

Macomb researcher's typo exposed the 'Gospel of Jesus' Wife' as a forgery

[Francis X. Donnelly](#)

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Macomb Township — For 30 years, Mike Grondin has searched for hidden messages in a condemned gospel in a long-dead language.

While trying to solve the 1,600-year-old mystery, he inadvertently helped unravel a modern-day one — a 21st-century hoax involving a breathtaking religious discovery.

A scrap of ancient paper whose writing described Jesus as married was exposed as a forgery with the strongest proof buried in Grondin's research on a different subject.



His distinctive translation of an old Egyptian language, including a typo, was copied by the forger and placed in the historic document.

This wasn't how Grondin, 76, envisioned leaving his mark on biblical scholarship.

"I made a minor mistake," he said ruefully. "Some are prone to say my translation is error-filled. It isn't. I'm very conscientious, not at all sloppy."

The tawdry trail runs from a Florida pornographer who owns the artifact to a prominent Harvard University professor who failed to adequately research the document and now admits she was bamboozled.

The fraud made worldwide news in 2016 and is the subject of a recently published book, “Veritas: A Harvard Professor, A Con Man and the Gospel of Jesus’s Wife.”

So how did Grondin find himself in the middle of one of the biggest religious hoaxes of the era? It’s a long story — three decades long, to be exact.

He’s not a biblical scholar or linguistics scholar or any type of scholar. He’s a retired computer programmer and self-described logician living in Macomb Township.

Nor does he have a religious bent, although he was an altar boy, sang in the church choir and, at 15, wanted to be a priest. In fact, he’s now an atheist.

Grondin is a quiet, easygoing introvert with a grown daughter and a wife of 39 years.

'Like a dog with a bone'

Grondin wanted to be a college professor but ran out of money before he could get a doctorate. He settled for a master’s degree in philosophy from Wayne State University.

He enjoys tackling complicated puzzles of different types — word, math or logic — said his younger brother, Maurice Grondin. Naturally inquisitive, he looks at all sides of a problem as he tries to solve it.

“He’s like a dog with a bone,” Maurice said. “If he gets ahold of something, he will tear into it. He’ll work every aspect until he gets to the marrow.”

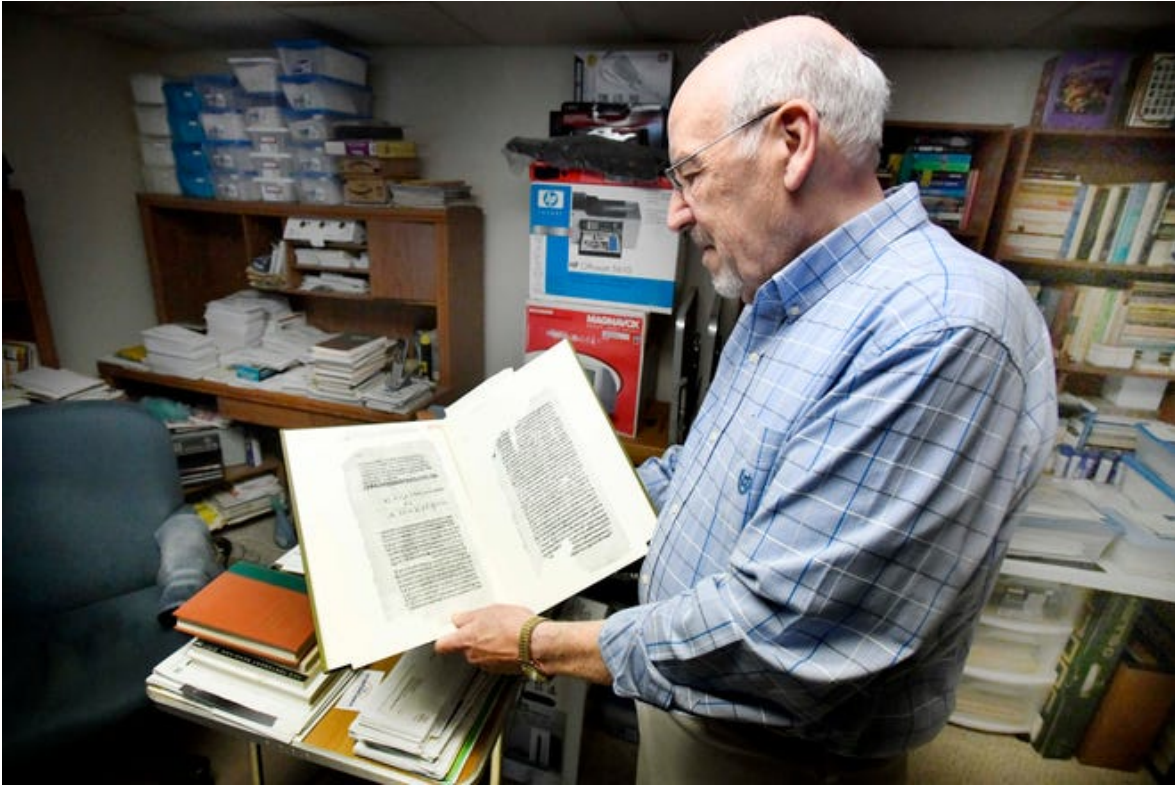
In 1988, Grondin showed his father an intricate word problem he had solved, but dad wasn’t impressed. He remarked on all the time his son spent on brainteasers, wondering if there were more important things he could be working on.

