

THE JOHANNINE *COMMA* (1 JOHN 5:7–8): THE STATUS OF ITS TEXTUAL HISTORY AND THEOLOGICAL USAGE IN ENGLISH, GREEK, AND LATIN

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Abstract

This article presents a *status quaestionis* on the origin, transmission, and theological use of the Johannine *comma*, a section of 1 John 5:7–8, especially within English scholarly literature. Used as a Trinitarian proof text in the Middle Ages and late-Reformation England, this variant in 1 John 5 has been relegated to a mere side note in recent biblical scholarship. This article also contrasts the arguments of theologians from the time of Erasmus and the King James Bible with modern biblical scholarship. Though it is clear in English discussions that the *comma* is not in the early Greek manuscripts, the origin of this variant has not been well explored in Anglophone biblical literature. Thus, this article also aims to examine the evidence for the probable origin of the *comma* within third-century Latin Christianity. The article ends by highlighting some implications regarding the use of the *comma* for doctrinal purposes.

Keywords: 1 John 5, Trinity, *Comma*, Textual Criticism, Bible Versions, Walter Thiele, Erasmus, Cyprian.

Introduction

The word *comma* comes from the Greek, meaning a cut-off piece, or, when applied to texts, it means a short clause. The Johannine *comma* is a contentious phrase found in 1 John 5:7–8 in some Bible versions but not in others. The KJV renders it, “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.” The Bible versions that do not have the *comma*, for example, the NIV, render the passage as, “For there are three that testify: the Spirit and the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement.” Were it not for its theological content, the *comma* would just be one of many variants of no particular importance that exist in the New Testament books.¹ However,

¹For a list and discussion of variant texts of the New Testament, see Bruce M. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*, enl. 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft; New York: United Bible Societies, 1994).

the doctrinal debates about the Godhead in Christian history propelled this manuscript variant into the limelight.

Although much good information about the *comma* is available in English, some ambiguities remain. No published source is up to date with the latest text-critical findings as presented on the Internet by Daniel B. Wallace.² Currently, the most complete discussion of manuscripts containing the *comma* is found in an open-source article on *Wikipedia*, which does not meet academic standards and does not consistently give adequate references to support its claims.³ This present article includes a review of the usage of the *comma* in theological materials and biblical commentaries in English, summarizing the *status quaestionis* of the probable origins and history of this variant reading of 1 John 5:7–8. The material gathered here can be used as an aid to those who interact with Christians that consider the *comma* normative for doctrine within Trinitarian debates.

Background

In seventeenth-century England, two popular preachers used the *comma* to bolster their argumentation against anti-Trinitarians. Benjamin Needler (1620–1682) and John Goodwin (1594–1665) not only used the KJV rendition of the passage, but accused critics of the *comma* of tampering with the text and removing a legitimate part of Scripture.⁴ This was the spirit of the time. Perspectives on the *comma* have changed, and most English expositions of 1 John 5:7–8 today do not refer to the Trinity. Similarly, expositions on the Trinity do not use the *comma* as support for their theological point of view. Thus, if a pastor today is assigned to teach his congregation concerning the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, and he or she depends on recent theological dictionary articles⁵ and books in English (from the twentieth and

²Daniel B. Wallace, “The *Comma Johanneum* in an Overlooked Manuscript,” 2 July 2010, <http://www.csntm.org/tcnotes/archive/TheCommaJohanneumInAnOverlookedManuscript>.

³“*Comma Johanneum*,” *Wikipedia*, 21 May 2018, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Comma_Johanneum.

⁴See Paul Chang-Ha Lim, *Mystery Unveiled: The Crisis of the Trinity in Early Modern England*, OSHI (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). More will be said on Needler and Goodwin later in the article.

