

See With What Variable Letter Sizes I Write: A Response to William Varner on Gal 6:11 in Papyrus 46

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Abstract: It has recently been suggested that the scribe of Papyrus 46 (P46) began writing in a larger script for Gal 6:11 in a visual nod to Paul's own mention of writing with larger letters and as indication of how the scribe personally interpreted the passage. In this short note, I refute the claimed variation in letter size with paleographical analysis of the scribe's letter formation, sizing, and variation in the immediate context of Gal 6:11 and in wider use. I then address the difficulty of ascertaining a scribe's beliefs from what and how the scribe copied.

In a recent edited volume thematically centered on paratextual features of early New Testament manuscripts is a chapter by William Varner ostensibly on conventions in documentary papyri of authors signing off on works primarily written by an amanuensis.¹ The stated aim of the chapter is to investigate whether there are “patterns in these documentary papyri that can shed light on what Paul intended to convey by calling attention to his ‘large letters’ in the Galatians subscription.”² After discussing the history of interpretation of the subscription and categorizing them into three interpretive groups, Varner presents seven illustrative papyri from the first to fourth centuries CE showing that “ancient letters, especially the more official the letter, were written by secretaries hired by the author and that the author then added their own subscription in a cruder and often in a larger hand.”³ This wider epistolary practice is then used to adjudicate between

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1. William Varner, “Can Papyri Correspondence Help Us to Understand Paul’s ‘Large Letters’ in Galatians?,” in *Studies on the Paratextual Features of Early New Testament Manuscripts: Texts and Editions of the New Testament*, ed. Stanley E. Porter, Chris S. Stevens, and Daniel I. Yoon, TENTS 16 (Leiden: Brill, 2023), 146–71.

2. Varner, “Papyri Correspondence,” 147.

3. Varner, “Papyri Correspondence,” 164. As a minor point of correction, I have given a range of first–fourth centuries above, whereas the chapter indicates the papyri are from “the first to the third centuries” (p. 156). Among the papyri is P.Oxy. 36.2770

the prevailing interpretive groups to say that Paul was merely following ancient practice by signing the end of this letter. In the middle of this, Varner turns his attention to Gal 6:11 in P46 to make the case that the scribe intentionally increased the letter sizing at this point in the text. According to Varner, this was the scribe “nodding his head to Paul by attempting to portray what Paul called his ‘large letters.’”⁴ In this short article, I want to investigate and ultimately refute this suggestion by examining letter sizes, comparing the letters to similar occurrences elsewhere in the manuscript, and analyzing the conclusions made by Varner.

After discussing the seven illustrative papyri, Varner introduces P46 with the caveats that it is not an original letter but a copy and is different from the epistolary evidence he has included so far.⁵ These significant caveats are indicative of broader issues in the selection and analysis of the *comparanda papyri* as well as in the discussion of ancient scribal practice. A thorough response to these problems is beyond the current aim.⁶

Before outlining Varner’s argument about P46 specifically, it is worth cursorily introducing the manuscript in question. In the Gregory-Aland system for cataloguing Greek New Testament manuscripts, it has the designation P46 (often stylized as $\mathfrak{P}46$). It is presently located in the collections

for which Varner provides “ca. AD 300” as its date. The papyrus is dated 26 January 304; see the *editio princeps* by David Rokeah in R. A. Coles et al., eds., *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri XXXVI*, *Graeco-Roman Memoirs* 51 (London: Egypt Exploration Society, 1970), 60–61.

4. Varner, “Papyri Correspondence,” 167.

5. Varner, “Papyri Correspondence,” 164.

6. Among the problems are misconceptions of what constitutes skilled versus unskilled hands wherein upright or uncial scripts are categorically perceived as skilled whereas cursive or slanting scripts as less skilled, regardless of actual execution. Similarly, there are problems identifying the hands at work, and different scripts are always regarded as having been written by different people rather than one scribe changing styles. These issues combine to cause recurring issues in the ascription of hands and therefore the conclusions drawn about those papyri. For instance, P.Col. 8.216 and P.Fay. 110 are attributed to a scribe and a signatory but are most likely the product of the scribe alone. Additionally, there are major problems in the categorization of the *comparanda papyri* as “letters.” For instance, P.Mich. 5.351, P.Oxy. 36.2770, and P.Oxy. 49.3487 are a contract, a deed of divorce, and a receipt of partial loan repayment, respectively. How any genre-typical patterns found in these types of documentary papyri can inform our understanding of letters, especially the kind of letter represented by Galatians, is not explained. To these issues can be added overlooking the work of enslaved people as scribes by repeatedly describing secretaries and scribes as paid or hired (Varner, “Papyri Correspondence,” 151, 162, 164).

