

WHAT IS THE TRINITY? - THE JOHANNINE COMMA

In Paper 006A we mentioned that we would discuss I John 5: 7 & 8 in a separate paper, *"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). The underlined words of these verses of Scripture are known as the "Johannine Comma". It gets this name from a controversy over whether it was part of John's original epistle or whether it was added in later. The reason for the controversy is that it is claimed that these words are not found in the "oldest" Biblical manuscripts and are therefore spurious. Many modern Bible translations omit these words. In this paper we will examine the reasons given for this claim and whether they are valid. The reasons for rejecting these words are listed below:

1. The words are not found in any Greek manuscripts except in four late medieval manuscripts and in another late four that have the verses added in the margin.
2. The words are not quoted by any of the early Greek Church Fathers (1st to 3rd centuries). Had they known of them they would have used them in the Trinitarian controversies.
3. The words are absent from all other ancient versions of the Bible such as the Syriac, Coptic, Armenian, Ethiopic, Slavonic, Arabic, early Old Latin and Jerome's original edition of the Vulgate. They are found in most of the later editions of the Vulgate (from about 800AD) from where they were apparently translated into Greek and then found their way into the late Greek manuscripts mentioned above.
4. The earliest occurrence of these words quoted as from the actual Epistle is found in a fourth century Latin treatise called Liber Apologeticus which it is thought was written by the Spanish heretic, Bishop Priscillian (died about 385AD) or by his follower Bishop Instantius.
5. If the words were original, why would they have been omitted by so many copyists and translators?
6. Grammatically, the words seem out of place.
7. Erasmus omitted it in the first two editions of his Greek New Testament and only added it to the third edition after being accused of heresy.

Now let us examine each of the statements given above as to their validity.

1. The claim that the Comma is not found in any early Greek manuscripts. The eight Greek manuscripts that contain the Comma are mostly from the 16th century but there is a ninth one from the 8th century, Codex Wizanburgensis, which is usually not mentioned. The claim is often made that the four manuscripts that have the Comma in the margin had it added in by scribes and from here it was incorporated into the later manuscripts. However, the opposite claim could be equally true - that the scribes noticed that it was missing and therefore added it in the margin as a correction to the text. The argument is also made that there are over 5000 Greek manuscripts in existence and the Comma is only found in eight or nine of them. This is not strictly correct however, as out of all the Greek manuscripts only about 500 contain the epistle of I John chapter 5. The other common argument that the oldest manuscripts are the best and therefore more correct is also not necessarily true. Although the Greek manuscripts that contain the Comma are relatively late, 95% of those that do *not* contain the Comma are equally late (post 9th century). In fact, Codex Wizanburgensis predates all the non-Comma-containing texts except for five. Another argument against the Comma is that it differs in wording among the manuscripts in which it appears. Yet the two oldest and supposedly best Greek manuscripts currently in existence that do not contain the Comma, Codex Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus, differ between themselves over 3000 times *in the Gospels alone!* In fact, the variant readings of the Comma is an indication that it probably is authentic because it suffered the same scribal errors we see in other manuscripts. If it was always exactly the same this would make it suspect as being a doctrinal emendation (addition).
2. The claim that the Comma is not cited by the early Church Fathers. It is of great importance to note Church Father Jerome's comment concerning the Comma while making a standard Latin translation of the Bible (the Vulgate) from the Greek. He said, "Irresponsible translators left out this testimony in the Greek codices." (*Prologue to the Canonical Epistles*). This was in the period 395-400AD. Jerome must have been aware of the Comma for him to make this statement. But there is mention made of the Comma even before Jerome. Tertullian in *Against Praxeas* (200AD) seems to allude to it and Cyprian in *De Unit. Eccl.* (250AD) actually says, "and again it is written of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, 'And these three are one'." This clearly shows that Cyprian was aware of the Comma to the extent that even the anti-Comma proponent, Scrivener, admits this. Athanasius quotes the Comma in three instances between 310-340AD and Idacius Clarus quotes it about 350AD. As far as the claim that the Comma was not used in the "Trinitarian controversies" of the 3rd and 4th centuries but only in the Arian controversies of the late 4th and 5th centuries goes, this claim misunderstands the nature of the so-called "Trinitarian controversies." The first of these controversies was Sabellianism which is a form of Modalism which basically said that the Father IS the Son IS the Spirit. In other words, it denied the individuality of the Persons in the Trinity. The Comma would not have been useful in combating this heresy because the Sabellians would have agreed that the "three are one" (in person, not in essence). The Comma could easily have been distorted to support Sabellianism. Only when Arianism arose was the Comma quoted.

