

# I John 5:7-8: A Plea for Truth over Tradition

---

I John 5:7 has been in some conservative circles a source of great controversy. It is included in the KJV/NKJV, but not in almost all other English versions. The debate arises because the KJV/NKJV has the additional words, *‘in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost, and these three are one; and there are three that bear witness in earth’* which are not present in the vast majority of English translations. The longer form of the passage is known as the *Comma Johanneum*, (*comma* meaning phrase/s, *Johanneum* meaning relating to John) or the *Trinitarian Formula*. For our purposes, the question is, what is the historical data that supports the longer/shorter reading? This brief essay is a summary of a much longer essay that deals with that data in much greater detail.<sup>1</sup> Note that the question at issue is not in any way shape or form, “Is God a Triune Being?” The question at issue is; “Did John speak of the Trinity here, at this passage, in these words, or not?” What is the manuscript evidence for or against the extra clauses? More to the point, did John write these clauses under inspiration, or didn’t he, and should we consider them part of inspired Scripture? To answer this question, we look first at the external and then the internal evidence.

## External Evidence

Remember that external evidence refers to the actual physical materials, their date, character, location, and contents. I have again placed the external evidence in a chart form, so that we can see each part of it and how it relates to each other part. The data is combined from the standard sources and apparatuses,<sup>2</sup> as well as the images available at the CSNTM and INTF websites.<sup>3</sup> The Greek, Versional, and Patristic evidence for the shorter reading is on the left side of the chart. I have again bolded and underlined the Greek columns, as I believe that the Greek support should carry the most weight, as every textual critic I know also does. Note that I have used an extremely small font for the later miniscules (especially those from the 12<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> centuries, which are the most numerous), in order to still place them on the chart without it becoming multiple pages long. On the right side of the chart is the Greek, Versional, and Patristic evidence for the longer reading. Note that the right side of the chart is in two parts; those witnesses that have the longer reading in a form *different* than the KJV/TR, and then further right, in darker grey, those witnesses that have the longer reading in the TR/KJV form. This is an incredibly important distinction that needs to be made and is routinely skipped over by those advocating any kind of a perfect KJV or perfect TR. One isn’t likely to find a single KJV or TR advocate who would allow us to re-write the passage into a different form, even if the vast majority of the support for the longer reading actually supports a different form. Thus, the external evidence in the middle section of the chart actually witnesses *against* the TR /KJV reading. Note also that a “v.r.” after a witnesses refers to the fact that the reading of that witness is a marginal addition (“variant reading”) in the margin of the witness, where the reading of the text itself then has a “text” after it. We will now walk through each of the witnesses.

---

<sup>1</sup> The full essay, which deals in greater detail with the data, interacts a little more with the KJVO TRO position, and brings out further implications of the data for those positions, is available at

<sup>2</sup> See NA 28, pg. 725; UBS 5 pg. 793-794; *Biblia Sacra* pg. 1,878; *Text Und Textwert*, Vol. 1 pg 1-15; *ECM* part 1 pg. 350, part 2 pg. 91-92;

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.csntm.org> and [http://egora.uni-muenster.de/intf/index\\_en.shtml](http://egora.uni-muenster.de/intf/index_en.shtml) primarily <http://ntvmr.uni-muenster.de/manuscript-workspace>.