⁵E.g., C. Draina, “Trinity, Holy (in the Bible),” *ER* 14:201–202; D. Larry Gregg, “Trinity,” *EDB* 1336–1337; C. F. H. Henry, “Trinity,” *The Zondervan Encyclopedia of the Bible* 5:939–941; O. Kirn, “Trinity, Doctrine of the,” *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* 12:18–22; C. Plantinga Jr., “Trinity,” *ISBE* 4:914–921; Philip A. Rolnick, “Trinity,” *The Encyclopedia of Christianity* 5:540–546; Geoffrey Wainwright, “Trinity,” *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* 815–818. We found only one article about the Trinity that mentions (briefly) the existence of the *comma* and dismisses it as “not an authentic part of the NT” (F. F. Bruce, “Trinity,” *IDB* 4:711). One should be mindful that there is a dictionary article specifically about the *comma* in the *ABD*. See Carroll D. Osburn, “Johannine Comma,” *ABD* 3:882–883.

twenty-first centuries) on systematic theology,⁶ New Testament theology,⁷ or the history of doctrine,⁸ the lecture most likely would not contain the passage

⁶E.g., E. Calvin Beisner, *God in Three Persons* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1984); Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 291–315; Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 226–261; Norman R. Gulley, *God as Trinity*, vol. 2 of *Systematic Theology*, 4 vols. (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2011); R. P. C. Hanson, *The Attractiveness of God: Essays in Christian Doctrine* (London: SPCK, 1973); Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), 1:442–448; Albert C. Knudson, *The Doctrine of God* (New York: Abingdon, 1930); William J. La Due, *The Trinity Guide to the Trinity* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003); Declan Marmion and Rik Van Nieuwenhove, *An Introduction to the Trinity*, Introduction to Religion (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Alister E. McGrath, *Understanding the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988); David L. Miller, *Three Faces of God: Traces of the Trinity in Literature and Life* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986); Jürgen Moltmann, *History and the Triune God: Contributions to Trinitarian Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 1992); Thomas C. Oden, *Classic Christianity: A Systematic Theology* (New York: HarperOne, 2009), 41–45, 105–124; Richard J. Plantinga, Thomas R. Thompson, and Matthew D. Lundberg, *An Introduction to Christian Theology*, Introduction to Religion (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 109–146; Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 1:211–289; Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being Three Persons*, Cornerstone Series (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016).

⁷Here are some works from a variety of perspectives that do not mention the *comma* at all in their books. The pages referenced below indicate the section(s) in which one would expect to find a discussion on the matter. Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. K. Grobel, 2 vols. (New York: Scribner, 1951–1955), 1:22–25; James D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980); idem, *New Testament Theology: An Introduction*, Library of Biblical Theology (Nashville: Abingdon, 2009), 41–70; Philip Francis Esler, *New Testament Theology: Communion and Community* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 60–62; George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 79–89, 657–665; Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1981), 75–115; I. Howard Marshall, “Johannine Epistles,” in *Theological Interpretation of the New Testament: A Book-by-book Survey*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Daniel J. Treier, and N. T. Wright (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 270; I. Howard Marshall, *New Testament Theology: Many Witnesses, One Gospel* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 529–547; Frank Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament: A Canonical and Synthetic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 536–555. Some introductions to the New Testament refer to the *comma* but do so as a note to textual criticism, affirming that the text is irrelevant for learning the theology of 1 John. In this case, like the biblical commentaries, the *comma* is not used as part of the discussion on the message of the book. E.g., David Arthur DeSilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament: Contexts, Methods, and Ministry Formation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 303.

⁸E.g., Khaled Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea: The Development and Meaning of Trinitarian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011); Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and*

of 1 John 5:7–8. In the same vein, if the same pastor were asked to preach on this passage, and the sermon preparation depended on biblical commentaries, the Trinity would not be the central point. What has changed in Christianity between the seventeenth and twenty-first centuries? The major influence on the shift of attitude toward this particular biblical text was the development of textual criticism, along with more reliable information about the different manuscripts of the Bible. Now, very few scholarly works, if any, adopt the *comma* as authentic.

Erasmus and the Debate of Scriptural Origins

In the sixteenth century, Desiderius Erasmus (of Rotterdam) published his editions of the Greek New Testament.⁹ Based on a variety of known manuscripts, his first two editions of the New Testament did not contain the *comma* in 1 John 5:7–8. Critics of his work very quickly accused him of anti-Trinitarianism and sloppy editing. He responded to Edward Lee in a letter, saying that he did not find any Greek manuscript that differed from the text of the Greek New Testament that he had published. It has been purported that Erasmus later wrote that if he could be shown one Greek manuscript with the variant, he would include it in his next edition (though it is doubtful that Erasmus ever made such a promise).¹⁰ Shortly afterward, around 1520, a *Codex* from Britain came to light, which did contain the variant; it became known as *Codex Britannicus* or *Montfortianus*.¹¹ Therefore, whether or not Erasmus actually saw the manuscript or promised to include the *comma*, the fact is that he did include it (in its entirety) in his next edition, which was published in 1522. What concerns us here is the theological argumentation and interpretations of 1 John 5:7–8 and the variant of this text.