3. The claim that the Comma is absent from other ancient translations of the Bible. This statement is not true as the Comma appears in ancient non-Greek versions of the Bible as far back as the middle of the 2nd century. The Old Latin manuscripts from this period that contain John 5 all contain the Comma. It is quite possible that the Old Latin was translated from first generation Greek copies so it provides powerful evidence that the Comma was present in these manuscripts. Jerome's Latin Vulgate (395-400AD) which replaced the Old Latin almost certainly contained the Comma although we only have existing copies of the Vulgate that date from about a hundred years later. Critics of the Comma will claim that the original Vulgate did not contain the Comma and that it was inserted later by medieval copyists. They base this claim basically on the earliest Vulgate manuscript currently in existence, the Codex Fuldensis (546AD), which does not contain the Comma. This is a strange claim as there are many Latin authors who lived before the Codex Fuldensis was copied and who quote the Comma in their works, e.g. Cassian, Victor Vitensis and Fulgentius. Where would they have gotten the verse from? The verse was also quoted by the Council of Carthage in 450AD against the Arian heresy. Also, Jerome himself spoke of the verse being omitted by "irresponsible copyists", so he would hardly have omitted it himself! If the words had only appeared as a gloss in the margin of some heretic's copy of the Vulgate (Bishop Priscillian is often named as the heretical instigator of the Comma), it is highly unlikely that several authors and a Church Council would have quoted it just a couple of generations later! There are over 8000 existing copies of the Vulgate, some of which are nearly as old as Fuldensis, and only a handful (1 out of every 50) do not have the Comma!

4. The claim that the words were invented by the Spanish Bishop, Priscillian, who was beheaded as a sorcerer and heretic about 385AD. Priscillian quoted these words in the work attributed to him, *Liber Apologeticus*, but there is absolutely no evidence that he invented them. We have already seen that others who lived before Priscillian knew of these words, e.g. Cyprian and Athanasius.

5. The claim that if the words were original, why would they have been omitted by so many copyists and translators? This claim is not as valid as it may first appear. It is interesting to note that there are other words in the Biblical manuscripts that do not appear in most copies but are nevertheless included in modern critical text translations. For example, in Matt.11: 19, the phrase "wisdom is justified of her children" is changed to "wisdom is justified of her works" on the basis of only three Greek manuscripts; in James 4: 14 the word "for" is omitted on the basis of only four Greek manuscripts; and in Rom.8: 24 "for why does anyone hope for what he sees" is changed to "for who hopes for what he sees" on the basis of only two Greek manuscripts. Why have the translators chosen to use these minority readings instead of the vast majority? It is simply because there are other reasons than just the numbers of concurring manuscripts that are used when determining the validity of readings. Critical Greek editors admit that an original reading can occur in a single manuscript or even in a late manuscript. Kurt Aland in "The Significance of the