**I John 5:7**  
- The External Evidence -

DATE	Shorter Reading			Longer Reading				
				Non-KJV/TR Forms			KJV/TR Form	
	Greek Manuscripts	Versional	Patristic	Greek	Vers (Lat Only)	Pat	Greek	Vers/ Pat
1								
2								
3		Cop <sup>sah</sup> ; Cop <sup>fay</sup> ; Syr <sup>c</sup>	Clem <sup>lat</sup> Rebap. (Orig <sup>lat</sup> )					
4	01, 03	Cop <sup>mid</sup>	Amb. (Ps-Cyp.)			Prisc. Ps-Vigil.		
5	02, 048	Geo;Vg <sup>mss</sup> Arm <sup>(1300+)</sup> Syr <sup>P(300+)</sup>	Aug. Quod. (Cyril)			Spec. Varim.		Vit. ?
6	0296	Eth (200+)	Fac.			Fulg.		
7		Syr <sup>h</sup>			It <sup>i</sup> ; It <sup>q</sup> ; vg <sup>mss</sup>			vg <sup>mss</sup>
8			(Jon. Dam.)					
9	018, 020, 025, 049, 0142, 1424, 1862, 1895, 2464,	Slav; Cop <sup>bo</sup> ; It <sup>ar</sup>						
10	044, 056, 82, 93, 175, 181, 221 <sup>text</sup> , 307, 326, 398, 450, 454, 456, 457, 602, 605, 619, 627, 832, 920, 1066, 1175, 1720, 1739, 1829, 1836, 1837, 1841, 1845, 1851, 1871, 1874, 1875, 1880, 1891, 2125, 2147,						221 <sup>vr</sup>	
11	35, 36, 2, 42, 43, 81, 104, 131, 133, 142, 177 <sup>text</sup> , 250, 302, 325, 312, 314, 424, 436, 451, 458, 459, 462, 464, 465, 466, 491, 506, 517, 547, 606, 607, 617, 623, 624, 635, 638, 639, 641, 699, 796, 901, 910, 919, 945, 1162, 1243, 1244, 1270, 1311, 1384, 1521, 1668, 1724, 1730, 1735, 1738, 1828, 1835, 1838, 1846, 1847, 1849, 1854, 1870, 1888, 2138, 2191, 2344, 2475, 2587, 2723, 2746,			177 <sup>vr</sup>				
12	3, 38, 1, 57, 88 <sup>text</sup> , 94, 97, 103, 105, 110, 180, 203, 226, 256, 319, 321, 323, 330, 337, 365, 431, 440, 442, 452, 618, 620, 622, 625, 632, 637, 656, 720, 876, 917, 922, 927, 1058, 1115, 1127, 1241, 1245, 1315, 1319, 1359, 1360, 1448, 1490, 1505, 1573, 1611, 1646, 1673, 1718, 1737, 1740, 1743, 1752, 1754, 1850, 1853, 1863, 1867, 1868, 1872, 1885, 1889, 1893, 1894, 1897, 2127, 2143, 2186, 2194, 2289, 2298, 2401, 2412, 2541, 2625, 2712, 2718, 2736, 2805			88 <sup>vr</sup>		Lat.		
13	4, 5, 6, 51, 204, 206, 172, 141, 218, 234, 263, 327, 328, 378, 383, 384, 390, 460, 468, 469, 479, 483, 496, 592, 601, 614, 643, 665, 757, 912, 914, 915, 941, 999, 1069, 1070, 1072, 1094, 1103, 1107, 1149, 1161, 1242, 1251, 1292, 1297, 1352, 1398, 1400, 1404, 1456, 1501, 1509, 1523, 1563, 1594, 1595, 1597, 1609, 1642, 1719, 1722, 1727, 1728, 1731, 1736, 1758, 1780, 1827, 1839, 1842, 1843, 1852, 1855, 1857, 1858, 1860, 1864, 1865, 1873, 2180, 2374, 2400, 2404, 2423, 2483, 2502, 2558, 2627, 2696,							
14	18, 62, 76, 189, 201, 209, 216, 223, 254, 308, 363, 367, 386, 393, 394, 404, 421, 425, 429 <sup>text</sup> , 453, 489, 498, 582, 603, 604, 608, 621, 628, 630, 633, 634, 680, 743, 794, 808, 824, 913, 921, 928, 935, 959, 986, 996, 1022, 1040, 1067, 1075, 1099, 1100, 1102, 1106, 1248, 1249, 1354, 1390, 1409, 1482, 1495, 1503, 1524, 1548, 1598, 1599, 1610, 1618, 1619, 1622, 1637, 1643, 1661, 1678, 1717, 1723, 1725, 1726, 1732, 1733, 1741, 1742, 1744, 1746, 1747, 1753, 1761, 1762, 1765, 1769, 1831, 1832, 1856, 1859, 1866, 1877, 1881, 1882, 1886, 1890, 1892, 1899, 1902, 2080, 2085, 2086, 2197, 2200, 2261, 2279, 2356, 2431, 2466, 2484, 2492, 2494, 2508, 2511, 2527, 2626, 2675, 2705, 2716, 2774, 2777,			629, 429 <sup>vr</sup>				
15	69, 102, 149, 205, 322, 368, 385, 400, 432, 444, 467, 615, 616, 631, 636 <sup>text</sup> , 664, 801, 1003, 1105, 1247, 1250, 1367, 1405, 1508, 1626, 1628, 1636, 1649, 1656, 1729, 1745, 1750, 1751, 1757, 1763, 1767, 1830, 1876, 1896, 2131, 2221, 2288, 2352, 2495, 2523, 2554, 2652, 2653, 2691, 2704,			636 <sup>vr</sup>				
16	90, 296, 522, 1702, 1704, 1749, 1768, 1840, 1844, 1861, 2130, 2218, 2255, 2378, 2501, 2516, 2544,			918, 61				vg <sup>cl</sup>
17	1101, 1721, 1748, 1869, 1903, 2243, 2674, 2776						2473	
18	1104						2318	
19		Vg <sup>ww</sup> ; Vg <sup>st</sup>						

## The longer Reading – Versional Evidence

The longer reading is not found in almost any of the ancient versions. It is known only in Latin, and occurs in several dozen different forms among the Latin Vulgate mss. The form that begat the KJV reading didn't arise until the 7<sup>th</sup> century, and even today, every form found among any one of the 10,000 Latin manuscripts is still in several particulars different from the KJV, and thus technically witnesses against it.<sup>4</sup>

## The Longer Reading – Greek Evidence

The longer reading is found in only 10 of our over 500 Greek manuscripts, and never before the second millennium. It is found in the text of 5 manuscripts, and as a later marginal addition in 5 others. Among these few 10 manuscripts that have some form of the longer reading, the comma appears in 6 different forms. Every single Greek manuscript that has the longer reading in any form shows clear evidence of being a translation into Greek of one of the common Latin forms. The only manuscripts that have the actual KJV/TR form are the marginal addition in miniscule 221, most likely written after the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and the text of 2473 and 2318, from the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, long after the printing press, and even long after the KJV, making their textual weight zero.