Grantley McDonald provides a good summary of the arguments between Erasmus and the inquisitors concerning the *comma*. The Spanish inquisitors

its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Matthew W. Bates, *The Birth of the Trinity: Jesus, God, and Spirit in New Testament and Early Christian Interpretations of the Old Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); R. P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy, 318–381* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005).

⁹The actual title of Erasmus's publication of the Greek New Testament was *Novum Instrumentum Omne*. For a detailed discussion, see Daniel B. Wallace, "Erasmus and the Book that Changed the World Five Hundred Years Ago," *Unio Cum Christo* 2.2 (2016): 29–48.

¹⁰Henk Jan de Jonge and Grantley McDonald have rejected this as myth. For one example of the story of the promise to include the *comma*, see Marc A. Schindler, "The Johannine Comma: Bad Translation, Bad Theology," *Di* 29.3 (1996): 163. For the latest discussion on this issue, see Grantley Robert McDonald, *Biblical Criticism in Early Modern Europe: Erasmus, the Johannine Comma, and the Trinitarian Debate* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 150–151; idem, "Erasmus and the Johannine Comma (1 John 5.7–8)," *BT* 67.1 (2016): 49–50; H. J. de Jonge, "Erasmus and the Comma Johanneum," *ETL* 56.4 (1980): 381–389.

¹¹McDonald, *Biblical Criticism*, 33–37. McDonald assumes and gives evidence for Erasmus probably seeing *Codex Britannicus*, but this does not prove that he actually saw it.

of Valladolid accused Erasmus of threatening the notion of scriptural canon by omitting the *comma* from his editions of the Greek New Testament. However, the accusers were not at all in agreement in all particulars. Some agreed with Erasmus that the passage was not well attested in early Greek manuscripts, and that the *comma* itself was not sufficient to prove the doctrine of the Trinity, thus requiring support from other biblical passages. Others were adamant in their position that the doctrinal usage of the *comma* by the church conferred canonicity (authority) to this passage, despite the lack of manuscript tradition. The major assumption of this later argument was that whatever the church transmitted was the correct text. Any variation was seen as a deviation from orthodoxy.¹² Thus, “Erasmus had implicitly raised the question whether canonical books might contain uncanonical elements. He had also questioned the source of canonicity: does it lie in the consensus of the manuscript tradition or in the long usage of the church?”¹³

Interestingly, Erasmus and the inquisitors agreed upon one thing: the *comma*, in itself, did not solve the problem of heresy concerning the Trinity. Take, for example, Peter Lombard and Thomas Aquinas, who both had to infuse the passage with Trinitarian meaning even when the inclusion of the *comma* was well attested in the biblical tradition of their time. On the other hand, Erasmus, Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Theodore Beza, who eventually accepted the *comma* with reservations,¹⁴ gave different explanations than the Trinitarian reading of the scholastics. The controversial issue was the meaning of oneness in the phrase “these three are one.” While Aquinas and Lombard affirmed that the text referred to ontological unity between three persons, the aforementioned theologians of the Protestant Reformation interpreted the language of unity in this passage to mean one, single testimony about Jesus; thus, on their view, it did not articulate essential sameness of the three divine beings. Therefore, they used the *comma* christologically rather than in connection with the Trinity. During the Reformation, then, the tradition regarding the interpretation of this passage took a turn.

Conversely, Tertullian and Cyprian of Carthage certainly used the words “these three are one,” and they applied them to the Trinity. Similarly, as we already noted, Lombard and Aquinas applied “there are three that testify in heaven” to the Trinity. The *comma* probably took its many forms, with its inclusion of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, from this kind of theological reading. Demonstrating this further, when Erasmus answered his accuser, Jacobus Stunica, one of the editors of the *Complutensian Polyglot Bible* from Spain (which included the *comma*), he reported that the manuscript brought from England did not include the phrase “these three are one” in the text of

¹²McDonald, “Erasmus,” 51–53. For a fuller discussion, see his latest book, *Biblical Criticism*.

