Spelling the End of Grant Jeffrey’s “Jesus Codes”

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How the Text of Isaiah 52:13-53:12 in the Oldest Hebrew Manuscripts from the Dead Sea Scrolls Proves that the Letter Sequences of the Hebrew Bible Have Changed

In my book The Bible Code Myth, which approaches the claims of a code from the perspective of scribal transmission of the manuscripts of the Hebrew Bible, I make reference to the demonstrable fact that the spelling of Hebrew words changes quite a bit during the Hebrew Bible’s long transmission history. This is easily demonstrated because (a) we know where the Hebrew alphabet comes from; (b) we know when the formation of the letters changed; (c) we know when the scribes began using certain consonants for vowel sounds (matres lectiones); (d) we know how the adoption of the practice of using consonants as vowels was observed in varying degrees by scribes; and (e) we know for certain that the more ancient texts (Qumran) reflect the use of consonant letters for vowels far more than the Masoretic scribes did—the scribes who produced the Hebrew Bible used today (“Masoretic Text”), which is the text used for Bible code letter sequencing. Simply put, there have been tens of thousands of letter deletions due to the change in spelling practices since the earliest time when the text of the Hebrew Bible was actually composed up until now. This is deadly to claims of a divinely-inspired every-letter sequence upon which the idea of a Bible code depends. This paper illustrates this fact by comparing the Masoretic text’s spelling with the spelling of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

My choice of text is Isaiah 52:13-53:12. Grant Jeffrey, a well-known Bible code proponent, claims to have found dozens of words encoded in the Hebrew letters of this passage that correspond to names and places in the life of Jesus, thereby “proving” this passage, which describes God’s suffering servant, cryptically pointed to Jesus of Nazareth as that suffering servant. The Hebrew text does nothing of the sort. The claim of a code, which depends on the letter sequences of today’s Masoretic text, is destroyed by the Hebrew text closest (400 years) to Isaiah’s own lifetime—the Dead Sea Scrolls. This is because the spelling of scribes of the earlier time differed dramatically from the scribes who produced the Masoretic text.

I should say at this point that this is not a religious argument. If the reader considers the Bible a reliable document in any regard, whether of history or prophecy), those claims are independent of the existence of a code. In this article I am only discussing letters. In most cases, changes in spelling does not affect meaning or accuracy. For example, meaning is not altered if a personal name or familiar word is spelled one way in the MT and another in different Hebrew text. We spell a man’s name today "Jon" or "John," "Steven" or "Stephen." We may spell the word "color" as "colour" or "endeavor" as "endeavour." Meaning is not affected, but the letters used—and so the sequences—vary.

Letter Differences in Isaiah 52:13-53:12

In order for the reader to understand what I am arguing and illustrating here, a few words of explanation will be helpful.
What You Are Looking At

Line 1 = The actual Dead Sea Scroll script


Line 2 = The Dead Sea scroll script of Line 1 put into modern type-face for readability

Scribes weren't terribly neat in many cases, so this will help you to see the letters. Once the reader compares line 1 with line 2, it will again be apparent how easily a scribe could have confused certain letters. One can also note how the letter styles have changed. At times the manuscript is damaged, so readability varies. A few notes of interest about scribal techniques are interspersed for the reader as well.

Line 3 = The Masoretic Text used by Bible Code Proponents (from “BHS” – Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia)

This line is the consonantal text of BHS with added vowel marks, which look like tiny dots and dashes over and under letters. The vowel marks do not alter the sequence of consonants used by the Bible code proponents, who simply remove the markings for their letter string.

The Point Being Made By the Graphic Illustrations

To discern the point being made here about spelling differences, the reader needs to visually compare the spelling (the letters) of LINE 2 and LINE 3. The differences are shaded for the reader's convenience. You will find that there are many letters in the words in the Dead Sea Isaiah scroll that are missing from the text used by Bible code practitioners (LINE 3). In other words, there are undeniably many spelling differences between the text used by Bible Code proponents and the Dead Sea Scrolls, the scrolls closest to the biblical period (roughly 200 BC) – far more than Jeffrey presumes. In fact, there are an astonishing 115 letter differences in this small portion of text! Extrapolated out to the near 24,000 verses of the Hebrew Bible, and one would easily be in the tens of thousands of letter variances—just due to spelling conventions. As a result, the scrolls that most likely preserve the spelling of the biblical Old Testament text when put in its final composed form disagrees with the letter sequences used by Bible code practitioners.