Papyri for Progress in New Testament Research" (*The Bible in Modern Scholarship*, ed. J.P.Hyatt, New York, Abingdon Press, 1965, Pg.340) says, "Theoretically the original reading can be hidden in a single manuscript thus standing alone against the rest of the tradition." And R.V.G.Tasker in *The Greek New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964, pg. Viii) says, "The possibility must be left open that in some cases the true reading may have been preserved in only a few witnesses or even in a single relatively late witness." The reasons for the omission of the Comma in so many Greek manuscripts may be due to several factors. Firstly, in some cases it could have been a copying error commonly called *homoeoteleuton*. This error occurs when a scribe inadvertently misses some words because his eye jumps to similar words he has just copied. In the case of the Comma it is easy to jump from the "three that bear witness" in verse 7 to the "three that bear witness" in verse 8. Secondly, it is likely that the omission was deliberate. In II Cor.2: 17 Paul speaks of those who "corrupt" the word of God. It is well known that the heretic Marcion (c.100-165) produced his own canon of the New Testament in which he left out any portions that did not suit his teachings, and at about 485AD Socrates Scholasticus writing of the heretic Nestorius and of I John 4: 2-3 says that, "...some persons have corrupted this epistle, aiming at separating the manhood of Christ from his Deity." (*Hist. Eccles*, Lib.VII, cap. xxxii). We have already noted the comment of Jerome at about 395-400AD with regard to the Comma that "Irresponsible translators left out this testimony in the Greek codices." With the rise of Arianism within the church it is likely that Arian heretics in the 4th century removed the witness of the Comma. This makes more sense than for Trinitarian scribes to have added it to the epistle as this is only one of many Scriptures in the Bible that support the doctrine of the Trinity. In fact, if Trinitarian scribes had added the Comma they would most likely have referred to the Father, SON and Holy Spirit. The WORD in place of the SON is uniquely the language that the apostle John employs (refer John 1: 1). T.Scott, speaking of the Comma in his *Commentary on the Holy Bible*, note on 1 John 5: 7-8 says, "...but if this testimony were admitted as the unerring word of GOD; all the ingenuity and diligence of opponents would scarcely suffice to explain it away, or to avoid the inference, which must naturally be drawn from it." Undoubtedly, the Comma is the single most devastating verse in the Bible against Arianism and, as such, it had to be quietly dropped.

6. The claim that the words seem grammatically out of place. B. Metzger in his *Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (1994, UBS, Stuttgart, Germany, pg. 649) says, "...the passage makes an awkward break in the sense." However, when read in context this is far from true. As Dabney has pointed out (*Discussions of Robert Lewis Dabney*, "The Doctrinal Various Readings of the New Testament Greek," Discussions: Evangelical and Theological, Vol.1, 1891, pg. 350-390), if the Comma is omitted then the grammar of the Greek is seriously incorrect. The particular rule of Greek grammar applicable here demands gender agreement in parts of a sentence. If the Comma is omitted then the masculine gender of the opening clause of verse 7 is married to three neuter nouns in verse 8 (spirit, water and blood) which is an insuperable difficulty. With the Comma in place, verse 7 agrees throughout in the

masculine gender (even though the word "spirit" is neuter) according to the rule of Greek syntax known as the "Power of Attraction". What this rule says is that a masculine noun (Father, Word) in a series of nouns within a clause forces all the nouns to take the masculine gender, hence "spirit" becomes masculine. This then carries over into the next sentence (verse 8) where the masculinized "spirit" now forces the neuter "water" and "blood" to become masculine as well. This principle collapses if the Comma is omitted. Opponents of the Comma try to get around this by saying that "personalization" caused a gender change, but this did not happen in verse 6 so there is no basis for it occurring in verse 8. If the Comma is omitted then there is definite problem with the Greek grammar, and since there is no record of any grammatical errors in all of John's writings one can only conclude that the Comma was deleted by copyists.

7. The claim that Erasmus omitted the Comma in the first two editions of his Greek New Testament and only added it to the third edition after being accused of heresy. This often repeated claim is entirely false. For example, Bruce Metzger in *The Text of the New Testament* says, "Erasmus promised that he would insert the Comma Johanneum, as it is called, in future editions if a single Greek manuscript could be found that contained the passage. At length such a copy was found - or made to order." However, in the 3rd edition of *The Text of the New Testament* on page 291, Metzger goes on to say, "What is said on p. 101 above about Erasmus' promise to include the Comma Johanneum if one Greek manuscript were found that contained it, and his subsequent suspicion that MS.61 was written expressly to force him to do so, needs to be corrected in the light of the research of H.J. de Jonge, a specialist in Erasmian studies who finds no explicit evidence that supports this frequently made assertion: see his "Erasmus and the Comma Johanneum", *Ephemerides Theologicae Novianenses*, lvi (1980)," pp 381-9.

A very interesting and almost unbelievable phenomenon occurs when we take the first and the last verses in the King James Bible and add the numerical values of their words and letters compared with I John 5: 7. Is God in His wisdom guaranteeing His Word?

Gen.1: 1 "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth."

Rev.22: 21 "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen."

I John 5: 7 "For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one."

Verse	Gen.1: 1		Rev.22: 21		I Jhn.5: 7
Words	10	+	12	=	22
Letters	44	+	44	=	88
Vowels	17	+	17	=	34
Consonants	27	+	27	=	54