



8-31-2017

## Slow Scholarship: Do Bloggers Rush In Where Jesus' Wife Would Fear To Tread?

James F. McGrath

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/facsch\\_papers](https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/facsch_papers)



Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

"Slow Scholarship: Do Bloggers Rush In Where Jesus' Wife Would Fear To Tread?" in *Fakes, Forgeries, and Fictions: Writing Ancient and Modern Christian Apocrypha*, ed. Tony Burke, Eugene: Cascade, 2017, 326-340.

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Liberal Arts & Sciences at Digital Commons @ Butler University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Scholarship and Professional Work - LAS by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Butler University. For more information, please contact [digitalscholarship@butler.edu](mailto:digitalscholarship@butler.edu).

Slow Scholarship  
Do Bloggers Rush in Where Jesus' Wife Would  
Fear to Tread?

— James F. McGrath —

WE LIVE IN AN era in which information flows quickly, sometimes *too* quickly. *Christianity Today* recently featured an article about the problem of Christians sharing fake news stories that came to their attention and were accepted uncritically.<sup>1</sup> But the issue is not limited to religious communities. I know a self-proclaimed skeptic who almost daily posts things on Facebook that are satire, but which he mistakes for real news. International news agencies have repeated “news” featured in the satirical newsmagazine the *Onion*. Academics are not immune from this: there are few if any of us whose information-literacy skills are so well-honed that we could never find ourselves mistaking satire for factual reporting, falling for a hoax, or getting “rickrolled.” This chapter explores how this ever-quickenning pace of information flow impacts scholars and the work we do, using the case of the *Gospel of Jesus' Wife* (GJW) as the primary example.

There have been reactions of protest to the ever-quickenning pace of life; the “slow food movement” is one example. But despite the echo in the title, this chapter is not advocating a slow scholarship movement; rather,

1. Stetzer, “Embarrassing Week.”

it seeks to evaluate whether there is a point beyond which any increase in *pace* will result in a corresponding loss of *scholarly rigor*. Even less will this chapter advocate for a *print* scholarship movement. I do not prefer physical papers (which slowly inch their way along in manila envelopes through campus mail) to e-mails. I do not long for the days when I had to make a trip to a library, use a card catalogue to try to find an item, and hopefully find it on the shelf, just in order to check a reference. I delight at the fact that I live in an era when I can often use Google to track down in seconds a piece of information that might in the past have involved a literal slow boat to China.

I believe that GJW provides a very interesting and important test case for some of the new ways we are approaching scholarship and scholarly interaction for a number of reasons. Perhaps most significantly, the majority of bloggers appear to be right, and some were right all along, that this papyrus fragment was indeed a modern forgery. Bloggers have been at the forefront of reporting on the topic, seeking to pass along accurate information to media outlets, and engaging in scholarly discussion about the papyrus fragment. The GJW case appears to vindicate biblioblogging as an approach to scholarship. So why is this essay voicing concerns and advising caution, even as the activity of blogging is moving further from the margins into the heart of the mainstream?

The case of GJW most certainly does provide evidence for the positive contribution of bloggers and blogging in the academy. But it is possible to draw that conclusion too quickly, and on the basis of insufficient evidence, even as some bloggers had done in the case of GJW's authenticity. They may have been proven right in the long term. But the crucial point which must be made emphatically in this context is that it is not the rightness of conclusions which defines scholarship, but the *methods* whereby those right conclusions are drawn. When Philolaus the Pythagorean supposed that the Earth moved around a central fire, because of the hierarchical relationship of fire to other elements in his system of thought, he was in a sense right that the Earth was not the stationary center of things, and right again that something hot was at the center. But he was not right about these things *for the right reasons*.<sup>2</sup> I am concerned that some bloggers *happened to turn out to be right*, after having made up their minds prematurely, before the evidence became available, and the arguments made about that evidence justified the conclusions that they drew.

