



Truth

On Tough Texts

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1 John 5:7–8: Beyond a Reasonable Doubt?

FEW TEXTS OF SCRIPTURE HAVE SPURRED AS much controversy as has 1 John 5:7–8. A portion of these verses has been dubbed the “Johannine Comma” (Latin *comma Johanneum*, “the phrase of John”). Here is how the verses read in the King James Version, with the bold words indicating the Comma:

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.

The issue, as many Christians are aware, is whether those words actually belong to the sacred text or should rather be rejected due to the lack of evidence of genuineness.

I want to approach this subject, however, from a little different direction than it is usually broached. To do so, I would first like to quote the following from a distinguished law professor at Rutgers University who explains “the prosecutor’s burden of proving guilt *beyond a reasonable doubt*”:

The defendant never has the burden of proving his innocence. The burden is entirely on the prosecutor, and if the prosecutor fails to carry that burden, an acquittal is required. The defense attorney may choose as a matter of trial strategy to convince the jury that the defendant is innocent, but it is equally appropriate simply to cast doubt on the prosecutor’s story so that the burden is not met.

Reasonable doubt is a much higher standard than the burden of proof elsewhere in the law. . . . Reason-

able doubt is a doubt about guilt that remains after the jury has weighed all of the evidence and seriously considered the matter.¹

In other words, the standard of proof does not require that the prosecutor establish absolute certainty by eliminating all doubt, but it *does* require that the evidence be so conclusive that all *reasonable* doubts are removed from the mind of the ordinary person.

So what’s the point? Simply this: I want to approach this issue from the perspective of *beyond a reasonable doubt*. The “prosecutor” (modern textual critic) insists that the “defendant” (our text) is “guilty,” if you will, of being false and not belonging here. One argument, in fact, is that there was deliberate tampering by zealous copyists who forged manuscript evidence.

My purpose, therefore, is not to prove that the Johannine Comma is authentic (or that the accused copyists were innocent), because as the “defense attorney” I don’t have to do that. Rather, my purpose is to allow the critics to present their evidence and just see if they meet their burden of proof. Let us see whether they do indeed prove their case *beyond a reasonable doubt* or if it is at least *possible* that the Comma is genuine. As the great theologian Robert L. Dabney put it in 1891: “All the critics vote against it. But let us see whether the case is as clear as they would have it.”²

Before continuing, I want to interject that my purpose is not to turn this into a polemic for “King James Onlyism,” for *that is not my position on the textual issue*.³ While I do defend the historic (and what I believe is the providentially preserved) text of the New Testament (i.e., Traditional or Ecclesiastical Text) instead of the modern

Critical Text, that is not my purpose here. Nor is my purpose to attack said critics, for that is neither constructive nor Christian. I know that some TOTT readers embrace the Critical Text and the modern translations based on it, so I do not wish to offend or inflame. My only purpose is to examine this issue from what I hope is a fresh perspective.

If I may also interject, while some in the “Kings James Only” camp stoop to unfortunate name calling, some critics react by lumping everyone who defends the Comma into that camp. But there have been several very solid and brilliant men through the ages that have defended the Comma, such as: John Calvin, Francis Turretin, Matthew Henry, John Gill, Robert L. Dabney, Edward F. Hills, and others. To shrug off men such as those as being unscholarly, or even fanatical simpletons, is not wise.

Let us now allow the prosecution to charge the defendant and present its evidence.

Charge #1: Lack of Greek Manuscript Evidence

By far, this is the most relied upon proof that the Comma does not belong here. One modern critic (I withhold his name for unity’s sake) blunders by writing that the Comma “disappear[s] from the Greek manuscript tradition without leaving a single trace,” but that is simply not so. Most critics agree that out of all the Greek manuscripts that contain 1 John, one (but only one) does contain the Comma: Miniscule 61, a 15th or 16th-century Italian copy named Codex Montfortii (Britannicus by Erasmus), which now resides at Trinity College, Dublin.

We submit, however, that there is a problem of consistency in that argument, which plants at least the seed of reasonable doubt. While in this instance the critics insist that only one manuscript supports this reading, they accept other readings based on minority evidence. For example, in 1 John 1:7, the Traditional Text reading *Iesou Christou* (“Jesus Christ”) appears in 477 manuscripts, but the critics prefer the Critical Text reading *Iesou* (“Jesus”) even though it appears in only 27 manuscripts. Also, while 491 manuscripts support *panta* (“all things”) in 1 John 2:20, the critics prefer *pantes* (“all”) even though its support is only 12 manuscripts. Again, much ado is made about nothing when it comes to the words “in Ephesus” (Eph 1:1). While the critics cast doubt that these words are genuine, relying on only six manuscripts, thousands of others support this reading. And these are only three of hundreds of illustrations. It seems the prosecutor wants to have the best of both worlds.

