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CONTENTS

PROLOGUE

Rome

On September 18, 2012, a group of international scholars gathered in a building across from the Vatican for an obscure academic conference on Egypt's earliest Christians. The weeklong program looked much like those of years past, with highly specialized lectures on Egyptian linguistics, monastery libraries and the wills of abbots. But at 7:00 that evening, the conference lost any semblance of the ordinary. A senior Harvard University professor rose to the lectern to make an astonishing announcement, one that a select group of journalists was at that very moment transmitting across the globe: she had discovered an ancient scrap of papyrus with the power to convulse the Roman Catholic Church.

The professor, a fifty-eight-year-old historian named Karen King, was a well-known and deeply respected figure in the field of biblical studies. Harvard had recently promoted her to its Hollis Professorship of Divinity, the oldest endowed chair in America and one of the most prestigious posts in the study of Christianity. She was familiar to the public, too, as a best-selling author and TV commentator on the first centuries of the faith.

But the events of September 2012 would put her in a brighter—and crueler—spotlight than any she had known before. In a room overlooking the dome of St. Peter's Basilica, King told the audience of elite scholars that she had already given her discovery a name.

"I dubbed it—just simply for reference purposes—'The Gospel of Jesus's Wife.'"

—

NINE MONTHS EARLIER, a middle-aged Florida man settled into a window seat in the first row of a midday Delta Air Lines flight to Boston's

Logan International Airport. In his luggage were four tattered scraps of papyrus, one of them small enough to fit in the palm of his hand.

When he arrived at Harvard Divinity School, Karen King gave him a tour of its Gothic grounds. A highlight, for the man, was a row of windows on the top floor of the theological library. The stained glass depicted a goblet-bearing woman, Cupid aiming an arrow, and a half-naked Jesus beneath riven skies—a peculiar patchwork of symbols from heraldry, classical myth and Christianity. He asked King's permission to take photographs of inscriptions that loped across the tarot-like panels. "She didn't quite know what it meant," he thought. But he had a flair for language puzzles, and he took the liberty of reading some of it to her. The medieval German blackletter, an extravagant script, could confound the eye; but the words themselves were banal, just the names of the windows' prosperous donors—husbands and wives, now long departed, from some towns near the Swiss-German border. He also answered her questions on a technical point of Middle Egyptian grammar.

He liked the feeling of knowing things she didn't.

"I tremendously enjoyed my meeting with her," the man would reflect later. "I feel that over the years we've almost become friends."

ACT 1

DISCOVERY

Do not be ignorant of me.
For I am the first and the last.
I am the honored one and the scorned one.
I am the whore and the holy one.
I am the wife and the virgin.
…I am control and the uncontrollable.
I am the union and the dissolution.

—The Thunder, Perfect Mind

SOLICITATIONS

Dr. Karen Leigh King had reached the summit of her field as a dazzling interpreter of condemned scripture. On her bookshelves at Harvard Divinity School were ancient texts as mysterious as they were startling. Among them were the Sophia of Jesus Christ, the Secret Revelation of John and the Gospel of Judas. The Gospel of Mary—as in Magdalene—was a favorite. So was The Thunder, Perfect Mind, a poem voiced by a female god whose paradoxical self-affirmations King found "incredibly inclusive."

Such writings were nowhere to be found in the church-sanctioned collection of sacred literature commonly known as the New Testament. Early bishops had rejected them as heresies and sought their eradication. For hundreds of years, no one knew what became of them. But in the late 1800s, fragments of papyrus bearing traces of these lost scriptures began turning up at archaeological sites and antiquities shops across Egypt. The story they told about the earliest centuries of Christianity would force historians to reexamine almost everything they thought they knew about the world's predominant faith. The more pieces of papyrus the deserts disgorged, the more the official history of Christianity—"the master story," as King called it—began to look like a lie.

To King, these newly unearthed texts were the missing pieces of a Bible that might have been, had history taken a different course. In the suppressed writings of ancient believers she saw a Christianity more open-armed and less taken with violence than the one passed down by the long line of powerful popes and Sunday sermonizers. "We are only beginning to construct the pieces of a fuller and more accurate narrative of Christian beginnings," she declared. "The dry desert of Egyptian Africa has yielded a feast for the nourishment of the mind and perhaps for the spirit as well."

When colleagues published a book celebrating her scholarship, they titled it *Re-Making the World*. "In a quiet voice," they wrote, "she has changed the face of early Christian studies."

—

AS AN EMINENT HARVARD HISTORIAN of banished gospels, King could pack a college lecture hall nearly anywhere in the world. But students weren't the only ones who sought her instruction. Her work at the fringes of faith drew notice from mystics, conspiracists and mediums, some of whom regarded her as a bearer of secret knowledge. One email correspondent sent her a code he said unlocked the mysteries of the Bible. Another asked for the key to the seemingly random order of Jesus's sayings in the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas. "Some woman offered me 'True facts about Mary Magdalene,' because, she told me, 'I am Mary Magdalene,'" King recalled. "I get a lot of that kind of stuff."

To many orthodox and evangelical believers, the gospels King studied were no less blasphemous now than they had been to the Church Fathers: they were delusions wrought by the devil, detours from the one true way. And this explained the other genre of email King had to contend with—the dark stream of threats and hate. Some messages were so toxic that King quarantined them in a folder she labeled "Poison."

"Repent," people had urged her, "while there's still time."

—

JULY 9, 2010, WAS A FRIDAY at the end of a long Boston heat wave. At a little before noon, King, who worked at home in the summers, received an email that Harvard Divinity School's spam filters had labeled "SUSPECT." King didn't recognize the sender. But the subject line—"Coptic gnostic gospels in my collection"—suggested someone more credible than the "kooky" strangers who sometimes emailed. The scriptures King wrote about, which dated from the second to fourth century A.D., were sometimes called Gnostic, because of their view that salvation came not from the death and resurrection of Jesus but from personal knowledge, or *gnosis,* of the divine. Coptic, meanwhile,

was the language of Egypt's earliest Christians and of some of the oldest surviving copies of the gospels. Most of the known Gnostic manuscripts were discovered between the 1890s and the 1940s, and many had long since been cataloged and conserved in libraries and museums in Egypt, Germany and the United Kingdom. Were a set of previously unknown gospels to come to light now, it would electrify biblical studies. The field had so few texts for so many scholars that every discovery occasioned a kind of stir—along with sometimes jealous fights for access.

The sender introduced himself as a manuscript collector. He told King he had about fifteen fragments of Coptic papyrus, one of which had recently rekindled his curiosity. "Unfortunately I don't read Coptic," he wrote. But he had an English translation. It "points," he wrote, "towards a gnostic gospel, in which Jesus and a disciple had an argument about Mary.

"Since I read some of your publications you [*sic*] name came to my mind," he continued. "If you are interested in having a closer look, I gladly email photos."

King replied that she was very interested.

Five hours later, the man emailed images of a dozen papyrus fragments. He called her attention to two. Coptic Papyrus 01-11 was a piece of the Gospel of John he believed dated to the third century A.D. The other—Coptic Papyrus 02-11—was the text about Mary he'd mentioned in his first email. He now called it "an unknown Gospel." A metal ruler, pictured along its bottom edge, showed it to be about three-by-one-and-a-half inches, nearly the dimensions of a business card. Its front side, or recto, was covered with eight lines of thickly stroked Coptic handwriting. Every line was incomplete, a sign that the scrap had probably broken off, or been cut, from the middle of some larger page.

King recognized some of the surviving words. The first line, for instance, recalled a verse from the Gospel of Thomas. Other phrases smacked of the Gospel of Mary, a second-century text that depicted Mary Magdalene as superior, in Jesus's eyes, to the male apostles. It happened that King was the world's foremost expert on the Gospel of Mary; her research on it, as a young scholar in California, had first brought her to Harvard's attention in the 1990s. In books and lectures,

King had used the text to dispel what she saw as one of the most pernicious falsehoods in the history of Christianity: the portrayal of Mary Magdalene as a repentant prostitute—a slander, sanctioned by popes, whose true purpose, King believed, was to keep Christian women from power as the fledgling Church courted the patronage of patriarchal Rome.

The parallels between these familiar texts and the collector's "unknown Gospel" were remarkable. But what riveted King was the one line lacking any known precedent: "*peje Iēsous nau ta-hime*" was Coptic for "Jesus said to them, 'My wife.' "

The phrase was so extraordinary that King didn't quite believe it. But the surrounding words seemed to leave little doubt. Just before Jesus speaks, the disciples pose a question about the worthiness of a woman named Mariam, or Mary. "My wife…," Jesus replies, "…she is able to be my disciple…/…Let wicked people swell up…/…As for me, I dwell with her in order to…"

It was a portrait of Jesus—married, living with his wife Mary Magdalene, cursing her detractors—unlike any known to history.

