Another “Fake” Or Just a Problem of Method: What Francis Watson’s Analysis Does to Papyrus Köln 255?

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Papyrus Köln 255 Verso
(a reasonable reconstruction)

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<th>Source of image: <a href="http://www-user.uni-bremen.de/~wie/Egerton/egerkoln-v.jpg">http://www-user.uni-bremen.de/~wie/Egerton/egerkoln-v.jpg</a></th>
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<th>Verbal parallels</th>
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Analysis

The forger has taken Jh 5.46 as the basis of his composition. Lines two to four in Köln 255 are copied directly from the Gospel of John with two minor modifications: line three has changed the tense of the verb (ETE→ΣΑΤΕ, or from 2nd pl imperf ind act to 2nd pl aor ind act), and the word order in line four has been changed by placing the word ΓΑΡ after ΕΜΟΥ rather than before it. Both changes are achievable even with a limited knowledge of the Greek language.
Above and below this nucleus the forger has drawn his exemplary from interesting sources. Line five takes the words ΤΩΙ ΠΑΤΡΙ ΥΜΕΙΣ from Jh 4.21–22, whilst changing their grammatical cases in one instance for each (ΥΜΕΙΣ→ΥΜΩΝ, or from nominative to genitive; ΤΩΙ ΠΑΤΡΙ→ΤΟΙΣ ΠΑΤΡΑΣΙΝ, or from singular to plural). That the forger used this particular passage as his exemplar is further strengthened by the fact that he copied the line break as well:

μοι, γύναι, ὅτι ἐρχεται ὑπάτρε ὅτε οὔτε ἐν τῷ ὀρεί τούτῳ οὔτε ἐν Ἱεροσολύμῳ προσκυνήσετε τῷ πατρί. (22.) ὑμεῖς προσκυνεῖτε οὐκ οἴδατε· ὑμεῖς προσκυνοῦμεν οἴδαμεν,

This further implies that instead of using ancient manuscripts or the various printed books containing the Greek text of the Gospel of John the forger utilized modern tools, specifically Thesaurus Linguae Graecae (http://www.tlg.uci.edu/), a fact that lets us pinpoint the composition of Köln 255 into late XX CE at the earliest.

One further observation for line five is the curious shape of the letter Y as illustrated below:

The forger seems to have made a mistake and begun to write the letter H (as in HMΩΝ) but subsequently corrected this into the letter Y. For the sixth line I could hardly decide which of the letters epsilon the forger had emulated, and the other epsilonss in John 4.22 could have been chosen as well.

These considerations leave only the first line without verbal parallels. Since a forger could have as well as not used other ancient writings as his sources (and I had a hard time deciding which of the numerous instances of ΤΟΙΣ and ΑΥΤΟΥ I should choose from the Gospel of John) it seemed shrewd to widen the scope of my investigation. Thanks to modern tools like TLG with its powerful custom searches, the
task of finding a match proved to be trivial. The words ΤΟΙΣ ΥΠ ΑΥΤΟΥ were likely lifted from the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* 9.6 where they occur exactly as in Köln 255. Additionally, they are followed by the word ΛΟΓΟΙΣ, and it is certainly no coincidence that the three letters that begin the second line of Köln 255 also happen to be ΟΙΣ.

**Discussion**

Following Francis Watson’s method of distinguishing between authentic and fake passages (http://markgoodacre.org/Watson.pdf) Papyrus Köln 255 Verso is found to be fake.

I have chosen Papyrus Köln 255 for this exercise of Watsonian analysis because it is a fragment for which we know the context of: this papyrus is the lower part of the first fragment of Papyrus Egerton 2 (see Wieland Willker’s excellent page with pictures and more at http://www-user.uni-bremen.de/~wie/Egerton/Egerton_home.html). Consequently, it should be clear that the analysis presented above is not a real analysis of the fragment but illustrates the perils of using Watson’s method when too much of the contextual information is missing. As such, the choice of Papyrus Köln 255 prevents people from claiming that my mock analysis is somehow “real” or “true”, and strengthens rather than diminishes the usability of Watson’s method in distinguishing authentic passages from fake ones. To be clear: *Papyrus Köln 255 is not “fake”*. The problem lies in the method which makes it look like a fake.

