

Excursus: Johannine Comma

In versions following the (so-called) *Textus Receptus* or Received Text (KJV and NKJV) there is an additional section of v. 7 known as the *Comma Johanneum* or the Johannine Comma (Gk., comma = sentence or clause). Here vv. 7 and 8a read, "For there are three that testify in heaven: the Father, the Word and the Holy Spirit, and these three are one. And there are three that testify on earth: the í ö Why do most modern versions demote this additional section to a mere footnote? Are modern versions deliberately less Trinitarian than classic translations such as the KJV? The question involved in deciding whether this verse is authentic is not based on the truthfulness of the statement but on the external manuscript evidence. In other words, just because a statement is true does not make it Scripture. One must look at why and how the Johannine Comma came to be adapted into the Greek Edition of the New Testament known as the *Textus Receptus* (A.D. 1633). This is not a question of the *inspiration* of the text but of the *transmission* of the text. John's letter, whatever the original, is inerrant. What must be established is what the autographs actually said.

The oldest textual witnesses of this text occur in Latin manuscripts of the seventh century. With its eventual acceptance in the Latin Vulgate (Clementine edition, 1592), the Johannine Comma began to appear in many other translations and versions. It only appears in eight Greek manuscripts (minuscules), none of which can be dated before 1400. Furthermore, it is clear that the text has been translated from Latin back into Greek, and in four of the eight manuscripts the Johannine Comma appears only in the margin of the text. If the text is authentic, then its disappearance in the early manuscripts is an absolute mystery. Why would the church be so careless as to let such a valuable text be forgotten?

It should be noted that not only does the manuscript evidence strongly favor the omission of this passage, but the same is true concerning the testimony of the early church. Not one Greek or Latin Church Father ever quotes this passage in the first four and a half centuries. This is especially revealing in light of the many controversies revolving around the Trinity (especially Sabellianism and Arianism). If the Johannine Comma was a part of the original text, then what would be a better passage to quote in order to prove the Trinity? Nicea (A.D. 325) and Chalcedon (A.D. 451) almost certainly would have taken advantage of it. The absence of such usage causes one to doubt seriously the authenticity of this passage.

Erasmus, a prominent New Testament Greek scholar of the fifteenth century, rejected the Johannine Comma in the first two editions of his Greek New Testament (1516, 1519). Soon, however, he began to receive criticism for his omission of the Johannine Comma. The Englishman E. Lee was one of Erasmus's constant critics. After being criticized by Lee for several years, Erasmus wrote to Lee the following reply, "If a single manuscript had come into my hands, in which stood what we read (sc. In the Latin Vulgate) then I would certainly have used it to fill in what was missing in the other manuscripts I had. Because that did not happen; I have taken the only course which was permissible, that is, I have indicated (sc. In the Annotations) what was missing from the Greek manuscripts."

Later, Lee suggests that Erasmus was negligent and that if he only had looked at other manuscripts he would have certainly found a copy that contained the Johannine Comma. Erasmus again explained to Lee that he had diligently consulted many manuscripts. He

continues: “What sort of indolence is that, if I did not consult manuscripts which I could not manage to have? At least, I collected as many as I could. Let Lee produce a Greek manuscript in which is written the words lacking in my edition, and let him prove that I had access to this manuscript, and then let him accuse me of indolence.” Shortly thereafter, a Greek manuscript containing the Johannine Comma was shown to Erasmus. It is almost certain that this manuscript was produced simply to induce Erasmus to include the Johannine Comma in his Greek New Testament. Even though Erasmus suspected this Greek manuscript to have been based on the Latin, there is doubt as to whether Erasmus knew that the manuscript had been created for the purpose of encouraging him to include the Johannine Comma. In the third edition of his Greek New Testament, Erasmus included the extra text (although he omitted the passage from later editions).

After Erasmus included the additional words of 1 John 5:7 in his Greek New Testament, others began to accept it without question. It was later included in Stephanus’s edition (1550), which was a precursor to the *Textus Receptus*—the basis for the KJV.

Is the Johannine Comma Scripture? The evidence seems to say no. Is the Johannine Comma truthful? Is it sound theology? Yes. It is not necessary, however, to place the Johannine Comma in the text of Scripture. The Trinity can be adduced from many other texts of Scripture (e.g., Matt 28:18–20; 1 Cor 12:4–6; 2 Cor 13:14; Eph 1:3–14; 4:4–6). We are warned in the Bible neither to take away nor add to its words. On this basis it is best to leave out the disputed words.¹

¹ Akin, D. L. (2001). [1, 2, 3 John](#) (Vol. 38, pp. 198–200). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.