2. On Philolaus's astronomical system, and the assumptions that led to it, see Huffman, "Philolaus."

In other words, under a tongue-in-cheek title (of the sort you would probably expect from a blogger), this chapter addresses the nature of scholarly methods and scholarly epistemology, and asks what remains the same and what is different between the traditional print approach to scholarship and the new avenues opened to us through blogging. While there is reason for concern and caution, there is also reason for excitement at ways that blogging and other forms of online interaction can make our work not only quicker, but also more accurate, and ultimately more accessible. But I would argue that our blogging is only in genuine service of the academy and the public when we make sure that we blog as scholars, making our points in appropriate scholarly ways.

Let me elaborate in more detail with specific examples from the case of GJW.<sup>3</sup> A good place to begin is with an outline sketch of the timeline whereby the news broke, the bloggers responded, and conclusions were drawn, as this information conveys very clearly the pace with which news travels and discussion unfolds in the biblioblogosphere. It was September 18, 2012 when Karen King made her presentation about the Coptic papyrus fragment that depicts Jesus saying “My wife. . .”<sup>4</sup> Once the news broke, bloggers like Mark Goodacre said what could be said safely at that stage, indicating that the text (1) did not tell us anything about the historical Jesus, and that (2) while there was reason to be cautious if not indeed suspicious, sometimes genuine discoveries have included things some would consider sensational.<sup>5</sup> One thing that blogs allow us to do is to be very precise about the timing of posts. In this case, Goodacre posted on his blog at 1:31am on September 19; clearly he was trying to get a balanced statement on the subject onto his blog as quickly as possible, even if that meant burning the midnight oil and beyond.

Yet even earlier, at some point on the very same day the news broke, a blogger named Jim West had already dismissed the fragment as “rubbish” because of its unknown provenance.<sup>6</sup> Ironically, he wrote the following about the statements by scholars that were being reported in the media: “In short, what it shows is that even now, when people should know better, they still are more than willing to say more than can honestly and confidently be

3. A useful timeline is maintained by Michael Grondin at *Question of Content*; Grondin, “Jesus’ Wife Fragment 2014”; and Grondin, “Jesus’ Wife Fragment 2015.”

4. The existence of the text was announced more widely in *Harvard Magazine* (“New Gospel”); see also the Harvard Divinity School *Gospel of Jesus’ Wife* website <http://gospelofjesuswife.hds.harvard.edu/>.

5. Goodacre, “Gospel of Jesus’ Wife.”

6. West, “No, People.”

said.” Surely his own confidence at this very early stage itself represents a willingness to “say more than can honestly and confidently be said”?

By the evening of September 19, Nicole Winfield of the Associated Press had interviewed two papyrologists who both expressed doubts about the fragment’s authenticity.<sup>7</sup> On September 19 and 20, Tom Verenna posted twice on his blog, the first post indicating that GJW looked like a forgery, the second still inclining in that direction, but noting the still very good reasons to not jump to that conclusion on the basis of evidence currently available.<sup>8</sup> On September 21, Francis Watson posted two pdfs on Mark Goodacre’s blog, arguing that the work is most likely a forgery.<sup>9</sup> Rafael Rodriguez in turn blogged about Watson’s article, under the title “A Verdict is In.”<sup>10</sup> By the end of the day, Andrew Brown was declaring the matter settled in the *Guardian*, even while getting key details incorrect in his reporting.<sup>11</sup>

Also on September 21, I joined the discussion, pointing out that Watson’s arguments about the derivative character of the work applied equally well to authentic gospels. I stressed that Watson’s comparison of GJW to the *Secret Gospel of Mark* simply presumed the inauthenticity of the latter, and so hurt his case in the eyes of those who do not share his assumption.<sup>12</sup> On September 27, Timo Paananen provided me with a pdf to host on my blog space, which showed that the same method Watson had applied to GJW, purportedly showing it to be a forgery, could be applied with the same results to a verifiably authentic ancient papyrus.<sup>13</sup> The argument whereby the most influential case had been made for inauthenticity at this stage was clearly flawed, as the evidence surveyed, while compatible with forgery, most certainly did not prove it in any meaningful sense. Nonetheless, by the end of the month, the Vatican as well as various Evangelical Christian apologetics blogs were claiming with confidence that the text is a fake.<sup>14</sup>

Let me stop my overview of the unfolding online reporting—on scholars’ blogs and in the media—to focus in on this one particular moment. Within *three days* (and in some cases significantly less), there were scholars

7. Other than on the Internet Archive, one of the few places where this press release can still be found online is Jim West’s blog; see West, “And Now the Motive.”