An irritated Grondin resolved to find a biblical mystery he could solve. Then his dad, who was religious, would have to be impressed.

Grondin began reading about faith and learned about the Gospel of Thomas, which is different from other scripture in that there’s no narrative, just sayings by Jesus. It was discovered in 1945 after being buried in an Egyptian desert for 1,600 years.

One of the books Grondin read posed an intriguing question: Were the 114 sayings in Thomas as random as they seemed or did they follow some secret order?

“Ah, there’s a project for me,” he thought. “I took it as a challenge.”



First, he had to learn Coptic, the old Egyptian language that Thomas is written in. Using an introductory grammar book, he gained a rudimentary understanding of the language in a month.

Ancient civilizations used letters as numbers so every word has a numeric value. Grondin became convinced that, if there was a mystery lurking in Thomas, it might be solved through numbers, not words.

He counted the number of letters in each line and the number of lines in each block of text. He charted the frequency of certain words and the distance between them.

He became so immersed in his computations that he began showing up late for work and continued working on them at the job.

His long-suffering wife, Letty, finally put her foot down. She mandated the setting aside of time every night so they could do something together, whether it was watching television or going out to dinner.

“He’s just always so busy with his group,” she said about a Thomas discussion group on Facebook. “He spends a lot of time researching and reading and listening to webcasts.”

After Letty went to bed, Grondin resumed working on the arcane intellectual pursuit, staying up to 3 a.m.

32:10(001)	ΝΑΓΕΙ	ΝΕ	Ν-ΘΑΧΕ	ΘΗΠ	ΕΝΤΑ-ΙΟ	ΕΤ-ΟΝΖ
Prologue	These	are	the-words	(hidden,	which-ISOf	who-lives
32:11(002)	-ΧΟ-ΟΥ	ΑΥΘ	Α-Ι-ΣΑΙ-ΚΟΥ	ΝΟΙ-ΔΙΔΥΜΟ		
	spoke(),	and	he-wrote-them,	viz-Didymos		
32:12(003)	ΙΟΥΔΑ	ΘΩΜΑ	>	ΑΥΘ	ΠΕΧΑ-Ι	ΧΕ ΠΕ-
L. 1>	Judas	Thomas,	>	and	said-he	this: Who-
32:13(004)	-ΤΑ-ΖΕ	ΘΕΡΗΝΕΙΑ	Ν-ΝΕΘ-ΘΑΧΕ	Ι-ΝΑ-		
	-ever-falls	upon-the-meaning	of-these-words,	he-will-		
32:14(005)	-ΧΙ-ΤΠΕ	ΑΝ	Ν-Π-ΜΟΥ			
	take-taste	not	of(the)Death.			
001	ΘΗΠ = ΕΤ-ΖΗΠ					
004	ΘΕΡΗΝΕΙΑ = ΕΤ-ΖΕΡΗΝΕΙΑ					

