

# Response to Leo Depuydt, “The Alleged *Gospel of Jesus’s Wife*: Assessment and Evaluation of Authenticity.”\*

Karen L. King

*Harvard Divinity School*

Although the production of *GJW* in modernity (“forgery”) is a hypothesis worthy of careful consideration, the arguments of Depuydt are not persuasive. I address only substantive issues here.

That newly discovered texts have resonance with “modern theological issues” (175) is not proof of forgery but in fact is quite common; *Gos. Thom.* is itself an example. The reader is left to surmise why mention of Jesus’s marital status is proof of modern forgery rather than a product of well-documented early Christian debates over sexual ethics. Moreover, two of the issues he suggests as possible motives for forgery (“the tradition that all Jesus’s apostles or disciples were male” and “the virgin conception and birth of Jesus”) are not topics in *GJW*. These points are also inaccurate as presented: Women are referred to as disciples and apostles already in first- and second-century C.E. literature that eventually became canonical (e.g., Acts 9:36; 11:26; Rom 16:7). That “Jesus owes his life 100% to Mary” (176) is an understanding of human reproduction not found anywhere in antiquity (or modernity). That the female contributes matter to the child is, however, a position found widely in ancient medical and philosophical literature, and indeed this is the Catholic position regarding Jesus’s birth from Mary. Moreover, not only Catholic teaching, but many Christian groups—both ancient and modern—represent Jesus as a celibate virgin and also oppose the ordination of women, so specifically anti-Catholic animus seems excluded in any case. Finally, the notion that the forger confused the Immaculate Conception (the doctrine that Mary’s conception was

\* An advance copy of my critical edition published above was given to Professor Depuydt before he submitted his essay, and I was then shown a copy of the final version of his essay.

without original sin) with the Virgin Birth seems to arise only from Depuydt's own (corrected) confusion, not from any evidence in the *GJW* fragment.

The easy dismissal of the relevance of Raman, FT-IR, and radiocarbon testing results is simplistic (175). Moreover, the undocumented reference to "forged paintings . . . on an old piece of wood" (175) would be better served by documented examples of established forgeries on old papyrus with testing results similar to those of *GJW*. I am unaware of any such case.

The mysterious article allegedly faking a Demotic text of *Gos. Thom.* (177–78) is irrelevant to the question of the production of *GJW*, and the case is not even comparable, especially given the absence of an actual artifact.

The grammatical "blunders" Depuydt posits are the result of incorrect analysis or can be accounted for as examples of known, if relatively rare, native Coptic usage:

1) The suggestion that the antecedent of  $\overline{\text{MOC}}$  (*GJW* →3) is  $\text{MAPIAM}$  and the conclusion that this constitutes a "third grammatical blunder" (184) is an unnecessary and highly unlikely hypothesis. In such a case, the normal explanation is that the antecedent is lost in the lacuna.

2) Similarly the problem of a supposedly negated aorist ( $\text{MAP}\epsilon\text{-}$ ) followed by an affirmative aorist ( $\text{WACI-}$ ) in line →6 arises because Depuydt has incorrectly analyzed the line (185–86).  $\text{MAP}\epsilon\text{-}$  is the normal Sahidic jussive and  $\text{WACI}\epsilon$  the infinitive, forming a standard non-durative sentence (see my article above, 142, including n. 52). Thus the "grammatical monstrosity" he posits arises from this error of analysis and cannot be attributed to the author/scribe of *GJW*.

3) The two other alleged "grammatical blunders" (187–89) are attested in ancient sources and thus entirely possible for a native Coptic speaker (see my article above, 139–40, including nn. 44–45, for examples of the absence of the direct object marker in relation to *GJW* →1, and 142 for a discussion of a zero-determined generic noun as the antecedent of a relative in *GJW* →6).

4) The usage of  $\text{TAXIME}$  and  $\text{CIME}$  is discussed in my article (141 n. 50).

In short, what Depuydt regards as "grammatical blunders" that prove the *GJW* fragment is a forgery are either attested in ancient Coptic literature whose "authenticity" is unquestioned or are the products of incorrect analysis. These phenomena are therefore not (unequivocal) evidence of forgery.

Regarding the two "orthographic facts" he discusses as evidence of forgery: The first suggestion—that the epsilon in  $\text{WACI}\epsilon$  (→6) is written over an iota (173)—is not based upon visual observation of the actual fragment nor upon microscopic or spectral imaging of it. Use of these techniques does not evidence overwriting here, although other cases of overwriting are clear (see above, 136). This hypothesis seems to have arisen in an attempt to substantiate an otherwise nonexistent parallel between *GJW* →6 and *Gos. Thom.* 45. The second observation, that the letters  $\text{TAX}$  (*GJW* →4) appear dark (thus allegedly emphasizing "My wife"; 174), does not take into account that the letters  $\text{NA}$  immediately below (*GJW* →5) are even darker. Indeed, the irregular optical density throughout the fragment

suggests blotted ink (a well-attested phenomenon) rather than an entirely unique and “hilarious” use of bold lettering (174).

The meaningfulness of statistical analysis for such a limited data sample is problematic for me to assess but in any case rests on a premise that “every single phrase of the Text [*GJW*] can be found in the *Gospel of Thomas*” (178). That premise, however, requires an inadequate dismissal of the many differences between the two works.<sup>2</sup> More crucially, even if Depuydt’s conclusions from the statistical analysis hold, this method does not establish that *GJW* was produced in modernity rather than composed in antiquity, when we know *Gos. Thom.* was circulating in Coptic.

