

A Critical Examination and Exegesis of 1 John 5:7

Which variant reading is the original and why?

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In a day where literacy abounds and technology is flourishing there is still a large amount of ignorance deeply-rooted within society. Much of this ignorance is manifest in the belief most people have that the New Testament is nothing more than exaggerated tales passed down from generation to generation eventually ending up in written form. There seems to be either a lack of interest or a lack of knowledge concerning the truth of the New Testament documents. Not only is there unambiguous evidence that all twenty-seven books were written before the end of the 1st century, but that there were so many copies in existence that the loss of any original autographs posed no problem whatsoever.

The early Christian church was experiencing such rapid growth that there was a need and demand for copies of the Scripture. One result of such growth is that the manuscript evidence for the New Testament is unparalleled in all of antiquity. There are more than 5,300 extant fragments or manuscripts in existence today. This number does not include the thousands of copies of New Testament translations in Latin, Syriac, Armenian, and Coptic; nor does it include the thousands of quotations from the Early Church Fathers. Other ancient documents pale in comparison to the New Testament. Homer's *Illiad* is the closest competitor with only 643 surviving manuscripts. It has been said that if we reject the New Testament documents as being reliable, we must reject all of ancient antiquity.

The rapid growth of the Church and the demand for manuscripts has brought us to our topic at hand. As Bruce Metzger described it, "as a result, speed of production sometimes outran accuracy of execution."¹ It is inevitable that the copying of multitudes of manuscripts at such a fast pace would result in some errors of transcription. Whatever the reason why there exists scribal errors (from unintentional errors such as bad lighting to intentional errors such as clearing up difficulties, conflating readings, or adding details), the fact is that due to scribal errors we have textual variants. The existence of variants requires the interpreter to seek to discover as nearly as possible what was written in the original autograph. The purpose of this paper is to discuss and apply the principles of textual criticism in assessing variant readings of the text. 1 John 5:7-8 will be the chosen text of exegesis.

Before exegeting the passage in 1 John, a concise understanding of the principles of textual criticism is necessary. Textual criticism is simply the scholarly work of examining the available manuscripts to determine the most reliable wording of the text.

There are two branches within this subject. There is higher criticism which seeks to find out what factors influenced the writing of the text. This also asks who wrote the text,

¹ Bruce Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament 2nd ed* (Stuttgart, 1993), 14.

where it was written, when it was written, and why was it written? Sadly, this field has been infiltrated with liberals who are intellectually dishonest and seek to attack the trustworthiness of Scripture. Lower Criticism is the analysis of the manuscript evidence and is often referred to as textual criticism.

The task of textual criticism is “to evaluate which reading or variant of the text is most likely the original. Variants are not the same as errors; they are rather differences in wording among the various manuscripts.”² Since all that exists are copies and copies of copies, the textual critic must carefully examine them to find out what the original text said.

Johann Bengel, (1687-1752) was the first scholar to separate the manuscripts into groups and weigh them rather than suppose they were equal in value. One of his key principles was “the difficult is to be preferred to the easy reading.”³ This principle is echoed by many other textual critics as well, such as J.J. Griesbach.⁴ Bengel came up with fifteen critical rules to weigh various readings of the manuscripts. This was his second rule and is a valid principle because scribes sometimes tried to correct what they thought were difficult or problem passages.

Another principle used to determine which reading of the text is most likely the original is that the early text is to be preferred. This seems to be obvious because the earlier the date of the manuscript, the less opportunity it would have had to become corrupted. Next, textual critics seem to agree upon the principle that the diverse geographical reading is to be preferred. What this means essentially is that if a manuscript is attested within several different families of texts that originated in different areas it seems to be more dependable. Finally, the shorter reading is usually said to be preferred. This is the case because scribes were more likely to add to the text than to omit.⁵

These external considerations should be sufficient to apply to our analysis of 1 John 5:7-8. The text reads, “For there are three that bear record **in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one. And there are three that bear witness in earth**, the Spirit, and the water, and the blood: and these three agree in one” (KJV).⁶

This passage is sometimes referred to as the Johannine Comma due to the sequence of extra words that appear in some editions of the Greek New Testament. The discussion is

² Paul D. Wegner, *The Journey from Texts to Translations The Origin and Development of The Bible* (Grand Rapids, Mi.: Baker, 1999), 215.

