

# The Johannine Comma: Bad Translation, Bad Theology

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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.**

—1 John 5:7-8 (Authorized Version)

THE PORTION OF 1 JOHN 5:7-8 HIGHLIGHTED IN BOLD has long given biblical scholars pause for thought. Not just modern, “secular,” or “liberal” scholars, either. A physics professor of mine once told his students that Sir Isaac Newton, whose formulation of the laws of gravity still form the fundamentals of physics, actually wrote four times as many books on theology as he did on science. As a young LDS undergraduate student taking institute of religion classes and struggling to integrate science and religion into my life, I found this comment especially memorable. Newton said about this fragment of John, “Let them make good sense of it who are able; for my part I can make none.”<sup>1</sup> This “fragment” has been scrutinized so thoroughly that it has a special name: the Johannine Comma, a comma in this sense being a portion of a sentence or phrase, with the implication that something has been inserted.

The Johannine Comma is a scripture which is used by some Christians, especially those of evangelical or conservative persuasions, as biblical evidence of the doctrine of the Trinity: “The Father, the Word and the

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1. Quoted in Raymond E. Brown, *The Anchor Bible: The Epistles of John*. Vol. 30 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1982), 775.

Holy Ghost: and these three are one." What could be more straightforward an indication that the godhead is one, just as the Nicene Creed says? However, translations newer than the Authorized Version—the King James Version, the official Bible of the LDS church in English—omit the Comma, almost without exception.

For example, the official LDS translation of the Bible in German and French omits the Comma, presumably leaving missionaries in German- and French-speaking missions with one fewer barrier than in English-speaking missions:

1 Johannes 5, 7-8 (*Einheitsübersetzung*): Drei sind es, die Zeugnis ablegen: der Geist, das Wasser und das Blut; und diese drei sind eins.

1 John 5:7-8 (*Unified Translation*): Three there are, who bear witness: the Spirit, the water and the blood, and these three are one.<sup>2</sup>

In fact, the *Unified Translation* adds a footnote: "5,7f The so-called Johanneine Comma is added in here in many textual witnesses, which does not belong to the original text: '(“which bear witness) in Heaven: the Father, the Word and the Holy Ghost, and these three are one. 8. And three there are, which give witness on Earth: (the Spirit”)' [my translation].

1 Jean 5.7-8 (*Traduction Oecuménique*): Il y a trois témoins: l'Esprit Saint, l'eau et le sang, et tous les trois sont d'accord.

1 John 5:7-8 (*Ecumenical Translation*): There are three witnesses: The Holy Ghost, the water and the blood, and all three are of one accord.<sup>3</sup>

The *New American Bible*, which is the English counterpart to the German and French translations but which is not officially sanctioned by the LDS church, also concurs that the correct translation excludes the Johanneine Comma:

1 John 5:7-8: So there are three that testify, the Spirit, the water, and the blood, and the three are of one accord.<sup>4</sup>

The *New American Bible* also adds a footnote. It is not exegetical in nature but is doctrinally interpretive. However, the doctrine involves the sym-

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2. *Einheitsübersetzung der Heiligen Schrift: die Bibel* (Stuttgart: Katholischer Bibelanstalt et al., 1982), 1369.

3. *La Bible: Ancien et Nouveau Testament Traduite de l'hébreu et du grec en français courant avec les Livres Deutérocanoniques de la Traduction Oecuménique de la Bible* (Montréal: Société Biblique Canadienne, 1983), (NT) 356.

4. *The New American Bible* (Iowa Falls, IA: World Bible Publishers, 1991), 1363.

bolism of the three tokens of water, blood, and spirit and how they relate to the divine witness of Christ's mission—there is not a word about the Trinity.

Finally, the publication which forms the basis of every proper translation of the New Testament today, the current descendant of the *Textus Receptus*, or critical apparatus of compiled manuscripts, also omits the Comma:

IOANNOU 1 5:7-8: hoti treis eisin hoi martuourontes: to pneuma kai to hydor kai to haima; kai hoi treis eis to en eisin.

1 John 5:7-8 (*Greek New Testament; word-for-word translation*): Then three (there are) which witness, the spirit and the water and the blood, and these three are the of one.<sup>5</sup>

How did the Johannine Comma make it into the Authorized Version in the first place, and why have other, subsequent translations excised it? And, finally, should the fact that our official English Bible, the Authorized Version, still contains the Johannine Comma be cause for concern?