Notes & Comments:

- In the phrase "And he said..." (line 3), the "he" is presumably IS, but may be Thomas.
- Here, as elsewhere, "fall upon" means "find" or "discover", just as in English.

ΔΙΔΥΜΟ	1	1	(here only)
ΘΩΜΑ	4	2	P.1,13(3)
ΙΟΥΔΑ	1	1	(here only)
ΜΟΥ	11	11	L.1,18,19,85,111 as nr; L.11,59,61,63,84,109 as vb
ΟΝΖ	14	10	P.1,3,11(3),37,50,52,59(2),60,111(2),114
ΠΑΓΕΙ ΤΑΓΕΙ ΝΑΓΕΙ	24	20	(see common index)
ΣΑΙ-	1	1	(here only)
ΘΑΧΕ	9	5	P.1,1,13(2),19,38 as nr; L.52(3) as vb
ΖΕΡΗΝΕΙΑ	1	1	(here only)
ΖΗΠ ΖΗΠ ΖΗΠ-	12	10	P.1,5(2),6,32,33,39,83(2),96,100,109
ΧΙ ΧΙ- ΧΙΤ-	14	13	L.1,13,18,19,22(2),35,39,64,65,85,88,95,96
ΧΟ-	27	18	(see common index)
ΤΠΕ	4	4	L.1,18,19,85 + other meanings

(Some words not indexed) (Greek words & names color-coded) Rev 02/24/09

After 30 years, he hasn't figured out the riddle but said he has cobbled together enough evidence to convince himself he's on the right track.

He discovered Thomas has exactly 500 Greek words that comprise exactly 2,400 letters, and found connections between the number of times certain words are used and the words' Greek numeric value.

Where others saw coincidence, he saw intention. He dismissed the notion he was finding proof because he was inclined to, since an inveterate puzzle solver sees puzzles everywhere.

"I'm convinced it's true," he said about a hidden code that lies just beyond his grasp. "I've found enough evidence that I'm satisfied, and I'm hard to satisfy."

From controversy to forgery

It was a partial sentence on a partial piece of papyrus, but it threatened to turn the Catholic Church on its head.

"Jesus said to them, 'My wife...'"

The rest of the Coptic text seemed to describe a conversation between Jesus and the apostles where he said a woman named Mary was worthy of being one of his disciples.

Jesus' celibacy and the fact the apostles were men are among the reasons priests are required to be celibate and women aren't allowed to be church leaders.

Harvard professor Karen King, one of the leading historians of early Christianity, announced the startling discovery in 2012 to fanfare and murmurs.



Some biblical scholars were quickly suspicious of the manuscript, whose text was eerily similar to the writing in the Gospel of Thomas.

More specifically, it seemed to lift Coptic words and phrases from a translation of Thomas that Grondin had created in 2002 to help in his research. It even contained a typo he made when transferring the translation to a PDF file. He failed to add the Coptic word “*m*” in a sentence.

His interlinear translation, which was accessible on his website, was the first ever done line by line, which made it easier to interpret single words.

When King later released a translation of the Jesus fragment that the owner had done, every line showed traces of Grondin’s interlinear, using his distinctive English words, which he had chosen to suit his statistical analysis, according to “Veritas.”

The duplications were discovered by an independent scholar from Portland, Oregon, who was familiar with Grondin's translation.