¹³McDonald, “Erasmus,” 51.

¹⁴See discussion on Ezra Abbot, “I John 5, v.7 and Martin Luther’s German Bible,” in *The Authorship of the Fourth Gospel and Other Critical Essays*, ed. Ezra Abbot (Boston: Ellis, 1888), 458–463.

1 John 5, and yet contained the *comma*.¹⁵ Again, however, it is not clear as to whether or not Erasmus actually saw the *Codex*. This report is important not only because it shows that there were a variety of readings of these verses but also because the focus of the author(s) of *Codex Britannicus* was not the language of the unity of the three—as it was in the writings of Tertullian, Cyprian, Lombard, and Aquinas—but the reference to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

A Matter of Perspective

From the time of Erasmus onward, there was a plurality of interpretations and versions of 1 John 5:7–8. English Bibles were produced both with and without the *comma*.¹⁶ For example, the Douay–Rheims Bible (1582) and a critical edition of the New Testament by William Bowyer (1699–1777)¹⁷ do not consider it authentic. Meanwhile, the translations of Tyndale and the KJV, as well as the earlier translation of the Vulgate by Wycliffe and his team, have the *comma* in the text.

Preachers, who lived after the time of Erasmus, were also divided in their reading of 1 John 5. It can be seen in their sermonic usage of the *comma* that the differing opinions about 1 John 5:7–8 were more a matter of how to read the text than about the textual evidence for some of its words. An already mentioned example of this is the two preachers, Needler and Goodwin, who, in seventeenth century England, vehemently attacked the positions of John Biddle and those like him who did not use 1 John 5 as they did. Needler and Goodwin argued strongly that not only was the *comma* original but also that it taught Trinitarian orthodoxy—a unity of essence between three divine beings. However, Biddle, a Protestant scholar from Oxford who taught in Gloucester, was of the belief that the *comma* was spurious and that the language of unity, “these three are one,” was about consent in witness and not about divine ontology.¹⁸ Goodwin attacked Roman Catholics, Socinians, and

¹⁵McDonald, “Erasmus,” 49.

¹⁶English versions which included the *comma* are as follows: Tyndale (1525/1535), Great Bible (1539/1540), Geneva Bible (1560/1562), Bishop’s Bible (1568/1602), and KJV (1611/1863). Additionally, here are some versions without the *comma*: Rheims (1582), RV (1881), ASV (1901), and RSV (1946/1960). They are all placed in parallel columns in one single volume in *The New Testament Octapla: Eight English Versions of the New Testament*, ed. Luther A. Weigler (New York: Thomas Nelson, 1962), 1366–1369.

¹⁷Bruce M. Metzger and Bart D. Ehrman, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 162. While the Douay–Rheims Bible does not have the *comma* in the text, the version produced by Bowyer has it in brackets like other questionable passages (Matt 6:13; John 7:53–8:11), since he esteemed it dubious for lack of good manuscript evidence.

¹⁸Lim, *Mystery Unveiled*, 38–39, 55–60. Lim explains how Biddle read the writings of the Church Fathers, such as Tertullian and Cyprian, who used the language of unity from 1 John 5 in application to the Godhead yet not in a Trinitarian fashion. This supports the point that the text, in itself, did not produce just one reading.

Arians in addition to Biddle, accusing them of twisting the biblical text and jeopardizing the truth.¹⁹ Interestingly, both parties accused one another of tampering with the text. Notice that the same accusation brought by Goodwin against Roman Catholics was used years before by Spanish inquisitors against Erasmus. However, the Douay-Rheims Bible, which was produced by Roman Catholics after Erasmus, renders it without the *comma*. Here we see the complex history of Christian usage of 1 John 5:7–8. Paul Lim describes this British debate as an “unbridgeable gap” between the different perspectives that can only be understood when one considers “the metaphysical presuppositions that guided, if not governed, their scriptural hermeneutics.”²⁰

Further examples may suffice to show the similarity of the debates about the *comma* in later England and the United States of America. John Wesley, in his *Explanatory Notes on the New Testament*, defends the usage of the *comma* for Trinitarian purposes.²¹ Meanwhile, Jonathan Edwards,²² the famous preacher of the First Great Awakening, and Ellen G. White,²³ a leader of Seventh-day Adventism, wrote about God in a Trinitarian framework without the use of 1 John 5:7–8 to make their argument. As in many denominations, Seventh-day Adventism shows a diversity of usage regarding this biblical passage throughout its history. For example, in some early Adventist periodicals the *comma* is found within descriptions of the beliefs of Seventh Day Baptists, who used it as a proof text for the Trinity.²⁴ Some early Adventist authors used