## The Longer Reading – Patristic Support

The Patristic support for the longer reading is found in only a handful of Latin fathers. All of these witnesses have three things in common;

1. They are all Latin Fathers using a Latin translation of the New Testament from one particular, limited, geographic locale. They all originate from the Spanish Latin locale. None of them are Greek fathers quoting a Greek text. There is no Greek Patristic version of the comma until the 12<sup>th</sup> century Lateran council.
2. None of them writes prior to the Trinitarian controversy that was taken up at Nicaea in 325. All of them write in the later half of the 4<sup>th</sup> century or later. This is after Nicaea had so firmly (and rightly) stamped a clearly articulated Trinitarian theology upon the church that it was seen everywhere—behind every Scriptural bush so to speak.
3. Not one of them has the longer ending in the exact KJV/TR form. Apart from Victor of Vita, each of the patristic witnesses that has the longer reading has it in a very different form spelled out in the longer essay. This is because they are using the divers Latin texts. The only exception (and thus the closest one comes to the TR /KJV form) is Vitensus. I included it on the right side of the chart, despite the fact that it still has differences from the TR, to be gracious. He at least has the right order of the triads.

Again, note that all of the patristic support for the longer reading comes from *Latin* Fathers quoting from *Latin* texts. There is simply not any early patristic support for the longer reading from the Greek Fathers (or at all until the 12<sup>th</sup> century Lateran council). Furthermore, even among the meager patristic support found among the Latin Fathers for the longer reading, *none* of them have it in the exact TR/KJV form. They have it in a diversity of forms, like the Latin manuscripts.

## The Shorter Reading

By contrast, the shorter reading has the almost unanimous consent of the patristic writings, the ancient versions, and all Greek manuscripts of any period.

---

<sup>4</sup> See the longer essay for details.

## The Shorter Reading – Patristic Support

The patristic support for the shorter reading is almost unanimous. Apart from the few later Latin Fathers we saw earlier, every single time an early Father quoted the text of I John 5:7-8, he quoted the shorter reading. A good number of patristic writers set forth detailed accounts of the Trinity, yet none of them quotes the longer reading; they know only the shorter form. If these authors knew of this longer addition, it seems incredibly odd that they don't mention it, even in their defense of the Trinity.

This silence expands beyond just those witnesses that we have included in the chart. Those witnesses on the left side of the chart are Fathers who directly quote the passage, and quote it in its shorter form. We could also add the many early patristic writers who discuss the Trinity, and yet never mention this passage. If this passage had been written by John, it would be by far the clearest and most direct passage on the Trinity anywhere in the Bible. It is simply impossible that these men who intended to set forth the Bible's teaching on the Trinity would not have even mentioned it if they had the longer reading.

This is even more striking during the Arian controversy at the end of the third and beginning of the fourth century. A young preacher named Arius had arisen who had begun to preach that there was a time when Jesus did not exist. He had been a disciple of Lucian of Antioch, to whom he attributed the genesis of his ideas. He began to teach that the Son of God was not eternal. He had no problem speaking highly of Jesus, and even worshiping him. But he believed that Christ was merely the very best of all God's created beings. He was adamant that the transcendent God could not have had contact with creation without some intermediary who was considerably less than very God of very God. He thus denied any Godhead of equals. His views became so widespread that a major controversy erupted throughout the empire. He even created songs that would be sung in some churches, claiming that "there was a time when he [Jesus] was not." Faithful pastors all over the world were fighting against his ideas even while many others were "buying into" his new views and still others were seeking a way for everyone to get along.

Understand that Christianity had largely been illegal and heavily persecuted (especially under Domitian) until the edict of Milan in 313. Many of these pastors had lived in hiding, unable to effectively communicate with each other. After the edict of toleration, Christianity was no longer illegal (at least for a short time). So, for the first time in history, they could meet publically *en masse* to discuss such issues, without fear of reprisal. At the council of Nicaea in 325 AD, 318 pastors<sup>5</sup> (each bringing 1-2 deacons with them) met together to discuss the question of Arianism and a few other divisive issues. Pastors were invited from both East and West, so that the meeting would represent every part of the world. These pastors had been through a veritable hell for their firm belief in Jesus. Many had been imprisoned multiple times. Many of them had been tortured for their faith. Several had limbs missing which had been removed during torture because they would not recant their faith in Christ. When they came together, limping in with their broken bodies to discuss Arius and his views, you can imagine that passions ran high. Every weapon in their arsenal was brought to bear. Every Scripture they could come up with was used. Every argument that could be thought of was presented.

