Veritas: A Harvard Professor, A Con Man and the Gospel of Jesus's Wife

Ariel Sabar (Doubleday, 2020—Kindle Edition), 401 pages in print, plates, illustrations, bibliography, index.

Reviewed by J. E. Leonardson

A book that centers on debates about the place of women in Roman Catholicism might at first glance seem an unlikely recommendation for an intelligence audience, but bear with me. *Veritas* is the story of an academic scandal that, in its complex threads, is an important cautionary tale for intelligence collectors and analysts alike.

The details of the story are too tangled to recap here, but the basics are straightforward. Karen King, the Harvard professor of the title, is a historian of early Christianity at Harvard Divinity School, whose specialty is the study of ancient Christian papyrus texts. These documents, written in Coptic in the first few centuries AD and found in the Egyptian desert, are from the era when Christianity still was forming and debating many of its fundamental tenets; the papyri often contain texts that later were dropped from the New Testament and, in many cases, suppressed by the Catholic Church as heretical. King, in particular, is world renowned for her work on texts that debated the role of women in the Church before it became a male-dominated institution, and her publications have challenged centuries of orthodoxy to Church teachings on sex, women's capacity for leadership, and priestly celibacy.

In July 2010, King received an email from a man who said he was a manuscript collector. Would she, the collector asked, be interested in examining some fragments of Coptic papyri that he had acquired? She said yes, he emailed images of a dozen fragments and, when King examined one of them, she saw that the text strongly suggested that Jesus had been married to Mary Magdalene. King believed the fragment to be a modern fake, however, but nonetheless a year later offered to the collector to have papyrological specialists examine it. He agreed and King sent the image to AnneMarie Luijendijk, a religion professor at Princeton. Luijendijk then showed it to Roger Bagnall, a New York University professor who is one of the world's leading papyrologists. Both agreed that it was genuine. With those assurances, King announced the find at a scholarly conference in Rome in September 2012, and a global sensation ensued because, as King put it, the fragment would force the Catholic Church to "completely reevaluate the way in which Christianity looks at sexuality and at marriage."

King's announcement also brought global scrutiny of the papyrus. Unfortunately for King, as more and more experts in papyrology, Coptic, and early Christianity looked at it, the more reasons they found to doubt its authenticity. King defended the papyrus—the April 2014 issue of the *Harvard Theological Review* carried her scholarly translation and analysis of what she called "the Gospel of Jesus's Wife," along with several scientific evaluations of the fragment that concluded it was genuine—but, by 2016, further textual analyses and improved technical processes made it clear that the text was, in fact, a forgery. (The papyrus itself was genuine—real pieces of ancient papyri are widely available—but the writing was fake.)

While King and her supporters may be content to forget the entire embarrassment, not so Ariel Sabar. A journalist who began covering King's find shortly before the Rome conference, Sabar followed the story for more than five years. His investigation centered on two questions—who was the forger (King refused to identify the collector, citing his request for privacy), and how had King and others been duped by what was, in fact, a crude effort? *Veritas* is the result of his inquiries and, even if the book is overly long and sometimes focuses more on the politics of the Harvard Divinity School or Sabar himself than the story, it is a captivating account of how a clever manipulator can deceive even the most sophisticated analysts.

After months of detective work, Sabar found that the forger was a man named Walter Fritz, a middle-aged German immigrant living in Florida. Fritz, as Sabar describes him, is a protean figure who at school and in jobs "made careful studies of the views and motivations of his superiors" to ingratiate himself and had a "preternatural gift for turning himself into a mirror of other people's beliefs and desires." At the same time, though, he had a "knack for exploiting people's vulnerabilities." Fritz had a troubled family background—his father abandoned his

mother, his stepfather wanted nothing to do with him, and he may have been molested by a priest—before he appeared in the 1980s as a student in Egyptology at the Free University in West Berlin. He showed some promise but did not finish his degree, though he still managed in the early 1990s to become the director of the newly established Stasi Museum in the former East Berlin. His museum performance, however, was disastrous and he soon was out and on his way to start over in Florida, where he engaged in several failed ventures. Eventually he found modest success running a pornographic website on which he sold videos of his wife having sex with other men. Sabar cannot say conclusively why Fritz turned to forgery, but he believes it was a "settling of scores with all the male authority figures who had robbed Fritz of his potential" and especially the Egyptology professors "who had seen him as a middling student instead of the prodigy he felt himself to be."

Whatever Fritz's talents, however, forgery was not among them. King and the other scholars who examined the fragment early on all saw that the handwriting was, as one put it, "really ugly" and far from the norm for sacred or other important ancient documents. The layout of the text, too, was wrong and contained egregious grammatical errors that, another scholar noted, showed the writer was "thinking in English, not Coptic."