¹⁹Ibid., 168. It is important to understand that the reference to Arians here and throughout history is loosely applied and is not clear as to what it exactly means in the discussion about the doctrine of God. What is clear is that Goodwin is using it in a pejorative way. About Arianism as a catchword for heresy, see J. Rebecca Lyman, “Arius and Arians,” in *Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, ed. Susan Ashbrook Harvey and David G. Hunter (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 237–257.

²⁰Lim, *Mystery Unveiled*, 163.

²¹John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* (London: Epworth, 1948), 917–918. Wesley’s idea is that John had the Trinity in mind when he elaborated on the three witnesses to Christ’s earthly ministry. The same argument is made by the British Catholic scholar, Ronald Arbuthnott Knox. Interestingly, Knox does not ascertain the apostolic authenticity of the *comma*, but presents it as “what was in John’s mind.” See *The Later Epistles and the Apocalypse*, A New Testament Commentary for English Readers 3 (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1956), 170–171.

²²For Edwards’s texts on the Trinity with comments, see Steven M. Studebaker and Robert W. Caldwell III, *The Trinitarian Theology of Jonathan Edwards: Text, Context, and Application* (Burlington, VT; Farnham, Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2012).

²³A search of 1 John 5 and the phrase “these three are one” in the Ellen G. White Writings web-based software (www.egwwritings.org) produced no results of her using the passage of 1 John 5:7 or 8. In her well known statement about Christ’s divinity in *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1898), 530, she did use 1 John 5:12, but not the previous verses.

²⁴E.g., “The Lectures of Eld. D. P. Hall,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* 6.23 (20 February 1855): 180; “A General History of the German Seventh-day Baptists,” *The Adventist Review and Sabbath Herald* 9.15 (12 February 1857): 123.

the words “these three are one” to counterargue a particular understanding of the unity between Jesus and God.²⁵ Other articles employed the same language of unity from 1 John 5 to present a view of divine and ecclesiological unity.²⁶ Yet another set of articles utilized the same language of unity for anthropological purposes²⁷ or referred to 1 John 5:7–8 without the *comma* to explain baptism and the divine witness to Jesus as the Christ.²⁸ The current, standard understanding of the *comma* among Adventist scholars can be illustrated by Angel Rodríguez, who, after a discussion of textual criticism, concludes, “The Trinity is a biblical doctrine, and you can preach about it. But you should not use this text.”²⁹

²⁵E.g., “The Trinity,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* 9.19 (12 March 1857): 146; D. W. Hull, “Bible Doctrine of the Divinity of Christ,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* 14.25 (10 November 1859): 194. Hull’s article is the only one found in nineteenth-century Adventist periodicals that mentions the *comma* as a gloss, citing Adam Clarke. See also Thomas M. Preble, *The Two Adams* (n.p., 1864?). In chapter four, on the divinity of Jesus, Preble wrote, “Because it is said of Christ that he and his Father are one; it does not mean that Jesus was his own Father! And because they are one in attributes or power; they are not one, numerically! for there are three that bear record in heaven, and these three are one—these three agree in one! 1 John 5:7, 8. Although the Father and the Son are one, it is equally true that Jesus spoke understandingly when he said, ‘My Father is greater than I!’ Why is the Father greater than the Son? Because the Father ‘made’ the Son; and yet Jesus said, ‘The Son can do nothing of himself, but what he seeth the Father do.’ All the power, therefore, that the Son possesses, was given him by his Father” (ibid., 18–19). The language of unity related to the Godhead is also used by John N. Andrews, when describing the beliefs of the Catholic Inquisitors against the Cathars. Here, there could be an indirect attack on the Trinitarian understanding of Roman Christians, since the beliefs attributed to the Cathars are similar to Seventh-day Adventists during his time. See John N. Andrews, “Traces of the Sabbath During the Dark Ages,” *The Adventist Review and Sabbath Herald* 19.24 (1862): 185.