—

FOR MORE THAN FIFTEEN CENTURIES, Christian authorities had equated sex —and, in turn, women—with sin. For centuries, preachers and theologians taught believers to feel shame and revulsion at the most human of yearnings. If evidence existed that Jesus married and chose his wife as a disciple—or even just that some early Christians believed he did—it would bring unprecedented scrutiny to how and why this vilification of sex prevailed. The celibacy of clergy and the exclusion of women from the priesthood were predicated, in no small part, on the presumption of Jesus's bachelorhood and on his choice of only male apostles. If a group of early Christians saw Mary Magdalene as Jesus's wife, it might explain why the Church went to such lengths to recast her as a prostitute—a tearful outcast who washes Jesus's feet with perfumed hair after repenting her sins.

King had spent much of her career questioning the completeness of the Church's "data," as she pointedly called it. Modern discoveries like the Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of Mary—and now perhaps

this text, too—showed just how effective the Church Fathers had been at skewing the data by literally burying the beliefs of Christians they didn't like. Indeed, the sands of Egypt might have swallowed these forbidden scriptures forever, were it not for the territorial ambitions of a twenty-eight-year-old French general.

STRANGE TEACHINGS

On July 1, 1798, Napoleon Bonaparte landed in the Egyptian port of Alexandria with forty thousand soldiers and dreams of empire. Fresh from his victories in Italy, he lusted for greater glory—a spectacular conquest that would simultaneously thwart British trade with North Africa and slake what some have called his "Oriental complex."

"I saw the way to achieve all my dreams," he said of Egypt. "I would found a religion, I saw myself marching on the way to Asia, mounted on an elephant, a turban on my head, and in my hand a new Koran that I would have composed to suit my needs." He aimed to exploit "the realm of all history for my own profit."

The expedition was, for Napoleon, a rare military fiasco. Under the cover of an August night in 1799, he slipped onto a frigate back to Europe, leaving Egypt to chaos and his soldiers to privation and mutiny. Napoleon could claim for his misadventure just one triumph: it had opened the land of the Pharaohs to the exploits of Western scholars. Along with arms, ships and soldiers, Napoleon had ferried with him from France some 170 intellectuals, or savants—some of the most luminous scientists, artists and engineers of his day. The savants returned with drawings of Egyptian wonders, from the tombs at Luxor to the zodiac at Dendera. A company of French soldiers expanding a fort near the town of Rosetta, meanwhile, uncovered a slab of polished granite engraved with three parallel blocks of text: one in Egyptian hieroglyphs; one in Greek; and one in demotic, a precursor to Coptic. The slab would become known as the Rosetta Stone. The French scholar Jean-François Champollion used its side-by-side translations to crack the code of hieroglyphics, opening the writings of the ancient Egyptians to the modern world. The savants published their extraordinary finds in a set of twenty-three volumes, *Description de*

l'Égypte, that effectively established the field of Egyptology and lofted Europe into the throes of "Egyptomania."

Egypt was soon awash with Western merchants, diplomats, spies and adventurers, along with a cavalcade of antiquities hunters and dealers, who discovered what the French scholar Hélène Cuvigny called "an archaeological El Dorado." The lust for exotica from a grand civilization was so unquenchable that deals were struck in which neither buyer nor seller knew exactly what was trading hands. Warnings about price gouging and forgery were sounded as early as the 1830s. Occasionally, though, a buyer got very lucky.

—

ON A JANUARY DAY IN 1896, a German scholar named Carl Reinhardt strolled into an antiquities shop in Cairo. A dealer took out a codex, or book, of Coptic papyri and claimed that a *fellah,* a peasant, had found it wrapped in feathers and stuffed in a wall niche in the city of Akhmim, three hundred miles south of Cairo. Neither the dealer nor Reinhardt could decipher its contents, but Reinhardt paid the man and carried the codex back to Berlin, depositing it in the city's illustrious Egyptian Museum. By the summer, a young German Coptologist named Carl Schmidt had sat down to try to make sense of it. Schmidt called the handwriting "of uncommon refinement" and dated its style to the fifth century A.D. But it wasn't until he reached the end pages—where ancient scribes left titles—that he saw the breathtaking words:

The Gospel
according to
Mary

If looks didn't deceive, it was the first known gospel written in the name of a woman.

In a central scene, the risen Jesus tells the disciples to go out and "preach the good news." Yet when Jesus departs, the disciples weep, fearful of coming to the same gruesome end as the Savior. "If they did not spare him," they ask, "how will they spare us?"

A woman named Mary, who appears to be Mary Magdalene, stands up to fire their courage. “Do not weep and be distressed nor let your hearts be irresolute,” she says. “For his grace will be with you all and will shelter you.”

“Sister,” the apostle Peter replies, “we know that the Savior loved you more than all other women. Tell us the words of the Savior that you remember, the things you know that we don’t because we haven’t heard them.”

“I will teach you about what is hidden from you,” Mary says, then gently mocks the men’s cowardice. She says that when she found Jesus in a vision, he answered, “How wonderful you are for not wavering at seeing me!”

But Jesus’s revelation to her—about the soul’s ascent, past dark powers, to a place of silence—arouses suspicion in Peter’s brother, Andrew, who complains that he doubts Mary’s “strange ideas.”

Peter, for his part, throws a jealous fit over Jesus’s preference for Mary. “Did he, then, speak with a woman in private without our knowing about it?” he asks. “Are we to turn around and listen to her? Did he choose her over us?”

“My brother, Peter, what are you imagining?” Mary asks, weeping. “Do you think that I have thought up these things by myself in my heart or that I am telling lies about the Savior?”

The disciple Levi puts an end to the quarrel, calling Peter temperamental and telling the others to be ashamed. He reminds the men that only the Savior decides who can announce the good news. “For if the Savior made her worthy,” Levi says of Mary, “who are you then for your part to reject her? Assuredly the Savior’s knowledge of her is completely reliable. That is why he loved her more than us.” The gospel ends with the chastened disciples going out into the world to preach.

It was a striking reversal of expectation. In the tradition familiar to modern believers, Peter is “the rock” upon which Jesus founds the Church, and Mary Magdalene, a reformed prostitute. Here, Peter is a hothead, and Mary, the rock, the only person steady enough to succeed Jesus as counselor to the disciples. To doubt her, as Levi suggests, was to doubt the Savior himself.

—

UNTIL THE DAY IN 1896 when Reinhardt acquired the codex, almost everything scholars knew about texts like the Gospel of Mary came from the fulminations of second-century heresy hunters. Epiphanius, a bishop from Cyprus, called his diatribe *The Medicine Chest,* comparing Gnostic interpretations of Jesus's teachings to a sickness on the Christian body. The Gnostics were "deluded people" who "forge nonsensical books," having "grown from [their teachers] like fruit from a dunghill," he wrote. These "despicable, erring" believers "assault us like a swarm of insects, infecting us with diseases, smelly eruptions, and sores."

Irenaeus, the bishop of Lyon, took a different tack, accusing the Gnostics of preening narcissism. "They proclaim themselves as being 'perfect,' so that no one can be compared to them," he writes in *Against Heresies.* "They assert that they themselves know more than all others, and…are free in every respect to act as they please, having no one to fear in anything." Among other outrages, Irenaeus said, the Gnostics "boast that they possess more Gospels than there really are." Gnosticism's favor among women was a particular irritant; its teachers, Irenaeus wrote, "deceived many silly women, and defiled them."

Through this fog of venom, it was hard for modern scholars to get a true picture of the Gnostic texts. It was as if, say, every copy of James Joyce's *Ulysses* had been destroyed and all a prospective reader could go on—to see if it was any good—were the reviews of critics who hated it. The one certainty was that these second-century bishops succeeded in elevating their model of Christianity to orthodoxy while demoting their rivals' to heresy. The Roman Catholic Church eventually sainted Epiphanius and Irenaeus, honoring them as "Church Fathers." The Gnostic gospels they raged against, meanwhile, vanished from places of worship. If anyone in antiquity recorded the means of destruction—whether it was by burning, burial or neglect—their accounts don't survive.

The discovery of the Gospel of Mary—along with three other lost texts tucked in the same codex—was a breakthrough of incalculable proportions. Silenced groups of early Christians were at last speaking in their own words, their voices creaky from long burial but muzzled

no more. “We are thus for the first time,” wrote Carl Schmidt’s colleague Adolf von Harnack, “able to check the Gnostic system, as the Church Fathers presented it, against the original.”