We should also point out here the reason for this obvious partiality toward the minority. It is usually due to the critic’s number one criteria for a “correct reading,” namely, that it is supported by the so-called “older manuscripts.” It is consistently *assumed* (repeat *assumed*) that the older are closer to the original. But does that hold up in court? Is a jury actually going to believe the testimony of only a few over the testimony of a thousand?

The prosecution goes one step further by even challenging Miniscule 61. This brings us to Erasmus. The Comma did not, in fact, appear in the first two editions of his Greek text (1516 and 1519) because he could not find a Greek manuscript that contained it (only Latin),⁴ but did appear in his third edition (1522). Now, it is here that the following story has been popularized. We cite Bruce Metzger’s own rendition of this story (written in 1968) because of his prominence in modern textual criticism:

In an unguarded moment 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 was made to order. As it now appears, the Greek manuscript had probably been written in Oxford about 1520 by a Franciscan friar named Froy (or Roy), who took the disputed words from the Latin Vulgate. Erasmus stood by his promise and inserted the passage in his third edition (1522), but he indicates in a lengthy footnote his suspicions that the manuscript had been prepared expressly in order to confute him.⁵

Based much on Metzger’s scholarship, this story has been retold countless times for decades, so we now call to the stand a rebuttal witness: Henk J. de Jonge of Leiden University. In 1980 he published his paper *Erasmus and the Comma Johanneum*. As an expert on Erasmus, de Jonge went through every word Erasmus wrote and found not a trace of this story. There is, in fact, not a shred of proof that it ever happened. In my own research, I have found not a single person who retells this story who then cites a source. While apologist James White does cite Professor Erika Rummel as a source, all she does is cite de Jonge and then still inexplicably maintain that Erasmus did issue the challenge.⁶ Most significantly, however, in light of de Jonge’s work, Metzger himself finally admitted in the 3rd Edition of his classic, *The Text of the New Testament*, that this story “needs to be corrected.”⁷ I ask the jury, does not all this cast some reasonable doubt?

Further, if we may add, as for the theory that Miniscule 61 was a deliberate forgery to deceive Erasmus, any defense attorney worth his salt would rise and say, “Objection, Your Honor! Speculative.” By law, the Judge would have to respond, “Objection sustained.” He might even add, “The jury will disregard the prosecutor’s remarks because there is no proof of his allegation.” As Dabney submits, “The recent [1891] critics are not so infallible as they pretend to be,”⁸ and we would submit that neither are the ones of today.

While Minuscule 61 is regarded as the only possibly credible Greek manuscript that contains the Comma, the fact is that there are a few others: Minuscles 110 (Codex Ravianus), 629 (Codex Ottobonianus, 14–15th-centuries), 918 (16th-century), and 2318 (18th-century). The prosecu-

tor shrugs off all these by saying that none are dated before the 14th-century, but this once again flows from the *presupposition and assumption* that older is always better and younger is irrelevant. We also note that the Comma is found in the margins of Minuscules 88 (Codex Regis, 11th-century with margins added in the 16th), 221 (10th-century with margins added in the 15–16th), 429 (14th-century with margins added in the 16th), and 636 (16th). There are also some variant readings in lectionaries (ancient church service books). All this evidence, however, is also discounted with improvable (and objectionable) allegations such as tampering and forgery.

While the Greek evidence is admittedly weak, giving the prosecution some weight, the Latin evidence makes up for that. As John Gill wrote in the 18th-century, “it is certain [that the Comma] is to be seen in many Latin manuscripts of an early date, and stands in the Vulgate Latin edition of the London Polyglot Bible.”⁹ We’ll continue our look at the Latin evidence in Charge #2.

We again ask, has the prosecution proven it’s case beyond a reasonable doubt?

Charge #2: Not Found in Greek Writers or Ancient Versions

Similar to Charge #1, this one points out the fact that the Comma is not quoted by a single Greek writer, who would surely have done so in the face of the Arianism of the day. Arius, a 4th-century parish priest in Alexandria, taught that Jesus was not coequal with God and was, in fact, a created being. If genuine, it is argued, the Comma would have been the perfect weapon against Arius.

