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The Difference Differences Can Make

*What Variations
Among Manuscripts Can Tell Us*

Visitors to the Center often pose the question, "What difference does it make?" The questioner usually means what difference is made in our understanding of the Bible by all these variations recorded in the manuscripts. Even after we have said that the Bible comes to us only through manuscripts and that the manuscripts record different wordings among which we must choose, the question remains. Why engage in the massive effort of accumulating, comparing and sifting all of these different wordings in order to find the one in each case that is closest to the original wording of the passage? Do the differences matter enough to merit the effort?

Of course, at one level the answer will vary from person to person depending on the degree and sort of importance each accords to the Bible, as well as other personal priorities and standards. But unless the Bible holds no importance, we are bound to admit that some investigation of the different readings is necessary, else we cannot know whether they make a difference in what meaning the Bible communicates. If, as for Christians and Jews, the Bible is foundational to one's religion and life, then the variations between manuscripts need to be investigated—if only to be sure that they do not matter.

We can, however, go beyond saying theoretically that this would be a good

thing. While there is much still to be recorded and investigated—and we cannot know what will come from that, there is much that has been done and we can say some things about the differences that have been examined.

The first thing to be said is that nothing has been uncovered that seems in any way to threaten the foundations of Judaism and Christianity. The second thing is that many variations in fact make little difference in the meaning of the Biblical text. The third thing is that there are a goodly number of cases where it makes considerable difference in the meaning of a passage—or perhaps of a whole book—how one decides between the different wordings of a passage.



The Tower of Babel. Vat. Gr. 746 (11th? cent.) folio 122. (Courtesy Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana)

There are even a few cases where a single manuscript has made a decisive difference in our attitude towards an entire book. Perhaps the most dramatic instances of this are the cases of four manuscript fragments, one of the Gospel of John and three of Jeremiah.

The fragment of the Gospel of John, known as P. Ryl. Gr. 457 and kept at the John Rylands Library in Manchester, England, is a small scrap of papyrus, two and

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one-half by three and one-half inches. It contains only John 18:31-33 and 37-38. From a provincial town on the Nile, this scrap lay unnoticed among many other papyrus fragments for fourteen years after its purchase. Nevertheless it is as important as any complete copy of the entire Gospel.

This papyrus scrap is the oldest surviving copy of any part of the New Testament. One day something older may very well be discovered, but P. Ryl. Gr. 457 is the oldest of which we know today. Of still greater importance is the specific date assigned it, the first half of the second century CE (=AD). This is of immense importance since one school of thought had proposed, based on internal characteristics of the Gospel of John, that the Gospel could not have been written until about 160 CE.

The fact that the Gospel of John was used in provincial Egypt sometime between 100 and 150 CE means that it could not have been written about 160. Further, since the Gospel was presumably written in Asia Minor (traditionally at Ephesus), it is most probable that the Gospel was written before 100 CE (i.e., in the first century), if a copy was current in Egypt between 100 and 150. Otherwise there would not have been enough time for its popularity to have spread to the extent that a copy might make its way to Egypt.

Whether John's Gospel was written late in the first century or in the mid-second century CE makes a good deal of difference in how we view the book's relation to the rest of the New Testament, to the apostles and to its audience. Thus this small piece of papyrus, although contributing only a little—because of its size—to our knowledge of the text of John's Gospel, contributes a great deal—because of its date—to our attitude towards the Gospel, and so how we understand it.

The three fragments of Jeremiah are from a single manuscript that was part of the library of the community at Qumran. These small scraps of leather, known as 4QJer b, are housed in the Rockefeller Museum in Jerusalem. As described by Professors Frank M. Cross and J. Gerald Janzen, they contain portions of Jer 9:22-10:18, 43:3-9, 50:4-6. Like the fragment of John, these fragments provide us with only a

small proportion of the text of the whole book concerned, but they influence mightily the way we look at that book.