Karen King was fresh out of graduate school in the mid-1980s when senior scholars asked her to introduce the Gospel of Mary in a new edition of *The Nag Hammadi Library in English.* The book was the definitive collection of the most important set of Gnostic gospels. (The cliffs near Nag Hammadi, Egypt, were the site, in 1945, of the largest single discovery.) In a previous edition of the book, a pair of distinguished male scholars had between them eked out just two paragraphs. King’s introduction, her first published words on the Gospel of Mary, spanned two pages. It was clear, even then, that she saw prior interpretations as severely wanting. The Gospel of Mary, she argued, was nothing less than a “head-on” attack on “orthodox positions that deny the validity of esoteric revelation and reject the authority of women to teach.”

As King saw it, debates over women’s spiritual authority were as contentious in the ancient world as they were in her own time. The Catholic catechism barred women’s ordination because “the Lord Jesus chose men to form the college of the twelve apostles, and the apostles did the same when they chose collaborators to succeed them.” The New Testament was even more proscriptive. “I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet,” the apostle Paul decrees in his First Epistle to Timothy. Paul says that women will be saved by childbearing, so long as they maintain “self-control.” If women have questions, he writes in his First Epistle to the Corinthians, “let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.”

The Gospel of Mary told a decidedly different story, and King would spend years mining its fragmentary pages for clues to its origins and meaning. She presented her findings in a breakthrough 2003 book, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle.* The Gospel of Mary, she argued,

> presents a radical interpretation of Jesus’ teachings as a path to inner spiritual knowledge; it rejects his suffering and death as the path to eternal life; it exposes the erroneous view that Mary of

> Magdala was a prostitute for what it is—a piece of theological fiction; it presents the most straightforward and convincing argument in any early Christian writing for the legitimacy of women's leadership; it offers a sharp critique of illegitimate power and a utopian vision of spiritual perfection; it challenges our rather romantic views about the harmony and unanimity of the first Christians; and it asks us to rethink the basis for church authority. All written in the name of a woman.

The Gospel of Mary, in other words, challenged almost everything modern Christians took for granted about their faith, from the meaning of Jesus's death to the basis of the Church's legitimacy. It was no accident that the longest chapter in King's book bore the magisterial title "The History of Christianity." As a young scholar in the 1980s, King had seen the Gospel of Mary through a pinhole, as a critique of the leadership of Peter and Andrew. The longer she sat with its pages, however, the more they opened up to her. She saw them now as the other side of a rancorous debate over gender in the early church—a fight that took place *before* men monopolized control, a fight that might well have gone the other way. King argued that Mary was a contemporary of some of the twenty-seven books that would make the New Testament, and not—as most scholars believed—a late second-century reaction to them. It was a daringly original argument. No one had interpreted Mary this way, King wrote, "until now."

—

KING'S TRAILBLAZING INSTINCTS traced in part to her childhood amid the soaring mountains of southwest Montana. She'd grown up riding horses and trailing cattle in a valley ringed by abandoned gold and silver mines with names like Smuggler, Paymaster and Lucky Strike. The road through Sheridan—a no-stoplight, seven-hundred-person town an hour's drive south of Butte—is still known as the Vigilante Trail, after the citizens' committee that brought frontier justice to the masked highwaymen who terrorized prospectors during Montana's nineteenth-century gold rush.

"She was someone who loved to go up in the Rockies on a horse and camp for days," recalled Robert Berchman, a graduate school

classmate at Brown University. "The idea of striking out on your own and achieving your goals—whether it was trekking through grizzly country for three days and coming out alive—that was part of Karen's character." Asked who the "grizzlies" were in his metaphor, Berchman said, "Anyone sitting in the audience who was listening to your paper and was going to come after you."

"I was raised to think that emotions were irrational," Karen King once said. Montana had "a very cowboy ethic," and part of it was, "Show no vulnerability."

—

THE BEST-KNOWN PRIVATE COLLECTORS of biblical manuscripts were early twentieth-century business tycoons: Alfred Chester Beatty was a mining magnate known as the King of Copper; Charles Lang Freer, a railroad baron; J. Pierpont Morgan, a Wall Street financier. They had the riches to compete with a syndicate of European universities and museums, known as "the papyrus cartel," for the most exhilarating finds. The hunt for ancient copies of the Bible reaped American-style publicity, with colorful details that evoked the era's stereotypes about the exotic East. "Words of Christ, Lost 1,300 Years," declared a banner headline in a 1908 issue of a Chicago newspaper. "Charles L. Freer Tells the Story of His Great Find in Egypt's Sands: How a Moslem Arab Who Made the Wonderful Find Let Him into the Secret and How the Purchase Was Completed After Secret Conferences and Tedious Negotiations—Manuscript Is More Valuable than the One Held Sacred in British Museum."

The twenty-first century produced a new breed of collector: wealthy evangelical Christians. Robert Van Kampen, a multimillionaire investment banker, and Steve Green, the billionaire president of the Hobby Lobby craft store chain, stockpiled large caches of Christian manuscripts in hopes of proving the Bible's God-given inerrancy across the ages.

As best as King could tell, her email correspondent belonged to neither camp. "A complete stranger," King said of him in August 2012, when I began reporting a story on the papyrus for *Smithsonian.* (The magazine, published by the Smithsonian Institution, had learned

of her discovery a few weeks before her announcement in Rome.) I had hoped to interview the collector for my article or to at least learn more about his background. But King couldn't oblige. The man, she said, did not want to be identified.

Her colleagues were naturally curious about the fragment's origins, but King was by no means the first scholar to defer to a private collector's wishes. Though the world of manuscript collecting had its publicity seekers, it also had its more reclusive habitués—hobbyists with smaller budgets, more idiosyncratic tastes and no interest in press. There was no single "type" among these amateur collectors, according to the Christian manuscript scholar Brent Nongbri, but at least a few were people, often with some academic training, who savored the idea of owning "a little bit of the past."

Where this man lived, what he did for a living, his nationality—King wasn't free to say. But she had no reason to suspect he was hiding anything. In her very first email to him, she had asked about the papyrus's provenance, or ownership history. Knowing where an antiquity came from—and whose hands it had passed through—helped scholars determine whether it was legally obtained and genuinely ancient. The man responded within a few hours: he had purchased his papyri from a German American man in the 1990s; the German American, in turn, had acquired them in communist East Germany in the 1960s. Where the papyri were before the 1960s the collector didn't seem to know. But few papyri, even those in museums, could be traced with any certainty to the patch of desert where some *fellah* first plucked them from the sand. And the stories of discovery that Egyptian antiquities dealers retailed to Western buyers in the early twentieth century? Scholars are now of a mind that most were tall tales, hatched by dealers to deter customers from bypassing middlemen and going straight to the source. What mattered in the eyes of the law and academic ethics was that antiquities were in Western hands before new international restrictions in the 1970s on the export of cultural artifacts from their lands of origin. To judge by the collector's paperwork, the papyri were in Germany no later than the early 1960s, which put King well in the clear.

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A CHALLENGE FOR HISTORIANS of antiquity wasn't just how few ancient manuscripts survived but how little remained of those that did. Papyrus was a brittle medium, made from the flattened, sun-dried stalks of a flowering sedge native to the Nile. For a codex to stay intact for hundreds of years, even in a climate as arid as Egypt's, would be extraordinary. Oxygen, insects and the ravages of time visited slow but inexorable destruction. Most papyri in collections today were so decrepit that they looked less like the pages of a book than like continents on a map, with rugged coastlines, odd peninsulas and plunging straits. Scholars needed to draw on deep wells of learning to propose restorations of missing text. The itch to get creative—not just by filling gaps, but by "correcting" the surrounding text in ways that make a manuscript more exciting—can grow so strong that the late American papyrologist Herbert Youtie coined a dictum. Known as *Lex Youtie,* Latin for "Youtie's Rule," it advises, "*Iuxta lacunam ne mutaveris,*" or, roughly, "Next to a hole, thou shalt not edit."

The papyri that called to King were often Christianity's most damaged and cryptic—the ones whose holes, or lacunae, posed the knottiest tests of intellect and erudition. For her doctoral dissertation at Brown, she deciphered a Nag Hammadi text called *Allogenes,* or "The Stranger." It survived in a single Coptic manuscript so mangled that many scholars saw it as too fragmentary to properly interpret. King wrested from its incomplete pages a universal story of a soul's alienation and redemption. The protagonist, an anonymous figure called the Stranger, "represents every person who is not at home in the world," King wrote.

