

Short Study

A Scribal Solution to a Problematic Measurement in the Apocalypse

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Orthographic variation within the manuscripts of the Greek NT is seldom a *cause célèbre* beyond the ranks of diehard textual critics. Even among these most will concede that orthographic irregularities amount to little more than evidence of scribal incompetency or inconsistency in their spelling practices.¹ To find the same word both spelled correctly and misspelled within a single manuscript by the same scribe is not uncommon.² It approaches the norm. The critical editions of our Greek NTs have therefore opted, on good grounds, to exclude textual variants displaying non-standardized spelling.³ To include them would make it impossible for anyone to use the critical apparatuses in a meaningful way. The deluge of senseless errors would drown out variants of demonstrable textual significance.

1 For a dated, but still indispensable treatment of orthographic variation in Greek papyri in antiquity, see Francis Thomas Gignac, *A Grammar of the Greek Papyri of the Roman and Byzantine Periods* (2 vols.; Milan: Istituto Editoriale Cisalpino, 1975). For discussions of orthographic variation in specific NT manuscripts, see D. C. Parker, *Codex Bezae: An Early Christian Manuscript and its Text* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University, 1992) 107–11; Juan Hernández Jr, *Scribal Habits and Theological Influences in the Apocalypse: The Singular Readings of Sinaiticus, Alexandrinus and Ephraemi* (WUNT 2/218; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 60–2, 103–4, 138–40; Dirk Jongkind, *Scribal Habits of Codex Sinaiticus* (ed. D. C. Parker and D. G. K. Taylor; TS 3/5; Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2007) 90–4, 147–50, 170–2, 204–5, 223–5; James R. Royse, *Scribal Habits in Early Greek New Testament Papyri* (ed. Bart D. Ehrman and Eldon Jay Epp; NTTSD 36; Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2008) 119–20, 244–54, 370–2, 490–2, 570–7, 647–51.

2 This is particularly true of the εἰ > ι variation. Case in point is the phrase ὡς μελι in codex Sinaiticus, which is spelled according to lexical standard in Rev 10:9, but rendered ὡς μέλει a few lines later in Rev 10.10. See A. F. C. Tischendorf, *Novum Testamentum Sinaiticum cum Epistula Barnabae et Fragmentis Pastoris* (2 vols.; Leipzig: F. A. Brockhaus, 1863) 2.130.

3 Not only are such readings excluded from the apparatus, but misspellings are standardized in the text of the critical editions of the Greek NT.

1. Significant Orthographic Variation

On occasion orthographic variations are more than spelling errors. They are meaningful textual variants. Their appearance in the guise of misspelled words, however, causes them to be overlooked. Their exclusion from the critical apparatus of the Greek NT leads to their exclusion from text-critical discussions and from contributing to the advance of scholarship. The singular reading $\chi\lambda\omicron\varsigma$, appearing in codex Sinaiticus' text of Rev 21.17, is one such variant.⁴

The reading $\chi\lambda\omicron\varsigma$ is not listed in the apparatuses of NA²⁷ or UBS.⁴ A translation of the reconstructed Greek text of Rev 21.17⁵ reads: 'and he measured its wall ($\tau\epsilon\iota\chi\omicron\varsigma$)'. But in codex Sinaiticus, $\chi\lambda\omicron\varsigma$ replaces $\tau\epsilon\iota\chi\omicron\varsigma$. On the surface, the exclusion of the variant from the critical apparatuses is reasonable. As spelled, $\chi\lambda\omicron\varsigma$ ⁶ means 'fodder' and makes no sense in its present location (e.g. 'and he measured its fodder'). The clear object of measurement in the broader context of Revelation is the celestial city's wall. The introduction of 'fodder' would be a meaningless intrusion.⁷

This particular variant, however, is conspicuous in both its form and location. In form, the putative consonantal errors exhibited in the exchange of $\tau\epsilon\iota\chi\omicron\varsigma$ for $\chi\lambda\omicron\varsigma$ do not fit the larger pattern of consonantal replacements in this manuscript. Neither the first syllable switch ($\tau > \chi$) nor the second syllable switch ($\chi > \lambda$) are ever attested in codex Sinaiticus' text of Revelation.⁸ This manuscript's pattern of consonantal substitutions is quite different and consistent.⁹ This leaves us with two options. Either the variant is an egregious and idiosyncratic spelling error, or it is a deliberate change. If deliberate, then to what end?