The obviousness of the fraud makes Sabar's explorations of how and why the academics fell for the hoax the most valuable parts of the book. The overarching reason, he argues, is that King desperately wanted the fragment and the text to be real, as it would crown her career. Furthermore, the communities of papyrology and historians of early Christianity are small and close, with the scholars closely linked by ties of mentorship and common outlook—they held the same views as she on women and the Church—and thus shared King's desire for the fragment to be genuine. They also brought additional biases to their work. Luijendik, for example, specialized in the study of religious texts found in ancient trash heaps, where torn-up papyri were dumped. Looking at the fragment through her "garbological" lens, says Sabar, she saw what she was used to seeing—a bit of ancient junk that "would be impossible to forge." Bagnall's examination was even worse. He invited several colleagues to examine it with him and, looking at the handwriting, the group instantly saw it was a forgery. But then, Sabar writes, the "scholars doubled back. Soon a full reversal was underway: the appalling handwriting, which Bagnall first saw as a tell of forger, became an obvious mark of authenticity. . . . A papyrus that looked like a clumsy fake was apt to be real, because an actual forger would have tried harder." Finally, Sabar details several conflicts of interest among the scholars and the scientists who carried out the technical examinations of the fragment.

From then onward, Sabar tells a sad, if familiar, story. The papyrus and the version of history it supported was, for King, too important for the text to be labeled a fraud, and she took no steps that would risk exposing it. Indeed, King never tried to do any of the detective work that Sabar undertook and, when she learned that an anonymous peer reviewer for the *Harvard Theological Review* had concluded the fragment was a fake, simply told Sabar that "it just doesn't count." After the Rome conference, moreover, there was no going back. Harvard put its full weight behind the find, as did the Smithsonian, which produced a documentary, and King—in Sabar's portrayal, a skilled self-promoter—hit the lecture circuit to publicize the papyrus and her arguments about Church history. In the end, says Sabar, King still refused to admit what everyone knew, deciding instead to "shift the criteria for the adequacy of truth claims away from objectivity to ethics." King believed so deeply in the correctness of her historical views that, in her view, the Gospel of Jesus's Wife had to be accepted as genuine not because it was an authentic artifact but, instead, because it advanced arguments that needed to be true.

Amidst all the wishful thinking, did anyone get it right? The answer is yes, some did, but King and the others always found reasons to dismiss them. The most prominent critic was a Brown University Egyptologist named Leo Depuydt, who focused on the grammatical errors and argued that the author was likely a modern-day European who "might have benefited from one more semester of Coptic." King's response to Depuydt, echoing Bagnall, was that she "couldn't imagine a con artist capable of getting so many details right and so many others wrong." Others who spotted the forgery were outside the academic mainstream—one was a dropout from academia who worked as a regulatory compliance officer at a vocational school in Portland, Oregon, and another was an evangelical Christian associated with the Museum of the Bible and thus was looked down upon by university-based scholars who viewed people like him as "irredeemably biased." These outsiders found what no one else had bothered to look for—images and translations on the Internet of other Coptic texts that Fritz copied

for his forgery. "Truths hounded in basements might take a bit longer to find their way into the ivory tower," says Sabar, "but they got there eventually."

Intelligence officers should have no trouble listing the causes of the debacle. In our terms, a volunteer wrote in offering exactly what King wanted, in this case a document validating decades of scholarly research and argument. From there, all other errors flowed. King made no effort at asset validation—rather than make even rudimentary checks on Fritz or disclose his identity to enable others to check his story, she simply accepted him as legitimate. The analysts who should have been more careful—Luijendik, and Bagnall and the other papyrologists—also wanted to believe, and thus fell into a groupthink in which they contorted the logic to come up with a desired result. Nonacademic dissenters, lacking the prestige of institutions to back them up, were dismissed with no consideration of their arguments or facts. As the months went by and the evidence piled up, King dug in even more and refused to reconsider her basic assumptions while inventing new reasons to believe.

Before shaking your head at the foolishness of the professors, however, ask yourself this question: how many times have you found yourself in a similar situation? Anyone who has been in the intelligence world for more than a few weeks likely has heard someone say, "I'm the expert, it's my account, and I say. . ." or "Yeah, we've checked this guy and he's reliable. . ." or "You're not cleared for that information, so you can't see the source documents. . ." only to hear later that the analysis was wrong and all the reporting has been recalled as fabrication. Anyone who sticks around for more than a few years, moreover, will at some point be thinking, "I can't believe how wrong I was, maybe there's some way I can avoid admitting it."

Intelligence officers of all specialties would be well advised to read *Veritas* and ponder how easily they might fall into the same traps as King and her colleagues. And if you read *Veritas* and don't think it can happen to you, then you might want to think about reading it twice.

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The reviewer: J. E. Leonardson is the pen name of an analyst in the CIA's Directorate of Analysis.