At the fore of the discussion was the Trinitarian Godhead. The pastors contended that Jesus had always existed. That he was eternal. That he was equal with the Father. They contended against Arius that Jesus was "*homoousios*" or "of the same substance or same essence" as the Father. One young deacon in particular shared Scripture with passion in defense of the Trinity. His name was Athanasius. He made the case for historic Christianity—biblical Trinitarianism. A representative presented the views of Arius. Then, the pastors voted. Only one, a good friend of Arius, voted that Arius and his views were acceptable. Every other pastor present, and the wide swath of Christianity which they represented, voted that Arius was a heretic and his views were heretical. After the council, many of these pastors continued to write against Arius and his (still popular) views. Athanasius soon became a pastor and spent the rest of his life

---

<sup>5</sup> The traditional figure, the exact attendance specifics are disputed.

defending (and being persecuted for defending) the historic theology of the incarnation, the eternity of Jesus, and the Trinitarian shape of the Godhead.

What is important to note is the place of the longer reading of I John 5:7 in this debate. If John had written the longer reading, then it is by far the most clear, direct statement of the Trinity anywhere in the Bible. There is not a single passage of Scripture that could have been more important to this debate. Because this council represented Christians from every part of the evangelized world, if the passage had appeared as part of the Bible at any point, in any manuscript, anywhere in the world, in any language, it would have been brought to this debate. If these pastors had the longer reading anywhere in any Bible, then wielding the other passages that they mention so fervently is the equivalent of bringing a knife to a gunfight. The *Johannine Comma* would have been a cannon that would silence all Arian opposition in a single fatal shot.<sup>6</sup> There are literally thousands of pages of writings from this debate that we still have access to. It is probably the single greatest doctrinal controversy the church has ever faced. Yet in all of the pre-Nicene and Nicene discussion of the Trinity, no one quotes the longer reading of I John 5:7-8. *Not even one time*. And there is no manuscript evidence anywhere in any language for the comma prior to this point. While we usually think of an “argument from silence” as being weak, when arguing *for* silence (i.e., the nonexistence of a text at this stage) the silence becomes one of the most powerful arguments that can be made. And this silence, at this juncture in history, is in fact deafeningly loud. There is only one reasonable explanation for this silence. They did not quote the comma for a very simple reason – they did not have it in their Bibles. It had not yet been created. It simply did not yet exist.

### The Shorter Reading – Versional Support

The shorter reading is supported by the earliest of the Latin witnesses, and by every single one of the ancient versions in other languages. When we come to the ancient translations of the NT into other languages, we find an almost unanimous agreement that is almost never found among the versions. A variety of different translators in a variety of different locales in a variety of different times can produce almost any number of different variants. Typically almost any variant that we know of can be found witnessed across the early versions. Not so in this case. Apart from the Latin witnesses which we have looked at already, the ancient versions are unanimous in having the shorter reading in I John 5:7-8. The Sahidic and Fayumic Coptic translations in Egypt in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century translate the shorter reading. So does the Curetonian Syriac from the same century. What about the Middle Egyptian Coptic translation made in the 4<sup>th</sup> century? Only the shorter reading. What about the Georgian translation in the next century? Only the shorter reading. What about the Armenian translation? We have hundreds of witnesses to the passage in manuscripts of this 5<sup>th</sup> century translation. You guessed it—every single Armenian manuscript prior to the KJV translates the shorter ending. Next comes the Syriac Peshitta. This was the version which was translated in Antioch in the 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> century, and which became, after the Old Syriac, the standard Bible of the Christians in Antioch. We have several hundred manuscripts of the Peshitta today. Every single one of them has the shorter reading. The Christians in Antioch knew nothing of the longer reading. *Ever*. A common KJVO argument says, “We use the KJV because it is the Bible of Antioch.” But any argument that wants to say, “I use the Bible of Antioch” or that wants to in any way build a connection between the KJV and Antioch and say, “that is why I’m KJVO”, is either invalid from the starting point, or must remove the comma from their Bibles. It would actually have to make hundreds of changes to the KJV, since the Syriac versions very often unanimously have readings different than the KJV,<sup>7</sup> which would

---

<sup>6</sup> In fact, centuries after the initial debate, when Arianism revived, after the comma had arisen, it was repeatedly used against the later Arians.

<sup>7</sup> To take one example, note that none of the Syriac manuscripts contain the *Pericope Adulterae* of John 7:53-8:11, they all have the shorter reading which picks up with what we call 8:12 right after what we call 7:52. It is nothing short of astounding when KJVO advocates try to argue that this story is original because God preserved it in the “true line” of Antioch – when none of the manuscripts from Antioch ever had it! See Metzger, “*The Early Versions*” pg. 48.

mean the KJV would have to be changed in many places if that evidence were even remotely valid support for the position. In addition to those mentioned above, we could go on and talk about the early Ethiopic translation (6<sup>th</sup> century), or the Slavonic, or the Boharic versions (9<sup>th</sup> century) – they all have the shorter reading, at different times, in different locations all over the world. No manuscript of any ancient translation of Scripture (apart from some of the Latin ones) prior to the 1500's has ever been found that has the longer reading in it. *Period*. It is a phenomenon unique to the Latin language, and to a handful of Greek manuscripts that were clearly influenced by Latin.