There is again, however, room for reasonable doubt because it most certainly is cited by Latin writers. As John Gill documents, it is “cited by many of them” such as “Fulgentius [of Ruspe, North Africa] in the beginning of the sixth century, against the Arians, without any scruple or hesitation.” Edward Freer Hills (1912-81), who not only graduated from Yale and Westminster Seminary but also earned a PhD in textual criticism from Harvard Divinity School, well sums up the data for us:

Evidence for the early existence of the Johannine comma is found in the Latin versions and in the writings of the Latin Church Fathers. For example, it seems to have been quoted at Carthage by Cyprian (c. 250) . . .

The first undisputed citations . . . occur in the writing of two 4th-century Spanish bishops, Priscillian, who in 385 was beheaded by the Emperor Maximus on the charge of sorcery and heresy, and Idacius Clarus, Priscillian’s principal adversary and accuser. In the 5th century the *Johannine comma* was quoted by several orthodox African writers to defend the doctrine of the Trinity against the gainsaying of the Vandals, who ruled North Africa from 489 to 534 and were fanatically attached to the Arian heresy.

And about the same time it was cited by Cassiodorus (480-570), in Italy. The *comma* is also found in *r*, an Old Latin manuscript of the 5th or 6th century, and in the *Speculum*, a treatise which contains an Old Latin text. It was not included in Jerome’s original edition of the Latin Vulgate, but around the year 800 it was taken into the text of the Vulgate from the Old Latin manuscripts. It was found in the great mass of the later Vulgate manuscripts and in the Clementine edition of the Vulgate.¹⁰

Charge #3: Probably an Interpolation

Here is a particularly serious charge. It is alleged that the only reason that the Comma appears is that a scribe deliberately inserted it to strengthen the teaching of the Trinity. A less accusatory contention is that one scribe made a comment in the margin and then a later scribe assumed it belonged in the text. All such accounts have one thing in common, however, namely, words such as “must have occurred” or “probably happened.” The defense once again is justified in his objection on the grounds of speculation.

Is there not, in fact, something amiss when one resorts to such tactics as accusing pious scribes of emendation, questioning their very integrity, and in effect calling them liars, or at the very least accusing them of incompetence? We call Matthew Henry to the stand:

It was far more easy for a transcriber, by turning away his eye, or by the obscurity of the copy, it being obliterated or defaced on the top or bottom of a page, or worn away in such materials as the ancients had to write upon, to lose and omit the passage, than for an interpolator to devise and insert it. He must be very bold and impudent who could hope to escape detection and shame; and profane too, who durst venture to make an addition to a supposed sacred book.¹¹

Charge #4: Destroys the Passage’s Continuity

The final charge, that the inclusion of the Comma destroys the continuity of John’s thought, is particularly odd. It is insisted that he “is speaking of certain things which bear ‘witness’ to the fact that Jesus is the Messiah, certain things which were well known to those to whom he was writing [Spirit, water, and blood],” so “how does it . . . strengthen the force of this to say that in heaven there are ‘three that bear witness’—three not before referred to, and having no connection with the matter?”¹² This is odd thinking because it calls into question the possible thinking process of an inspired author.

The same commentator further insists that the “language is not such as John would use,” adding that John does use “the term ‘Logos,’ or ‘Word’ (Jn. 1:1, [etc.], but it is never in this form, ‘The Father, and the Word.’” That, of course, as the jury immediately discerns, proves nothing. Just because John doesn’t use this term anywhere else

as he does here does not negate this usage. Interestingly, while this commentator was certainly not a liberal, the same kind of argumentation is, in fact, used by liberal scholarship to “prove” that Paul did not pen Ephesians. One such argument insists that Paul was not the author since almost 100 words and phrases appear in Ephesians that are not found in any other of his letters.¹³ We submit, then, that ignoring the obvious significance of John’s characteristic use of “Word” (*Logos*) is self-defeating.