4 Tischendorf, *Novum Testamentum Sinaiticum*, 2.134.

5 In both NA²⁷ and UBS⁴.

6 I add the accent to indicate that I am now talking about the actual word $\chi\lambda\omicron\varsigma$ and not the itacism for $\chi\epsilon\iota\lambda\omicron\varsigma$. Words with itacistic spelling are not accented in this paper.

7 And therefore appropriately judged 'per incuriam' by Tischendorf. See *Novum Testamentum Graece* (3 vols.; Leipzig, 8th ed. 1884–94) 2.1033.

8 The only attested spelling error for $\tau\epsilon\iota\chi\omicron\varsigma$ in this manuscript is the $\epsilon\iota > \iota$ switch. $\tau\epsilon\iota\chi\omicron\varsigma$ is spelled $\tau\iota\chi\omicron\varsigma$ in Rev 21.12, 14 (Tischendorf, *Novum Testamentum Sinaiticum*, 2.134) and $\tau\epsilon\iota\chi\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$ is spelled $\tau\iota\chi\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$ in Acts 9.25; 2 Cor 11.33; Rev 21.18, 19 (Tischendorf, *Novum Testamentum Sinaiticum*, 2.105*, 79, 134). Only twice is the word spelled according to lexical standards: $\tau\epsilon\iota\chi\eta$ in Heb 11.30 (Tischendorf, *Novum Testamentum Sinaiticum*, 2.93*) and $\tau\epsilon\iota\chi\omicron\varsigma$ in Rev 21.15 (Tischendorf, *Novum Testamentum Sinaiticum*, 2.134*). Weiss argues that the switch from $\tau\epsilon\iota\chi\omicron\varsigma$ to $\chi\lambda\omicron\varsigma$ could not have arisen on the basis of a similarity of sounds: 'Aber es finden sich auch hier Verschreibungen, zu denen die Lautähnlichkeit kaum Anlass gab, wie die... $\chi\lambda\omicron\varsigma$ statt $\tau\epsilon\iota\chi\omicron\varsigma$...' (Weiss, *Die Johannes-Apokalypse: Textkritische Untersuchungen und Textherstellung* [TU 7/1; Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1891] 61). While Weiss is no doubt correct in this judgment, he offers no explanation for the origin or function of the variant.

9 These include: $\nu\kappa > \kappa\gamma$ (1×); $\nu\chi > \gamma\chi$ (1×); $\nu\kappa > \gamma\kappa$ (1×); $\nu\gamma > \gamma\gamma$ (1×); $\zeta > \sigma$ (1×); $\theta > \tau$ (1×); $\xi > \sigma$ (1×); $\zeta > \delta$ (1×); $\delta > \zeta$ (1×). See Hernández, *Scribal Habits and Theological Influences*, 60–2.

There is good reason to suspect that the change was not only deliberate but sensible. True, if the intended spelling of the variant was $\chi\lambda\acute{o}\varsigma$, then a pure contextual error results. As written, the word wreaks havoc on the passage. But what if $\chi\lambda\omicron\varsigma$ is an itacistic spelling of $\chi\epsilon\tilde{\iota}\lambda\omicron\varsigma$? If so, then the variant not only makes sense, it makes a significant contribution to the reading of the passage.

A number of factors supports the idea that $\chi\lambda\omicron\varsigma$ is an itacism for $\chi\epsilon\tilde{\iota}\lambda\omicron\varsigma$. The orthographic variation of $\epsilon\iota$ to ι is attested elsewhere in codex Sinaiticus' text of the Apocalypse. In well over one hundred instances the scribe writes ι instead of $\epsilon\iota$.¹⁰ None of the misspelled terms, however, is the word in question. With this observation, $\chi\lambda\omicron\varsigma$ as an itacism remains only a possibility.

