

1 John 5.7-8: A Spurious Text

October 9th, 2008 by [Sean](#)

1 John 5:7-8 [KJV] 7 For there are three that bear record **in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one. 8 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 [NASB] 7 For there are three that testify: 8 the Spirit and the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement.

The words which are bolded above in the KJV are known as the Comma Johanneum (comma = a short clause). This is the most explicitly trinitarian phrase in the Bible. There are two ways to look at this issue: (1) the KJV is right and the original reading included these words or (2) the NASB (and all modern versions) is right and these words were a corruption added in for theological reasons. In order to get a better grasp of this issue we need to determine what the Greek manuscripts have to say. Does the Comma Johanneum appear in the oldest and best manuscripts? If not, when did this reading enter the Greek text of 1 John 5.7-8? Dr. Daniel Wallace, noted manuscript expert at Dallas Theological Seminary and editor of the NET Bible, says the following:

[The Textual Problem in 1 John 5:7-8](#) by Daniel B. Wallace, Th.M., Ph.D.

This longer reading is found only in eight late manuscripts, four of which have the words in a marginal note. Most of these manuscripts (2318, 221, and [with minor variations] 61, 88, 429, 629, 636, and 918) originate from the 16th century; the earliest manuscript, codex 221 (10th century), includes the reading in a marginal note which was added sometime after the original composition. Thus, there is no sure evidence of this reading in any Greek manuscript until the 1500s; each such reading was apparently composed after Erasmus' Greek NT was published in 1516. Indeed, the reading appears in no Greek witness of any kind (either manuscript, patristic, or Greek translation of some other version) until AD 1215 (in a Greek translation of the Acts of the Lateran Council, a work originally written in Latin). This is all the more significant, since many a Greek Father would have loved such a reading, for it so succinctly affirms the doctrine of the Trinity. The reading seems to have arisen in a fourth century Latin homily in which the text was allegorized to refer to members of the Trinity. From there, it made its way into copies of the Latin Vulgate, the text used by the Roman Catholic Church.

The Trinitarian formula (known as the Comma Johanneum) made its way into the third edition of Erasmus' Greek NT (1522) because of pressure from the Catholic Church. After his first edition appeared (1516), there arose such a furor over the absence of the Comma that Erasmus needed to defend himself. He argued that he did not put in the Comma because he found no Greek manuscripts that included it. Once one was produced (codex 61, written by one Roy or Froy at Oxford in c. 1520), Erasmus apparently felt obliged to include the reading. He became aware of this manuscript sometime between May of 1520 and September of 1521. In his annotations to his third edition he does not protest the rendering now in his text, as though it were made to order; but he does defend himself from the charge of indolence, noting that he had taken care to find whatever manuscripts he could for the production of his Greek New Testament. In the final analysis, Erasmus probably altered the text because of politico-theologico-economic concerns: he did not want his reputation ruined, nor his *Novum Instrumentum* to go unsold.