### The Shorter Reading – Greek Support

While there are a few other textual variants in other parts of the passage, all of the witnesses on the left side of the chart are uniform in one respect – they all have the text in its shorter form, and do not contain the longer reading in any form whatsoever. They uniformly have the text of I John with the reading, “*For there are three who bear witness, the spirit, and the water, and the blood, and these three agree in one.*” Our most important witnesses are those that come from the first millennium. Most textual critics believe that witnesses from essentially the first millennium should be given a much greater weight than later witnesses from the second millennium. This just makes good historical sense. Manuscripts that are almost a full millennium closer to the autographs are most likely to reflect the original text. From the first 6 centuries, we have five such witnesses – Majuscules 01, 03, 02, 048, and 0296. These early witnesses would carry the greatest weight, regardless of the reading of the later miniscules, and they all have the shorter reading. But we have even more. Still prior to the tenth century, we can add majuscules 018, 020, 025, 049, 0142, and miniscules 1424, 1862, 1895, 2464. We can also add the other later Alexandrian and Western manuscripts, as well as the Byzantine manuscripts, which are the large chunk of manuscripts from mostly the 10<sup>th</sup> century + in Byzantium. Thus we add, in chronological order, the miniscules: 044, 056, 82, 93, 175, 181, 221text, 307, 326, 398, 450, 454, 456, 457, 602, 605, 619, 627, 832, 920, 1066, 1175, 1720, 1739, 1829, 1836, 1837, 1841, 1845, 1851, 1871, 1874, 1875, 1880, 1891, 2125, 2147, 35, 36, 2, 42, 43, 81, 104, 131, 133, 142, 177text, 250, 302, 325, 312, 314, 424, 436, 451, 458, 459, 462, 464, 465, 466, 491, 506, 517, 547, 606, 607, 617, 623, 624, 635, 638, 639, 641, 699, 796, 901, 910, 919, 945, 1162, 1243, 1244, 1270, 1311, 1384, 1521, 1668, 1724, 1730, 1735, 1738, 1828, 1835, 1838, 1846, 1847, 1849, 1854, 1870, 1888, 2138, 2191, 2344, 2475, 2587, 2723, 2746, 3, 38, 1, 57, 88text, 94, 97, 103, 105, 110, 180, 203, 226, 256, 319, 321, 323, 330, 337, 365, 431, 440, 442, 452, 618, 620, 622, 625, 632, 637, 656, 720, 876, 917, 922, 927, 1058, 1115, 1127, 1241, 1245, 1315, 1319, 1359, 1360, 1448, 1490, 1505, 1573, 1611, 1646, 1673, 1718, 1737, 1740, 1743, 1752, 1754, 1850, 1853, 1863, 1867, 1868, 1872, 1885, 1889, 1893, 1894, 1897, 2127, 2143, 2186, 2194, 2289, 2298, 2401, 2412, 2541, 2625, 2712, 2718, 2736, 2805, 4, 5, 6, 51, 204, 206, 172, 141, 218, 234, 263, 327, 328, 378, 383, 384, 390, 460, 468, 469, 479, 483, 496, 592, 601, 614, 643, 665, 757, 912, 914, 915, 941, 999, 1069, 1070, 1072, 1094, 1103, 1107, 1149, 1161, 1242, 1251, 1292, 1297, 1352, 1398, 1400, 1404, 1456, 1501, 1509, 1523, 1563, 1594, 1595, 1597, 1609, 1642, 1719, 1722, 1727, 1728, 1731, 1736, 1758, 1780, 1827, 1839, 1842, 1843, 1852, 1855, 1857, 1858, 1860, 1864, 1865, 1873, 2180, 2374, 2400, 2404, 2423, 2483, 2502, 2558, 2627, 2696, 18, 62, 76, 189, 201, 209, 216, 223, 254, 308, 363, 367, 386, 393, 394, 404, 421, 425, 429text, 453, 489, 498, 582, 603, 604, 608, 621, 628, 630, 633, 634, 680, 743, 794, 808, 824, 913, 921, 928, 935, 959, 986, 996, 1022, 1040, 1067, 1075, 1099, 1100, 1102, 1106, 1248, 1249, 1354, 1390, 1409, 1482, 1495, 1503, 1524, 1548, 1598, 1599, 1610, 1618, 1619, 1622, 1637, 1643, 1661, 1678, 1717, 1723, 1725, 1726, 1732, 1733, 1741, 1742, 1744, 1746, 1747, 1753, 1761, 1762, 1765, 1769, 1831, 1832, 1856, 1859, 1866, 1877, 1881, 1882, 1886, 1890, 1892, 1899, 1902, 2080, 2085, 2086, 2197, 2200, 2261, 2279, 2356, 2431, 2466, 2484, 2492, 2494, 2508, 2511, 2527, 2626, 2675, 2705, 2716, 2774, 2777, 69, 102, 149, 205, 322, 368, 385, 400, 432, 444, 467, 615, 616, 631, 636text, 664, 801, 1003, 1105, 1247, 1250, 1367, 1405, 1508, 1626, 1628, 1636, 1649, 1656, 1729, 1745, 1750, 1751, 1757, 1763, 1767, 1830, 1876, 1896, 2131, 2221, 2288, 2352, 2495, 2523, 2554, 2652, 2653, 2691, 2704, 90, 296, 522, 1702, 1704, 1749, 1768, 1840, 1844, 1861, 2130, 2218, 2255, 2378, 2501, 2516, 2544, 1101, 1721, 1748, 1869, 1903, 2243, 2674, 2776, 1104.