The full text of the Gospel of Mary was no less elusive. Ten of its nineteen pages—including the first six and middle four—were missing. The surviving nine were strewn with archipelagoes of lacunae. But enough remained for King to summon what she called a "Christianity lost for almost fifteen hundred years." When someone at a public lecture asked whether she thought of herself as a "treasure hunter"—an Indiana Jones who scoured the outback for talismans—King demurred. "The metaphor that probably comes closer," she said, is "puzzle figure-outer, a solver of mysteries."

—

THE GAPPED ENGLISH TRANSLATION in the collector's July 2010 email to King was itself a kind of riddle:

> me not. For my mother she gave to me the
> ( ) The disciples said to Jesus this ( )
> ( ) abdicate, Mary be worthy of you (not)
> ( ) Jesus said this to them: My wife (and)
> ( ) she can become a disciple to me and
> No man who is wicked, is he? SIC!
> I exist within her, because ( )
> ( ) a ( )

The "SIC!" signaled that someone had found an error in the sixth line, but whether the fault lay in the translation or in the original Coptic was unclear. If the rest of the translation was accurate, however, the collector's hunch looked right: the papyrus appeared to concern a dispute between Jesus and the disciples over someone named "Mary."

But which Mary? The name belonged to nearly a quarter of the Jewish women in Palestine between 330 B.C. and A.D. 200, according to the Israeli historian Tal Ilan. In the New Testament gospels, the ratio was more lopsided still: six of the sixteen named women were Marys, and at least two of them, Jesus's mother and Mary Magdalene, were close to Jesus. To narrow the field, one needed texts showing *fights* over a Mary, and these occurred in just one place: the Gnostic gospels. No fewer than three Gnostic texts depicted conflicts over a woman by that name, and in each case that woman was Mary Magdalene. Among them, only the Gospel of Mary portrayed an all-out row over Magdalene, but Jesus isn't present for it. Not in the surviving pages. Could the quarrel at the end have had a prologue? Could the collector's papyrus be a piece of it?

King had long believed that Mary's lost pages would one day surface, and for a simple reason: the codex that Carl Reinhardt purchased in Cairo a century earlier was in reasonably good shape. One theory was that its missing pages had simply decomposed over the preceding 1,500 years. But another struck King as more likely: modern antiquities dealers, she believed, had probably sold the pages

piecemeal, in a misguided effort to maximize profits. "These missing leaves of the Gospel of Mary probably still are extant," King told a Northern California audience in October 2003, during a four-hour seminar on the gospel, one of several she led for the public in those years.

"Maybe they're sitting in somebody's drawer somewhere," she said, nodding at the audience. "And they may not even know what they have."

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HOW COULD THE COLLECTOR have missed the translation's most striking line? Why had his first email pointed to "an argument about Mary," rather than the showstopping "Jesus said this to them: My wife"? It didn't matter. The fragment distilled all the themes King found most compelling in the Gospel of Mary, then went them one better. Its twist —about Mary Magdalene as Jesus's wife *and* disciple—redeemed the wrongly maligned Magdalene twice over; challenged Church teachings on priestly celibacy and women's leadership; and filled one of the biggest holes in gospel accounts of Jesus's life. It was the missing link between texts King had spent decades writing and talking about. She made up her mind before so much as translating the fragment herself: Coptic Papyrus 02-11 was a modern forgery.

THE HARVARD IMPRIMATUR

For as long as Christians have found God in the written word, the written word has given forgers the power to play God. No doubt some pretenders had the holiest of intentions, like the anonymous second-century author who wrote 3 Corinthians in the name of the apostle Paul. Later fakes, like the Donation of Constantine, were naked power grabs. The Roman emperor's "inviolable gift" of political supremacy to the Church shaped centuries of history before an Italian literary critic studying its crude Latin in the fifteenth century unmasked it as a medieval forgery.

In the mid-nineteenth century, a Greek manuscript dealer named Constantine Simonides announced the discovery of a Gospel of Matthew that purported to be written "at the dictation" of Matthew himself just fifteen years after Jesus's ascension. That would make it a century older than any surviving gospel manuscript and the only one all but autographed by a living apostle. Almost as surprising as its supposed date was an odd word change in the otherwise familiar text: Jesus declares it harder for a rich man to enter heaven than for a "cable"—rather than a "camel"—to pass through the eye of a needle. Simonides, whose counterfeits fooled scholars across Europe, appeared to be acting in this instance on patriotic impulse. Amid an outpouring of national pride following Greek independence from the Ottoman Empire, he sought to bolster the case for Greek—rather than Hebrew, with its camel-driving patriarchs—as the New Testament's original tongue. (Simonides was briefly jailed, then faked his own death.)

More recently, Hershel Shanks, the editor of the popular magazine *Biblical Archaeology Review,* staged a press conference at a Washington, D.C., hotel in 2002 to unveil an ancient limestone ossuary, or burial box, inscribed in Aramaic with the words "James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus." The "James Ossuary," as it became

known, made international news as the first archaeological proof of Jesus's earthly existence. "WORLD EXCLUSIVE!" crowed the magazine's cover. "Evidence of Jesus Written in Stone." Except that it wasn't. Leaving aside the ubiquity of the names James, Joseph and Jesus in the first century, technical experts deemed the words "brother of Jesus" a modern forger's addition.

Jesus speaking of a wife was exciting, to be sure. But King had been around long enough to be wary of artifacts that looked too good to be true. "Okay, Jesus married? I thought, 'Yeah, yeah, yeah,'" she said. "Just the *idea* of it, you know?" But something else unnerved her, too. "The name of Harvard University carries a weight, and so one wants to be very careful about how one uses that kind of influence and prestige," she said. "I was highly suspicious that the Harvard imprimatur was being asked to be put on something that then would be worth a lot of money."

She didn't relay these thoughts to the collector; there was no need. She closed his email and moved on.

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THREE WEEKS LATER, in late July 2010, King traveled to the former East Berlin for the annual meeting of the Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas, an august international society of New Testament scholars. The presidential address, titled "The Female Body as Social Space in 1 Timothy," was of special interest to King. Delivered by the Yale scholar Adela Yarbro Collins, it suggested that women in ancient Christianity faced a double bind. The early Christian leader Marcion appointed female and male leaders but ordered his followers to renounce marriage and sex. The apostle Paul's First Epistle to Timothy, meanwhile, encouraged women to marry and have children but barred them from speaking, teaching or leading. Without saying so explicitly, Collins zeroed in on an abiding conundrum: Why couldn't early Christian women be wives, mothers *and* preachers? Why did even more egalitarian leaders, like Marcion, force them to choose?

Or did they? The timing was uncanny, but the stranger's papyrus had conjured a third way, one in which women had the sanction of Jesus himself to both marry and lead. Odder still, the collector sent

King another email, unbidden, on the very day of Collins's lecture, when King might have been seen as particularly receptive to more examples of bias in the "data" on which the Church based its teachings. "Since I haven't heard from you," he wrote, "I want to make sure that you received my email and the enclosed photos."

Was the collector, or someone he knew, in the auditorium during Collins's talk? King waited for the conference to end, then sent a curt reply, saying she was busy. When she finally emailed him again, almost a year later, it was to send him away. "I made some initial attempts at the material you sent, but without real success," she wrote, on June 25, 2011. "It is a disappointment to me as well, but perhaps you have found someone who can offer more help." She was being polite. "I didn't believe it was authentic," she explained later, "and told him I wasn't interested."

Rebuffed, the collector could have taken his papyrus to world-renowned professors at any number of other universities. But he didn't. He came back at King, pinning hope on a scholar who hadn't meant to give him any. His reasons could only be guessed at. Perhaps it was King's expression of "disappointment." Perhaps it was the simple fact that after a year's silence she'd bothered to write at all.

"I understand your frustration," he wrote to her the next day, saying that he, too, had struggled to make sense of his papyri, having consulted "several people" in the last couple of years, including a Coptic priest. His email included new photos, this time of modern documents. One was a typed letter from a Berlin professor who had looked at the fragments in 1982, when the German American had owned them. The other was a note in handwritten German—unsigned and undated, but possibly from the same professor—that called one of the papyri "the sole example of a text in which Jesus uses direct speech with reference to having a wife," and "evidence for a possible marriage." In an apparent effort to make sure King understood the German, the collector reiterated, in English, that "the professor back then saw a possible husband-wife connection of Jesus and Mary Magdalene."