NOTE: The line/verse breaks are set up to match the line length in the scroll.

Isa 52:13-14a
Isa 53:3b-4a

Note the tiny raised yodh (ו) above the second last word (from left) in the DSS – it’s a scribal correction in the original scroll.

Isa 53:4b

Isa 53:4c-5a

Isa 53:5b-6a

Isa 53:6b-7a

continued ....
Isa 53:7b

The last word in the line (reading right to left) is a different verb form in the DSS than in MT, where we see יִפְרָד instead of יִנָּפָר. In the MT and our English Bibles the verb reads, "and he would not / will not open his mouth." Thus it sounds prophetic. In the DSS, though, the scribe has, "he opened not his mouth" – it apparently made more sense to him that the action would already be PAST. He apparently did not take this phrase to be a prophecy. This is an example of a content disagreement in a manuscript. The scribe is not speculating on any "fulfillment" since he sees no prophetic content here. The DSS text is odd since the other imperfect verb forms and prophetic context are the same as MT. It's a good contextual argument for seeing MT in this case as the better reading in text-critical terms. The Bible code proponent nevertheless has another letter disruption.

Isa 53:7c-8a

Note again the raised letter (scribal correction) in the second word from the right in the DSS to correct the text (and MT had it right).

Isa 53:8b

The last four words in this phrase are bracketed because in the Dead Sea manuscript these words are lighter in color. They were most likely added by a second or subsequent scribe who thought they belonged in the text, probably on the basis of another copy he was referencing. At any rate, this is only for interest – except for the shaded letter, the MT and DSS match.

Isa 53:9a
The (ך) in parentheses in the transcribed version reflect an erasure made by the scribe in his scroll (one that would show up in magnification or infrared). In regard to the raised letter for footnote "a" in LINE 2, there is a raised dot above the footnoted word (ך - MT hasךך). This is a dot written by the scholars who transcribed this text in book from which I photocopied the Dead Sea script. The Dead Sea text hadךך originally, and a scribe put the correct letter over the wrong one. See the actual script for a raised letter above the rest; it's a scribal correction.

In regard to footnote "b," there are also two dots over two of these letters, again placed there by modern scholars to tell us there was great difficulty determining the lettering of the script, as it could be several things grammatically.

Isa 53:9b-10a

The last word in this line is different in the Dead Sea scroll. The word there means, "he (God) profaned him (the sufferer in the chapter)." In MT it means, "he (God) made him sick/weak". A slight difference, but not terribly significant – unless you are counting letters – here there would be six variations in a single word.

Isa 53:10b

Isa 53:10c-11a

Isa 53:11b-12a
Incredibly, when faced with this evidence from the Dead Sea scrolls, Grant Jeffrey would have those who believe in the codes simply respond by saying we should just go with the *later* BHS text as the text God wanted us to have – and so use it authoritatively for Bible code research. This is not only illogical but also reflects an ignorance of the history of BHS. It demands that his own Christian community of faith embrace a text about which several noteworthy comments can be made:

1. The early church predominantly used the Greek Septuagint for their Old Testament, not the MT (upon which BHS is based). MT was later “standardized” to allow Jews to better debate Christians and their Septuagint in certain matters. If Jeffrey is even aware of this, his decision for the codes to just go with MT is at best self-serving.

2. The letter sequence of BHS was produced by removing consonants from the Dead Sea Isaiah scroll and replacing them with vowel point-markings. If one wanted to detect a code placed within the Hebrew letters by God, wouldn’t one want to use the text closest to the time of prophetic inspiration, rather than a later text that had tens of thousands of letters removed to “modernize” spelling and pronunciation? In short, shouldn’t Bible code researchers argue the opposite of what Jeffrey suggests and go with the Dead Sea material?

3. If one argues as Jeffrey does that we should just "go with BHS / MT" we are still left with the problem of manuscript disagreements between BHS and other MT manuscripts.

4. Are we to believe that the very Jewish scholars who revised the spelling of the Dead Sea material, and who rejected the messianic claims of Jesus, then cryptically inserted hints to Jesus' messiah-ship? If God used these “Jewish unbelievers” to hide His code in the Masoretic text, why didn’t He do that with the earlier Dead Sea texts, which are much closer to the biblical prophets themselves?