For a long time scholars have observed that the ancient Greek translation (Septuagint) of Jeremiah is substantially shorter—about one-seventh or one-eighth—than the surviving Hebrew version of the book. Moreover, there are many places where the Greek text differs significantly in meaning from the Hebrew. Especially in the last century, scholars have vigorously debated whether the Greek represented a literal translation of a lost Hebrew version of the book—a version different from the one in the Hebrew Bible, or the Greek represented a translation of the same Hebrew text that we have, albeit with a lot of editing. The first option means that there were two different Hebrew versions of the book in Antiquity; the second means that there was only one.

The three manuscript fragments that are 4QJer b give us just enough text to be able to say that there were two different Hebrew versions of Jeremiah in Antiquity. The Hebrew text that survives in 4QJer b looks very like what one would expect the Greek of the Septuagint to be translating if that were a literal translation—without editing by the translator. Scholars are still working out the relation of these two

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Luke 22:39-46, lacking 43-44, Vat. Gr. 1209 (4th cent.) folio 1344. (Courtesy Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana)

versions of the book of Jeremiah as well as the significance of this fact for Jeremiah studies in general. Nevertheless we can say that because of the fragmentary manuscript 4QJer b, we will never look at the book of Jeremiah quite the same as we used to.

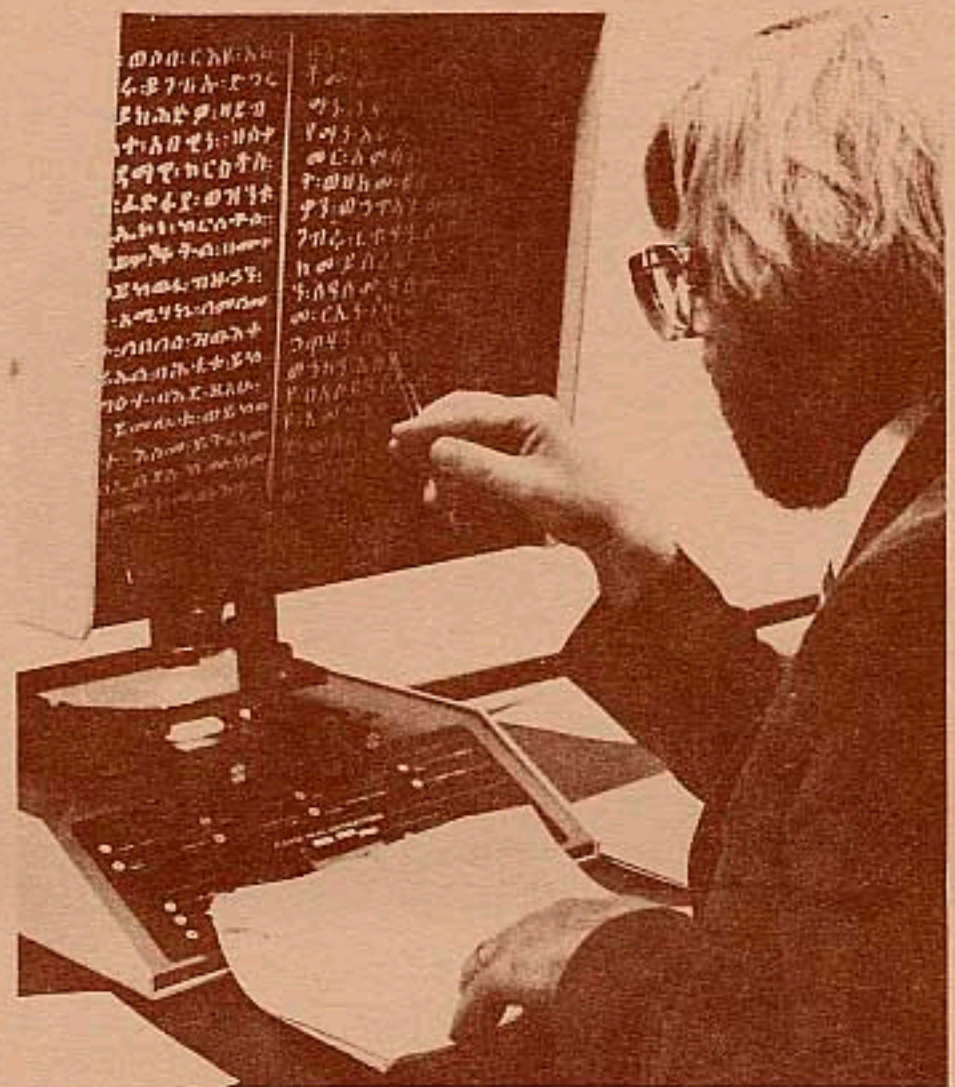
Apart from these examples where a single manuscript changes our attitude towards an entire Biblical book, there are more numerous examples where the way we decide among the variations offered us by manuscripts makes a difference in the meaning of a particular passage within a book. While these variations in wording, and our decisions about them, will do little to change the voice of the Bible as a whole, they can affect significantly the way we understand and relate to specific texts within the whole.