First, there are stylistic reasons for doubting the authenticity of the Johannine Comma. References to the Holy Spirit and the Word personified are not found anywhere else in the writings of John; neither in the epistles, nor in the Gospel. The closest reference to the Word is in the Prologue to the Gospel of John (John 1:1-5), where the Word was with "God" and "was God"—there is no conjoining of the Word with the Father specifically phrased that way. In other words, it is clear that the Word was Jesus Christ, or God the Son, but the word used in John 1:1 for God the Father is the non-specific "God," not "the Father." There was no need to be specific since the controversy of the Trinity had not yet arisen. The fact that the Johannine Comma does explicitly refer to the Father conjoined with the Word would not be necessary if it had been written in the first century C.E.

Likewise the Comma's doctrine of the Spirit bearing witness both in heaven and on earth sounds suspiciously like a neo-hellenistic concept which seems to represent the Holy Ghost as a member of a ruling troika, much like the leadership of the Roman Empire was a duality during the later days of early Christianity (post-third century)—this heaven and earth duality is a concept of which there was no need in the first century, so one has to question its place in a document which purports to be a first century writing. It is, put simply, an anachronism, like finding a Porsche in Camelot.

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5. Eberhard Nestle, Erwin Nestle, Kurt Aland, et al., eds., *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 26 ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelstiftung, 1979), 825.

Other passages in the New Testament mention three divinities (for example, Matt. 28:19), but even that scripture does not claim they are one; only the Comma has the sophistication of fourth-century trinitarianism.

Even conservative Protestant scholars are acquainted with the sordid history of the Comma. The Scottish biblical critical scholar I. H. Marshall, in his article on the Epistles of John in a Bible dictionary published by the conservative Eerdmans press,<sup>6</sup> refers to the Comma indirectly but in a way that assumes it is spurious: "(v. 5-12; for the correct text of v. 7 f., see RV, RSV or NEB)." The Canadian conservative scholar Norman Geisler goes further. After relating briefly the story of how the Comma made it into the Authorized Version in the first place (about which more shortly), he criticizes the Comma, writing that "the acceptance of this verse as genuine breaks almost every major canon of textual criticism."<sup>7</sup>

It is often assumed that the Authorized Version is a translation from the original Greek and Hebrew texts, but in fact it is actually a version. It was first published in 1611 to solve a political problem. The Hampton Court Conference—convened in 1604 soon after the Protestant James I succeeded Elizabeth I—dealt with political pressure from Puritans for a modern translation that was not "Catholic" by commissioning the Authorized Version which was in fact based on previous versions and translations, including the Bishop's Bible, the Great Bible, and the versions of William Tyndale and Miles Coverdale. Tyndale's New Testament, the final version of which appeared in 1525, was based on Luther's German Bible with some "improvements" from the Greek text. The only direct, pure English translations of the Bible until modern times were translated from the Latin Vulgate.

Tyndale knew at least some Greek, and he was the first English translator to refer to Greek texts. The apparatus of manuscripts he used was one which had just been published in 1516 by that amazing Renaissance man Desiderius Erasmus. As related by a scholar whom we could call the twentieth-century counterpart to Erasmus (Kurt Aland):

Then at the beginning of the sixteenth—the *Novum Instrumentum Omne* of Desiderius Erasmus, the great humanist of Rotterdam, was published and marketed by Johann Froben in Basel on March 1, 1516. It is famous as the first edition (*editio princeps*) of the Greek New Testament, fulfilling the goal of its editor and of its publisher.

The sources used by Erasmus for his edition are known. He took manuscripts most readily available to him in Basel for each part of the New Testa-

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6. J. D. Douglas, ed., *The New Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1962), 643.

7. Norman L. Geisler and William E. Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1968), 370.

ment (the Gospels, the Apostolos [Acts and the Catholic letters], the Pauline letters, and Revelation), entered corrections in them where he felt it necessary, and sent them directly to the printer. Work on the magnificent folio volume (with Erasmus' Latin version paralleling the Greek text) began in August 1515, and since it was completed in only a few months' time, the rate of its progress can be imagined (*praecipitatum verius quam editum* "thrown together rather than edited" was how Erasmus described it later). But it gained for Erasmus and Froben the fame (and financial profit) of publishing the first edition of the Greek New Testament.