³ Ibid., 217

⁴ Henry Alford, *The Greek Testament; an Exegetical & Critical Commentary Vol. I-IV* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1958), 82.

⁵ See J.J. Greisbach’s first critical rule found in (Alford, *The Greek Testament*, 82) or (Bruce Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 209).

⁶ The Comma in the Greek is identified by the brackets, ὅτι τρεῖς εἰσιν οἱ μαρτυροῦντες [ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ, ὁ Πατήρ, ὁ Λόγος, καὶ τὸ Ἅγιον Πνεῦμα· καὶ οὗτοι οἱ τρεῖς ἓν εἰσι. 8 καὶ τρεῖς εἰσιν οἱ μαρτυροῦντες ἐν τῇ γῆ] τὸ πνεῦμα καὶ τὸ ὕδωρ καὶ τὸ αἷμα, καὶ οἱ τρεῖς εἰς τὸ ἓν εἰσιν.

whether or not the short clause which is bolded above is part of the original writing of the text. The *New International Version* (NIV) renders it different from the above *King James Version*. The NIV reads, “For there are three that testify: the Spirit, the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement” (1 John 5:7-8).

Here is where critical analysis of the text is important. At this point Berkeley Michelson’s words ring ever so true:

No passage should be employed to support any doctrine until the interpreter has made sure that it is supported by good manuscripts and can, therefore, be regarded as what the original writer said.⁷

Therefore, as we exegete this passage we will be able to conclude whether or not the Johannine Comma can be regarded as what the original writer said. Does this statement appear in enough manuscripts to warrant its inclusion in the main body of the text?

Many King James Only supporters would call us blasphemous for even *inspecting* the text in such a way. What truly is at stake here? If the passage is genuine and represents what the apostle John wrote to his original audience than we have one of the strongest texts supporting the doctrine of the Trinity. For this reason some Christians (such as King James Only supporters) are resistant to relegating this passage to a mere footnote.

If this clause is not part of the original passage does the doctrine of the deity of Christ or of the Trinity fold? It must be plainly stated that the absence of this passage in no way diminishes the historic Orthodox belief of the Trinity. There are a wealth of passages that explicitly teach the doctrine (Matt. 28:18-20; John 1:1, 14, 18; Rom. 9:5; 2 Cor. 13:14; 1 Tim. 3:16; Phil. 2:5-7; Col. 1:15-16; Titus 2:13; Heb. 1:1-3; 1 John 5:20).

As we begin our analysis we must first look toward the external considerations of the text. The Greek apparatus to the 27th Edition of the *Nestle-Aland Novum Testamentum Graece* states that this clause is found in eight Greek manuscripts. Here are the following manuscripts:

- 61: 16th century codex Montfortianus.
- 88: 16th century variant reading added to the 14th century codex Regius of Naples.
- 221: 10th century variant reading added to a manuscript in the Bodleian Library at Oxford.
- 429: 16th century variant reading added to a manuscript at Wolfenbüttel.
- 629: 14th or 15th century manuscript in the Vatican.
- 636: 16th century variant reading added to a manuscript at Naples.
- 918: 16th century manuscript at the Escorial, Spain.
- 2318: 18th century manuscript influenced by the Clementine Vulgate, at Bucharest, Rumania.

⁷ Berkeley A. Michelson *Interpreting The Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1963), 352.

As one perceives, four of these eight manuscripts contain the passage as a variant written in the margin. The earliest manuscript that the Comma is found in is a fourteenth or fifteenth century manuscript from the Vatican. As a variant added to the manuscript, the earliest date we have is in the tenth century. This is not considered great manuscript evidence.

Desiderius Erasmus, who published the first Greek New Testament in 1515, was criticized for not having the Johannine Comma in the text. Erasmus told his critics that he never found any Greek manuscript that had the text but if he did find one it would be placed in there. Apparently someone took him up on that offer and ‘found’ a copy containing the passage. Erasmus put it in the text with a lengthy footnote indicating that he was suspicious of the finding.