Depuydt’s hypothesis that *GJW* was fabricated from patchwork extracts from *Gos. Thom.* basically comes down to an argument for literary dependence. Two questions are pertinent: 1) How close are the parallels? 2) Are they better accounted for by modern fabrication or ancient compositional practices?

1) The closest parallel to *GJW* →1 is *Gos. Thom.* 55 (but not 101, which has  $\alpha\eta\ \eta\alpha\epsilon\iota$  not  $\eta\alpha\epsilon\iota\ \alpha\eta$ ). The distinctive element in *Gos. Thom.* 55 (“my true mother”), however, is not in *GJW*.<sup>3</sup> The sentence “she is able to be my disciple” (*GJW* →5) is not negative, as are *Gos. Thom.* 55 and 101, and the pronoun refers to a female, not male, person. These differences suggest a topic (who is worthy of being Jesus’s disciple) common to both works, but one that was also widespread in the Jesus tradition and not precisely parallel to *Gos. Thom.* The sentences “The disciples said to Jesus” (*GJW* →2) and “Jesus said to them” (*GJW* →4) seem unremarkable in a dialogue between Jesus and his disciples, and do not in my mind require positing direct literary dependence. That isolated lexical items (i.e.,  $\alpha\rho\eta\alpha$ ,  $\sigma\upsilon\gamma\gamma\iota\kappa\omega\eta$ ) are present in both works — without any similarity in the topics under discussion — does not signal literary dependence. Similarly, to say “Mary is worthy of something” (*GJW* →3) has an entirely different meaning from saying “The world is not worthy of him” (*Gos. Thom.* 56, 111), even if both concern worthiness. The only commonality between *GJW* →6 and *Gos. Thom.* 45 is the word  $\rho\omega\mu\epsilon$  (human being); neither the grammatical construction nor the meaning have anything in common. *GJW* →7 and *Gos. Thom.* 30 both have the phrase “I exist/dwell with” someone (her or him, respectively), but it would be hard to imagine that the topic of *Gos. Thom.* 30 (the number of gods) fits the concerns of *GJW*. Depuydt offers no parallel in *Gos. Thom.* to the following  $\epsilon\tau\tau\epsilon\ \eta\lbracket$ . The term  $\tau\alpha\gamma\eta\mu\epsilon$  (my wife; *GJW* →4) is not found in *Gos. Thom.* This summary analysis demonstrates similarities in the topic (worthiness to be a disciple) and in some phrasing, but also significant differences in vocabulary, grammatical forms (esp. *GJW* →6), and meaning. My conclusion is that Depuydt’s 100%

<sup>2</sup> Depuydt writes, for example: “The deviations do not in the least affect the striking individuality of the phrases as distinct from all other possible phrases of the Coptic language” (180). In the line-by-line analysis, he himself repeatedly notes that not every word or phrase in the text comes from *GJW*.

<sup>3</sup> For further discussion, see my article above, 144.

assurance of the dependence of *GJW* on *Gos. Thom.* results not from careful comparison but from his own premise of forgery.<sup>4</sup>

2) Even if *GJW* could be proved to be literarily dependent upon *Gos. Thom.* (and/or other texts), this would not necessarily indicate fabrication in the modern period. The similarities and differences between them can be accounted for with regard to literary practices that are well-documented in the Mediterranean world of Late Antiquity where streams of communication and modes of composition included both oral and literary aspects. The importance of memory in oral and written composition and transmission, the pedagogical emphasis upon imitation of proper style, the literary representation of a person's character and beliefs by inventing speeches and dialogue, and citational practices aiming more for the gist than for word-for-word accuracy all played a role in the compositional practices of antiquity and are specifically documented in the "redactional" activity and outright inventions of the early Jesus tradition. Consider the literary dependence among the Synoptic Gospels, the fancy of the infancy gospels, the invention in the correspondence between Jesus and Abgar, or the mixing of known and unknown sayings attributed to Jesus in *Gos. Thom.*, *Gos. Mary*, or other non-canonical gospels. The fact that *GJW* offers something startlingly new is not itself startling or new. Recent discoveries from Egypt have offered evidence of notable diversity and creativity among ancient Christians. More crucially, the topics of *GJW* fit neatly within early Christians debates over sexual ethics: Is marriage and reproduction entirely acceptable for baptized Christians or is virginity so far and away the better choice that mothers and wives cannot be considered to be fully disciples of Jesus? That a celibate Jesus came to dominate Christian tradition does not make it unimaginable that some ancient Christians could have composed such a dialogue as is found in *GJW*. It is indeed methodologically unproblematic to account for the production of the *GJW* within the literary, social, and theological milieu of the early centuries of Christianity.

In conclusion, Depuydt's essay does not offer any substantial evidence or persuasive argument, let alone unequivocal surety, that the *GJW* fragment is a modern fabrication (forgery). Should the fragment be proved on other grounds to be such, a few of these observations may, however, be useful in hypothesizing how it may have been done.

<sup>4</sup> For example, regarding *GJW* □5, Depuydt writes: "The conclusion is obvious. If just about every word and phrase in the Text [*GJW*] was taken from the *Gospel of Thomas* as I am convinced it was, then the masculine 'he (will be able)' must have been changed into the feminine and the negation must have been removed" (185). The "obvious" conclusion here, however, follows only if one accepts his premise. The analysis is not evidence of forgery but results only from the premise of forgery.