The case of Luke 22:42-45 is a good example of this kind of significant difference. In the Revised Standard Version (RSV) the text moves from verse 42 to verse 45. A footnote tells you that "Other ancient authorities" (i.e., some manuscripts) add verses 43-44 between 42 and 45. Indeed, the ancient manuscripts for this text are seriously divided on this matter. A very considerable number, including some good ones, include verses 43-44. A smaller, but still large, number—also including good manuscripts—do not include 43-44. A few manuscripts follow other options that we can disregard for now.

Luke 22:43-44 read (in the RSV), "And there appeared to him (i.e., Jesus) an angel from heaven, strengthening him. And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down upon the ground." This is while Jesus is praying in the Garden of Gethsemane before his crucifixion.

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is generally presented as very restrained in expressing emotion. Without verses 43-44 this scene is consistent with that, and shows Jesus very much in control of the situation even in the face of his death. This is important for the picture of Jesus which the Gospel of Luke offers us.

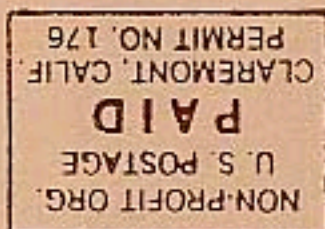
On the other hand, with the verses in the story Jesus appears more emotional, and therefore more human. While he appears less in control, and perhaps less at one with God's will, it might be easier to identify with him. This version of the



story also guards against a heresy called docetism that taught that Christ really only put on a human appearance, like a disguise, rather than becoming fully human. In addition, if verses 43-44 are retained, the parallels between Jesus' time in the garden (on the Mt. of Olives) and the Transfiguration (also on a mountain) as recounted in Luke 9 are stronger. This would affect our interpretation of the larger picture of what the Gospel of Luke says about Jesus.

There are many more details to this, but this is enough to show that the way we decide here will affect both the way we react to Jesus in this passage and the view of Jesus we derive from the Gospel of Luke as a whole. The committee responsible for the United Bible Societies' edition of the Greek New Testament decided that verses 43-44 were not part of the original text of Luke, although their note indicates they were not altogether certain. It is indeed a hard decision, but one that makes a difference.

In this final example the difference resulted not from the effect of a single manuscript, but groups of manuscripts. If space permitted, we could multiply examples of places where the differences between manuscripts make a real difference in what the Bible says and in how we understand it. To understand fully the problems, we need the evidence of as many individual manuscripts as can be read.