That is to say, all of our Greek manuscripts that have this passage (around 500), apart from the small handful of late exceptions that we noted earlier, uniformly have the shorter reading. The Greek manuscripts are unanimous in their reading of the text here, except for five exceptionally late manuscripts (14<sup>th</sup> century and later) and the marginal notes in five others (which notes are all almost certainly all later than the 14<sup>th</sup> century). Further, as noted, those 10 late manuscripts that do have the longer reading have variation even among themselves about the reading. Of only ten manuscripts that have the longer reading either in the text or in the margin, the reading is found in *six different forms*. It is hard to describe how convincing that kind of data should be to anyone who cares at all about evidence, to anyone who believes God preserved His word instead of magically “restoring” it in 1611, or to anyone who cares about truth more than they do tradition.

## Internal Evidence

When we turn to the internal evidence, we note several elements. The comma is unlike anything else John writes. His normal use of “witness” language follows a few clear patterns; 1. *John precludes Jesus from witnessing to himself, except where special conditions are met* (I John 5:31-39), but the comma would involve Jesus in a contradiction, as he would be witnessing to himself, which he said would make him a liar. 2. *John presents the spirit as an earthly witness* (John 15:26. I John 5:6,8), but the comma makes him a heavenly one. 3. *John’s entire point is undermined by the comma*. In accordance with Jewish jurisprudence (Deut. 17:6; 19:15), John intends to “stack up” witnesses to Jesus, as he does elsewhere (John 5:33-26). The whole point of this particular element of jurisprudence is that a greater number of credible congruent witnesses equals a greater strength of testimony. The more witnesses who say the say thing, the stronger the case. This being true, the shorter reading is John, consistent with his usage elsewhere, showing that there are multiple witnesses to Jesus, that these witnesses are separate but in agreement, and thus, that there is greater strength to the testimony. But the language of the longer ending (specifically the latter part, “these three are one”) would actually work directly against John’s point. If one professes three witnesses (as the Persons of the Trinity), but then asserts that these three are in fact only *one*, (“these three are one”), he is reducing rather than increasing the number of witnesses, and thus weakening rather than strengthening the testimony being adduced. The “these three agree in one” of the shorter reading is part of a good Johannine theology of witness. The “these three are one” of the longer reading, while an orthodox expression of Trinitarianism, is language that would work directly against John’s normal use of witness language, and directly against his clear intention for such language in this very passage. John simply did not write this language here. He did not write the comma.

Further, among all of John’s uses of “Spirit”, he very rarely adds the modifier “holy.” But when he does add “holy,” or a modifier of any kind, he always consistently follows the same syntactical pattern, placing the modifier *after* the noun. Thus, he doesn’t use “Holy Spirit” in I John at all, and the actual phrase of I John 5:7, “The Holy Spirit,” with the adjective *before* the noun, never occurs in John’s writings. *Ever. Anywhere.* John speaks of the Spirit often, and pneumatology is an especially strong theme of his. But I John 5:7 is linguistically unlike how he speaks of the Spirit in every other place.<sup>8</sup>

In fact, this particular phrase (placing the adjective before the noun) almost never occurs anywhere in the NT at all, with a small handful of exceptions in Luke; (Luke 12:10-12; Acts 1:8; 2:33, 38; 9:31; 10:45; 15:28; 16:6), and twice in Paul; (I Cor. 6:19; II Cor. 13:14). In over 385 uses of “Spirit” in the NT, most as a reference to the Holy Spirit, and over 80 uses of some form of the actual phrase, “The Holy Spirit” in the NT, in 15 different books, by 7 different authors, this exact phrase is found only in a handful of Lukan passages and two very rare uses by Paul. This is not the language of John, and John simply did not write the comma. Finally, we note that the phrase “these three are one” in reference to the Trinity,

---

<sup>8</sup> See the detailed list of references and expansion in the longer essay.

while a fully orthodox statement, is an articulation which wouldn't arise until much later in the Church. John couldn't have used such language, because it simply did not yet exist.<sup>9</sup>

## Conclusion

Thus, to conclude this examination of the longer reading of I John 5:7, it is obvious that every strand of the data arrives firmly and independently at the conclusion that the shorter reading is undoubtedly the original one. The external data is definitive. If we only knew the versional witnesses, we would be able to tell that the longer reading occurs only in Latin, and only later than the shorter reading. In light of the additional versional witnesses, which unanimously testify to the shorter reading, the versional data is conclusive. The patristic data tells the same story. The longer reading is known only among Latin fathers, and only after Nicaea, never before. When we look at the Greek manuscripts, the data is overwhelmingly on the side of the shorter reading, with the shorter reading supported not only by every early witness, but by essentially every witness from any time and place.

