

The Earliest Text of Romans 4-5: Deciphering Greek MS 0220

Ronald R. Cox and Randall D. Chesnutt
with Natalie A. Lewis, Vincent V. Quach, and Matthew G. McCay

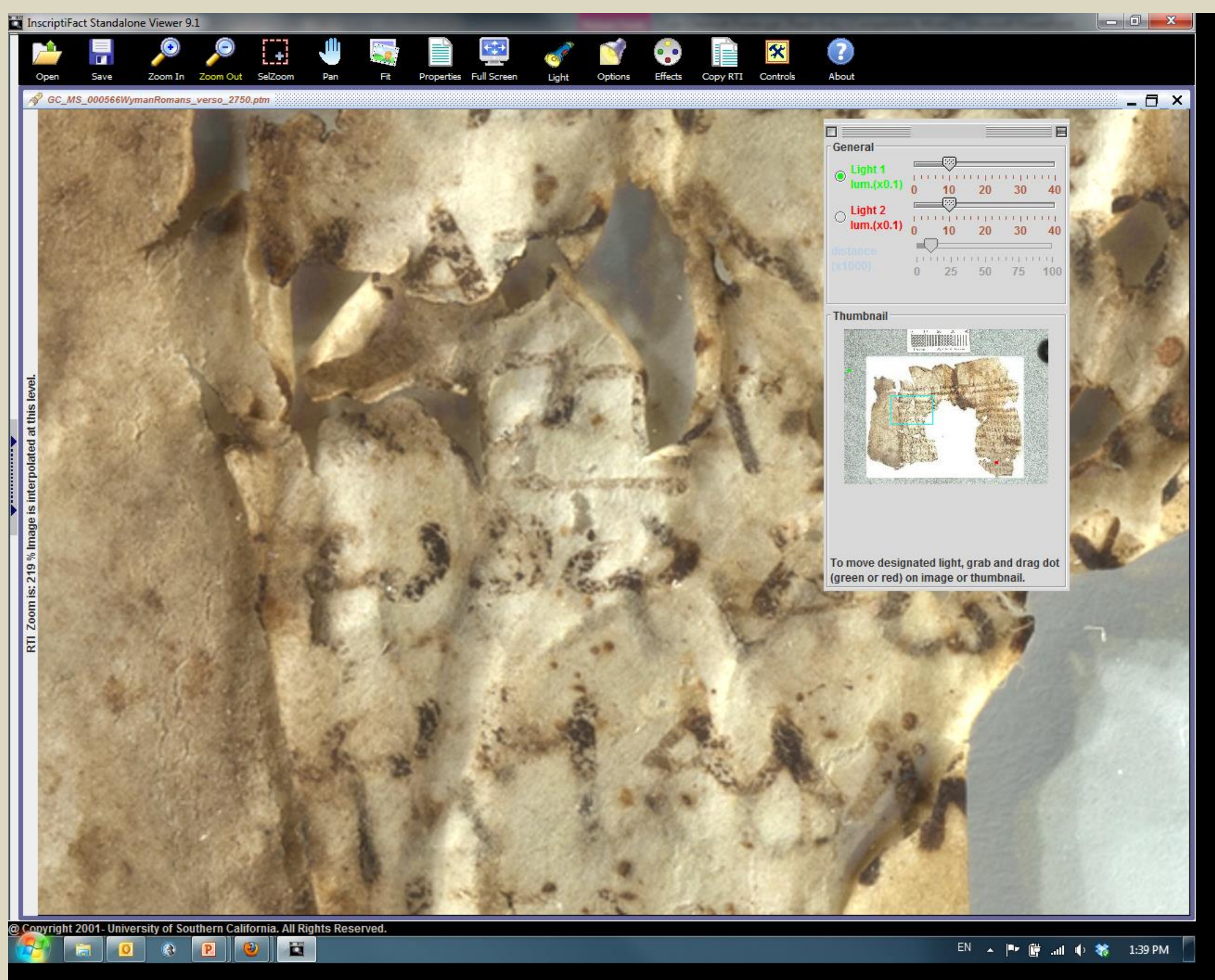
One of the earliest known copies of Paul’s letter to the Romans is being studied and prepared for publication by Seaver Religion Professors Cox and Chesnutt and three students of New Testament Greek. This parchment fragment, recovered in 1950 from Fustât, Egypt, was owned by private collectors in Boston until 1988, when it became part of the famous Schøyen Collection in Oslo, Norway. In 2012 it was acquired for the Green Collection in Oklahoma City and assigned to the Pepperdine scholars for analysis and publication in Dirk Obbink and Jerry Pattengale, eds., *The Green Scholars Initiative: Papyrus Series* (Leiden, Netherlands: E. J. Brill, forthcoming in 2014).



The obverse side of the fragment (a partial text of Romans 4:23-5:3) is quite legible and was published in 1952. However, the ink on the reverse side is degraded and indistinct from the ink that bled through from the obverse, leaving it illegible until recently. With photographic and computer technology now available, the Greek text on the reverse can be read at last. Using this new technology, the Pepperdine team has succeeded in deciphering most of the lettering on the reverse and recovering the text of Romans 5:8-13 as it circulated eighteen centuries ago.

Reflective Transformation Imaging

Through funding by the Green Scholars Initiative, state-of-the art imaging tools and techniques developed by Bruce Zuckerman, Director of the West Semitic Research Project at the University of Southern California, are available for the study of MS 0220 here at Seaver College. Zuckerman has provided three-dimensional renderings of the fragment using his innovative Reflective Transformation Imaging (RTI). Analyzing these renderings with the Inscriptifact Viewer developed at Hewlett-Packard Laboratories, the research team has been able to see previously unseen ink residue, quill impressions, and lettering hidden in the folds and wrinkles in the parchment, as well as to distinguish between the ink that bled through from the obverse and the writing on the reverse.