"My problem right now is this," the collector continued:

A European manuscript dealer has offered a considerable amount for this fragment. It's almost too good to be true. Since these Coptic fragments typically don't see that high, I assume that with this one the value is in the content. I had several people look at it in the past couple of years. We finally came up with a transcript and a tanlation[*sic*]-suggestion, which seems to make sense.

One situation I want to avoid is a situation whereby this fragment disappears in some archive or private collection for good, if it really is hat [*sic*] we think it is. Before letting this happen I would like to either donate it to a reputable manuscript collection or wait at least until it is published, before I sell it.

I know you are very busy, but if I could please ask you for a little more of your time. Could you please look at the enclosed translation, and tell me your ideas, how I could possibly get this documented and published. I am completely clueless as far as this goes. Does our translation make sense. Does the Gospel make sense?

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SOME FIVE YEARS EARLIER, doctors had diagnosed King with olfactory neuroblastoma, a rare cancer of the upper nasal tract and brain. There were questions about whether she would live. Doctors cut open her skull to remove the tumor, but mistakes were made. She underwent seven surgeries, which left her in harrowing pain and altered the appearance of her face.

Before her diagnosis, King had begun to write an opus about Christian conceptions of what it means to be human. She had deliberately sworn off discussion of the body; many of the theorists she read treated the human form less as flesh and bone than as a stage —or "social space," as Collins had put it—on which we "perform" our identities as women or men, black or white, young or old. King's brush with death, however, had brought her face-to-face with the ineluctable physical reality of the body. It "revolutionized my thinking," she wrote in 2006, "although I would be hard-pressed to articulate how very clearly, at least yet." All she knew was that the original focus of her book manuscript "no longer made any sense to me at all." She had lived inside her head for so long that it took being sick to realize that

one's body—*her* body—was really there. She left the hospital with an idea for a new book that addressed these epiphanies head-on. Its subject, she decided, would be martyrdom.

In the early centuries of Christianity, when some persecuted believers would sooner burn at the stake than renounce their faith, the theologian Tertullian declared that their willingness to suffer and die before a crowd, in imitation of Christ, would inspire mass conversion. "Kill us, torture us, condemn us, grind us to dust," Tertullian wrote to the rulers of the Roman Empire in A.D. 197. "We conquer in dying….The oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow."

After the agonies of radiation and surgery, King questioned whether Jesus truly wanted believers to suffer. Should Christians really understand pain—whether from illness or violence—as Christlike? The Roman Catholic Church venerated martyrs with feast days, sainthoods and hagiography. But when King returned to the Gnostic texts during her convalescence, she found evidence of passivism, quietism and nonviolence in the face of persecution. "There were other [early] Christians who said, 'No, God doesn't want this. God never wanted the death and cruelty and suffering involved in this.' "

Yet for reasons no one seemed to know—possibly the cancer, possibly her perfectionism—King appears never to have completed the manuscript. Despite grants and sabbaticals and notices in mainstream news stories about forthcoming books, she had published no books at all since her illness.

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IN THE FALL OF 2011, the collector opened his email to find a message he could hardly have expected. Four months earlier, after ignoring him for almost a year, Karen King had told him she couldn't help. She was too well-mannered to call his papyrus a fake, but from her tone and brevity—and her failure to respond to his threat to sell it—he might have intuited her suspicions.

But there was no mistaking this out-of-the-blue email: she had reconsidered. "I did spend a bit more time on the gospel fragment and was able to make some real progress," she wrote. "I would be very

happy to arrange to have a papyrological specialist authenticate and date the fragment, and would myself be interested in publishing it, probably with a colleague from Princeton.

"If authentic, the fragment is of important historical value, as well as public interest," King continued. "As you suggest, publication would ensure that it not be lost into the oblivion of a private archive. I would also be happy to intervene for you with the Harvard University Library collection, where the fragment would be well taken care of, and join one of the ancient fragments of The Gospel of Thomas among other important works."

It must have struck the collector as nothing short of a miracle.

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ANNEMARIE LUIJENDIJK is a well-liked figure on the Princeton University campus, where the student newspaper included her in a write-up of "fashion-conscious professors." She wears her long red hair in a chic bun and has a taste for high heels, tortoiseshell glasses and faux animal print. "I'm a very visual person," she told the student newspaper, explaining her attention to stylistic detail. "My scholarly work is also very visual—I work with papyrus."

Luijendijk (pronounced *Lion-dike*) grew up Protestant in a heavily Catholic province of the southern Netherlands. As a child she thought of becoming a minister, in part because of how much she enjoyed talking with ordinary people. But in a theology master's program in Amsterdam, she grew fascinated by the intellectual puzzles of early Christianity and shifted her sights to academia. The lives and languages of ancient believers "opened up worlds for me."

In 1995, at the age of twenty-seven, she found herself in a van with a stick shift on a Harvard Divinity School–led tour of Christian ruins in Greece and Turkey. On a narrow road in the mountains one day, the van's driver—a man who'd left a banking career to study divinity at Harvard—gunned the engine and crossed the center line to overtake a slow-moving truck. Out of nowhere, an onrushing car materialized, forcing him back into his lane. They were milliseconds from a catastrophic head-on collision. Her heart pounding, Luijendijk watched as another woman in the van instructed the former banker to

pull over. The woman advised him, with an almost preternatural sangfroid, that she would be taking the wheel. The woman's name, Luijendijk had recently learned, was Karen King, a California college professor on a yearlong Harvard fellowship for scholars studying women and faith.

"She just stood up and drove the stick," Luijendijk recalled admiringly some two decades later. "I really think that's who she is. She likes to control and make sure. You don't walk over her."

When Luijendijk came to Harvard the next year, to pursue a doctorate in theology, King was a finalist for a full-time post on the divinity school faculty. King's "job talk"—the public lecture candidates give—so impressed Luijendijk that she wrote an enthusiastic letter to the search committee. King had it all, in Luijendijk's view: a command of language, history and theory, along with an eye for "implications"—the effects of biblical interpretation on everyday life. King got the job, and Luijendijk asked King to supervise her dissertation, an incisive case study of personal letters exchanged by ancient Christians in the lost Egyptian city of Oxyrhynchus.

In 2006, within months of graduation and with King's backing, Luijendijk landed a coveted faculty job at Princeton. The school's distinguished religion department was home to the scholar Elaine Pagels, a MacArthur Foundation "genius" whose 1979 best seller, *The Gnostic Gospels,* won the National Book Award and introduced the long-lost scriptures to spellbound American readers.

Luijendijk had just submitted her tenure application in the fall of 2011 when an email with a photo arrived from Karen King. Unlike her former adviser, Luijendijk was a papyrologist; King wanted her expert opinion on the papyrus in the photo. Luijendijk didn't yet know it—she'd never seen the papyrus before—but King had already assigned her a role in its launching. Three days earlier, King had written the collector that a "papyrological specialist," a "colleague from Princeton," would not only authenticate and date the fragment but probably publish it with her. If King had perhaps presumed, it wasn't without reason. She knew Luijendijk well, and it was hardly uncommon for scholars to involve former students in their work.

innovation in the history of writing. Unlike Sumer's clay tablets, this new material was light and flexible and took easily to pen or brush. It would democratize writing, bringing the written word from the palaces of kings into the homes of ordinary people. It was the forefather of paper; it was how "paper" got its name. Yet for all its importance, it remained a terra incognita, a sprawling graveyard of ancient voices against which scholars had only begun to press their ears.

The earliest known papyrus manuscript dates to about 2900 B.C. But it wasn't until Alexander the Great conquered Egypt in 332 B.C. that demand for papyri boomed. The vast territories under Greek—and soon Roman—rule required heaps of paperwork to administer, and no land produced papyrus like Egypt, where the swamp-dwelling plant flourished in full sun on the banks of the Nile. To turn *Cyperus papyrus* into a writing surface, Egyptians sliced its long triangular stalks into thin strips, moistened them with river water, then pressed a horizontal layer across a vertical one. The plant's natural glues bonded the layers together, and the sheets hardened in the sun.

If the Nile was a sumptuous cradle for papyrus, the desert was a cosseting grave. The parched, nearly lifeless sands sheltered the writings of the ancients from the depredations—insects, rain, air—that crumbled and pulped papyri sent to other parts of the world. Scribes who put pen to papyrus, unlike those who put chisel to rock, harbored no hope of lapidary longevity. Like paper today, papyrus was a throwaway medium. And throw it away Egyptians did, dumping it in rubbish heaps like the one outside Oxyrhynchus or abandoning it to the winds as they left one settlement for another. The irony isn't lost on papyrologists: the manuscripts that desert refugees most cherished—the ones they carried to new homes in the cities—vaporized under wet skies and the trample of urban life, while the ones they forsook in the desert endured. It was no surprise that the first papyrus Roger Bagnall translated and published, in an eminent journal, was a late third-century hardware receipt. "This papyrus contains a virtually complete order for nails," the twenty-one-year-old Bagnall began.