The most compelling evidence that $\chi\lambda\omicron\varsigma$ is the itacistic spelling of $\chi\epsilon\tilde{\iota}\lambda\omicron\varsigma$ originates elsewhere in the manuscript. The word $\chi\epsilon\tilde{\iota}\lambda\omicron\varsigma$ surfaces seven other times in the NT (i.e. Matt 15.8; Mark 7.6; Rom 3.13; 1 Cor 14.21; Heb 11.12; 13.15 and 1 Pet 3.10). Five out of its seven occurrences exhibit the itacistic spelling suspected of the singular reading in Rev 21.17. $\chi\epsilon\tilde{\iota}\lambda\epsilon\sigma\iota\nu$ is written $\chi\iota\lambda\epsilon\sigma\iota\nu$ in both Matt 15.8 and Mark 7.6¹¹ and $\chi\epsilon\tilde{\iota}\lambda\eta$ is written $\chi\iota\lambda\eta$ in both Rom 3.13 and 1 Pet 3.10.¹² In Heb 11.12, $\chi\epsilon\tilde{\iota}\lambda\omicron\varsigma$ is rendered $\chi\lambda\omicron\varsigma$, a form identical to the variant in question.¹³ In short, $\chi\lambda\omicron\varsigma$ is an attested itacism for $\chi\epsilon\tilde{\iota}\lambda\omicron\varsigma$ in the same manuscript and by the same scribe. True to form, codex Sinaiticus' scribe manages to spell the word correctly in other spots: both $\chi\epsilon\tilde{\iota}\lambda\epsilon\sigma\iota\nu$ (1 Cor 14.21) and $\chi\epsilon\tilde{\iota}\lambda\acute{\epsilon}\omega\nu$ (Heb 13.15) accord with lexical standards.¹⁴

2. Evidence of Early Exegesis?

The variant's conformity to larger orthographic patterns in the manuscript weighs in favor of reading $\chi\epsilon\tilde{\iota}\lambda\omicron\varsigma$ for $\chi\lambda\omicron\varsigma$ in Rev 21.17. The semantic contribution of $\chi\epsilon\tilde{\iota}\lambda\omicron\varsigma$ to the passage may weigh in favor of its exegetical merit. The word $\chi\epsilon\tilde{\iota}\lambda\omicron\varsigma$ literally means 'lip', but is also widely used in the metaphorical sense of 'edge', 'brink', and 'rim'.¹⁵ A literal understanding of $\chi\epsilon\tilde{\iota}\lambda\omicron\varsigma$ as 'lip' is

¹⁰ By 'scribe' I refer only to scribe A, who transcribed the text of the Apocalypse with the exception of its first 34 ½ lines (Rev 1.1–5, up to and including the word $\nu\epsilon\kappa\rho\acute{\omega}\nu$). Scribe A also copied the rest of the NT, except for its 'cancel-leaves' and the last 8 lines of John's Gospel (See H. J. M. Milne and T. C. Skeat, *Scribes and Correctors of the Codex Sinaiticus* [Oxford: Oxford University, 1938], 18). This allows us to track orthographic variations transmitted by the scribe over a large swath of material. As for the $\epsilon\iota > \iota$ variation, these are too numerous to itemize. Examples in Revelation include: $\epsilon\chi\iota\varsigma > \acute{\epsilon}\chi\epsilon\iota\varsigma$ (2.3); $\alpha\pi\omicron\kappa\theta\alpha\nu\iota\nu > \acute{\alpha}\pi\omicron\kappa\theta\alpha\nu\epsilon\tilde{\iota}\nu$ (3.2), etc. See Tischendorf, *Novum Testamentum Sinaiticum*, 2.126–7.

¹¹ Tischendorf, *Novum Testamentum Sinaiticum*, 1.9, 22*.

¹² Tischendorf, *Novum Testamentum Sinaiticum*, 2.63, 121.

¹³ Tischendorf, *Novum Testamentum Sinaiticum*, 2.93*.

¹⁴ Tischendorf, *Novum Testamentum Sinaiticum*, 2.73*, 94*.

¹⁵ LSJ, 1982.

ruled out by the broader context of Revelation. The metaphorical sense of ‘edge’, for example, produces a better translation, akin to how ‘seashore’ is indicated by ‘the edge of the sea’ (τὸ χεῖλος τῆς θαλάσσης) in Heb 11.12. The absence of any mention of a body of water in Rev 21 makes it unlikely that a shoreline is in view. Rather, the celestial city’s ‘edge’ is envisioned.¹⁶ A contextual rendering of the passage would therefore read: ‘and he measured its edge’. The city’s edge, not its wall, is being measured in codex Sinaiticus. But what does ‘edge’ mean and why make the change in the first place?

