

Comma Johanneum

1 John 5:7 (*KJV*) 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 (*NIV*) For there are three that testify:
8 the Spirit, the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement.

1 John 5:7 (*NRSV*) There are three that testify:
8 the Spirit and the water and the blood, and these three agree.

In the *King James Version*, 1 John 5:7 is a beautiful key text on the Trinity, mentioning the three persons of the Godhead: Father, Word (Son), and Holy Ghost. What has happened to this text in the modern versions? Do the modern translators have something against the Trinity? How do they dare omit such an important text?

Before we insert any more emotion, let us look calmly at the facts:

The apostle John wrote his letters in Greek. Although John's original autograph is lost, the church members soon made copies of his letters, then copies of the copies, all in Greek, of course.

In later years, the scriptures, Old and New Testament, were gradually translated from their original languages into Latin. In the case of the Old Testament, the Old Latin translations were generally from the Greek Septuagint, which of course was itself a translation from the Hebrew.

"Augustine (353-430) says that 'those who have translated the Scriptures from Hebrew into Greek can be numbered, but the Latin translators cannot, for every one into whose hands a Greek manuscript came in the first periods of the Christian faith, and who fancied that he had some skill in both languages, ventured to translate.' It is now generally conceded that at the latest a Latin translation of the entire Bible was in circulation at Carthage by 250 A.D." - *The Ancestry of Our English Bible*, p. 84, Price, Third Revised Edition by Irwin and Wikgren; Harper & Row, 1956.

"The existence of several Latin versions, differing greatly in their texts, occasioned either by careless copying or translating or both, soon aroused complaints and shook the faith of the church in the authoritative value of the manuscripts." - *The Ancestry of Our English Bible*, p. 86.

Pope Damasus took a special interest in the Scriptures. At his request, in 382 Jerome began a revision of the Latin Bible on the basis of the Greek text. In 384 Pope Damasus died; Jerome moved from Rome to Bethlehem, where he continued his work. Jerome learned of the many differences between the Greek Septuagint and the Hebrew. He decided that his Latin translation should better be made directly from the Hebrew. This he did, completing his work in 404 A.D. His Bible is called the Vulgate, because he translated not into classical Latin, but into the common (vulgar) Latin then current.

"The conservatives of that day, as of this, clung to the older versions because long use and familiarity had cast a halo of sanctity about them. But the wisest of the churchmen soon began to recognize the superiority of Jerome's work. Augustine, who had expressed fear of its consequences, now wisely turned to praising it. But poor Jerome saw only contention and strife to the time of his death at Bethlehem in A.D. 420." - *The Ancestry of Our English Bible*, p. 89.

Jerome's new Bible however, eventually won over its critics, and became the standard Bible of the Western world for over 1,000 years.

During that time copyists made many scribal errors, some of which mixed the Old Latin with Jerome's Vulgate translation. With the invention of printing there came a new interest in understanding the Bible from its original languages.

The Spanish Cardinal Ximenes began work on an edition of the Greek New Testament text, but he was not the first to publish.

"A printer named Froben in Basel had heard of the work of Ximenes and was eager to publish a Greek New Testament before that of the Spanish cardinal would be issued. For this reason he requested the famous humanist, Erasmus of Rotterdam (c. 1466-1536), to prepare an edition of the Greek New Testament.

"After ten months of work the first edition appeared on the market in the spring of 1516. Although Erasmus' Greek New Testament corrected many of the numerous errors contained in the Vulgate (cf. GC 245), it was not a masterpiece. The printing was hastily and carelessly done, and contained numerous typographical errors.

"Neither was the text very good, since it was based on six late minuscules, the only ones available to Erasmus at Basel. Two of these manuscripts contained the Gospels; three, the Acts and the general

epistles, four, Paul's epistles; and one, the book of Revelation. Because it was difficult to read, Erasmus used but little of the best of these minuscules, which now bears the number 1.