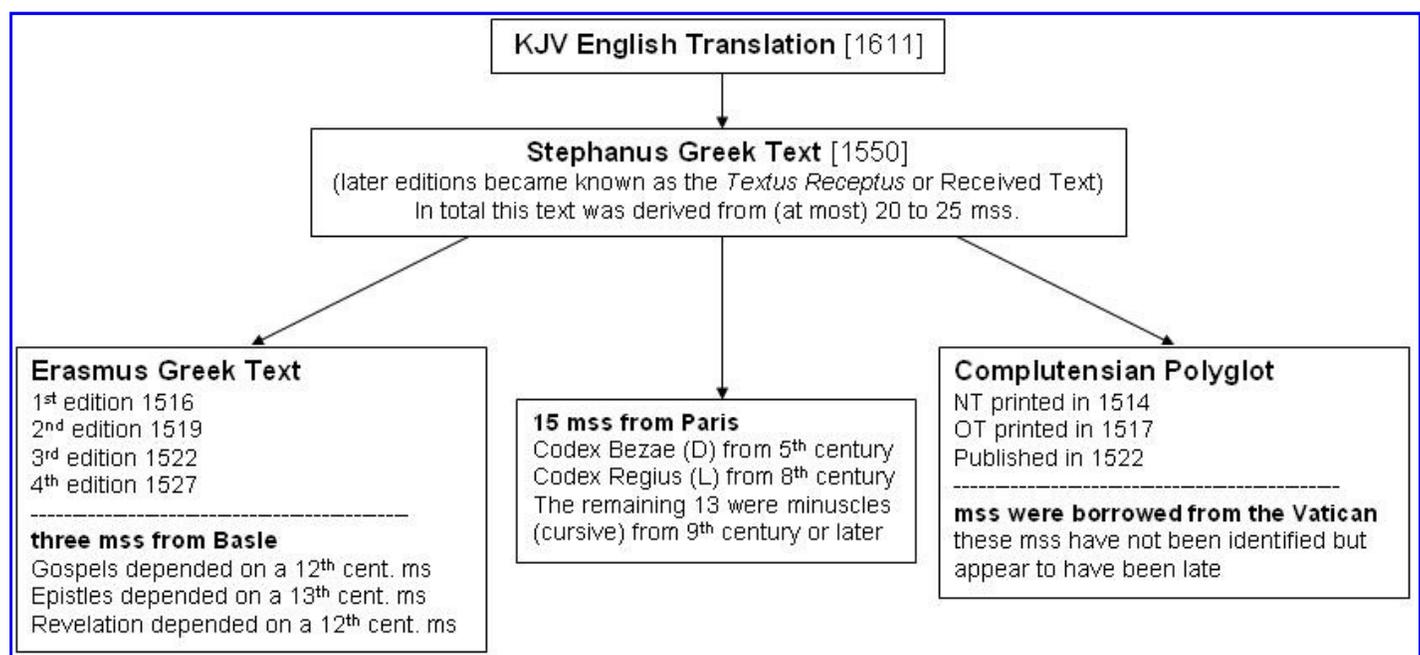
Thus, the Comma Johanneum first was composed in Latin in the 4th century. Then it made its way into the Latin Vulgate. It did not occur in the Greek until a.d. 1215 and even then it was in the margin. Even so, there was a heavy emphasis on the Latin version (Vulgate) because that was what the Church had become accustomed to reading for centuries. Thus, when Erasmus' new Latin translation appeared (with the corresponding Greek text on the opposite page) without the familiar phrase about the Father, Word, and Spirit being one, people (especially the Catholic authorities) were understandably disturbed. Unfortunately, rather than correcting this corrupt addition in light of the evidence, Erasmus decided (whether he was forced or not is unclear) to include it once he was presented with a Greek ms containing the extra phrase. So why is Erasmus' Greek text so important to this discussion? It is because Erasmus' Greek text was very influential and was used by subsequent Greek texts as a basis. The KJV was translated into English in 1611 from the the Greek text printed by Stephanus (Robert Estienne) in 1550.

F. G. Kenyon, "Text of the New Testament," p. 916, from *Hastings' Dictionary of the Bible* ed. James Hastings, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson 2001), (originally published in 1909). The edition of Stephanus was based upon the two earliest printed texts of the NT, that of Erasmus (published in 1516), and that of the Complutensian Polyglot

(printed in 1514, but not published until 1522); and he also made use of 15 mss, mostly at Paris. Two of these (Codex D and Codex L) were of early date, but not much use was made of them; the others were minuscules of relatively late date. The principal editor of the Complutensian Polyglot, Lopez de Stunica, used mss [manuscripts] borrowed from the Vatican; they have not been identified, but appear to have been late, and ordinary in character. Erasmus, working to a publisher's order, with the object of anticipating the Complutensian, depended principally upon a single 12th cent. ms for the Gospels, upon one of the 13th or 14th for the Epistles, and upon one of the 12th for the Apocalypse. All of these were at Basle, and were merely those which chanced to be most accessible.

The TR [*Textus Receptus*] is consequently derived from (at most) some 20 or 25 mss, dating from the last few centuries before the invention of printing [c. 1450], and not selected on any estimate of merit, but merely as being ready to the editor's hands. They may be taken as fairly representative of the great mass of Gr. Test. mss of the late Middle Ages, but no more.

To illustrate this information the following table may be helpful. Note that the 1522 and subsequent editions of Erasmus' Greek text included the Comma Johanneum and thus this is the access point for this corruption making its way into the most influential English translation of all time.



Back to our initial question: When it comes to 1 John 5.7-8, do we have a case where some explicitly trinitarian material was added in, or is it the case that this material was taken out by modern translations? After viewing the data, the answer is certain. The Comma Johanneum was added to the Greek text in Erasmus' 3rd edition (in 1522) and thus entered the English translation tradition through the massively accepted and preferred King James Version of 1611. Thus, it is our conclusion that the modern translations, though newer, are more reliable because they rest on a much larger manuscript base (5,000 compared to 2 dozen) which are much older (dated at the earliest to the first half of the second century).