8. Verenna, “Wife of Jesus’ Fragment”; Verenna, “Two Days Later.”

9. Watson, “Fake Gospel-Fragment”; Watson, “Introduction and Summary.”

10. Rodriguez, “Verdict Is In.” He had not taken this view when he first shared the news about the papyrus the day before: Rodriguez, “Gospel of Jesus’ Wife.”

11. Brown, “Fake, Claims Expert”; Mark Goodacre pointed out some of the errors in an update to his post sharing Watson’s article (“Fake Gospel-Fragment”).

12. McGrath, “Is the Gospel of Jesus’ Wife a Fake?”

13. Paananen, “Another ‘Fake.’”

14. O’Leary, “Fragment Is a Fake.”

who felt that they were in a position to comment with confidence on a question pertaining to a papyrus which had not been subjected to scientific testing, which they had not studied in person, and about which experts in papyrology had expressed a range of opinions. They did so on the basis of what I hope we can agree are problematic arguments. The fact that the writing on the papyrus was not that of professional quality does not tell us about its antiquity or recent production. Nor does the presence of grammatical and other errors. Those of us who study ancient artifacts, such as magic bowls from Mesopotamia, know that there were people throughout history who had learned enough writing to produce and sell such objects to others, but whose writing on the bowls ranged from meaningless combinations of letters to awkwardly and inaccurately-copied versions of the compositions of others. One might call these “forgeries”—and to his credit, Watson acknowledged in his article that GJW could have been an *ancient* forgery rather than a modern one, but his article nonetheless ran together those two possibilities, which scholars of antiquity ought to keep separate, and should want to ensure that the wider public can also keep separate. To my knowledge, no scholar was suggesting that GJW was an early work that might answer the historical question of whether Jesus was married. The only question was whether the papyrus might provide evidence of what some people believed in later centuries about Jesus and his wife. A work like the *Gospel of Philip*, which depicts Jesus and Mary Magdalene as kissing frequently on the [lacuna] (63.35–36), can be categorized as an “ancient forgery” in the sense that it is a work from a later time, pretending to be written by an individual named Philip who had lived earlier. But ancient forgeries are of great value to historians and scholars for the things they tell us about the people who forged them and the context in which they considered it worth doing so. And so even to risk giving the impression that the choice was between the work being a historically authentic account of the life of a married Jesus or a forgery (ancient or modern), which is thus of little or no value, is to fail to accurately convey scholarly nuance in what is communicated. And while the press has a notorious history of being resistant to such nuance and precision, it is crucial that we try to convey it nevertheless.

Blogs would later present evidence that seems to demonstrate beyond reasonable doubt that GJW is indeed a forgery. But the fact that subsequent evidence and study demonstrated this does not justify the premature assertion, based on inadequate evidence and unconvincing arguments, that the matter had already been settled. It is arguable that Galileo Galilei did harm to his own case (as well as that of others) for heliocentrism when he claimed that the tides provided proof of the Earth’s rotation. His critics correctly saw the problems with this claim, and this affected their impression

of his overall case.<sup>15</sup> The fact that he used bad arguments in his case for a conclusion that nevertheless proved to be correct, and had a tendency to belittle and insult those who disagreed with him, certainly makes Galileo a historical example from which bloggers ought to learn, prone as we are to both these shortcomings. And so the issue is not merely procedural but also practical. If we jump too hastily to conclusions, bolstered by flawed arguments, it may undermine the credibility of our views—and may continue to do so even later, when other, better evidence and arguments shows that our initial hunch was correct all along.

Would anything have been lost if scholars in those first few days had consistently emphasized that forgery was a *real possibility*; that scientific testing needed to be done but that, even if the papyrus and the ink were ancient, such testing would not exclude the possibility of forgery; and that even if the text was an authentic ancient fragment, it was one from long after the time of Jesus and thus told us about beliefs in those times, and not about Jesus himself? And was anything gained by jumping to a conclusion so hastily, before the evidence justified it? My own view is that because scholarship is characterized by rigorous methods, it is to our credit when we openly acknowledge that certain views we hold are hunches, and that we still await the results of further investigation to show whether or not our instincts are as good as our methods. It will also make it easier to change our minds if further evidence comes to light which should lead us to do so.