Dr. Daniel B. Wallace described this in his article, *Why I Do Not Think the King James Bible Is the Best Translation Available Today*. He wrote:

Erasmus said that he did not put that in the text because he found no Greek MSS which had that reading. This implicit challenge—viz., that if he found such a reading in any Greek MS, he would put it in his text—did not go unnoticed. In 1520, a scribe at Oxford named Roy made such a Greek MS (codex 61, now in Dublin). Erasmus’ third edition had the second reading because such a Greek MS was ‘made to order’ to fill the challenge!⁸

This story is not without its critics. H. J. de Jonge, a professor at Leiden University has a different take on the matter. According to de Jonge, one of Erasmus critics was the archbishop of York, Edward Lee. Lee argued that Erasmus only consulted one manuscript of 1 John. To the charge of neglecting manuscripts Erasmus replied:

Is it negligence and impiety, if I did not consult manuscripts which were not within my reach? I have at least assembled whatever I could assemble. Let Lee produce a Greek MS. which contains what my edition does not contain and let him show that that manuscript was within my reach. Only then can he reproach me with negligence in sacred matters.⁹

H. J. de Jonge proposes that Erasmus did not challenge Lee to produce a manuscript but instead challenged Lee to prove he neglected a manuscript he had access to. Until Lee could do that the charge of being negligent and impious are inappropriate. Moreover, it is claimed that Erasmus included the Comma “not due to a so-called ‘promise’ but the fact that he believed “the verse was in the Vulgate and must therefore have been in the Greek text used by Jerome.”¹⁰

⁸ Daniel B. Wallace, *Why I Do Not Think the King James Bible Is the Best Translation Available Today*. http://www.bible.org/page.php?page_id=665.

⁹ Michael Maynard, *A History of the Debate over I John 5:7, 8* (Tempe, AZ.: Comma Pub, 1995), 383

¹⁰ Jeffrey Khoo, *Kept Pure in all Ages* (Singapore: FEBC Press, 2001), 88.

Regardless of Erasmus motive or what he believed about the Johannine Comma we simply have to reserve judgment at this point and look at the manuscript evidence. It must also be noted that this clause is not in any ancient version except the Latin.¹¹ No Syriac or Coptic manuscripts include the Comma. Moreover, Metzger points out that none of the Greek Fathers quote this passage either. Though the earliest manuscript is found in the fourteenth century, the earliest citation of the Comma is in a fourth century writing by Priscillian. This citation was written in Latin.¹² The first time it appears in Greek is in a Greek translation of a Latin book of Acts in A.D. 1215.

Before we conclude with the external evidence (which definitely does not favor the inclusion of the passage) we must address the claim that in A.D. 250 Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage quoted this passage. In *Treatise I, On the Unity of the Church* it is written, “The Lord says, “I and the Father are one;” and again it is written of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, “And these three are one.”¹³ The debate over Cyprian is whether this Church Father is quoting the Comma or not.

Michael Maynard and King James Only advocates such as the Dean Burgon Society say this is a clear reference to the Johannine Comma. Dr. Jack A. Moorman, replied to Dr. Daniel Wallace’s *Why I Do Not Think the King James Bible is the Best Translation Available Today with Twenty Points of Criticism Answered*. He wrote:

Critics have argued that Cyprian was merely giving a Trinitarian interpretation to verse 8. *The spirit, and the water, and the blood: and these three agree in one*. The answer to this is obvious; the figures of verse 8 cannot naturally be interpreted as the Persons of the Holy Trinity. Though missing in most Greek manuscripts, it nevertheless leaves in them its *footprint* with the mismatched genders that result when the disputed words are removed. The loose ends do not match up grammatically! Native Greek speakers find this "glaring". Here in London, the printed *Apostolos* (the lectionary text used in Greek Orthodox services) contains the passage.¹⁴

In all fairness to the debate, Dr. Moorman’s statement contains many fallacies. He presents a straw man argument of those who deny Cyprian is speaking of 1 John 5:7-8. He claims that the critics argue Cyprian is giving a Trinitarian interpretation of the Comma, and then he easily refutes that by saying that the figures (the Spirit, the water and the blood) cannot be interpreted as the Persons of the Trinity.