of the Chester Beatty Library and the University of Michigan, where it has the shelfmarks CBL BP II and P. Mich. Inv. 6238, respectively.⁷ Between these two locations, 86 of the original 104 leaves are preserved that have content, in order, from Romans, Hebrews, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Ephesians, Galatians, Philippians, Colossians, and 1 Thessalonians.⁸ Its *editiones principes* were produced by Frederic G. Kenyon in two parts as more leaves of the manuscript were found and acquired.⁹ Unlike many New Testament manuscripts, its dating has rarely been significantly contested, with a general consensus of about 200 CE.¹⁰ The original text was written by a single hand, with as many as four correctors making changes to the text over the next few centuries.¹¹ In subsequent analysis, the characteristics of the first hand will be explored in more detail.

7. Folio 18, containing portions of Rom 14–15, is in a plate with other texts and has the shelfmark CBL BP 190. Digital images of the manuscript may be found at <https://ntvmr.uni-muenster.de/manuscript-workspace> and <https://manuscripts.csntm.org>.

8. This unusual order essentially reflects ordering the epistles by length, with Hebrews before the Corinthian letters, since its length is between theirs and would have divided them if put in their true order. On this, see C. C. McCown, “Codex and Roll in the New Testament,” *HTR* 34 (1941): 245–46; and Jack Finegan, “The Original Form of the Pauline Collection,” *HTR* 49 (1956): 99–101.

9. Frederic G. Kenyon, ed., *The Chester Beatty Biblical Papyri, Fasciculus III: Pauline Epistles and Revelation, Text* (London: Walker, 1934); Kenyon, *The Chester Beatty Biblical Papyri, Fasciculus III, Supplement: Pauline Epistles, Text* (London: Walker, 1936). Sometimes overlooked is the edition of the Michigan portion produced in between the Kenyon volumes by Henry A. Sanders, *A Third-Century Papyrus Codex of the Epistles of Paul*, University of Michigan Studies Humanistic Series 38 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1935).

10. E.g., 150–250: Don Barker, “The Dating of New Testament Papyri,” *NTS* 57 (2011): 581; around 200: Kurt Aland, ed., *Kurzgefaßte Liste der griechischen Handschriften des Neuen Testaments*, 2nd ed., ANTF 1 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1994), 9; 200–225: Pasquale Orsini and Willy Clarysse, “Early New Testament Manuscripts and Their Dates: A Critique of Theological Palaeography,” *ETL* 88 (2012): 462, 470; 200–250: Kenyon, *Fasciculus III: Pauline Epistles and Revelation, Text*, ix; Alan Mugridge, *Copying Early Christian Texts: A Study of Scribal Practice*, WUNT 362 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), 260. The outlier, which has received little to no traction, is “before the reign of the emperor Domitian” (i.e., pre-81 CE), by Young K. Kim, “Palaeographical Dating of P46 to the Later First Century,” *Bib* 69 (1988): 254.

11. See especially James R. Royle, *Scribal Habits in Early Greek New Testament Papyri*, NTTSD 36 (Leiden: Brill, 2008); Edgar B. Ebojo, “A Scribe and His Manuscript: An Investigation into the Scribal Habits of Papyrus 46 (P. Chester Beatty II–P. Mich. Inv. 6238)” (PhD thesis, University of Birmingham, 2014); and Jacob W. Peterson, “An

Turning to Varner's argument about Gal 6:11 in P46, he draws our attention to the end of lines 2–4 of f.86→.¹² There he observes that “the first and last words of 6:11 seem to be slightly larger than the surrounding words!”¹³ Taking another angle, he then offers that the “scribe may have intentionally decreased the size of the letters immediately before Ἰδετε and after the final χειρῖ,” having the effect of making verse 11 look larger than its surrounding text. As noted earlier, this is theorized by Varner as the scribe mimicking what Paul declares to have done in the original letter. From this, Varner uses the visual differentiation in the text of P46 as evidence that the scribe of the manuscript believed that Paul himself took over writing the letter only at 6:11.

