote left-wing politics'). [7] The point is not that Watson's intervention settled the debate online, but that he decisively changed its terms. His argument that the text is a forgery was acknowledged on all sides as the key question.

The overall public benefit is clear. A carefully planned campaign based on mainstream print, broadcast and online media outlets not only publicised a newly-discovered text, but also persuaded a worldwide audience that that text put received views of the origin of Christianity into question. Yet the application of appropriate scholarly procedures showed that the text is most probably a modern forgery, and this claim was communicated in an accessible form to a worldwide audience through the timely use of online publication. It is a public good that misinformation in an area of such deep concern to many should be exposed as such. More generally, as the owner of the 'Bible and Interpretation' website wrote in personal correspondence: 'It is essential that biblical scholars disseminate their research to a public interested in biblical issues. ... What we do and say is important to the public at large. [Watson's] article about this fragment is a perfect example. ... We all need to maximize the power of the internet.'

#### 5. Sources to corroborate the impact

1. 'Harvard professor identifies scrap of papyrus suggesting some early Christians believed Jesus was married', *Boston Globe*, 18/09/2012. <http://tinyurl.com/9jyqxqk>
2. Media coverage considering whether Jesus had a wife:
  - a) 'A Faded Piece of Papyrus Refers to Jesus' Wife', *New York Times*, 18/09/2012. <http://tinyurl.com/99oou32>
  - b) 'Did Jesus have a Wife?', *Washington Post*, 18/09/2012. <http://tinyurl.com/92w54b6>
  - c) 'HDS Scholar Announces Existence of a New Early Christian Gospel From Egypt', Harvard News Office, 18/09/2012. <http://tinyurl.com/8rwzafn>
  - d) '5 Questions and Answers About Jesus' "Wife"', *Chicago Tribune*, 20/09/2012. <http://tinyurl.com/lztjewj>
3. Media reports casting doubt on the authenticity of the fragment:
  - a) 'Jesus' wife' documentary broadcast delayed amid doubts', *BBC*, 02/10/2012 <http://tinyurl.com/92ha6st>
  - b) 'The Jesus Conspiracy', *New York Times*, 21<sup>st</sup> September 2012. <http://tinyurl.com/nzswewh>
  - c) 'Scholars Begin to Weigh In On "Gospel of Jesus' Wife"', *Boston Globe*, 26/2012. <http://tinyurl.com/kw4yvpj>
4. Media reports agreeing with Watson:
  - a) 'Gospel of Jesus' wife' fragment is a fake, Vatican says', *Reuters*, 28/09/ 2012. <http://tinyurl.com/qynrqvu>
  - b) 'Ce spun expertii despre papirusul care sustine ca Iisus a fost casatorit', *Ziare*, 22/09/2012. <http://tinyurl.com/loxmpog>
  - c) 'Text über Mrs. Jesus nur ein Fake?', *Kurier*, 23/09/ 2012. <http://tinyurl.com/pbhff/7a>
  - d) 'Британский учёный опроверг подлинность папируса, рассказывающего о жене Христа' *Вести.Ru*, 24/09/2012. <http://www.vesti.ru/doc.html?id=915038?cid=2161>
  - e) Gesù, matrimonio lampo', *Lettera43*, 24/09/2012 <http://tinyurl.com/ov2cntb>
  - f) 'Jesus' Ex-Wife', *Weekly Standard*, 01/10/2012. <http://tinyurl.com/92okeam>
5. Director's personal website as at 01/10/2012 <http://www.pbshowfolio.com/andywebb1>
6. Correspondence and media reports surrounding this issue:
  - a) Email from *Tovima* staff writer, 25/09/2012.
  - b) European Journalism Centre report. [http://ejc.net/media\\_landscapes/switzerland](http://ejc.net/media_landscapes/switzerland)
  - c) Emails from NT Weblog and 'Bible and Interpretation' webmasters, 05/11/2012
7. Media reports about the aftermath of this debate:
  - a) <http://tinyurl.com/nlutd6a> b) <http://tinyurl.com/o832q5w> c) <http://tinyurl.com/nw89sws>