It is worth listing the bloggers of whom I am aware who commented even briefly on this matter within those first few days after the news about the papyrus broke, since it gives a sense of the impressive speed and collaborative attention in the response of scholars and of others who regularly read and engage with scholars' blogs. They are: Paul Barford, Allan Bevere, Mike Bird, John Byron, Stephen Carlson, Steve Caruso, Jim Davila, April DeConick, Bart Ehrman, Jeffrey Garcia, Mark Goodacre, Chuck Grantham, Larry Hurtado, Ferrell Jenkins, Dirk Jongkind, Brian LePort, Timo Paananen, Stephen Prothero, Rafael Rodriguez, Gavin Rumney, Ken Schenck, James Tabor, Tom Verenna, Dan Wallace, Joel Watts, Jim West, and Ben Witherington.<sup>16</sup> While not all of the above are scholars or even students in a relevant field, the list still features an impressive number of names of not merely scholars, but *well-known* scholars with an international reputation. All of the aforementioned individuals commented within a week of the news breaking, and used blogs to do so. Surely this is a noteworthy mo-

15. See further Shea, "Galileo's Claim," 111–27; Finocchiaro, *Routledge Guidebook*, 215–56.

16. McGrath, "Is the Gospel of Jesus' Wife a Fake?"

ment in the history of scholarship, whatever one may think of the specific conclusions drawn or points made.

Returning to our survey of the unfolding events, on October 11, Andrew Bernhard posted a pdf article with the title “How The Gospel of Jesus’s Wife Might Have Been Forged: A Tentative Proposal.”<sup>17</sup> On October 16, making reference to Bernhard’s article, Andrew Brown wrote on the subject in *The Guardian* once again, declaring that “It’s been fairly clear for weeks that the papyrus fragment known as the ‘gospel of Jesus’s wife’ was a modern fake.”<sup>18</sup> I want to highlight the contrast between these two online publications. Note Bernhard’s tentativeness—emphasized in the title—despite having very insightful evidence and arguments which would be vindicated later.<sup>19</sup> Also to be noted is what Bernhard had to say about the *process* of how this matter was handled through online venues. Bernhard told *Live Science* that the involvement of the Internet in the release of information and scholarly interaction was a significant step forward: “My personal opinion is that Karen King and *Harvard Theological Review* have significantly improved the traditional peer review process by utilizing the Internet. In fact, this could potentially be a watershed moment in the history of scholarship where the academic process becomes more open and transparent.”<sup>20</sup> This claim too seems to have been vindicated. It would take two to three years for these matters to be addressed in the traditional print format of scholarly journals.<sup>21</sup> Even then, many of us have read the articles in *Harvard Theological Review* and *New Testament Studies* online. And the print articles were in almost every instance interacting with the earlier online discussion; in some cases they were simply more developed versions of those online articles and blog posts.

There is a longstanding precedent in other fields to this approach of academic discussion beginning online in a similar manner to what we have documented here.<sup>22</sup> In physics and other fields of science, drafts of work have been shared on the online repository arXiv (or its predecessor) since

17. Bernhard, “Tentative Proposal.”

18. Brown, “Very Modern Fake.”

19. Bernhard, “Patchwork”; see also Bernhard, “Patchwork (Recap)” and additional discussion in Askeland, “Grondin’s Interlinear.”

20. Brynner, “Authenticity Tests.”

21. See the April 2014 *HTR* issue and the July 2015 *NTS* issue. See also Baden and Moss, “Curious Case”; Pattengale, “Hoax Fell Apart.”