Based on the analysis of Papyrus Köln 255 I have provided, I suggest that Watson’s method fails to distinguish between authentic and fake passages. If it does not work—one could also claim that the problem lies in the fact that it works *too well* i.e. it turns almost every fragment into a “fake”—why is that so? One of the reasons was pointed out by Michael Peppard (http://www.commonwealmagazine.org/blog/?p=20919): Watson’s argument is a *non sequitur* at heart i.e. the conclusion of patchwork/forgery does not follow from the observation of verbal similarity between the *Gospel of Jesus’ Wife* and the *Gospel of Thomas*. It seems to me that Watson has arrived at his conclusions by backwards reasoning. If the *Gospel of Jesus’ Wife* is a (modern) forgery—so the train of thought goes—then it is reasonable to think that the (modern) forger composed the text out of bits and pieces of genuine ancient writings. And if the text is such a patchwork, it should be possible to point out the bits and pieces that were utilized in its composition. The logic in this chain, however, is not a two-way street, and one cannot travel it backwards. To do so, is to *affirm the consequent*, one of the logical fallacies listed by Aristotle, and a variant of a *non sequitur*. 
Or, a bit more formally:

P1: if forgery, then patchwork
P2: if patchwork, then possible to point out verbal parallels
O: it is possible to point out verbal parallels
C1: thus, patchwork
C2: thus, forgery

These two conclusions do not follow from the premises.

Above I was consistently putting the word “modern” in parentheses. Another reason why Watson’s method fails (or succeeds too well) is the circular nature of his reasoning. Though he keeps the possibility of the Gospel of Jesus’ Wife being an ancient patchwork open, he favours the possibility of modern forgery, not in the least because he brings out the Secret Gospel of Mark as a parallel case. In an earlier article (http://www.dur.ac.uk/resources/theology.religion/SecretGospelofMark.pdf) Watson has argued, partly using the method under scrutiny here, that the Secret Gospel of Mark is a modern forgery purported by Morton Smith. A tendency to favour modern origins for disputed manuscripts could explain the non-reflectiveness with which his method is put to use. In many cases scholars who observe verbal parallels between different texts explicate their criteria for drawing conclusions, especially strong conclusions like Watson’s. The criteria for establishing the highest level of confidence for literary dependence (and Watson’s conclusion necessitates a literary dependence) range from three rare words common to both texts (Lehtipuu) up to sixteen (!) subsequent words common to both texts (McIver & Carroll). It is interesting to note here that it is the rare words in the Gospel of Jesus’ Wife (“wife”, “swell”) for which no verbal parallels are found (note that Watson’s updated essay changes the reading of the word from “swell” to “bring” which allows him to find a parallel from the Gospel of Thomas).

Watson does state in the end of his essay that the words in the Gospel of Jesus’ Wife “derive” from the Gospel of Thomas “virtually in their entirety”, which makes the literary dependence “certain” (p. 7). Yet taking the step from observing verbal parallels to concluding that the observed text “derives” from these same verbal parallels is only possible if one begs the question or, in the words of Andrew Bernhard: “there is a distinct difference between demonstrating that [the Gospel of Jesus’ Wife] could
have been composed using [the Gospel of Thomas] and that it actually was” (http://www.gospels.net/gjw/GJW-GThRelationship.pdf). This is evident in Watson’s analysis of the first line where the text from the Gospel of Jesus’ Wife is traced to two different lines in the Gospel of Thomas, and the line breaks are observed to match with Thomas as well. This line of reasoning works only if the modern origin of the composition is taken as a premise. Lifting two different parts of sentences and placing them together sounds plausible only if done by a modern forger, who was not terribly conversant in Coptic—a notion that Watson presents as the conclusion of his analysis. The argument concerning line breaks—though it is technically correct to note that they are located wherever the fragmentary manuscript happens to break off—likewise presupposes the modern origin of the text. If we could acquire more fragments of this page or if we had the whole page available to us, the line breaks would naturally turn out to be somewhere else. In other words, if the Gospel of Jesus’ Wife is not a modern forgery, the fact that the line breaks happen to match where they currently do is only a coincidence. By which criteria does Watson distinguish between coincidences and deliberate actions of the author? We do not know. Yet such details are important if, one day, we will want to use Watson’s method in successfully distinguishing between authentic and fake passages.

Verdict

Watson’s method, in which he hunts out parallel words from a large text mass, cannot tell the difference between authentic and fake passages, and has no bearing on the question of authenticity of the Gospel of Jesus’ Wife. Once the question of authenticity is settled for (modern) forgery, however, it can be used to shed light on the composition procedure of the text.

Caveat 1: This is not a comprehensive experiment in which Watson’s method would be tested against a dozen ancient manuscript fragments and another dozen artificially composed manuscript-like fragments (“fakes”).

Caveat 2: This small study, much like Watson’s, has no bearing on the question of authenticity of the Gospel of Jesus’ Wife.