²⁶E.g., [Alonzo T. Jones], “Editorial Note,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* 76.2 (10 January 1899): 24. Merlin Burt, Director of the Center for Adventist Research, has suggested to us in conversation that the author is most probably A. T. Jones.

²⁷“As to man’s nature, I premise, that my views and Bro. Cornell’s are not at all alike. I believe and maintain—I have always done so—that man is a Trinity in unity—soul, body and spirit. These three are one—not one in substance, but three. One in that sense that they are inseparably identified in the man” (S. A. Taft, “Communication from Eld. S. A. Taft,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* 12.19 [30 September 1858]: 145).

²⁸E.g., Ellet J. Waggoner “Notes on the International Sunday-School Lessons. The Source of Power. Zechariah 4:1–14,” *The Present Truth* 15 (7 September 1899): 36; idem, *The Glad Tidings* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1900), 154.

²⁹Ángel Manuel Rodríguez, “1 John 5:7,” 14 May 1998, <https://adventistbiblicalresearch.org/materials/bible-nt-texts/1-john-57>. See also Francis D. Nichol, ed. “The First Epistle General of John,” in *Philippians to Revelation*, Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary 7 (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1980), 675; Denis Fortin, “God, the Trinity, and Adventism: An Introduction to the Issues,” *JATS* 17.1 (2006): 5.

These examples demonstrate the diversity of ways in which Christian interpreters have employed the language of 1 John 5:7–8, with and without the *comma*. This multiplicity of views is not confined to any one particular Christian denomination. As discussed below, most English Bible commentaries or Christian theologies of the last two centuries do not interpret the passage in a Trinitarian way. However, there are still those who read it as a Trinitarian text and are accused by non-Trinitarians of misusing Scripture.³⁰

Bible Commentaries and the Johannine Comma

As stated earlier in the article, if a pastor was asked to preach on 1 John 5:7–8 today, and the sermon preparation depended on recent Bible commentaries, the Trinity would not be the central point. Most of the data of recent Bible commentaries do not include the *comma* as part of their readings of 1 John 5. Importantly, the Bible versions used by Bible commentators do not adopt the variant. Therefore, the *comma* is typically addressed only in a side note, if it is even mentioned.³¹

What is of interest to us here is the argumentation that Bible commentators utilize regarding the manuscript attestation of the *comma* in Greek and Latin and their dates. Both of these text-critical data are employed as indicators of a probable origin of this reading. A review of this data reveals that there is no consensus on the earliest date of the *comma* in Greek. Furthermore, the Latin origin of the *comma* is discussed only by a few commentators.

Of the consulted commentaries that assert that the *comma* was a gloss to the Greek text, all of them present the late Greek manuscript attestation as evidence for this assertion. However, they often disagree about or misinterpret the evidence that indicates the actual age (how early or late) of this Greek variant. In the commentaries, the earliest dates assigned to the first

³⁰One recent example of a defender of the Trinitarian reading of the *comma* and its authenticity is Michael Maynard, *A History of the Debate Over 1 John 5:7–8* (Tempe, AZ: Comma, 1995). For one example of anti-Trinitarian accusations, see Ken Allen, “The Trinity—Fact or Fiction?” n.d., <http://www.auburn.edu/~allenkc/trinity.html>. It is noteworthy to see that the United Church of God, a Christian denomination that is not Trinitarian, in their official statements on their website do not refer to 1 John 5 in their criticism of Trinitarian misuse of Scriptures. See United Church of God, “What about Passages that ‘Prove’ the Trinity?” n.d., <https://www.ucg.org/bible-study-tools/booklets/is-god-a-trinity/what-about-passages-that-prove-the-trinity>). So, again, in contemporary times, we see multiple perspectives on the issue.