22. Anne Mahoney recently wrote, “Classicists can take digital humanities (DH) for granted. We are all familiar with projects like the TLG, Perseus, the Bibliotheca Neo-Latina, and even BMCR itself” (Review of Klein, *Interdisciplining*).



the early 1990s.<sup>23</sup> These are not peer reviewed (although there is oversight of submissions to ensure relevance), and the appearance online of pre-publication copies of works apparently does not prevent subsequent publication in print. Indeed, it is arguable that the feedback received on drafts plays an important role in the quality of the finalized published versions—or whether the research is continued at all. In January of this year, that site celebrated the posting of its *millionth* paper.<sup>24</sup> The closest we have had in our fields is arguably the academic conference—and the parallel is even closer for some of us who, for a good many years now, have participated in sessions for which digital copies of papers have been circulated in advance, allowing for them to be read and not merely heard, and for them to be reflected on, facilitating not only more but better discussion and feedback.<sup>25</sup>

The digital dissemination of scholarship is connected to another aspect of this topic, since an online source is thought to have been used by the person who forged GJW. Andrew Bernhard, in his article in *NTS*, acknowledged that each suspicious detail could have a legitimate plausible explanation in an authentic text, and that it is the combination of these features that makes it most likely that GJW is a forgery: “No genuinely ancient writing would be likely to compress so many suspicious textual features into just eight short, partial lines of text. GJW is better understood as a modern forgery that contains numerous indications of its recent origin: all five notable textual features can be explained well as the result of a forger’s dependence on ‘Grondin’s Interlinear.’”<sup>26</sup> If online discussion played a decisive role in the case for the work being a forgery, online material may also have played a crucial role *in the forgery itself*.

Michael Grondin’s website has been very useful to scholars, and so it is also worth noting that Grondin is a computer programmer with an interest in the *Gospel of Thomas* but has no degrees that relate directly to the study of that text.<sup>27</sup> The Internet, it has been said, democratizes knowledge—anyone can create a blog or website on any topic they wish. Some have decried this as creating a free-for-all in which expertise counts for nothing. Yet far from representing a departure from historic scholarship, this shift is actually a return to something that was commonplace in earlier eras. The proliferation of experts in crowded research areas has, in recent decades, tended to

23. Ginsparg, “Twenty Years Ago.”

24. Noorden, “arXiv Preprint Server.”

25. The conference that led to the production of the present volume is itself an example of this procedure being followed.

26. Bernhard, “Textual Evidence,” 354.

27. See Grondin’s website for more information: [http://gospel-thomas.net/s\\_persnl.htm](http://gospel-thomas.net/s_persnl.htm).

marginalize those outside the academy, with very few exceptions. But we are all presumably aware of some famous instances of crucial work done by people who would be dismissed as amateurs in our time. For instance, would Darwin even be given a hearing by modern biologists given that he only earned an undergraduate degree, and even then in theology rather than biology?<sup>28</sup> And arguably the most important work on the Mandaeans in the twentieth century was undertaken by Ethel Stepšana Drower, who was an autodidact in the relevant fields. But living in Iraq, she made friends with the Mandaeans and acquired the most important collection of Mandaean manuscripts for the Bodleian Library in Oxford, wrote what is still the go-to survey of the Mandaeans, published the only translations in English of a number of Mandaean texts, and published articles and reviews in mainstream scholarly journals. Today such an “independent scholar” might find it much harder to get a hearing, perhaps because the Internet has made us more aware of how many cranks there are around, but also because there are so many scholars *within* the academy vying for spots in publications and conferences that there is less room for anyone else. Nonetheless, in the case of GJW, and also in discussion of *Secret Mark*, we have seen the important role played not only by professional academics who blog, but also people whose interest in ancient religious texts is not connected directly to their qualifications or profession.<sup>29</sup>

Another point that is relevant in the consideration of this new approach to scholarship online is the penchant for online articles and blog posts, even those with substantial scholarly content, to contain snide or offensive remarks which would be unlikely to make it into a peer-reviewed print journal article—or even be included in a submission to such a venue. For instance, the conclusion of Francis Watson’s online article reads:

The Jesus of the Secret Gospel [of Mark] likes to consort naked with young men at night, while seeming hostile to women. By contrast, the new gospel fragment has Jesus speak

28. Jump (“Watson and Crick”) suggests that even Watson and Crick, who had relevant qualifications and who famously proposed the double helix structure of DNA, would have found it hard to get that idea published if they were seeking to do so in our time.