The most serious defect of the first edition of the Greek New Testament was not so much its innumerable errors (many of these were pointed out to Erasmus by his contemporaries; a nineteenth-century critic in England called it the least carefully printed book ever published) as the type of text it represented. Erasmus relied on manuscripts of the twelfth/thirteenth century which represented the Byzantine Imperial text, the Koine text, or the Majority text—however it may be known—the most recent and the poorest of the various New Testament text types, and his successors [until the twentieth century] have done the same. This was the dominant form of the text in the fourteenth/fifteenth century. *Textus Receptus* is the name by which the text of Erasmus has been known ever since an enterprising publisher, Elzevir, characterized it in 1633 in the following words: "*Textum ergo habes, nunc ab omnibus receptum: in quo nihil immutatum aut corruptum damus* [What you have here, then, is the text which is now universally recognized: we offer it free of alterations and corruptions]."<sup>8</sup>

Erasmus had basically five more-or-less complete manuscripts at his disposal to create this first Greek *Textus Receptus*. By 1869-72, Constantin von Tischendorf published his *Textus Receptus*, the first of the modern, more accurate and more comprehensive Greek New Testaments, using sixty-five manuscripts—including his spectacular find at the St. Catharine's Monastery on Mt. Sinai, *Codex Sinaiticus*, plus scores of minuscules. The Englishmen Hort and Westcott issued a Greek New Testament in 1881 which was generally inferior to Tischendorf's (although because of their situation at Cambridge, it became popular amongst English Protestants and was even the basis for the Jehovah's Witnesses *Interlinear Translation* which used to be popular with their missionaries until errors forced its discontinuance in the 1980s). In the latest edition of the Greek New Testament (which is no longer referred to as the *Textus Receptus*, since its scholarly underpinnings are based on much earlier and more comprehensive manuscripts unknown to late Renaissance workers), no fewer than 395 manuscripts and more than 2,800 minuscules were referred to. Some of these go back to the second century, predating what

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8. Kurt Aland and Barbara Aland, *The Text of the New Testament*, trans. Erroll F. Rhodes, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1989), 3-4.

Tischendorf and Hort and Westcott had by two centuries.

Perhaps because of a combination of his haste to publish and the pressure he was subjected to from certain sources, Erasmus fell into a trap concerning the Comma. As Geisler relates,

There is virtually no textual support for the Authorized Version reading [of the Comma] in any Greek manuscript, although there is ample support in the Vulgate. Therefore, when Erasmus was challenged as to why he did not include the reading in his Greek text edition of 1516 and 1519, he hastily replied that if anyone could produce even one Greek manuscript with the reading, he would include it in his next edition. One sixteenth century Greek minuscule (the 1520 manuscript of the Franciscan friar Froy, or Roy) was found, and Erasmus complied with his promise in his 1522 edition [third edition]. The King James Version followed Erasmus' Greek text, and on the basis of a single testimony from an insignificant and late manuscript all of the weight and authority of some 5,000 Greek manuscripts were disregarded in favor of this text.<sup>9</sup>

Although Geisler overstates the number of Greek manuscripts which Erasmus would have had access to, the point is that all the Greek textual evidence—as opposed to Latin textual evidence—points to the Comma being much later than the rest of the Epistle and therefore its inclusion is spurious. However, because he did end up including it in the Textus Receptus, it ended up eventually in the King James Bible we use today. Also, technically speaking, there are some Greek manuscripts which include the Comma, but none of them is very old, and several of them are clearly Greek copies of earlier Latin texts: *Codex Montfortianus* (m61), an early sixteenth-century manuscript at Trinity College, Dublin, copied from an earlier code (m326) which did not have the Comma; presumably the Comma was inserted from a Latin text, possibly to embarrass Erasmus (this is the manuscript produced by the infamous Friar Froy). *Codex Ottobonianus* (m629), a fourteenth- or fifteenth-century manuscript at the Vatican Library; two-column, with Greek on one side and Latin on the other; the Greek has been revised to accord with the Vulgate. And a group of insignificant, very late manuscripts in which the Comma appears as a variant reading added to the main text: m918 (Escorial, Spain, sixteenth century); m2318 (Bucharest, Romania, eighteenth century); 88vl (*Codex Regius*, Naples, Italy, sixteenth-century Greek Vulgate); 221vl (Oxford, England, tenth-century Greek Vulgate); 429vl (Wolfenb<sup>n</sup>ttel, Germany, sixteenth-century Greek Vulgate); and 636vl (Naples, Italy, fifteenth-century Greek Vulgate).

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9. *Ibid.*, 370.