Examining the internal evidence only further confirms what we could already conclude. In terms of intrinsic probability, the language of the comma is not at all Johannine, disturbs the context of the passage, works against John's point, and is historically anachronistic. In terms of transcriptional probability, the great variety of the forms of the passage (6 different forms among only 10 manuscripts that have it) would alone show it to clearly be an addition. The fact that exactly half of these witnesses have the comma as a marginal addition would by itself explain that it was an "addition" to the original text. The extremely late nature of these witnesses would make the reading irrelevant in terms of establishing the original text of the NT. But the fact that all of even these few late witnesses show clear evidence of being translations from Latin only seals the deal. Thus, the three separate strands of evidence combine and intertwine to become a three-fold cord not easily broken. John simply did not write the longer reading of I John 5:7. Anyone who values truth over tradition must come to this conclusion. Period.

## Where The Longer Reading Came From

When we attempt to trace how the longer reading arose, it is clear that it began life fairly early as a patristic interpretation (see Cyprian, Augustine, et. al.). Some reading the text in its original form (the shorter reading) interpreted the reference to "spirit and water and blood" as an allegorical representation of the Trinity. Scribes who copied manuscripts often included comments in the margin of their manuscripts, and apparently a scribe (or more than one) placed this Trinitarian reflection into the margin of his manuscript. But such glosses commonly slip into the text, especially in Latin. This is because marginal glosses can perform several different functions. Sometimes they mean, "This is a correction – the text should say this." Sometimes they mean, "This is a variant reading. Some manuscripts have the reading in the text, some have this other reading which I am putting in the margin." But sometimes they mean, "This is how I interpret the text," and then include comments on the text, either those of the scribe, or those of others which he copies into the margin. When someone later copied a text with such a marginal note, he faced a natural difficulty – was this marginal note a comment, a variant reading, or was it supposed to be part of the text? Clearly, a scribe made a mistake here, and took what was meant as a marginal comment, and thought it was supposed to be in the text, and so added it into the text of his manuscript.

However, the longer reading (in a variety of different forms) became the common reading in Latin, and in the early part of the second millennium became the "vulgar" reading, which it was a crime against the state to question. Many theologians declared that anyone who questioned the comma was a heretic promoting Arianism. Erasmus was willing to oppose this idea, and follow the evidence, and so when he created a revision of the Latin vulgate, he left the comma out, and explained in his annotation (1516) that

---

<sup>9</sup> See "Appendix A" in the full essay for details.



it was not part of the Greek manuscript tradition. He was viciously attacked for this decision over the next several years from a variety of different theologians (primarily Roman ones). Eventually, he realized that it is wise to pick ones battles, and that if he continued to print the shorter reading his NT would become insignificant, derided, and largely ignored. Thus, he chose to print the longer reading in the third edition (1522) and following. He notes in his annotation to the text that he is still convinced that the comma is not part of the Greek tradition. But he notes the two manuscripts in which he had seen it (one in the margin, and one in the text, just recently penned). Interestingly, he then rejected both of those forms and created his own Greek translation of his revision of the Latin Vulgate form of the comma, thus inventing a new form of the comma in Greek never known before his time. If he would include the comma, it would be in a form of his own polished invention, not that created by what he calls “clumsy scribes.” This is the form he included, which became the TR form, which later became the KJV form. It is an English translation of Erasmus’ Greek translation of his revision of what he expressly declared to be a late Latin patristic gloss.

However, Erasmus took what had originally been a brief one-paragraph note explaining that the comma was not original, and turned it into a 3-page-long explanation of why he considered it so clear that the comma was the result of a later patristic gloss. He then included this note with every single edition of his NT, so that he would on the one hand not be attacked as heretical by the Roman Catholics (since he had the comma in the text), but on the other hand was still explaining what he knew to be the truth (by explaining at length in the note that John did not write it). His politically correct compromise had the unfortunate effect of making the comma a part of what would become the traditional printed Greek text. Stephanus and Beza both repeat his choice, printing the comma in the form Erasmus created in the text, but noting in the margins that they retain it only out of tradition, and that it was never part of the Greek manuscript tradition.