The owner of the Jesus papyrus had wanted to remain anonymous, but Ariel Sabar, the author of “Veritas,” eventually discovered his identity.

He was Walter Fritz of North Port, Florida, a German immigrant who had studied Egyptology at a Berlin college before dropping out. His main source of income in the Sunshine State was making videos of his wife having sex with other men and selling them online, Sabar wrote.

Fritz first told Sabar he hadn't used Grondin's interlinear to translate the fragment — "Absolutely not!" — then admitted he had used it and, in fact, had printed it from the internet and kept a copy on his shelf.

But Fritz denied he was the forger, saying he got the artifact from another person, a claim Sabar's reporting raised doubts about.

Fritz told The Detroit News he wasn't familiar with Grondin's interlinear and hadn't used it to translate his artifact.

"I most definitely did not," he said.

Fritz said he didn't know how a typo from the interlinear ended up in his document. He said it wasn't unusual for historic manuscripts to have mistakes.

"I have no explanation for it," he said and then laughed.

Fritz said he hadn't read "Veritas."

A biblical trailblazer

Academics are impressed by all the resources Grondin has accumulated over the years related to the Gospel of Thomas.

Christian Askeland, a Cambridge-trained scholar in Coptic studies and one of the people who helped expose the hoax, wrote on a blog that he was a huge fan of Grondin's website, describing the Macomb Township resident as a trailblazer in making Thomas resources available online.

Askeland told The News that Grondin's website and listserv were the best forums for discussion of the Thomas.

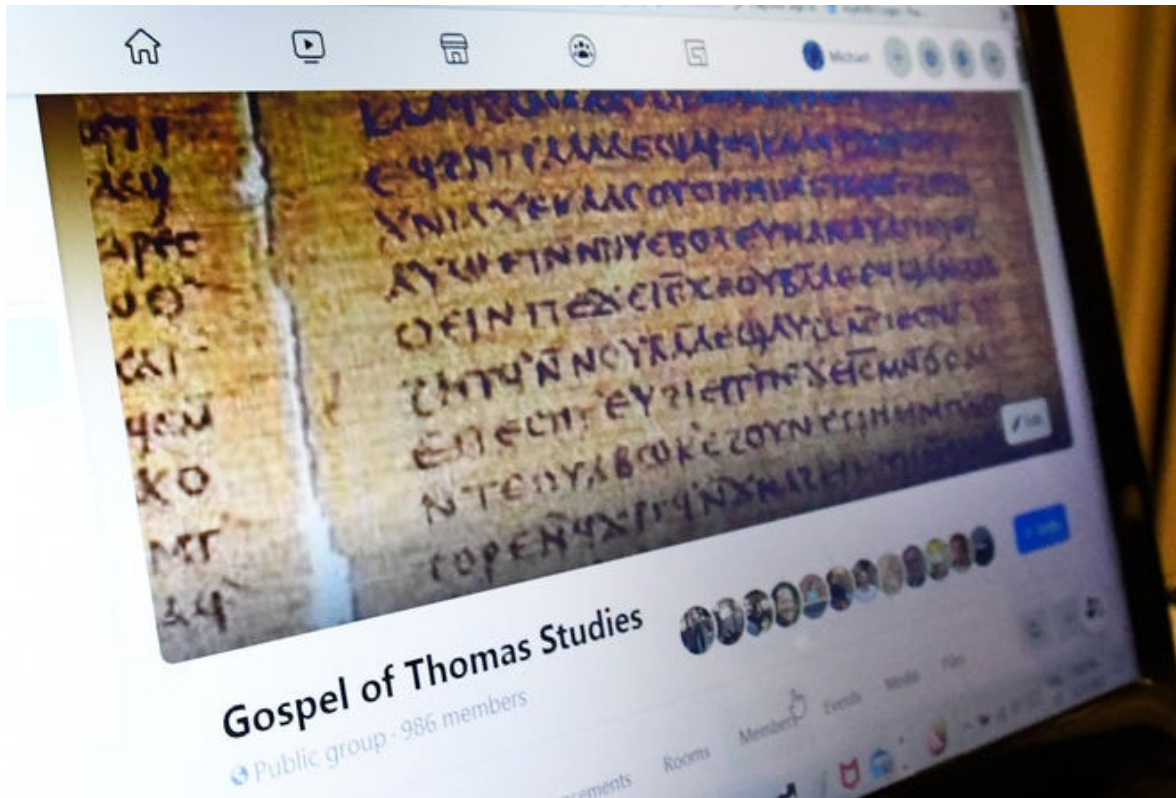
"Mike can be blunt and has his own ideas," he said. "(But) he has contributed to open dialogue between starkly different worldviews."