If the Johannine Comma is spurious in the sense of being anachronistic with respect to the Epistle of John, where did it in fact come from? The key to its origin lies with the history of the Latin Vulgate in medieval Spain. Even in the Vulgate (not to mention the Old Latin version upon which Jerome based his Vulgate), the Comma does not appear until the seventh century, and even there it appears only in manuscripts of Spanish provenance. We know that the primary critic of Erasmus's omission of the Comma in his first two editions was D. Lopez de Zuñiga, editor of Cardinal Ximenes's *Complutensian Polyglot Bible* which was roughly contemporary with Erasmus's first edition. An Englishman named E. Lee also criticized Erasmus in 1520 for omitting the Comma, and it was to Lee that Erasmus made his famous response that if but one Greek manuscript could be found with the Comma, he would include it in his next edition. The *Codex Montefortianus* was promptly offered by one Friar Roy (or Froy), and although Erasmus and many others believed it was a deliberate forgery, Erasmus felt honor-bound to include it. Tyndale was one of those who suspected the provenance of *Montefortianus* as well, so in his English translation he put the Comma in brackets to indicate his doubt as to its authenticity. However, Erasmus's reputation as a scholar was so great that future scholars, not knowing the circumstances surrounding the inclusion of the Comma, assumed it was genuine. Thus it ended up more or less permanently in the *Textus Receptus* until modern days when the Nestle Greek New Testament (and its current incarnation, the Aland-Black Greek New Testament) finally corrected a centuries-old error.

*Montefortianus* was just a convenient arrow in the quiver of Catholic apologists served up to deal with Erasmus, however; the Comma predated the sixteenth century. The first known mention of the Comma was from the Latin Church Father Priscillian, who mentions it in his *Liber apologeticus* 1.4, written in the mid-fourth century, but there is no proof he originated the Comma. Its next mention is in tractates defending what came to be the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity in the century following Priscillian, but this was during a period when it was by no means clear that the "Catholic" (non-Arian) doctrine would eventually prevail. The Comma is referred to in a confession of faith by North African bishops in 484 C.E. (recorded in Victor of Vita's *Historia persecutionis Africanae Provinciae* 2.82) at Carthage. Less than a half century later another North African bishop, Fulgentius (bishop of Ruspe, d. 527 C.E.), referred to it in two tracts: *Responsio contra Arianos* and *De Trinitate*. Written as an apology of what became orthodox Catholic belief, these were attacks on Arianism, a version of Christianity professed by, among others, the Vandals, a Germanic tribe who had crossed the Pyrenees, conquered Spain, and crossed into North Africa.

As the Anchor Bible summarizes this development,

Eventually, in the continued debates over the Trinity, the modalist Priscillian or some predecessor took the Johannine equivalents of Spirit, water and blood, namely, Father, Spirit, and Word, and shaped from them a matching statement about another threefold witness that was also one. If the phrase "on earth" had already appeared in the Old Latin reference to the Spirit, the water, and the blood, the counterpart "in heaven" was obvious for the added threefold witness of the divine figures. At first this added witness was introduced into biblical mss. as a marginal comment on I John 5:7-8, explaining it; later it was moved into the text itself. Some who knew the Comma may have resisted it as an innovation, but the possibility of invoking the authority of John the Apostle on behalf of trinitarian doctrine won the day in the fifth-century debates against the Arians and their Vandal allies. The close connection of Spain to North Africa explains that the Comma appeared first in Latin biblical texts of Spanish origin. In summary, Greeven phrases it well: "The Johannine Comma must be evaluated as a dogmatic expansion of the scriptural text stemming from the third century at the earliest in North Africa or Spain."<sup>10</sup>

What is the significance of such an error in the official Bible of the anglophone LDS church? If Mormonism were a traditional biblicist Protestant sect, but with the same beliefs of the Godhead (i.e., quasi-Arianist anti-trinitarian), the existence of the Johannine Comma would present a serious inconsistency. However, Mormonism's theology is notably not biblicist. We believe in the Bible on a conditional basis—only insofar as it is translated "correctly," or is in accordance with modern revelation. If anything, the existence of the Comma does not surprise anyone familiar with Nephi's prophecy that "plain and precious things" would be taken away (or, we might say with respect to the Comma, that the sense of those plain and precious things would be removed by spurious additions) from the Bible (see 1 Ne. 13:26-29). In a positive sense, then, the Johannine Comma is actually a small affirmation of Joseph Smith and LDS non-biblical scriptures.

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10. "Comma Johanneum," *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, Vol. 1 (1854), quoted in Brown, 786.