The sense of papyrology as an extravagant waste of intellect had vexed the discipline since its birth in 1788, when a Danish classicist published the first modern edition of an ancient papyrus. "The excitement aroused by the text before it was published," remarked one

scholar, "matched the lack of interest subsequently shown, when it turned out to be a list of forced labourers on the dykes." Similar anticlimax met the manuscript hunters who set upon the Roman resort town of Herculaneum, which Mount Vesuvius had entombed beneath ninety feet of volcanic ash in A.D. 79. The town's so-called Villa dei Papiri was the only large library to survive intact from antiquity. Hopes swelled for lost works by the likes of Sophocles and Aristotle. What were found, instead, were the musings of a minor Greek philosopher named Philodemus, whom one nineteenth-century scholar labeled "an obscure verbose, inauthentic Epicurean from Cicero's time." The condescension heaped on papyri often extended to the specialists who saw the medium as worth their time. "Outside Italy," a Dutch classicist said in 1843, "one would look in vain for bigger nitwits."

The prejudice persisted well into Bagnall's undergraduate years at Yale. A new classics chairman had no sooner been recruited from Harvard than led a putsch of the papyrologists, archaeologists and other technical specialists who made Yale's classics department a force in the study of antiquity. Classics, for the new chairman, was the literature of great writers, not the receipts of nail smiths. Alan Samuel, Bagnall's mentor, was among the professors effectively forced out. The chairman soon came after the teenage Bagnall, too, firing him from his work-study job in the department's slide library.

To escape the chairman's clutches, Bagnall dropped his classics major and won appointment as "Scholar of the House," a prestigious Yale-wide program that excused exceptional students from class for independent projects. (Bagnall had by then piled up a trophy chest of undergraduate prizes in Greek and Latin.) He struck back at the new chairman the next year, with a review in the student-published *Yale Course Critique* so eviscerating that it was covered in the local newspaper. "Charging that the classics have been 'emasculated,' Bagnall wrote that the department has 'virtually eliminated archaeology,' and that one of the chairman's first acts was 'to deny tenure to one of the best young numismatists in the country,'" *The New Haven Register* reported in April 1968. That the target of his ire was sixty-four years old and still chairman—and Bagnall a twenty-year-old senior with ambitions in the field—offers a sense of the

latter's self-assurance. Elevating papyrology to respectability would become his life's mission.

Bagnall joined the classics faculty at Columbia University at age twenty-seven and was dean of the university's Graduate School of Arts and Sciences at forty-two. Unlike many papyrologists before him, who plied narrow paths, Bagnall envisioned the field maximally. Whereas others confined themselves to publishing airless *editiones principes* of individual manuscripts, Bagnall roamed through vast caches of papyri to write sweeping social and economic histories. A seventeen-hundred-year-old order for nails wasn't just an order for nails. It was a window into the economy of the ancient Mediterranean; into the hierarchies among workers on construction projects; into the building materials, technologies and measurement systems of ancient Egypt. Bagnall rapped traditional papyrologists for seeing themselves as little more than the fingerprint dusters of classics programs. If they wanted to liberate the field from its "ghetto," they would need bold new collaborations that shunned "the simplistic form of papyrologist as drudge working with historian as thinker." Bagnall personified those aspirations. On top of writing 239 journal articles and all or part of more than forty books, he ran an archaeological dig in Egypt and beamed the field into the digital age, leading a project to put images of every known papyrus online. The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation awarded him a $1.5 million humanities prize in 2003. Four years later, New York University lured him from Columbia with the directorship of a new, $200 million Institute for the Study of the Ancient World.

Yet for all Bagnall had accomplished, he worried as he neared retirement about how "small and perpetually vulnerable" the field of papyrology remained. His college years—in which a big shot from Harvard had made a mockery of his mentors—were a painful reminder of how easily it could all come undone.

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ON THE EVENING OF October 24, 2011, Roger Bagnall and his wife, Whitney, a research librarian, tidied their Upper West Side apartment for the usual suspects. Roughly every other week since the late 1980s —typically on a Monday—the couple hosted an informal workshop in

their home for New York–area papyrologists. Young scholars were encouraged to bring slides of papyri they were working on, and Bagnall would preside, guiding the discussion as scholars nibbled on chocolate chip cookies he baked for the occasion. Some eight papyrologists made the pilgrimage to his eighteenth-floor apartment that night. As they settled into his living room, AnneMarie Luijendijk, a regular, handed Bagnall a thumb drive.

"What do you think?" she asked as Coptic Papyrus 02-11 filled the projector screen.

They had known each other since 2001, when Luijendijk wrote to Bagnall to ask if he would serve with Karen King on her dissertation committee. She had concluded her letter with a popular sign-off among the Greek-speaking Christians whose papyri she was studying: "I often pray that you would be well, my master." King followed with a letter of her own. "Your expertise in Egyptian papyrus," she wrote, "is unmatched—certainly by anyone here." Not that Bagnall needed more laurels at this stage in his career, but a professor at Harvard—which had supplied the snooty chairman Bagnall blamed for the gutting of Yale's classics department—was now telling him that he had more talent in his field than anyone at Harvard. Bagnall accepted, and Luijendijk wrote a dissertation that was in many respects a book-length tribute to his scholarly legacy. She quoted, footnoted or referred to him more than a hundred times, an average of about once every three pages. When she mailed Bagnall the finished work for formal evaluation, she included a postcard calling him "my 'papyrological hero.'"

Bagnall had a good first impression of her latest project. The writing surface of Coptic Papyrus 02-11 looked genuinely ancient. "As Justice Stewart said, 'You know it when you see it,'" Bagnall recalled. He was referring to a 1964 Supreme Court case in which Justice Potter Stewart said he could not define "hard-core pornography" but could tell on sight whether a film belonged to the genre. "Anyone who has spent any time in Egypt," Bagnall said, "has seen a lot of fake papyrus, made of banana leaves and all sorts of stuff. The fake stuff has a different texture, different thinness, strips not laid out the same way. The pattern of the fibers look different." One can acquire new, artisanal papyrus, but its blonder hue gives away its modernity. "The

stuff that looks as if it's been around for fifteen hundred years probably was."

It might sound like a low bar, but another encouraging sign was that the script on Luijendijk's papyrus was an actual language. The fakes Bagnall had come across over his long career were, to a one, written in a chicken scratch that was neither Greek, Coptic nor any other tongue. Antiquities dealers palmed them off on tourists and other naïfs who could tell neighbors back in Peoria that the precious piece of history in their luggage was a magic spell from the Pharaohs. Mom-and-pop frame shops could spot these trinkets as easily as could scholars. ("I have little to no respect," a framer in Oregon groused in a web forum a few years earlier, "but I understand people who have gone on those kinds of trips and brought back the 'Rosetta Stone of Papyruses' that they bought for $1.25.")

The art world, of course, attracted forgers of virtuosic ability. But there was a crucial difference: lost works by world-renowned artists could fetch huge sums. Between 1994 and 2009, a Chinese artist working out of his garage in Queens, New York, made paintings that rogue dealers passed off as newfound originals by modernist masters like Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko and Willem de Kooning. The fakes gulled experts, prominent collectors and New York's oldest art gallery, selling for some $80 million. Prices for papyri, by contrast, tend to be commensurate with the medium's reputation as antiquity's scrap paper. There was simply too little financial incentive to entice any but the most penny-ante of forgers. "I don't know of a single verifiable case," Bagnall said, "of somebody producing a papyrus text that purports to be an ancient text that isn't."

The only feature of Coptic Papyrus 02-11 that made him suspicious that night was the handwriting. It had neither the beautifully proportioned refinement of most sacred texts nor the cursive slope of informal, or "documentary," manuscripts, like private letters or business contracts. "We all sort of stared at it, and our first reaction was, 'Wow. This is really ugly,'" Bagnall recalled. "The handwriting is not nice—thick, badly controlled strokes made by somebody who didn't have a very good pen."

The scribe appeared to be attempting a "unimodular" script—a style in which each letter fits snugly inside an imaginary square. But

celebrated Luijendijk's successful dissertation defense over lunch at the Harvard Faculty Club.

