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## Five big questions about the 'Jesus' wife' discovery

by Daniel Burke by David Gibson by Religion News Service

In a surprise announcement that seemed scripted by the novelist Dan Brown, a Harvard professor revealed an ancient scrap of papyrus Tuesday that purports to refer to Jesus' wife.

The so-called "Gospel of Jesus' Wife" presents a dialogue between Jesus and his disciples, said Karen King, a well-respected historian of early Christianity at Harvard Divinity School.

The fourth-century fragment says, "Jesus said to them, 'My wife ...,'" according to King. The rest of the sentence is cut off. The fragment also says "she will be able to be my disciple," according to King.

The discovery that some ancient Christians thought Jesus had a wife could shake up centuries-old Christian traditions, King suggested.

But even King acknowledged that questions remain about the receipt-sized scrap, which contains just 33 words and incomplete sentences. Here are five of the biggest questions.

### Where did the papyrus come from?

We don't know. King says that "nothing is known about the circumstances of its discovery," an admission that has raised red flags for other scholars.

King speculates the fragment might have been tossed in an ancient garbage heap by someone who objected to the idea of Jesus being married. Christians fiercely debated celibacy and marriage in the first centuries after Christ's death.

The papyrus now belongs to an anonymous collector who asked King to analyze it. King says three scholars have determined that the fragment is not a forgery, but that further tests will be conducted on the

ink. The scholar also says that she will press the fragment's anonymous owner to come forward.

### **Does it prove that Jesus was married?**

No. King says the fragment is a fourth-century translation of a second-century Greek text. It's not quite old enough to prove that Jesus was married, King says -- only that early Christians discussed it.

"The earliest and most historically reliable evidence is entirely silent about Jesus's marital status," King says.

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King also acknowledged that Jesus might have been speaking figuratively when he referred to "my wife." After all, the fragment is just 33 words long, with incomplete sentences and very little context.

### **What do other ancient texts say about Jesus being married?**

The Bible, of course, says nothing about Jesus marrying, though New Testament writers occasionally used the metaphor of the church and God's people as the "bride of Christ."

Some of the Gnostic gospels -- ancient texts unearthed in the 20th century that are not included in the Christian canon -- suggest Jesus had an intimate relationship with Mary Magdalene. The apocryphal Gospel of Philip, for example, says that Jesus kissed Mary, and loved her more than the apostles.

But the Gnostics were often intimate in nonsexual ways. In the Gospel of Philip, for instance, Christians greet each other with kisses to convey the sense that they are a spiritual family, according to scholars.

### **Will this change contemporary Christianity?**

King said her discovery could cause believers to rethink their assumptions about early Christian debates over marriage, celibacy and family. Those early arguments led to contemporary practices like the Roman Catholic Church's all-male, mostly unmarried priesthood.

Perhaps King is correct -- almost everything is open for debate in Christianity these days. After all, Christians are still arguing over homosexuality, the role of women in ministry and whether priests should marry.

But how many overhyped archaeological discoveries have proven less than world-changing under careful examination?

Remember the Gospel of Judas? He didn't betray Jesus. Or did he?

"The Gospel of Judas was so packed with opaque Gnostic metaphor that scholars are still debating whether it portrays Judas as a hero or a villain," said Gary Manning, an associate professor of New Testament studies at Biola University in La Mirada, Calif.

The so-called James ossuary then? As Roland Meynet, a biblical scholar at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, said Wednesday, "that made a lot of noise on newspapers, but was then revealed as a fraud."

Even if the new papyrus "were proved true, it would mean that there is a new apocryphal text from that time, as there are many," Meynet said. "It won't reopen the debate and, anyway, we must wait for verification and be very cautious until we know the origin of the fragment."

### **How will the Vatican respond?**

If the Vatican's new communications team is as good as they say it is, Rome will stay silent.

The Vatican and its media-savvy friends in Opus Dei said all they needed or wanted to say about Jesus' marital status during the whole *Da Vinci Code* saga a few years ago. They will likely let scholarly surrogates debate this one, while the hierarchy sits on the sidelines.

The Vatican insists there's nothing new to debate about the gender and celibacy requirements for its priesthood. It's unlikely that a business card-sized scrap of papyrus of dubious origin is going to change that.

Or perhaps Pope Benedict XVI, himself a renowned scholar, will indirectly enter the fray over the fragment. He just finished his third and final installment on the historical Jesus. It will be published around Christmas, and will likely be as well received as the previous two, and sell as strongly.

[Alessandro Speciale contributed to this report from Rome.]

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