It must be acknowledged that Varner is correct to see a size difference between the ending of πιστεωσ and beginning of ἴδετε on line 2 and, to a lesser extent, between εμη ending line 3 and χειρῖ starting line 4. That this size difference is notable within the papyrus, much less indicative of Pauline mimicry, is far from obvious. Indeed, Varner himself notes that “I did see some words in other lines that seemed close to the size of the letters in 6:11 overall.”¹⁴

I will begin by addressing the size increase between πιστεωσ and ἴδετε to begin 6:11. It is possible to measure individual letters using the images produced by the Center for the Study of New Testament Manuscripts that include a ruler. The *iota* of ἴδετε is approximately 50 mm tall, including its diacritic, and 40 mm without. By comparison, the *iota* with diacritic beginning line 6 is approximately 55 mm tall and the *iota* with diacritic beginning line 9 approximately 45 mm tall. Even ignoring the scribe's *iotas*, whose descending stroke dips below the line, there are numerous examples on this leaf alone of *iotas* without diacritics whose vertical stroke height is within millimeters of what is observed in ἴδετε (e.g., *καρκι* on L4, *περιτεμνεσθαι* on L5, *αυτοι* on L7). Accordingly, this *iota* in 6:11 should not be construed as something intentionally outside the scribe's normal letter formation. On the contrary, what contributes to a seemingly abrupt change in character

Updated Correction List for Chester Beatty BP II + P.Mich. Inv. 6238 (Gregory-Aland Papyrus 46 [P46]),” *BASP* 56 (2019).

12. To avoid potential confusion over the terms *recto* and *verso*, arrows are used to denote the direction of the fibers on the page being referenced; see Eric G. Turner, *The Terms Recto and Verso: The Anatomy of the Papyrus Roll*, *Papyrologica Bruxellensia* 16 (Brussels: Fondation Égyptologique Reine Élisabeth, 1978).

13. Varner, “Papyri Correspondence,” 164.

14. Varner, “Papyri Correspondence,” 164.

size is that here we encounter two characters next to one another that the scribe frequently deviates in opposite directions from the average when producing. Many of the scribe's rounded letters (e.g., *epsilon*, *omicron*, *omega*, and *sigma*) are frequently shorter than their counterparts whose formation is made up of linear strokes, especially those with descending strokes (e.g., *iota*, *upsilon*, and *rho*).¹⁵ Good examples of this can be seen on lines 2 and 7 of this same leaf, where there is frequent alternation between rounded and linear characters in the sequences *προς τους οικειους* and *-μενοι αυτοι νομον*.

As will also be important in the comparisons for the end of verse 11, it should be noted that the scribe's letter heights frequently slightly decrease as he progresses along the line (cf. lines 6–9).¹⁶ This phenomenon is less obvious on the line in question with *ἴδετε* but is noticeable even within the line in *της πιστεως*. This, too, contributes to the visual jump in letter sizing between *πιστεως* and *ἴδετε*. However, this should not be taken as an indication of scribal intention but rather noted as one example among many of similar sizing jumps from one word to another near the end of a line. The following inexhaustive list demonstrates the phenomenon's recurrence throughout the papyrus:

- f.43↓ L18: Between *καρκος* and *ἵνα*
- f.45↓ L13: Between *εκαστος* and *ἴδιον*
- f.53↓ L12: Between *θς* and *τα*
- f.54→ L13: Between *αντιλημψις* and *κυβερ-*
- f.55↓ L22: Between *προσευχεσθω* and *ἵνα*
- f.68↓ L3: Between *θω* and *και*
- f.83→L6: Between *και* and *επιστευεν*

One thing immediately noticeable from this list is that in each case the apparent jump in size occurs between a word ending with a small, rounded character and a word beginning with a linear stroke, as in Gal 6:11 between *πιστεως* and *ἴδετε*. This indicates that a perceived sudden size change is

15. Ebojo, "Scribe and His Manuscript," 160, 214. Ebojo records that *omicron* and *sigma* were written as petily as 10mm. See also Klaus Junack et al., *Röm, 1 Kor, 2 Kor*, vol. 1 of *Das Neue Testament auf Papyrus II: Die Paulinischen Briefe*, ANTF 12 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1989), xlv.