Grondin created the website in 1996 to interest people in his research. It dutifully notes whenever academics mention him in their writings.

While his robust resources are roundly praised, his theories about Thomas have been met with a resounding silence.

If the study of non-canonical gospels is a fringe field, he is all by himself, on the fringe of a fringe.

When Grondin finally received the attention he craved, it wasn't for something he had discovered but for being part of a hoax.



Even worse, the attention centered on a mistake he had made, the typo the forger then placed in the Jesus fragment.

“I’m a cautious, careful person when it comes to scholarly work,” he said.

When Grondin began looking into Thomas 30 years ago, he fantasized about unraveling secrets from the earliest years of Christianity, such as whether the fire that destroyed most of Rome in 64 A.D. had been ignited by the faithful.

Now he thinks the solution to the puzzle is more pedestrian, just a rejiggering of the gospel parts to yield a structure where the sayings aren’t quite so random.

He isn’t sure how close he is to solving the conundrum but, at 76, he doubts he’ll ever get there. It’s too complex for one person to figure out, he said.

One reason Grondin had hoped others would join his journey was so they could carry it on in his wake. At this point, that appears unlikely, he said.

After he’s gone and his website slips into the ether of the internet, he hopes that, much like the Gospel of Thomas was plucked from a grave in the desert, someone goes looking for his research and retrieves it from the web archives.

“It’s as if God said, ‘I’m going to let you figure out it’s a puzzle and I’ll let you find evidence of it but — and this is the curse part of it — no one will pay attention to you,’” he said. “The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away.”

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Additional Information about the above article

This file is a slightly reformatted version of the original Detroit News e-edition article.

I was interviewed by Frank Donnelly in two phone calls in mid-September. Additionally, a photographer came to my home and I showed him various working materials.

The print edition appeared in the Detroit News, Thur, Oct 1st, 2020, p. 1-2, under the headline “Jesus married? Typo helps expose forgery” with sub-heading “Researcher’s quest to solve one mystery unravels another.” The front-page picture – which didn’t appear in the e-edition - was of me showing the title page of Gos. Thom.

Other differences between electronic and printed editions:

E: “Nor does he have a religious bent, although he was an altar boy, sang in the church choir and, at 15, wanted to be a priest. In fact, he’s now an atheist.”

P: “Nor does he have a religious bent. In fact, he’s now an atheist.”

E: “... Askeland ... wrote ... that he was a huge fan of Grondin’s website ...”

P: “... Askeland ... wrote ... that he was a fan of Grondin’s website ...”

The black-and-white picture on page 2 of the print edition is in the e-edition in color.

The e-edition contains 4 pictures not in the print edition.

“Beautifully written ... the reporter did his homework ...” (Ariel Sabar, email Oct 1st)

I would like to respond to one point in the article. Comparing my work with that of “Biblical scholars” and “linguistic scholars”, Donnelly was unable to say what “type” of scholar I am. The answer is simple: I’m a Thomas scholar. More specifically, I specialize in the internal aspect of Gos. Thom. – as opposed to its dating and dependence, e.g..

Michael W. Grondin, 21 October 2020