29. Another oddity related to blogs and publications on this topic is when I was cited in an article on GJW by David Kim (“Reconsidering”). The bibliography has a link under my name to Francis Watson’s pdf article hosted on Mark Goodacre’s blog! Errors happen in print scholarship as well as electronic, but it is worth mentioning that the blog format—in which there can be guest posts and hosted articles—may make confusion of this sort more common. Also noteworthy is the small amount of print publications cited in Kim’s bibliography.

disconcertingly of “my wife.” Has this new heterosexual Jesus been created to complement Smith’s homosexual one?<sup>30</sup>

I am not sure which is more problematic: the homophobic mischaracterization of what *Secret Mark* depicts, or the suggestion that merely by depicting Jesus as heterosexual (which apparently is disconcerting), GJW might be offering a deliberate counterpart to *Secret Mark*. Arguably worse still, Christian Askeland, in a blog post that offered what many of us consider the decisive evidence that GJW was a forgery (showing as it did that the Lycopolitan Gospel of John text which accompanied it was written in the same hand and follows the line breaks of a print edition) managed to distract from the substantive matters by referring to the text as the “ugly sister” of Jesus’ wife.<sup>31</sup> The title of the post was eventually changed as a result of feedback, but the matter still drew attention.<sup>32</sup>

But let us set aside matters such as the casual tone of most blogs, which one can also find in conference papers (which, as I have already said, I consider the closest historic analogue in our field to substantive blog posts), and return once again to the most crucial point, which is not the speed at which scholarship moved in the case of GJW, so much as the speed with which particular scholarly proposals came to be treated as definitive, not only by the media, but by other scholars. In the traditional workings of scholarship, the appearance of a new article would typically mark either the beginning of a conversation or its continuation, and only very rarely its definitive end, and that after much consideration of its merits. We are aware that our work as academics moves constantly between two poles, that of consensus-building and consensus-challenging. We seek to break new ground, but we know that our points of agreement as an academic community are more likely to be correct, and the correctness or otherwise of our new proposals must be evaluated by the scholarly guild as a whole.

And so let me pose the question in epistemological terms: at what point if any could we appropriately say that we *knew* that GJW is a modern forgery? When I ask about our *knowledge*, I mean in the sense that our scholarly conclusion was adequately justified. The epistemology of scholarship has been a focus of significant discussion in recent years, in particular in relation to the Digital Humanities.<sup>33</sup> If we set the bar too high, then perhaps even now we do not yet *know with absolute certainty* that GJW is a

30. Watson, “Fake Gospel-Fragment.”

31. Askeland, “Jesus Had a Sister-in-Law.”

32. See Mroczek, “Sexism.”

33. See for instance Schon, “Knowing-in-action”; Cecire, “Introduction”; Ramsay and Rockwell, “Developing Things”; Kitchin, “Big Data”; Liu, “Theses.”

forgery. It seems extremely likely based on current evidence, to be sure, but how likely does it need to be for us to speak of *knowledge*? And is input from a significantly larger number of experts necessary before we can be not just confident but, for all intents and purposes, certain?

Consensus-building takes time. As we teach students to inquire into the scholarly consensus as a starting point for their own research, the question arises as to where is best to look in order to find out what the consensus of experts is on a particular matter. To what extent do scholarly blogs give the public a clear sense of the scholarly consensus on any given topic? If those scholars who happen to blog also tend to have views that are a minority stance in the guild, could that lead to misperception by readers outside of the field? To give but one example, I sometimes get the sense that skepticism about the classic four-source solution to the Synoptic Problem (the Q hypothesis) is more common in the biblioblogosphere than in the academy more generally. To the extent that not all scholars blog, will those who do blog have an undue influence in shaping the impression amongst the media and the general public of what scholars think?

This ought not to concern us too much. The bigger issue is how to convey to the public that attempts to further knowledge, whether on blogs or in peer-reviewed articles, will often be seeking to challenge a consensus. Reading just one publication, whether it be a blog post or a peer-reviewed article, in many instances will not convey a sense of what the scholarly consensus is. In seeking to distinguish scholarship from other voices online, we have rightly pointed to peer review as distinctive of the scholarly enterprise. But it seems that, in turn, we also need to make clear that peer review does not guarantee that the viewpoint expressed or conclusions drawn are correct; that judgment requires the further steps of discussion, evaluation, response, counterargument, and consensus-building that are also key features of the scholarly endeavor.