The answer to the second question may lie in the wall’s reported size. According to John, the wall measures 144 cubits, the equivalent of about 75 yards. The city enclosed by the wall, however, is a colossal structure with a height, width and length of 12,000 stadia—the equivalent of 1,500 miles. Although some ambiguity exists as to which of the wall’s dimensions are being measured (e.g. its height, width, length or all of them),¹⁷ the gross disproportion between the city and its wall remains. Understood in a flat, literal manner, a wall of that size is far too small for the gargantuan, cubical city. The introduction of ‘edge’ may have been an early attempt to alleviate the incompatibility. The apparent incongruity between the city and its wall is mitigated, if not eradicated, by having the city’s ‘edge’, rather than its ‘wall’, measured. Presumably, the city’s ‘edge’ would be a fraction of the size of the whole.

It is difficult to know what is meant by the city’s ‘edge’, however. If χεῖλος indicates a boundary line, then we are left with a number of unanswered questions. Does the border run along one side of the cubical city or is its perimeter being designated? Is it possible that ‘edge’ refers to one of the celestial cube’s angles? A perimeter of 144 cubits returns us to the thorny issue of congruence, as would a border of that length along one side of the city. The supposition that a cube of 12,000 stadia has an edge of 144 cubits does not work geometrically. The city’s ‘edge’ remains ambiguous.

Identifying the source of the variant may clarify the meaning of the phrase. The selection of χεῖλος appears to have been influenced by the Greek text of Ezekiel 43. Both Revelation 21 and Ezekiel 43 contain a number of formal and material parallels. As with the Apocalypse’s celestial city, the altar’s height and width are

16 The antecedent of the personal pronoun in the phrase τὸ χεῖλος αὐτῆς is ἡ πόλις in Rev 21.16.

17 For one of the more recent, comprehensive discussions of wall dimensions in antiquity and its relationship to Rev 21.17, see David E. Aune, *Revelation 17–22* (WBC 52c; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998) 1162–3. The issue here, of course, is not what the Seer attempted to communicate in his original composition, but what a scribe or early reader might have understood (or misunderstood) upon reading the passage. The conspicuous appearance of χεῖλος in codex Sinaiticus appears to indicate an interpretative problem with the wall’s dimensions.

also being measured in terms of cubits.¹⁸ Ezekiel, however, contains an additional detail. He reports that ‘the border *on the rim of it* (ἐπὶ τὸ χεῖλος αὐτοῦ)’ was also to be measured and its measurement was ‘a span’. Ezekiel saw an altar that contained a 10-inch ledge on its outer rim.¹⁹

If the insertion of χεῖλος into codex Sinaiticus is modeled after such a detail (read in a quasi-literal manner), then the variant may indicate that the celestial city was surrounded by a ledge.²⁰ As a narrow shelf along the perimeter of the city, a ledge 144 cubits in width would avoid the incongruity of a wall dwarfed by its city. Read in a less literal manner, χεῖλος may refer to a boundary-line of that width surrounding the city. Both options eliminate a disproportionate measurement. It is also worth noting that χεῖλος was never corrected back to τεῖχος by the seventh-century correctors of this manuscript.²¹

3. Conclusion: Critical Editions, Scribal Habits and Early Readers

The editors of Nestle-Aland’s *Novum Testamentum Graece* should consider including χεῖλος in the textual apparatus under Rev 21.17.²² The patterns of orthographic variation in codex Sinaiticus indicate that χίλος is an itacism for χεῖλος. The reading makes sense as a deliberate insertion designed to solve a problem raised by a literal reading of the text. Whether or not the proposed interpretation of the variant is accepted, the scribal tendency to harmonize to

18 Rev 21.9–22.5 is clearly modeled after Ezek 40–48, exhibiting many of the same words and themes. See Aune, *Revelation 17–22*, 1162.

19 Sol Scharfstein, *The Book of Haftarat for Shabbat, Festivals and Fast Days: An Easy to Read Commentary and Translation* (New York: Ktav, 2007) 149.