The defense must now caution the jury before continuing. We must present some technical evidence for a moment to demonstrate further reasonable doubt. Critics consistently gloss over a grammatical fact concerning this text and dismiss it as irrelevant, despite several noted scholars who point it out it.¹⁴

To put it simply, words in Greek have gender. For example, “man” is the masculine *anthrōpos*, so if we wanted to modify it with “good,” the modifier must also be masculine, *agathos*. Likewise, to modify the feminine form *genē* would require the feminine *agathe*. In verse 6, then, “water” (*hudōr*), “blood” (*haima*), and “spirit” (*pneuma*) are all neuter in gender. Likewise the participle “beareth witness” is neuter (*oi marturoun*), as it should be. If we immediately jump to verse 8, however, the same three words are treated as if they were masculine because the same basic participle, “that bear witness,” is now in the masculine (*oi marturountes*). That is poor grammar. Something seems to be missing. The problem is easily solved when we include verse 7, where we find two masculine nouns, **Father** (*patēr*) and **Word** (*logos*), and one neuter, **Holy Ghost** (*pneuma*). Because of the influence of these masculine nouns in verse 7, it is quite proper to treat the usually neuter nouns in verse 8 as masculine using the masculine participle (*oi marturountes*). If we may submit, there is no adequate rebuttal that the prosecution can bring here, and we are once again left with reasonable doubt.

The Defense’s Closing Argument

Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, this controversy really boils down to one question: Why *is* there a controversy? This is the clearest statement of the trinity in Scripture, so why challenge it in the first place? While the defenders of the Comma are the ones often accused of making this a “big deal,” it is on the contrary the critic who has made it such and for no good reason. Incalculable time has been wasted on this question when there is absolutely no constructive reason to do so. If we may presume upon Shakespeare a moment, “The [critic] doth protest too much, methinks.”¹⁵ Is there some deeper reason for such loathing of these words? Is there an agenda?

“Why would God allow this text to be lost to antiquity?” the persecutor insists. “If He has supposedly providentially preserved the biblical text, why would He permit these words to be so ambiguous in the textual record?” If I may be so simple-minded and naïve for a moment, could it just *possibly* be to see if we will truly trust His providence—as puzzling as that might appear to our human thinking—instead of resorting to rationalism and sewing the seed of doubt in the sacred text to no good end?

No, we cannot prove beyond doubt that the Comma is authentic, but as noted at the beginning of this trial, we don’t have to do that. It is the prosecutor, the textual critic, who has made this allegation, and the burden of proof has been upon him. We submit, therefore, that he has not met that burden and has, indeed, left a reasonable doubt.

The defense rests.

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NOTES

¹ Jay M. Feinman, *Law 101: Everything You Need to Know About the American Legal System* (Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 325–6.

² Robert L. Dabney, “The Doctrinal Various Readings of the New Testament Greek” in *Discussions: Evangelical and Theological*, Vol. 1 (Banner of Truth, 1891, reprint 1982), p. 377.

³ See TOTT #13 & 14, *What’s Really at Stake in the Textual Issue?*

⁴ An oddity here is that while Erasmus refused to include the Comma based solely on Latin authority, he did that very thing with the disputed words of Acts 9:5 (“it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks”) and 6 (“And he trembling and astonished said, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do? And the Lord said unto him”).

⁵ *The Text of the New Testament* (Oxford, 1968), p. 101.

⁶ Henk J. de Jonge, *Erasmus and the Comma Johanneum* (an extract from *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses*, 1980, t. 56, fasc. 4, pp. 381-389). This extract is posted on our website: www.thescripturealone.com. James White, *The King James Only Controversy* (Bethany House, 1995), pp. pp. 61, 85(n29). Erika Rummel, *Erasmus’ Annotations on the New Testament* (University of Toronto, 1986), p. 133.

⁷ *The Text of the New Testament*, 3rd Edition (Oxford, 1992), p. 291.

⁸ Dabney, p. 377.

⁹ *John Gill’s Exposition of the Entire Bible*, electronic edition, 1 Jn.5:7.

¹⁰ *The King James Version Defended* (Christian Research Press, 1956, 1984), p. 210. (Hills copiously documents these statements, but for space sake we have not included his notes.)

¹¹ This is actually John Reynolds, one of those who finished Henry’s commentary (completed through Acts) upon his death in 1714.

¹² *Albert Barnes’ Notes on the Bible*, electronic edition, 1 Jn.5:7.

¹³ Andrew Lincoln, *Word Biblical Commentary: Ephesians* (Word Publishing, 1990).

¹⁴ E.g., Dabney (p. 378), Hills (p. 211–212), Henry, etc.

¹⁵ *Hamlet* (New Folger Library, 1992), Act 3, scene 2, line 254.

Speaking Engagement: Pastor Watson will be preaching a Bible Conference on “The Five Solas of the Reformation” at First Baptist Church of Alto (Alto, MI) on November 8–11. See the website for details and directions.