The photo of Coptic Papyrus 02-11 had impressed Bagnall, but he was withholding final judgment until he could see the fragment firsthand. He offered the visitors seats at a conference table, and King, who'd taken the train from Boston, withdrew the Plexiglas-mounted papyrus from her red leather bag. She'd had it since December, when the collector came to Harvard for a handoff. Bagnall set it beneath a magnifying glass and began his examination. The front of the papyrus, its recto, was in relatively good condition, and all but covered in eight lines of text. The verso was worse off. It appeared to have once contained six lines, in a larger script, but most of its top fibers were missing, leaving only three legible Coptic words:

…my mother
…three
…forth…

There was a good deal of ink where the fragment's surface remained intact, and none where the surface wore away, exactly what one would expect in a genuine piece. A forger who acquired a blank scrap of ancient papyrus, then wrote on it, was apt to leave telltale ink dribbles on a fragment's exposed lower layers, layers that wouldn't have been exposed in antiquity. A gifted enough artist could pull it off, Bagnall thought. But the number of people with the manual dexterity and knowledge was vanishingly small. He knew his beloved field well enough to put the census of colleagues with the *character* for it at zero. Papyrologists so prized their goodwill toward one another that the field long ago coined a Latin name for it—*amicitia papyrologorum.* "The world," Bagnall thought, "is not really crawling with crooked papyrologists."

Perhaps not crawling. But all it took was one. If anyone might have known, it was Roger Bagnall. When I examined the personal papers he donated to Columbia University, I discovered how close he had been to a scholar accused of the most successful Christian forgery of the twentieth century.

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IN THE WINTER OF 1941, a twenty-six-year-old graduate of Harvard Divinity School rode a donkey from Jerusalem toward an ancient monastery in the desert cliffs above Bethlehem. Morton Smith had come to Mar Saba to study the prayer of its Greek Orthodox monks. He left two months later with what he called "a new understanding of worship as a means of disorientation." The monks' devotions "were unmistakably hypnotic…dazzling the mind and destroying its sense of reality."

Columbia University hired Smith onto its history faculty in 1957, but within a year Smith said he was "ready for a rest." He returned to "the tranquility of Mar Saba," having developed an interest in what he called "manuscript hunting." He was in the monastery's tower library one afternoon, cataloging books, when he claimed to find a letter describing a previously unknown "secret" version of the Gospel of Mark. The letter, attributed to the Church Father Clement of Alexandria, quotes a passage from this secret gospel in which Jesus raises a Lazarus-like youth from the dead, then spiritually initiates him through what appears to be a gay encounter:

> The youth, looking upon [Jesus], loved him and began to beseech him that he might be with him….And after six days Jesus told him what to do and in the evening the youth comes to him, wearing a linen cloth over his naked body. And he remained with him that night, for Jesus taught him the mystery of the kingdom of God.

Making text out of subtext, Clement writes that a more explicit phrase—"naked man with naked man"—does *not* appear in Secret Mark, as the recipient of the letter, one Theodore, had thought. The "naked man" line, Clement implies, was added later by a group of "blasphemous and carnal" Gnostics, as one of their "utterly shameless lies." But Clement vouches for the authenticity of a different passage, in which Jesus rejects women.

The discovery landed Smith on the front page of *The New York Times* in 1960, much as Karen King's find would half a century later.

monastery. As in Smith's case, a Western scholar stumbles on the sensational Greek manuscript as he prepares to depart the monastery. "The other two [manuscripts] need not concern us, since they…do not invalidate any doctrine of Scripture," the fictional scholar, Sir William Bracebridge, tells his associates. "It is this one, gentlemen, that may change the history of the world." The book was published in 1940, the year before Smith's first visit, and became a best seller, with more than a dozen printings over the next three decades.

Though Smith still has some prominent defenders, many scholars, even those once in his camp, have come to regard Secret Mark as an ingenious ruse: "the most outrageously successful 'inside job' ever perpetrated in the modern field of early Christian studies," writes Jeffery, "at least that we know of."

Yet for all its brilliance, it lacked something obvious. What Smith claimed to discover at Mar Saba wasn't Secret Mark itself. Nor was it a letter in Clement's hand from second-century Alexandria. It was a "tiny scrawl" of Greek handwriting in an eighteenth-century style on the endpapers of a printed seventeenth-century book. At best, this meant that some unknown person three centuries ago had used blank pages in the back of a book to copy some version of a letter penned some fifteen hundred years earlier, about a never-before-seen gospel from a century and a half before that. That Clement wasn't known to have written letters made the find all the more curious. Stranger still, Morton Smith never produced the book he'd claimed to have found. All he had were photographs he said he'd taken on his 1958 visit. (The story called to mind a line from Umberto Eco's postmodern gospel thriller *The Name of the Rose.* "On sober reflection," one narrator says, "I find few reasons for publishing my Italian version of an obscure, neo-Gothic French version of a seventeenth-century Latin edition of a work written in Latin by a German monk toward the end of the fourteenth century.") If Smith were indeed the forger, his use of copies of copies of copies took some of the bloom off his rose. A more skillful con man would have fabricated an ancient document, an *original* that could withstand firsthand scrutiny by both humanities scholars and laboratory scientists. Not even Jeffery, a grudging admirer of Smith's wiles, thought Smith capable of that. "A forged ancient papyrus, he well knew, would be too easily discredited."

seconded a colleague's pronouncement of forgery. He was more experienced now and realized that despite "its ungainliness" the handwriting could have come from the second or third century A.D. He and a colleague, Raffaella Cribiore, even managed to tease out the formerly unintelligible Greek text. What emerged was a previously unknown comic speech, by an unnamed author, depicting a ribald threesome. The anonymous speaker, of uncertain gender, watches a man having sex with a barbarian woman and jealously offers him or herself in the woman's stead. Bagnall and Cribiore published the following translation:

> the crowns…
> Why are you crazily rocking a silent
> barbarian woman without pleasure?
> So that you can talk and laugh
> in front of me? Since I'm willing,
> pal, take whatever you
> need. I'll give (myself) pathically [that is, anally],
> in a way you don't know, by your
> head, and in a strange way, if I
> hand over my limbs to sleep first.
> What are you doing? I don't know why
> you're searching for me.
> Fuck me so that I can feel it.

In documents I obtained through a public records request to Florida State University, Bagnall acknowledged knowing little about where the ostraca had come from. He had acquired them, he said, from a Dutch papyrologist who moonlighted as an antiquities dealer. "He purported to be acting on behalf of a seller"—a Dutch woman whose father had owned them since 1900—"but it would be impossible to say whether that was only a pretense," Bagnall wrote to an FSU librarian in early 2018. A short while later, Bagnall told me that the provenance supplied by the dealer was likely "a complete cover story."

His and Cribiore's 2010 article about the ostracon, which they titled "An Amorous Triangle," makes no mention of Morton Smith's bizarre questions about it three decades earlier. Whatever its origin,

calls, and Karen felt a surging sense of purpose as she pledged herself to Christ. But when she returned to Sheridan to share the good news with her Sunday school teacher, the woman dismissed her pupil's story as delusion. Whatever transformation Karen imagined she underwent would surely pass, the teacher suggested. "That was a very difficult thing for a Sunday school kid to hear," recalled Kathleen Wuelfing, one of Karen's close childhood friends. "It just really diminished her experience." Not even her own family's church, it seemed, had a place for the kind of Christian she wanted to be.

The perniciousness of orthodoxy was a theme that would later consume King's scholarship. This was twentieth-century America, not fourth-century Rome. King was a child searching for a spiritual home, not some heretic leading the faithful astray. But religious authorities—from bishops down to small-town Sunday school functionaries—were still telling believers that they were doing Christianity wrong, still ostracizing the ones who loved Jesus in their own way. "Who gets to say what the right religion is?" King would tell an audience more than three decades later, in a lecture on the Gospel of Mary. "Who gets to say…what it means to be a true Christian?"

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KAREN MIGHT HAVE STOPPED worshipping at Bethel United Methodist. But it remained the town's biggest church, and she hadn't lost sight of its usefulness. In her junior year of high school, she persuaded the church's large youth group to host fund-raising dinners and food sales, in hopes of sponsoring an international student through a Christian exchange program. The local newspaper, quoting "spokesman" Karen King, said that an overseas exchange would serve "to stress the idea that Christians cannot afford to have a horizon which is less than all of humanity." The article presented the opportunity as open to all comers—students and host families alike. But it soon became clear that the effort's sole beneficiary would be its spokesperson. "I almost was afraid of her because she was so smart," said her mother, Minnetta King, a college-educated woman who during King's childhood was a housewife and local adviser to the Future Homemakers of America. "She always knew what needed to be done."