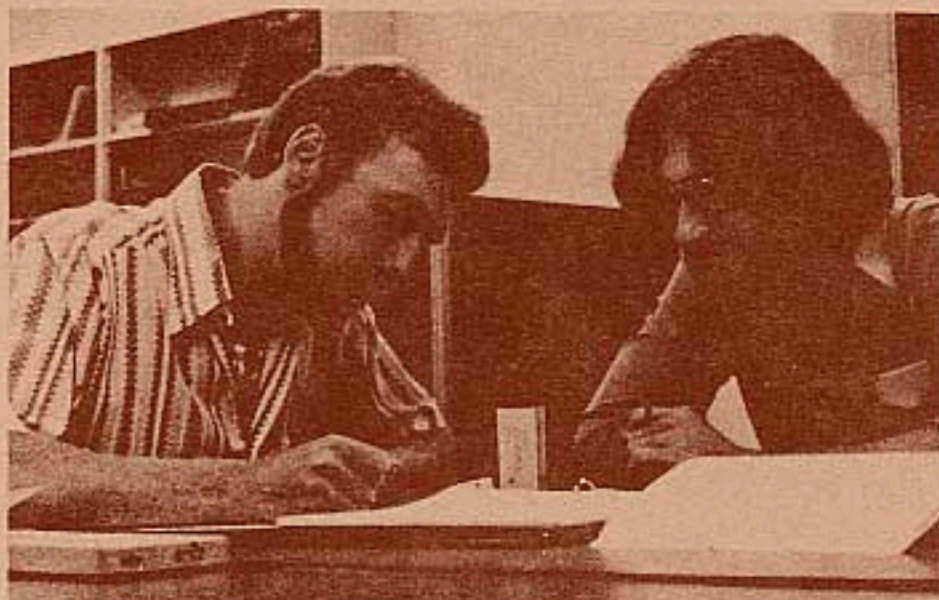
Ancient Biblical Manuscript Center
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Who, What and Where

Last February the Center welcomed the REV. DR. JAMES H. COSTEN, Moderator of the General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church in the U. S. A. for 1982-83, and Dean of Johnson C. Smith Theological Seminary, for a visit. Dr. Costen, accompanied by various church officials from Southern California, stopped to see the Center on a moderatorial visit to the area.

PROF. GEORGE KNIGHT of Hardin-Simmons University in Abilene, Texas, was in again in June to read a series of Greek New Testament manuscripts. He was checking their evidence on a variety of text critical questions he is investigating.



Peter Pettit learns computer-format cataloguing under the watchful eye of Dr. Marvin Sweeney.

Of late various persons have brought MANUSCRIPTS TO THE CENTER FOR IDENTIFICATION. Five different manuscripts have been brought in: two Hebrew scrolls of the book of Esther, a Hebrew scroll of lectionary readings in the Prophets (Haftarot), a Hebrew book of portions of Genesis and Exodus and a small Ethiopic book. The Center acquired films of two of the manuscripts—films otherwise unobtainable since the manuscripts are in private hands and otherwise unknown.

The Center continues to benefit from the contributions of time and energy of volunteers. MS. SALLY WEBER gives of her time to work on development research. MS. GRACE LORENZ helps with filing new entries in the card catalogue. MRS. LILLY MOYNIHAN has helped assemble mailings of The Folio, as have Mss. Weber and Lorenz. Mrs. Moynihan has also filled in on occasion for the Center's Administrative Secretary. MRS. MARGARET WOODRUFF. Their contributions of time and talent are deeply appreciated.

The Center's Head Cataloguer, DR. MARVIN A. SWEENEY, resigned his post as of June 15 to become Assistant Professor of Religion at the University of Miami in Coral Gables, Florida. Dr. Sweeney also received his Ph.D. this last spring. MR. PETER A. PETTIT, of the Claremont Graduate School, has assumed Dr. Sweeney's duties with the title of Cataloguer. The Center's Director, Richard D. Weis, commented, "Marv Sweeney did pioneering work here and we will miss him. Nevertheless we are very happy for him in his new post, and feel that Peter Pettit will be a worthy successor."