16. Sanders, *Third-Century Papyrus Codex*, 13; Ebojo, "Scribe and His Manuscript," 153.

merely a characteristic of the scribe's penmanship occasioned by particular character sequences.

I can now briefly discuss the second perceived size difference pertaining to Gal 6:11, having so far only addressed the first of the shifts in sizing claimed to be significant by Varner. Again, the claim is that $\chi\epsilon\rho\iota$, the final word in 6:11, has either been increased in size or the following text has been decreased. As noted above, the ends of lines frequently feature smaller letters, and to this we can add that the first letter of a line is often noticeably larger than what follows.¹⁷ The leaf on which Gal 6:11 occurs contains examples of both patterns, with the *chi* beginning $\chi\epsilon\rho\iota$ being a clear example of an initial letter written larger than is typical and larger than the rest of its line. As for the remainder of $\chi\epsilon\rho\iota$, the letter sizing can hardly be described as noticeably larger than the preceding or following words. If anything, we again see the difference in the scribe's linear versus rounded characters showing up, with $\chi\epsilon\rho\iota$ ending in three linear characters and the following word, $\omicron\omicron\iota$ beginning with three rounded characters. Even noting this explanation for slight variation in letter sizing is essentially splitting hairs, as all the letters on the line, save the initial *chi*, fit within expectation and roughly follow the constraints of a shared upper and lower bound.¹⁸ Accordingly, we should reject the idea that any differences between $\chi\epsilon\rho\iota$ and other words in the surrounding lines are noteworthy or a sign the scribe intended to visually communicate his continuity with Paul.

I want also to address the logic of the conclusions drawn from the scribe's handling of the first and last words of Gal 6:11, momentarily forgoing the above palaeographical analysis that shows the supporting evidence to be highly unlikely. Varner's chapter begins by grouping the most common interpretations of Paul's large letters in Gal 6:11 into three groups:¹⁹

1. Paul wrote only Gal 6:11–18.
2. Paul wrote the entirety of Galatians.
3. Paul is commenting on the length of the Galatian epistle.

On the basis of the apparent size differentiation in the first and last words of 6:11, Varner concludes that the scribe believed the first option. Interpre-

17. Ebojo, "Scribe and His Manuscript," 153.

18. On a general emphasis on the upper notional line, or rough bilinearity, in P46, see Ebojo, "Scribe and His Manuscript," 154–56; and Barker, "Dating of New Testament Papyri," 578–80.

19. Varner, "Papyri Correspondence," 147–50.

tive options 2 and 3 could be eliminated as not being the scribe's view of Paul's large letters if we assume Varner's interpretation of the manuscript. The scribe's endorsement of option 1 is less clear, however. Varner seems aware of the logical problem when he writes, "The scribe believed that Paul began his large letters in 6:11, although Paul did not limit them to 6:11 as the P46 scribe does but continued to use that hand through to the end of the epistle."²⁰ If the scribe limited his large letters to verse 11 when he could have continued them, this restriction can no more be used as positive evidence of interpretive option 1 than it can be used to support a view that Paul penned only verse 11.

It must also be noted that none of the intervening words that make up Gal 6:11 are claimed to be noticeably distinct in their largeness—nor are they. According to Varner, the scribe's only clues to the reader that he is alluding to Paul's own practice are the first and last words of one verse out of eight. One would be right to question just how subtle a nod is too subtle to be noticed and whether the scribe was effective at all, especially when it would have been easy to make sure such an allusion was painfully obvious. To this end, it seems unlikely that the scribe of P46—noted for his aesthetics in letter formation and attention to the appearance of the papyrus as a whole—would so poorly execute upon visually differentiating the words of the amanuensis versus those of Paul if that were what he intended to do.²¹