Since that process is so crucial, we may take delight in the possibility that blogs and other online forums may speed things up considerably. When it comes to the process of academic publication and dialogue, there is nothing inherently positive about taking a long time. No-one, I am sure, thinks that the lengthy process and tedious delays before the Dead Sea Scrolls finally became available is preferable to the process around GJW. I am not advocating for us to move more slowly, but to move as quickly as we can while still being *careful*. Nor has print scholarship always moved at a snail's pace. For example, after the publication of E. P. Sanders' seminal work *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, four reviews by major scholars appeared within the following year, and many scholars seemed to be aware very quickly that a

landmark publication had taken place.<sup>34</sup> It might be interesting to speculate as to what this example might have looked like if it happened now, in our Internet era. Would Sanders' 600+ pages have worked as a series of blog posts? If Sanders had blogged on his points while working on the book, his posts certainly would have appeared over time as they were written, rather than all at once. And with blog posts one does not usually go back and polish a previous post; instead, one writes a new one, and the effect of such rewriting on the persuasiveness of one's arguments has not, to my knowledge, been studied. If the entire argument of the book had appeared in a series of blog posts, would it have seemed as persuasive? And how might the reviews have impacted things, if they too had appeared on blogs? Presumably there would have been interaction throughout the series, but would the interactions, and the reactions of the scholarly community as well as of religious groups, have been the same?

Turning to another example, what might have unfolded in the blogosphere if Codex Sinaiticus had been discovered in our time? Larry Hurtado mentioned Constantine Simonides on his blog in connection with the discussions of GJW.<sup>35</sup> Simonides, a famous forger, claimed to have forged Codex Sinaiticus, which Tischendorf discovered at St. Catherine's Monastery in the nineteenth century. Lest this seem too speculative an undertaking, I would point out that, unbeknownst to most academics, debates continue on blogs between Christian apologists about the authenticity of Codex Sinaiticus to this very day, with the case for its inauthenticity championed in particular by members of the King James Only movement.<sup>36</sup> If the matter were not something considered to be long settled among scholars, but was something that appeared as breaking news, how might scholarly bloggers have reacted to this sensational find, which was followed in turn by a confession from a renowned forger that he had produced the artifact? I will not try to apply to the methods used by bloggers in analyzing GJW to Sinaiticus in detail—it is not, at any rate, a precisely parallel situation. But I suspect that some of us might have considered the sensational character of the find, coupled with the confession of the forger, to settle the matter. It would be worth looking closely at precisely what persuaded scholars of the authenticity of Codex Sinaiticus, and what would be involved in the same kind of evidence being found persuasive in the context of online discussion and interaction today, whether about GJW or something else.

34. See the reviews by Dahl, Sandmel, Caird, and Jacob Neusner.

35. Hurtado, "Master Hoaxer."

36. Pack, "Codex Sinaiticus."

What about *Secret Mark*? In this case, we have Stephen Carlson, a blogger who has also published a book on that specific subject.<sup>37</sup> And so this is not a purely theoretical case, but one in which we can ask about the role of blogging in relation to print scholarship. In this instance, however, there is far, far less agreement among scholars about the question of forgery vs. authenticity than in the case of *Sinaiticus*. A Google search for “Secret Gospel of Mark” turns up many blogs among the first two pages of results, with a mix of arguments for authenticity and inauthenticity—perhaps representing quite well the lay of the scholarly land on this topic. It would be another interesting thought experiment, to consider how the situation might be similar or different if the news about the discovery of *Secret Mark* broke for the first time in the present day. We would surely have accusations of forgery, but perhaps the matter might have been resolved more satisfactorily if Morton Smith himself had had the opportunity to write a guest blog post responding to Stephen Carlson’s accusations, as well as those of others.