³¹The following two commentaries do not mention the *comma* at all: Gerald Bray, ed., *James, 1–2 Peter, 1–3 John, Jude*, ACCS 11 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 223–224; Alan England Brooke, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Johannine Epistles*, ICC 42 (New York: Scribner, 1912), 137–138. The absence in the first commentary is noteworthy for our purposes because it contains collections of early Christian interpreters of the Bible. This suggests that, early in the history of Christian interpretation, the *comma* was not an issue, as is explored below. An additional commentary just remarks that the *comma* is “obviously a late gloss with no merit.” So no further explanation is given. See Glenn W. Barker, “1 John,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* 12 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 353.

available biblical manuscript in Greek with the *comma* span five centuries. Some commentaries affirm that the earliest Greek manuscript evidence is from the sixteenth century,³² while others claim it is from the fifteenth,³³ fourteenth,³⁴ thirteenth,³⁵ and as early as the twelfth century.³⁶ Most of them do not explain the variants themselves³⁷ but refer to or depend upon the works

³²See Henry Alford, *The Epistles of St. John and St. Jude and the Revelation*, 2 vols., The Greek Testament 4 (Cambridge: Rivingtons, Deighton, Bell, 1866), 2:503; Gary M. Burge, *The Letters of John: From Biblical Text to Contemporary Life*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 203.

³³See “The First Epistle General of John,” 675; Daniel L. Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, NAC 38 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001), 198; Robert W. Yarbrough, *1–3 John*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 293.

³⁴See Karen H. Jobes, *1, 2, and 3 John*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 222; George R. Knight, *Exploring the Letters of John & Jude: A Devotional Commentary* (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 2009), 159; I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, NICNT 16 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 236; Ekkehardt Mueller, *The Letters of John* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2009), 85; Bruce G. Schuchard, *1–3 John*, ConcC (Saint Louis: Concordia, 2012), 512.

³⁵See Gary W. Derickson, *1, 2, & 3 John*, Evangelical Exegetical Commentary (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2014), 513.

³⁶See Stephen S. Smalley, *1, 2, and 3 John*, WBC 51 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 260.

³⁷Marshall is an exception and gives two lists of Greek biblical manuscripts (*The Epistles of John*, 236). The first list is from the first edition of Metzger’s *A Textual Commentary*, published in 1971: MSS 61, 88mg, 629, 635mg. Please note that “635mg” was apparently a typographical error in Metzger’s first edition (635, without mg) that in his later work (idem, 2nd ed., 1994) is corrected to “636^{vr}.” Unfortunately, Marshall followed Metzger’s typo, causing more confusion. Also note that “mg” is used to designate a marginal reading, that is, a reading which is not included as the text of Scripture but is written in the margin of the manuscript, either at the time the manuscript was copied or later and “without being identified as either a correction or an alternative reading” (NA²⁸, 59*). In comparison, a superscript vl stands for the Latin *varia lectio*, which designates an alternative reading identified in the manuscript itself. Thus, the difference between an mg and a vl is the identification in the manuscript itself of the purpose for the gloss. In this article, we adopt the Latin abbreviation, vl, used by Nestle-Aland instead of the anglicized vr (variant reading) used by Bruce Metzger.

The second list Marshall gives is from the critical apparatus of *The Greek New Testament* from UBS³: MSS 61, 88mg, 429mg, 629, 636mg, 918. Although not a commentary, Osburn’s article (“Johannine Comma,” 3:882–883) is helpful at this point. Osburn also gives two lists of Greek biblical manuscripts: the first list attesting the *comma* in the text (MSS 61, 629, 918 and 2318) and the second list consisting of references in the margin (MSS 88, 221, 429, 635 and 636) (ibid.). Again, the inclusion of manuscript 635 is apparently residual from the typo in Metzger’s first edition of *Text of the New Testament* as copied by Marshall (*The Epistles of John*, 236). Metzger clarifies that manuscript 636 includes the *comma* in a marginal reading, not 635 (*A Textual Commentary*, 2nd ed., 648).

of Raymond Edward Brown,³⁸ Bruce Metzger,³⁹ Rudolf Schnackenburg,⁴⁰ Georg Strecker,⁴¹ and/or Brooke Foss Westcott.⁴² These latter works⁴³ are the best scholarly and most up-to-date discussions in English about the manuscript history of the Johannine *comma*. To them we turn next.