Karen's application to the exchange program showed a nearly perfect grasp of its interdenominational aims. "I was raised United Methodist, but I practice ecumenism," she wrote on the application form. To a question about career plans, she answered, "I am to be a missionary."

Asked decades later whether the exchange had beckoned to her as a spiritual journey, she said, "No, it was the romance, the excitement." If anyone had told her, "Go," in those years, she said, she would have been "off, gone!" By that summer, Karen was on a plane to Norway. She would live with a Lutheran minister's family in the western resort town of Voss for the entirety of her senior year, missing her hometown graduation and her shot—all but guaranteed—at being named valedictorian.

"We came back to school in the fall and she wasn't there," recalls Charles "Leslie" Gilman, a friend who was salutatorian of the Sheridan High Class of 1972. That Karen wouldn't care what people thought—that she might even relish the gasps left in her wake—didn't surprise the closer of her acquaintances. "She had her independence," Gilman said, "and strong will."

In Voss, far from the expectations of family and home, King summoned the courage to teach a group of awkward Norwegian classmates a favorite song. It had been written in the 1960s, on Chicago's South Side. Now it echoed through a thirteenth-century church amid the fjords of inland Norway.

"We are one in the Spirit," King began, conducting the teenagers in as rousing a rendition as their halting English allowed. "We are one in the Lord."

And we pray that all unity may one day be restored
And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love
Yes, they'll know we are Christians by our love.

"She wanted people to hear it," recalled one of her recruits, Kristoffer Tjelle, who in the early 1970s was a shy farm boy with a small crush on the visiting American. "Christian unity: she was advocating that." It was the first and last time he sang in church, he


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The only struggle was her scholarship. "Well-meaning male colleagues advised me to do something a little more central," she once recalled of her time at Occidental. "They said that work on women and heresy would always keep my work at the margins. They said I should work on something like the Gospel of John, something canonical, you know?" But she outmaneuvered them, just as she had her adviser at Brown, her professors at Montana and the Sunday school teacher who belittled her faith.

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IN THE LATE 1980S AND EARLY 1990S, King became increasingly sensitive to a modern image problem for the Gnostics: their apparent political apathy. Theologians old and new had called them aloof solipsists fixated on their own spiritual perfection. The divine spark saved regardless of the virtue or venality of one's earthly life, the argument went. So why trouble with charity or politics? Why bother doing good or fighting for change?

King's first articles on the Gnostics, written at Occidental, took square aim at this view. The Gnostics, she argued, weren't self-absorbed peacocks; they were social critics. They yearned to flee their bodies and the world because the societies they lived in were under assault by "illegitimate domination…injustice, sexual exploitation, war, poverty and wealth, and slavery." Gnostic theology sprang from "life experiences" under Rome's "totalitarian, colonial rule." Beneath the complex metaphors was history.

King imputed to the Gnostics things that they didn't quite say but that she believed they must have meant. "Unseen behind claims to reject the world and escape to heaven," she wrote, "can often be a very socially intact, politically conscious—though alienated and appalled—human being, a human being striving for dignity under oppression." Eve's disassociation from her body during a gang rape in one Nag Hammadi text is "a sharp and biting critique of male authority, violence, and aggression," King argued. Mary Magdalene's triumph over Peter and Andrew in the Gospel of Mary is a "sharp critique of illegitimate power." In the Secret Revelation of John, the Savior says that the Creator didn't understand "the mystery" of "the Holy Height"

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FROM HER OFFICE ATOP a crenellated tower at Harvard Divinity School, King turned out books and articles that were masterworks of learned interpretation, readings that made remote spiritual worlds come alive —and feel relevant—to modern readers. A 2003 book, *What Is Gnosticism?,* blasted the assumptions of her own field, arguing that colleagues unwittingly demoted important Christian scriptures by labeling them "Gnostic," a term she hoped to abolish. King wanted people to see gospels like Mary and Philip as every bit the equals of the New Testament, both as portals to the earliest centuries of Christianity and as fodder for modern-day ethics. Her work, she felt, was as vital to the study of Christianity as it was to its *practice.* "What history can do is show that people have to take responsibility for what they activate out of their tradition," she said. "It's not just a given thing one slavishly follows. You have to be accountable."

As a charter member of a California-based project called the Jesus Seminar, King took her scholarship directly to the pews, mounting daylong presentations to paying audiences from Florida to Oregon. The lectures bore thrilling titles—like "Forbidden Scriptures"—and were often filmed for sale on videotape or DVD. The Jesus Seminar sought to topple the wall between ivory tower and church, between reason and faith, and King had become one of its stars. In public lectures, she liked to call the Christian texts she worked with "data," a word that invested her scholarship with an air of scientific detachment. "Some people call this 'revisionist history,'" she told a New York audience. "I call it 'getting it right.'"

But it was a struggle. Tradition—garrisoned by creed, canon and clergy—didn't give way overnight. Nor did the powerful men who remained its gatekeepers, in pulpits as much as in faculty lounges. Like many women of her generation, King felt at times that she had to work twice as hard as her male counterparts to be seen as their peers. As a student, during a break in a two-hour presentation she had prepared for professors, she went to the bathroom, blacked out and suffered a concussion. Rather than postpone the second half of her talk to seek medical attention, she carried on as if nothing had happened. Her footnote-packed writing, the sense she gave colleagues that she never


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THE COMPLICATION OF MARY

In March 1531, the Duke of Mantua, seeking a gift for a friend, commissioned a painting from the renowned Venetian artist Titian. In the finished masterpiece, a nude Mary Magdalene—eyes glistening with tears, pearlescent jar of ointment at her hip—casts her gaze heavenward with a look of abject surrender. Her hands are clasped across her body, clutching coils of auburn hair as she tries, in vain, to cover her breasts. The Palazzo Pitti, the sumptuous Florence museum where the portrait now hangs, describes its subject as "a penitent prostitute, a woman with a dissolute past [who] is naked due to her resolve to strip herself bare of her past." Almost no artwork better distills the heady mix of sensuality, shame and sorrow that many believers still summon when they think of Mary Magdalene.

The difficulty was that Titian's *Penitent Magdalene*—and the long line of others like it—have no basis in scripture. The New Testament depicts Mary as a woman from the town of Magdala who supports Jesus's work out of her own wealth. She follows him to Jerusalem and observes his crucifixion and burial. When she returns with two other women to anoint his body with spices, they find the tomb's cover moved and the corpse gone. Her most consequential scene appears only in John, the latest of the canonical gospels, after Peter and another disciple flee the empty tomb.

> Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus's body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?"
>
> "They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him." At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus.
>
> He asked her, "Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?"


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broadened people's view of Christian history that Norville had to cut in: "Let me stop you there."

Then Norville posed the same question to Harold Attridge, the dean of Yale Divinity School and himself a Harvard graduate and Nag Hammadi editor. "Well, I think the most disturbing thing about the book," Attridge began, echoing the view of most scholars, "is the ways in which there are facts embedded in it that are taken totally out of context and they're given a spin that distorts them I think quite dramatically."

There was no historical evidence of a married Jesus, King was always careful to say. But she found a kind of common cause with Dan Brown. That the Church Fathers demonize Mary Magdalene in *The Da Vinci Code* because of her marriage to Jesus—and in King's book, because of her spiritual leadership—was not a distinction King harped on. She appeared to regard the *Code*'s ends as more important than its means; the historical questions it inspired mattered more than the fictional plot that inspired them. She told a Los Angeles newspaper that she understood why the *Code* was "touching so many people."

"It has to do with people really being suspicious," she said. "If Magdalene is not a prostitute, then what else is the truth?" *The Harvard Crimson* reported that "King deals with many of the same ideas as Da Vinci Code…in the sense that she asks people to rethink their conceptions of Christianity."

"People are looking for a different kind of religious understanding," King said. Brown's book was "lead[ing] people to ask questions," like "What else haven't we been told?"

"Oh, it was a *huge* teaching moment," she had told me in 2012, when, a few weeks before King announced her new discovery, I had asked about *The Da Vinci Code.* "You know, like, people are actually asking this question about the history of early Christianity and about the texts and materials we worked on."

For King, the *Da Vinci* effect was farther-reaching than any book reviewer had foreseen. It helped turn a scholar whose intellectual passions had been confined to classrooms, academic tracts and the occasional church into a best-selling author with live audiences of hundreds and a television viewership of millions. Yet it put King in a curious bind: On the one hand, *The Da Vinci Code* was just the latest