

# HOAX

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"I was against that. This is something that will create controversy. I tried to talk her out of it. This is something that will offend religious people," Fritz said. "She chose to fly to Rome and do this right across from the Vatican ... I thought this was a little like raising the middle finger."

King called the scrap of papyrus "The Gospel of Jesus' Wife." Her thesis led to several news stories, magazine articles and a TV show on The Smithsonian Network in 2014.

Now people are backing off over whether this piece of evidence is real — although some say there is evidence that Jesus did have a wife. This isn't the proof that some people had hoped it was.

"Everybody is running for cover," Fritz said. "The hoax argument: authenticity. She consulted four or five world-class experts who thought this was real. I had no hand in

choosing the title ("The Gospel of Jesus' Wife"); the location where she was doing this. I voiced my concerns and she chose to do it that way anyway."

Fritz acknowledges he was interested in ancient languages while a college student in Berlin. He studied Egyptology and was a "terrible" student when it came to Coptic, saying he never liked the language.

The Atlantic writer, Ariel Sabar, said Tuesday in an email he had no idea his investigation would end up in North Port.

"When I started looking into the origins of the papyrus last October, I had no idea where I'd wind up. The six months I spent researching my Atlantic story felt very much like detective work, following one clue to the next, and one source to the next, until a picture began to take shape," Sabar stated.

Sabar said King never said it was the only evidence Jesus had a wife.

"(King) was very clear from the start that the papyrus could not be



SUN PHOTO BY MADISON HEID

**Walter Fritz' home on the north side of North Port has several signs warning people to keep out — fairly common for some of the homes in the area off Tropicaire Boulevard.**

taken as proof that Jesus was married. It was composed, she'd said, too long after the crucifixion to have any value as biography. If authentic, it would only show that one group of ancient Christians, living a few hundred years after the crucifixion, thought he'd been married. This was still important because it would show just how diverse the voices of early Christians were — and how at least some of them had no problem with Jesus being married, even possibly to Mary

Magdalene," Sabar said.

"For those who saw the papyrus as proof that women from Magdalene on have been unfairly marginalized by the church — particularly by the Roman Catholic Church — the news that it's a likely forgery may come as something of a disappointment. But I'm not sure historians need this papyrus to make that argument. There are other early Christian texts that also suggest a particularly close relationship between Jesus and Magdalene, though

the Gospel of Jesus's Wife would have been the first to suggest the two were married, and that's what made it so controversial," Sabar continued.

Fritz agrees with that. "It would render the Catholic religion based on something false — and that's why it's offensive."

Fritz said Sabar was a good journalist. He said the article was "mostly factually correct but goes in a certain way" — making it appear Fritz had odd motives and fantasies that led to the potential reason to create a hoax.

"It is tilted to make a statement," he said. "It is making it look like I could forge this."

And the very personal aspects bring in Fritz' sex life as a motive — at one point focusing on Fritz' wife.

"That's exactly what I don't like about his article. He somehow creates an aura about us. He drags my wife into this. I owned these before I knew my wife," Fritz said.

"I still like Ariel to some degree ... but I think in the end he was trying to

find a smoking gun."

Fritz said King, with whom he emailed for years, was scared by the story from Sabar.

"I think Professor King just caved in," he said. "I think she read Ariel's article and gave in."

And while there is some suggestion the papyrus and the controversy was a secret, Fritz said it wasn't too much of a secret in North Port, saying he'd told a North Port Sun reporter about it years ago.

"There's people in North Port who knew about this. It wasn't really a big mystery. I would have not talked to Ariel either, but he had a really nice and good approach."

Fritz is steadfast in one point. Even if Harvard says it's unsure of the authenticity of the papyrus, nobody has confirmed it either way.

"To my knowledge, there's no test so far that shows it as a forgery ... even if you had absolute proof that it was not a forgery, if you were a scientist, would you come out right now and say so? Heck no."