Though it is true that some critics believe Cyprian is interpreting this passage in such a way, Moorman does not mention to his readers that the Alexandrian allegorical method

¹¹ It is not found in Jerome’s Vulgate or the Old Latin. Nor does it appear in the Vulgate before A.D. 800.

¹² This quite possibly was quoted from a gloss made by Cyprian.

¹³ Cyprian. *Treatise I On the Unity of the Church Vol. iii*
<http://oll.libertyfund.org/title/1972> (accessed August 1, 2007).

“*Et iterum de Patre et Filio et Spiritu Sancto scriptum est—Et hi tres unum sunt*”

¹⁴ Jack A. Moorman, *Twenty Points of Criticism Answered*
<http://www.deanburgonsociety.org/KJBible/reply.htm>

of interpreting the Bible dominated the first two to three centuries after Christ. With a tad bit of historical background one could easily reconcile the Bishop of Carthage using this passage to teach the Trinity. The allegorical method was used by the Church Fathers for the purpose of forming a deeper spiritual life. Clement, Origen, and others ripped verses out of context to seek out a deeper spiritual meaning and “to uphold the rationality of the Christian faith.”¹⁵

Other critics claim that if Cyprian was aware of the Comma he would have quoted it directly rather than simply referring to a gloss¹⁶ from a different book with a sentence that resembles the Comma. Was Cyprian truly quoting this text or was he merely inserting his allegorical exegesis of the three witnesses in the passage? In closing out our examination of the external evidence we must consider the truth that there is a lack of reliable manuscript evidence for the Comma.

One would expect that Clement, who lived around A.D. 210, would mention this passage, especially in commenting on John’s First Epistle.¹⁷ Yet, the strong Trinitarian Church Father though quoting 1 John 5:8, interestingly enough, did not include the Comma.

King James Only advocates and others who support the inclusion of the Comma also have been known to cite Tertullian. These authors (whom many do not even identify themselves) reference John Gill in his *Exposition of the NT* Volume 2 page 907-8. Apparently Gill cites Tertullian who in his apologetic work *Against Praxeas*. Of the many websites who recycle this claim of Tertullian, I have found few which actually quote the citation itself. Tertullian writes:

Thus the connection of the Father in the Son, and of the Son in the Paraclete, produces three coherent Persons, who are yet distinct One from Another. These Three are one essence, not one Person, as it is said, ‘I and my Father are One,’ in respect of unity of substance not singularity of number.¹⁸

The author of this web page who does not identify himself says the following in regards to this quote:

While Tertullian here quotes John 10:30 so as to elucidate the point he makes about the unity of essence, and not of number, among the Persons of the Godhead, his language concerning all three Persons is strikingly particular to that found in 1 John 5:7. He quotes "these three are", and then clarifies that the "one" is a one of

¹⁵ David Dockery, *Biblical Interpretation Then and Now: Contemporary Hermeneutics in the Light of the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Book House., 1992), 104.

¹⁶ A gloss was a brief explanation of a difficult word or phrase written in the margin.

¹⁷ Clement comments on 1 John 5:6 and then immediately afterwards comments on 1 John 5:14. There is nothing about the Comma.

¹⁸ Tertullian, *Against Praxeas*, 598

substance and essence, not person. Quite clearly, this is a reference to the Comma.¹⁹

This is obviously a dismal attempt to justify the inclusion of the Comma. First of all, it is evident that Tertullian quotes John 10:30. Just because Tertullian uses the phrase “these three are one” does not indicate that he is referring to 1 John 5:7-8. He certainly did not preface the phrase with “as it is written” or anything of the like. For anyone to see this as a clear reference to the Comma is to read into the text what Tertullian did not attempt to write. These proponents have made an egregious error and are quite possibly being scholastically dishonest.