RTI image of reverse side viewed with Inscriptifact

Paleographic Dating

Paleographic analysis (the comparative study of Greek handwriting style in order to determine the date of a manuscript) confirms the third-century date assigned to the manuscript when the obverse was published in 1952, but now with the qualification that an early fourth-century date is also possible. Whether from the third century or the early fourth, MS 0220 is one of the earliest known copies of any part of Romans and the earliest of Romans 4:23-5:13.



Above Left: The faint lettering on the reverse side is difficult to read because of deterioration and ink bleeding through from the obverse. Above Right: The same image, but with some letters made visible by Inscriptifact superimposed upon the RTI photograph with Photoshop.

Nomina Sacra

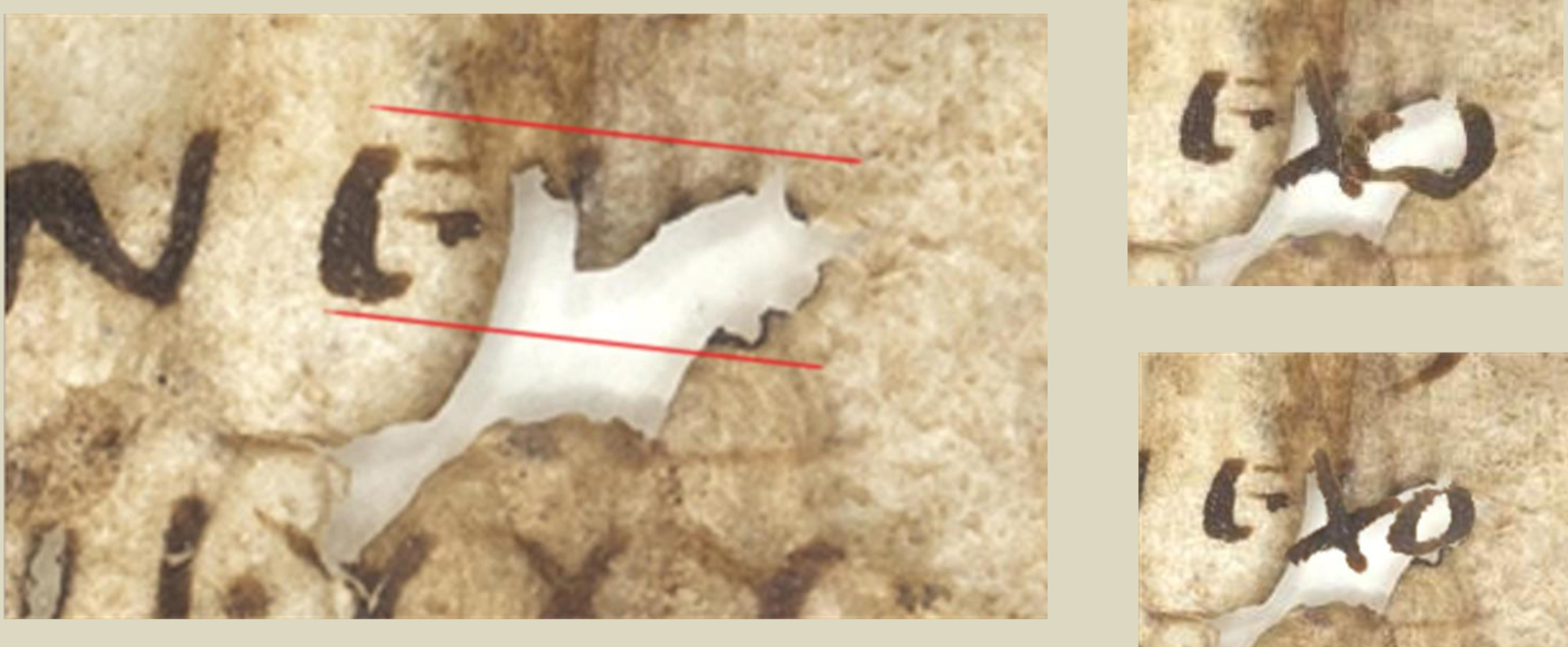
Among the interesting features of MS 0220 is its abbreviation of *nomina sacra*, or sacred names. In a pattern unique to ancient Christian manuscripts, *nomina sacra* are written with the first and final letters, then marked as an abbreviation with a supralinear stroke. Thus KYPION, “Lord,” is written as K̄N̄, and ΘΕΟΝ, “God,” as Θ̄N̄. The way *nomina sacra* are treated provides invaluable information on the date and character of a manuscript.



Though partly obscured by letters bleeding through from the obverse, the left image shows the faint remains of the nomen sacrum X̄C̄ representing XPICTOC, “Christ.”

Textual Variation

One significant place where MS 0220 differs from other ancient Greek copies is in Romans 5:1. Most early texts read the subjunctive verb ἔχωμεν, “let us have peace,” but others, now including MS 0220, have the indicative ἔχομεν, “we have peace.” The two readings differ by a single letter and would have been pronounced alike. Experts have long debated which is original and have understood the verse somewhat differently depending on the textual decision. The issue is still unresolvable, but as the oldest witness to this part of Romans, MS 0220 tips the scales in favor of the indicative ἔχομεν.



The left image highlights the two missing letters of ἔχομεν/ἔχωμεν. The right two images are reconstructions using the scribe’s own letters copied from elsewhere in the fragment. This exercise demonstrates that omicron (O) fits the available space whereas omega (Ω) does not.