The KJV translators unfortunately followed this same tradition (just like the Bishop’s Bible they were revising, and the Greek text on which it was based) and retained the comma in the text. They probably knew that if they involved themselves in the controversy that Erasmus started, their translation would likewise be ignored. The entire impetus behind the KJV was a political one, seeking a unifying translation. Thus, printing the shorter reading, or even noting it in the margins (which the King’s rules had precluded), was likely not even an option for them. Thus, the comma ended up in the KJV, having (at the time) not a single Greek or Latin manuscript that actually supported the form in which it was included. Anyone who chooses to consider it original today does so entirely out of deference to tradition, or out of a belief that the KJV translators were so inspired that even in their retention of error they speak for God with new revelation. To hold such a view, one must utterly ignore all the historical evidence, and choose to categorically reject what is clearly the truth. I for one believe that we should choose to value truth over tradition.

## Conclusion

We have surveyed the data extensively to show that the comma is not original, and we have further traced its history to show how it arose in the Latin tradition, how Erasmus reluctantly bridged that Latin tradition into his Greek text, and how that mistake ultimately ended up in the translation of the KJV. But I am well aware that for many, such data simply doesn’t matter. There is a psychological and emotional attachment to the translation in their own tongue that they are convinced is infallible, and they feel that any attack on any reading in this translation is somehow an attack upon the Word of God. They will hear nothing of correcting this infallible translation with the “original Greek.” Their attitude is not new, and is, ironically, exactly the force that Erasmus had resisted to produce the text that they now so ardently defend. History repeats itself. All that has changed is the referent. Thus, it seems fitting to conclude with a statement of Erasmus against his detractors. While he wasn’t speaking just of the comma, he was defending his first edition, and the many passages where his annotations explained that he felt the

Greek text should correct the common Latin Vulgate. The comma is a prime example of such a passage. He explains that the Latin text can be easily corrupted, but that the Greek manuscripts had a resiliency to them that makes it more difficult for the Greek manuscripts to be corrupted. Thus, in such places, the Greek manuscripts should be preferred to the Latin. While there were some passages where he made exceptions (e.g., Acts 9:5-6; Acts 8:37; et. al., where he preferred the Latin text to the Greek), he was one of the first in almost 1000 years to sound the cry that we should favor the original tongues instead of the Latin. Since I John 5:7 is the prime example in his work of such a passage, his words are deeply applicable to this essay. Since the KJV of I John 5:7 is essentially a translation into English of Erasmus' own translation into Greek of his revised Latin text, his words should be heard all the more forcefully. These words, sounding out almost 100 years prior to the KJV, from the man who created the form of the comma now found in the KJV, should be closely and deeply heard by all who would defend that comma as part of the canon.

“Do you intend to overlook all this and follow your own copy, though it was perhaps corrupted by a scribe? For no one asserts that there is any falsehood in Holy Scripture (which you also have suggested), nor has the whole question on which Jerome came to grips with Augustine anything at all to do with the matter. But one thing the facts cry out, and it can be clear, as they say, even to a blind man, that often through the translator's clumsiness or inattention the Greek has been wrongly rendered; often the true and genuine reading has been corrupted by ignorant scribes who are half-taught and half-asleep. *Which man encourages falsehood more, he who corrects and restores these passages, or he who would rather see an error added than removed?* For it is of the nature of textual corruption that one error should generate another. And the changes I make are usually such as affect the overtones rather than the sense itself; though often the overtones convey a great part of the meaning. But not seldom the text has gone astray entirely [his opinion of I John 5:7]. And whenever this happens, where, I ask you, do Augustine and Ambrose and Hilary and Jerome take refuge if not in the Greek original? This is approved also by the decrees of the church; and yet you shuffle and try to reject it or rather to worm your way out of it by splitting hairs.”<sup>10</sup>

## Summary Bibliography

- Aland, Kurt and Barbra, Metzger, Bruce, et. al. eds., “*The Greek New Testament*” 5<sup>th</sup> revised edition. (UBS5) Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, Stuttgart, Germany, 2014.
- Aland, Kurt, and Nestle, Erwin, et. al., eds. “*Novum Testamentum Graece*” 28<sup>th</sup> rev. ed. (NA28) Germany, INTF, 2012.
- Beza, Theodore. “*Iesu Christi Domini Nostri Novum Testamentum, Sine Novum Foedus.*” Vignon, 1598
- Erasmus, Desiderius. “*Novum Instrumentum Omne*” Froben, Basil, 1516.
- “*Novum Testamentum Omne*” Froben, Basil, 1519.
- “*Novum Testamentum Omne*” Froben, Basil, 1522.
- “*Novum Testamentum*” Froben, Basil, 1527.
- “*Novum Testamentum*” Froben, Basil, 1535.
- Metzger, Bruce M. “*The Early Versions of the New Testament: Their Origin, Transmission, and Limitations.*” Clarendon, Oxford, 1977.
- Robertus, Stephanus, “*Novum Testamentum.*” Geneva, 1551.
- “*Novum Testamentum.*” Paris, 1550.

---

<sup>10</sup> Erasmus, “*Letter to Dorp,*” translated in CWE vol. 71, pg. 25-26. Emphasis mine. The longer quote is available in the longer essay.