As a final point of departure, speaking of scribal intent or belief in the way Varner has done conflates what authors might do with what a copyist would do. The scribe of P46 is described as "nodding his head to Paul" and not believing one interpretation of Gal 6 but believing another, which the scribe then graphically imposed upon the manuscript.²² Without additional evidence, it is impossible to say the scribe of P46 believed anything about the text and—assuming for a moment the graphic distinction

20. Varner, "Papyri Correspondence," 167.

21. Kenyon describes the hand as "calligraphic in character ... with some pretensions to style and elegance," in *Fasciculus III: Pauline Epistles and Revelation, Text*, ix (the same comments are repeated in the supplement volume, p. viii). The handwriting and page layout are described as "elegante und flüssige Unziale professionellen ... auch die Seitengestaltung ist gekonnt selbst in dem Bereich, in dem der Schreiber raumsparend schrieb" in Junack et al., *Das Neue Testament auf Papyrus II.1*, xlv. Ebojo declares that the scribe shows "obvious concern for the aesthetic look of his manuscript" in "Scribe and His Manuscript," 152; see also n. 76. Mugridge summarizes the scribe's work as "the hand is clearly that of a trained scribe writing with skill" in *Copying Early Christian Texts*, 260.

22. Varner, "Papyri Correspondence," 167.

did exist in P46—the change in script size could have simply been copied from the exemplar. While the scribe of one of Varner’s comparanda (P.Col. 8.216) used different scripts to differentiate the main text from the farewell, it is unlikely a trained scribe would have felt free to introduce such a visual distinction into a copy on his own.²³ Indeed, in a survey of 342 Greek New Testament manuscripts containing Gal 6:11, none has a visual shift for this passage.²⁴ This indicates that, even if a scribe had a belief about the text being copied, he was unlikely to introduce the type of visual change Varner has proposed exists in P46.

All these factors lead decisively to a rejection of the view that the scribe of P46 intentionally increased the sizing of his script in Gal 6:11 to mimic the ἡλίκοις γράμμασιν of the subscription to the original Galatian letter written by Paul himself.²⁵ The differentiation in letter sizing is explainable by reference to patterns throughout the manuscript and through close examination of the scribe’s habits in letter formation. Furthermore, the scribe’s own attention to aesthetic detail in the production of his manuscript makes it extremely unlikely that, if there was intention to mimic Paul, it would not be more obvious or carried out over more than just two words from one verse out of eight. This ultimately means that the letter height of the papyrus cannot be used as a sort of paratextual indicator through which we gain early evidence supporting one interpretation in the debate over the meaning of Paul’s large letters. Here we must continue to rely on traditional interpretive methods and the growing body of evidence regarding ancient epistolary conventions to which Varner has otherwise alluded.

Investigating this wider Greco-Roman papyrological record for its relevance in interpreting the New Testament and understanding its genres and structures remains a fruitful and valuable area of inquiry. This documentary record is immense, varied, fragmentary, and unevenly biased toward certain periods and the climates, cities, and villages in which the

23. On the classification of the scribe of P46 as a professional, see Mugridge, *Copying Early Christian Texts*, 22–23, 138, 260; and Ebojo, “Scribe and His Manuscript,” 149–63.

24. This search is available at <https://ntvmr.uni-muenster.de/manuscript-workspace> by completing the dropdowns for “Indexed Biblical Content” and checking the box for “Has Images.” This does not capture all Pauline manuscripts that might contain Gal 6:11, since many are not indexed and others do not have images, but it provides a sufficiently large representative sample.

25. P46, along with 03 and 33, reads ἡλίκοις instead of πηλίκοις.

major caches have been found. Its use thus requires careful attention to detail and an abundance of caution against overinterpretation and comparison of dissimilar things. While the evidence might be incomplete and pull in different directions, it nonetheless has the potential to offer invaluable insights for better understanding seemingly familiar texts and the lives of those who wrote and read them.²⁶

26. For other recent investigations into the Galatian subscription within the broader epistolary tradition, see Peter Arzt-Grabner, *Letters and Letter Writing*, PNT 2 (Leiden: Brill, 2023), esp. 176–82; and Steve Reece, *Paul's Large Letters: Paul's Autographic Subscription in the Light of Ancient Epistolary Conventions*, LNTS 561 (London: T&T Clark, 2016).