Another article says Tertullian makes a clear reference to the “teaching found in the Comma” yet that is not the issue at hand.²⁰ There are many Church Fathers who reference the teaching i.e. the Trinity. Yet, the question is whether or not they quote the passage of the Comma. So given the external considerations we have examined, which witnesses omit the Johannine comma? Wayne Grudem summarizes the witnesses in writing:

The vast majority of Greek manuscripts from all major text traditions, including several very reliable manuscripts from the fourth and fifth century A.D., and also including quotations by church fathers such as Irenaeus (d. A.D. 202), Clement of Alexandria (d. ca. A.D. 212), Tertullian (died after A.D. 220), and the great defender of the Trinity, Athanasius (d. A.D. 373).²¹

To that we must conclude we have insufficient external evidence supporting the inclusion of the Johannine Comma.

The internal evidence must now be weighed. Why would this passage be omitted if it were original? Whether intentionally or accidentally, there is no good reason why this passage is not in the thousands of Greek manuscripts or ancient translations. In regarding the intrinsic probability, the passage does seem to be awkward compared to the rest of the context. As we exegete the context of the passage this will become more clear.

In the epistle of 1 John, the apostle is writing to instruct believers concerning the joys of fellowship in Christ. He is also addressing the false teachers and refuting this pre-Gnostic heresy that Jesus could not have taken on human flesh because all matter and flesh is evil. These heretics also said that the divine Spirit came upon Jesus at His baptism and then left before He died. In countering those who denied the incarnation John begins to speak of the witness (or testimony) of God to the truth of the deity of Christ (5:6-12).²² This witness of God is objective and external (5:6-8), and internal and subjective (5:10-12). The apostle declares that the overcomer is the one who believes that

¹⁹ This unidentified author is quoted on <http://www.studytoanswer.net/bibleversions/1john5n7.html>

²⁰ Boyd, Jesse M. “*And These Three Are One*”- *A Case for the Authenticity of 1 John 5:7-8 Rooted in Biblical Exegesis*, (Wake Forest, NC.: 1999), paragraph 47.
http://www.jesus-is-savior.com/Bible/1john57-exegesis.htm#_ftn56 (accessed June 16, 2008)

²¹ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 231.

²² The word *marturia* is used as either a verb or a noun a total of nine times in this section. This has the idea of someone being a witness or having immediate knowledge.

Jesus is the Son of God (5:4-5). He then states that we ought to believe this because of the testimony of God the Father.

God's testimony that Jesus is deity is supplied by three witnesses: the Spirit, the water and the blood (5:8). The water and blood in this verse refer to Christ's baptism and death. Therefore, God has given testimony to the deity of Jesus by Christ's baptism and death. God testified about the Son at His baptism when he said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well-pleased" (Matt 3:17). On the eve of the crucifixion, as Jesus predicted His death, the Father gave testimony again of the Son. In John 12:28 we read that Jesus prayed, saying, "'Father, glorify your name!' Then a voice came from heaven, 'I have glorified it, and will glorify it again.'" The Holy Spirit was active all throughout Jesus life and testified to His identity as well (Mark 1:12; Luke 1:35; Acts 10:38). In other words, in all these places, the Father was testifying to Jesus Christ that He is the divine person in two natures. Therefore, the Spirit, the water, and the blood are all one great testimony from God the Father about God the Son.

Since God is giving His testimony about Jesus being the incarnate Son it would seem awkward if the Johannine Comma were placed in the passage. For the apostle introduces Christ as coming by water and blood in verse six. In this context John is talking about the testimony of the Father to the Son. Specifically, that testimony while Jesus was on earth. For him to immediately say that there are three witnesses in heaven, "the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one" and then to reiterate the testimony on earth, "the Spirit, the water and the blood" seems awkward to say the least.

To conclude this paper we must state that the external evidence and the internal evidence do not support the argument that the Johannine Comma was originally written by John the apostle. The best explanation is that it probably originated in an allegorical exegesis of the three witnesses and was placed in the text as a marginal note in certain Latin manuscripts. Therefore, we have to conclude that these words are spurious and should *only* be relegated to footnote status, since it is a valuable expression of the Church's faith in the fourth century. In the words of Berkeley Michelson: "to cite a verse like 1 John 5:7 (KJV) as supporting the doctrine of the Trinity is foolish."²³ For any Christian to cry "heretic" over this is flat out absurd. The lack of authenticity of this passage absolutely in no way affects the Biblical witness as to who Jesus is – the Second Person of the Triune God.

²³ Michelson, *Interpreting the Bible*, 352

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