"In his one manuscript of Revelation the closing six verses were missing. Erasmus therefore supplied them from the Vulgate by translating it back into Greek. Although Erasmus corrected many of the typographical errors in four subsequent editions (2d ed., 1529; 3d ed. 1522; 4th ed. 1527; 5th ed. 1535), he did not otherwise improve his text." - *SDA Bible Commentary*, Vol. 5 p. 141, Review and Herald, 1956.

Now let us return to 1 John 5:7, which in the Greek manuscripts available to Erasmus did not include the "three witnesses" passage. Nor was this passage part of the better manuscripts of Jerome's Vulgate. So Erasmus did not include this Trinity "key text" in his first or his second edition of the Greek.

But most Vulgate Bibles did include the "three witnesses" text, which probably began as a scribe's marginal note, then eventually crept into the text. Then as now, people were used to their key texts. They were outraged should anyone seem to tamper with them. Erasmus was severely criticized for omitting the "three witnesses" text. He sought support from other scholars. A friend wrote from Rome that the disputed passage was not present in a very old Greek Bible available there (probably the Codex Vaticanus).

"This made Erasmus so certain in his conviction that it was a recent textual addition, that when criticized for omitting it, he promised that he would insert it in his next edition if anyone could produce a single Greek manuscript that contained it. Such a manuscript was finally shown him in England, and Erasmus inserted the passage in his 3d ed., in 1522, as he had promised.

"He did not know that the manuscript shown to him had only recently been written, in 1520, with the sole purpose of forcing him to insert the disputed passage in his Greek text. It is now known that this passage appeared first in late Latin manuscripts, but is missing in all early Greek texts. ...Thus it is clear that the *Comma Johanneum* has no right to be part of the Bible text, and that modern translators are justified in omitting it." - *SDA Bible Commentary*, Vol. 5 p. 141, Review and Herald, 1956.

By including the passage in his third edition, Erasmus kept his rash promise. Then as a responsible scholar, in his fourth and subsequent editions, he again left it out.

"But because the third edition became the basis for the later standardized text it came into the English Bible and remained there until the time of the Revised Version." - *The Ancestry of Our English Bible*, p. 203.

The Greek text thus prepared by Erasmus has since been referred to as the "*textus receptus*," or received text. It was the text used by Tyndale to translate the first printed English Bible. And it was included in the 90% of Tyndale's work which was carried over to be included in the *King James Version*.

And that's how the supposed Trinity "key text" became part of the *King James Bible*.

As we have seen, Erasmus did his work in a hurry, and made important use of only about six Greek manuscripts, those most readily available in Basel. In the four and a half centuries since Erasmus, thousands of New Testament Greek manuscripts have been discovered. Modern scholars make use of them all, doing their best to recover the original text. Realizing how scribal errors are made and passed on, they make special use of those manuscripts which they find are the earliest and most carefully produced.

And that's why the "Trinity key text" is missing from modern Bibles. Of course we have many other texts describing the members of the Godhead. With omission of this spurious text, nothing is lost. The modern translators are not making a theological statement. They are just doing their work honestly and well.

Let us view differences among translations with interest, but not with dismay or alarm. Let us learn the reasons for the differences. Usually the translators merely illustrate various legitimate options. Only rarely is a translation clearly wrong. And on this occasion it is the *King James Bible* which is wrong.

The King James translators were themselves most generous to the scholars who had preceded them, yet welcomed the opportunity to give God's Word in fresh language:

"For is the kingdom of God become words or syllables? why should wee be in bondage to them if we may be free?"

Ellen White made major use of the *KJV*, while feeling free to use as well, several more modern translations:

"Some look to us gravely and say, 'Don't you think there might have been some mistake in the copyist or in the translators?' This is all probable, and the mind that is so narrow that it will hesitate and stumble over this possibility or probability would be just as ready to stumble over the mysteries of the Inspired Word, because their feeble minds cannot see through the purposes of God.

"All the mistakes will not cause trouble to one soul, or cause any feet to stumble, that would not manufacture difficulties from the plainest revealed truth." "1 SM 16.