

Here is something different on the significance of textual variants for understanding the Greek New Testament. Most of the hundreds of thousands of variations are completely insignificant in the big overall scheme of things (e.g., misspelled words and slips of the pen); others involve enormous differences that matter a lot (the story of the woman taken in adultery). Lots of others are between the two, small differences that are interesting for how they might change the meaning of a passage slightly but possibly significantly.

This semester I'm teaching an intermediate Greek class for the Classics Department with some exceptionally bright undergraduates who are already proficient in the ancient language. Yesterday we in class we translated the birth narrative of Luke 2, and I realized anew how a slight change can be important.

Among the changes attested in our manuscripts is one whose significance had never registered with me. Luke 2:1-5 indicate that Caesar Augustus send out a decree for "the entire world" to be enrolled, and that Joseph needed to enroll in the town of Bethlehem because he was from the lineage of King David (who had been born in Bethlehem). So he goes there, taking with him his betrothed Mary.

In Luke 2:6 we are told that (this is the literal translation): "And when they were there, the days of her giving birth were fulfilled, and she gave birth to her son...."

So that is fairly straightforward: they made a trip to Bethlehem and after they arrived Mary gave birth. (It goes on to say that she laid him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn.)

But there is a textual variant in one of our oldest manuscripts of Luke, called Codex Bezae (from around 400 CE). This variation changes ...

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