Looking at this case, another issue arises related to blogging and online scholarship: the penchant of online scholarship to later disappear from the Internet. Andrew Bernhard’s name has been mentioned already in connection with GJW, but he also at one point had materials online related to *Secret Mark*. His current website, however, does not include those pages, and the Internet Archive suggests they disappeared from the web in the late 1990s.<sup>38</sup> Blogs and other web pages are notorious for being ephemeral, but residual copies of materials that have since been updated and improved continue to be accessible, if one knows where to look for them. Scholarship depends on our ability to access work that was done previously and to build upon it. If finding print copies of articles and books is much more tedious and time-consuming than accessing them online, the ease and speed of access to blog posts and online pdfs will not be an advantage if those things disappear from the web completely, unobtainable even through interlibrary loan.

Blogging is simply a *format* of online publication, which can serve to make available anything from pictures of cats to scholarly arguments. The same things can be found in print, although much less frequently are they found side-by-side in the same publication. But the fact that hobbies and humor may appear on blogs alongside reflections on ongoing research and commentary on breaking news about archaeological finds has, for some of us, created a genuine sense of getting to know one another as people via the Internet. Given the penchant for rancor and insult in online venues,

37. Carlson, *Gospel Hoax*.

38. For those who may be interested, the materials are accessible via the Internet Archive at [https://web.archive.org/web/19981205133918/http://www.teleport.com/~cabern/andrew/translations/secret\\_mark.html/](https://web.archive.org/web/19981205133918/http://www.teleport.com/~cabern/andrew/translations/secret_mark.html/).

the potential benefit of something that leads us to recognize one another—and thus hopefully treat one another—as real human beings, offsets, in my mind, the potential disadvantages of the mixing of frivolity and scholarship on blogs and other social media.

In conclusion, I want to very briefly propose that scholars who maintain an online presence ought to work together to determine how best to achieve the aim of preserving scholarly rigor while coupling it with the greater speed possible through the harnessing of current and future technology. The following elements seem to me to be of particular importance and urgency:

1. More participation: One of the strengths of the academy is that it has participants around the world, who all look in some standard places for the research carried out by others. To have that strength as part of online scholarship, we need a much larger number of scholars involved in blogging, present on social media, and participating in the scholarly process online.
2. More caution: A day or two, in my opinion, is unlikely to ever be an appropriate amount of time in which to draw a definitive conclusion about a serious subject. But even when drawing a tentative conclusion, we need to be aware that media reports are often inaccurate, photographs do not always give an accurate impression of artifacts, and that in other ways we may not yet have access to the information that we need. And, to the extent that we comment day-by-day as things unfold, we need to be an example in our willingness to change our minds as newly-available evidence makes a compelling case for our doing so.
3. More openness and accessibility: To the extent that we can make our publications available online, not just on blogs but institutional repositories and open-access peer-reviewed journals, we can allow interaction not just with blog posts but with full-fledged articles online.

Blogging and online publication and interaction have already had a transformative impact on scholarship, and I am excited about the many ways that technology will enhance what we do in the future, in ways that we have yet to imagine. In the meantime, I hope that we can work together to make sure that rather than imposing an arbitrary speed limit on scholarship which does nothing but slow us down, we can move quickly but collaboratively. We have more insight together than we do alone. By drawing

conclusions too quickly as individuals, and by hearing only select voices (whether by choice or because other scholars are not participating in online discussion), we risk losing that which gives scholarship its strength. The good news is that none of those things is a necessary part of blogging and online interaction. And so all it should take in order for us to preserve the historic strengths of scholarship and combine them with the greater speed that the Internet makes possible, is for us to make a concerted effort to do so. We have not always seen that happen, but we can surely find examples to show how similar shortcomings have been evidenced in the past in print scholarship too. The academy is what academics make it, and I for one am more thrilled than worried by the positive things we have seen as academics have come together and joined forces to investigate and expose a forgery, across wide distances of geography as well as ideology, in ways that could not be achieved as easily, as quickly, or as effectively in the past. It is my hope that the next time a major discovery—authentic or forged—makes headlines, we will see a response that includes all the positive elements in the response to GJW, while surpassing what we achieved in that instance in terms of caution, scholarly interaction, accuracy of reporting, judiciousness, and effectiveness in conveying our scholarly insights to the media and to the wider public.