20 As such, the city’s ‘ledge’ could be a synecdoche for a ledge on the city’s wall. Of course, it is also possible—as suggested to me by D. C. Parker—that the variant’s insertion might not have even made literal sense to the person who made it. The reader might have picked up on the weird calculation, found a phrase in Ezekiel that fit the context and used it without a very clear sense of what the ‘shelf’ might be.

21 As noted in Tischendorf, *Novum Testamentum Sinaiticum*, 1.lxxvi.

22 Despite Colwell’s call for omitting singular readings from the critical apparatus and restricting them to specialized studies (see E. C. Colwell, ‘Method in Evaluating Scribal Habits: P⁴⁵, P⁶⁶, P⁷⁵’ *Studies in Methodology in Textual Criticism of the New Testament* [ed. Bruce M. Metzger; NTS 9; Leiden: Brill, 1969] 123), NA²⁷ includes a number of codex Sinaiticus’ singular readings in its apparatus of the text of Revelation. This may be due to the Apocalypse’s idiosyncratic textual history relative to the rest of the NT. The Apocalypse’s comparatively meager textual support requires the inclusion of readings that might have been excluded in works with better attestation. In the first chapter of the book of Revelation, NA²⁷ includes the following singular readings in its apparatus: ἀγίοις (1.1); the omission of αὐτόν (1.7); the omission of καὶ εἰς Σάρδεις (1.11) and μέσον (1.13). More are found throughout the rest of the apparatus. The inclusion of χεῖλος in the apparatus of Rev 21.17 would not be a departure from the well-established practice of the editors of NA²⁷.

other biblical passages is a well-attested behavior in codex Sinaiticus.²³ To include the variant in the critical apparatus would grant scholars an opportunity to explore its significance for the Apocalypse's reception history.

The introduction of $\chi\epsilon\tilde{\iota}\lambda\omicron\varsigma$ also sheds light on the Apocalypse's early readership and scribal activity. The variant's insertion into Rev 21.17 points to a literal reading of the book. A symbolic or spiritual reading would not find such incongruous measurements problematic.²⁴ The decision to harmonize the passage to Ezekiel also indicates a degree of biblical literacy common among scribes and some early readers. Although the variant surfaces in codex Sinaiticus, it is unlikely that the scribe simply 'thought up' the change as he copied the text of the Revelation. The patterns of orthographic variation and the word's meaningful insertion indicate deliberation and forethought. Such deliberate changes were unlikely to have occurred as the scribe sought to produce an accurate copy from his exemplar.²⁵ It is probable that the reading was already present in an exemplar (either in the text or as a reader's note in the margins) or that it was introduced by the scribe as the exemplar was prepared for transcription.²⁶ This ancient solution to a problematic measurement surfaces only in codex Sinaiticus.

23 Hernández, *Scribal Habits and Theological Influences in the Apocalypse*, 76–82.

24 For example, there is no hint of a problem in the commentaries of Apringus of Beja, Oecumenius, Primasius and Andrew of Caesarea, all of whom interpret Rev 21.17 in a non-literal manner. (See William C. Weinrich, *Revelation* [ed. Thomas C. Oden; ACCS 12; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005] 371–2; Josef Schmid, *Der Apokalypse-Kommentar des Andreas von Kaisareia* [Munich: Zink, 1955] 242, ll. 19–21). However, early Christian sources also indicate that a literal reading of the Apocalypse posed a challenge for some, as indicated in the complaints of Eusebius of Caesarea (*Hist. eccl.* 3.39.11–13). The introduction of the variant $\chi\epsilon\tilde{\iota}\lambda\omicron\varsigma$ may be a vestige of an early, literal reading of the Apocalypse.

25 On distinguishing between the various stages in the process of literary production/reproduction of manuscripts in antiquity, see Ulrich Schmid, 'Scribes and Variants: Sociology and Typology', *Textual Variation: Theological and Social Tendencies?* (ed. H. A. G. Houghton and D. C. Parker; TS 3/6; Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2008) 1–23. See also, in the same volume, Dirk Jongkind, 'Singular Readings in Sinaiticus: The Possible, The Impossible, and the Nature of Copying' and D. C. Parker, 'Scribal Tendencies and the Mechanics of Book Production', 35–54, 173–84.

26 On the challenges of distinguishing between editorial variants and readers' notes, see Schmid, 'Scribes and Variants', 16–23.