

Was Jesus Married?

This is SCIENCE IN THE NEWS, in VOA Special English. I'm Mario Ritter.

And I'm Faith Lapidus. Today, we tell about a debate over words written on an ancient piece of papyrus. The wording suggests that some early Christians believed Jesus was married. We also tell about an ancient statue of a man. Scientists now say the statue was made from a rock that may have come from outer space.

Scientists and religious experts are debating the value of a small piece of papyrus that found its way to a researcher in the United States. The piece of paper raises an ages-old question about Jesus, whose life and teachings form the heart of Christianity. Could Jesus have been married?

Harvard Divinity School Professor Karen King recently explained the Coptic wording on the papyrus. She says the words mean that Jesus called Mary Magdalene, an early Christian, “my wife.” She says he did this while speaking to his disciples, or followers.

Professor King adds that, in another part of the papyrus, Jesus says, “She will be my disciple.” And she says other wording on it means, “I dwell with her.” This sentence may suggest that Jesus lived with Mary Magdalene.

The possibilities suggested by Karen King's work are important for many Christians. Roman Catholic Church clergy members are banned from marriage and having sexual relations. The official Vatican newspaper, L'Osservatore Romano, dismissed the papyrus as a fake, a falsified document. Catholics are not alone in believing that Jesus was sexually pure and never married. Some Protestant groups also condemn the idea of a married Jesus.

Over time, however, some non-traditional students of Christianity's Bible have suggested that he was married. They say the most likely person to have been his wife would have been Mary of Magdala, also called Mary Magdalene. Except for Jesus' mother, she is the woman whose name appears most often in the Bible's New Testament.

For centuries, Biblical experts believed that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute. As she grew older, she was said to have regretted selling sex for money, and then began to follow Jesus. She is often represented that way in works of art and Christian studies.

But many twentieth century experts rejected the idea that Mary Magdalene was once a prostitute. They say there is no evidence in the Bible to prove it.

Professor King reported her findings at a recent conference on Coptic studies in Rome. Some experts welcomed the report as a possible addition to knowledge about early Christians. The professor herself says firmly that the paper does not prove Jesus was married. But she praised the fact that, in her opinion, it shows that people in the fourth century were talking about Jesus.

Her report on the papyrus also raised questions about its authenticity. Is the piece of paper really one thousand six hundred years old? Professor King is a top expert on the Coptic language. But is her interpretation of the wording correct? Or, could the papyrus be a fake? No chemical testing of the writing has been made yet. Some experts in the study of ancient papers said it would be difficult or impossible to falsify. But other experts question whether it is real. Or they say that at the least, the papyrus should not have been made public until its history is known.

The much talked-about papyrus is about the size of a business card, measuring just eight centimeters by four centimeters. It is kept now between two pieces of a protective glass. Professor King says its owner is a collector of ancient papers who asked her to study and translate it. The collector told her that he does not want to be identified, and is unwilling to provide details about how the papyrus came to him.

The small piece of paper has just thirty-three words, written in fourteen lines of black ink. The words probably developed from Greek before being expressed in Egyptian Coptic.

Darrell Bock is an expert on New Testament studies at the Dallas Theological Seminary in Texas. Professor Bock says he believes that Karen King has done much of what she can to establish her case. But he does not believe the papyrus is very important. He says it must pass several examinations before it can be confirmed as authentic. And, he says, even if it is proven real, it is not very important.

"I don't think that this text is that significant. There are so many hurdles for it to get over. You've got to show that it's authentic, and there are real questions about whether that text is authentic."

Professor Bock expresses other concerns about the papyrus. For example, he says, there is not enough writing on it to establish the real meaning of the words. He says the word "wife" may not mean "wife" in the traditional way. And, he says the papyrus is just one text showing that Jesus might have been married.

"And then you've got the fact that this is one text out of many, many, many texts that don't indicate that Jesus was married. And I think had Jesus been married, the early tradition about Jesus would have reflected that."

Professor Bock says that if Jesus were married, he does not think it would be a problem for Christianity. Instead, he says, it would have shown that Jesus took part in human traditions, just as he was actively involved in human life in other ways.

Recently, a Protestant clergyman in Maryland asked friends if they believe Jesus was married. Most of them told him that it made little difference to their beliefs.

The Reverend Tim Tutt says he does not think that the question will be answered. He thinks there is not enough evidence, and that the words may be misunderstood.

"I don't think we'll ever be able to prove (that Jesus was married). That papyrus is so limited. It's just a fragment. It could have been a metaphor. It could be someone's editorialization. I don't know that we'll prove anything conclusively. But what it really does is allow my theological imagination to wonder."

The clergyman is happy to think about the mystery.

German researchers have shown evidence that an ancient Buddhist statue of a man may have been carved from a meteorite. The researchers say the meteorite fell from space thousands of years ago in what is now eastern Siberia and Mongolia.

Their report was published in the journal *Meteoritics & Planetary Science*. Elmar Buchner of Stuttgart University led the research.

It is not known when the statue was made. But some estimates say the rock-like material fell from the sky at least ten thousand years ago.

The researchers call the statue the "iron man". It weighs more than ten and one half kilograms and is about twenty four centimeters tall. The iron man is holding an unidentified object in his left hand. A swastika is cut into the middle of the statue. The swastika is a centuries-old sign of good luck in Buddhist philosophy. The statue may represent the god Vaisravana, the Buddhist king of the North, known as Jambhala in Tibet.

The researchers believe the iron man may have been carved in the Bon culture of the eleventh century in what is now Tibet. No one is sure how the statue was discovered. But a research team may have taken it to Germany after a trip to Tibet in nineteen thirty-eight and nineteen thirty-nine.

The noted zoologist Ernst Schafer led the exploration. He was sent to Tibet by Germany's Nazi Party. His team reportedly was looking for the starting place of the Aryan race, which the Nazis believed to be greater than any other race. But no one knows for sure that that was the reason, either. One unconfirmed story says Ernst Schafer used scientific expeditions to hunt animals.

The iron man found his way to the city of Munich. It remained for years in a private collection. But a public sale made the statue available for study in two thousand seven.

At first, the Elmar Buchner team was permitted only to test pieces from the outside of the statue. But as time passed, they were able to take samples from the inside. The researchers identified the material as ataxite, an iron meteorite with high levels of nickel. The world has only a few samples of this kind of material.

The Buchner team says a number of cultures used meteorite iron to create knives and jewelry, including carvings of birds. The researchers also said many ancient cultures worshipped rocks from space.

Elmar Buchner says the iron man is the only known human figure carved into a meteorite. He says, "If our estimation of its age is correct and it is nearly a thousand years old, it could be invaluable."