Regarding the earliest evidence of the *comma* in a Greek manuscript of 1 John, all five of these authors (Brown, Metzger, Schnackenburg, Strecker, and Westcott) cite MS 629 (*Codex Ottobonianus*). This manuscript is dated no earlier than the fourteenth century (for the other manuscript evidences, see **tab. 1**).⁴⁴ There is dubious or incomplete information given by Brown, Metzger, and Strecker regarding the date of another manuscript which contains the *comma* as a marginal addition. Manuscript 221^{vi} (from the Bodleian Library of Oxford) is listed by all three of them and dated to the tenth century. The addition of the *comma* in the margin, however, is not dated by any of these works.⁴⁵ Clearly, it must be after the origin of the manuscript in the tenth

³⁸Raymond Edward Brown, *The Epistles of John*, AB 30 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1982). Brown recognizes that his information about manuscripts is from Metzger, *A Textual Commentary*, 776n3. It is important to notice that, even though Brown used the first edition of Metzger's list with the typo of MSS 635, he corrects this type to MS 636, unlike Marshall.

³⁹Metzger, *Text of the New Testament*, 2nd ed., 101. In this edition, there is no list of manuscripts provided. See also idem, *A Textual Commentary*, 715–716. For the list of manuscripts that contain the *comma* to which the others refer, see idem, 2nd ed., 647–648.

⁴⁰Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Johannine Epistles*, trans. Reginald Fuller and Ilse Fuller (New York: Crossroad, 1992).

⁴¹Georg Strecker, *The Johannine Letters: A Commentary on 1, 2, and 3 John*, trans. Linda M. Maloney, Hermeneia—A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996).

⁴²Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Epistles of St. John: The Greek Text with Notes and Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1883); idem, 3rd ed. (Cambridge; London: Macmillan, 1892).

⁴³The five authors (excluding Schnackenburg) are also the only references given in the important work of Roger L. Omanson. See *A Textual Guide to the Greek New Testament: An Adaptation of Bruce M. Metzger's Textual Commentary for Needs of Translators* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2006). On the back of the cover page it is explained that this is “intended to be used with the fourth edition of the United Bible Societies' Greek New Testament.”

⁴⁴Brown, Strecker, and Westcott give a range between the fourteenth and fifteenth century (Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 776; Strecker, *The Johannine Letters*, 189; and Westcott, *The Epistles of St. John*, 3rd ed., 207), while Metzger suggests a range from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century (Metzger, *Text of the New Testament*, 3rd ed., 101–102). It is worth noticing that Westcott only gives this single Greek biblical manuscript (MS 629) as evidence in his discussion (Westcott, *The Epistles of St. John*, 3rd ed., 207), and this is the only Greek biblical manuscript before Erasmus which has the *comma* in the text instead of as a marginal note.

⁴⁵This is also the situation in other works on textual criticism, such as Kurt Aland, *Kurzgefasste Liste der griechischen Handschriften des Neuen Testaments*, rev. and enl. ed.,

century, but exactly how long after has not been argued in print.⁴⁶ One is left wondering whether the date could be established by studying the actual manuscript. Thus, there is the slight possibility that MS 221 could actually contain the earliest Greek biblical manuscript appearance of the *comma*, earlier than the fourteenth century MS 629, but merely as a marginal variant.

Table 1. Biblical Manuscripts that Attest the Johannine *Comma* in 1 John 5:7–8^a

MSS No.	Name/Place	Date	Discussions
61	<i>Codex Montfortianus</i> or <i>Britannicus</i> from Dublin, Ireland (used by Erasmus in his 1522 edition, which includes the <i>comma</i>)	sixteenth century MS	Brown, Metzger, Schnackenburg, and Strecker
88 ^{vi}	<i>Codex Regius</i> of Naples, Italy	eleventh to fourteenth century MS with a marginal gloss from sixteenth or seventeenth century	Metzger (2002) ^b —eleventh or fourteenth century MS with sixteenth century gloss; Metzger (1992) and Schnackenburg—twelfth century MS with seventeenth century gloss; Brown and Strecker—twelfth century MS with sixteenth century gloss
221 ^{vi}	Bodleian Library of Oxford	tenth century MS with a marginal gloss that needs dating ^c	Brown, Metzger, and Strecker
429 ^{vi}	<i>Codex Wolfenbüttel</i> from Germany	sixteenth century MS with undated gloss ^d	Brown, Metzger, and Strecker

ANTF 1 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1994), 60. We consulted the New Testament Virtual Manuscript Room at the Institute für neutestamentliche Textforschung from the Muenster database (<http://ntvmr.uni-muenster.de/liste?docID=30221&pageID=30>), the references to MS 221 in J. K. Elliott's *Bibliography of Greek New Testament Manuscripts* at the Université de Lausanne's *BiBIL* (<https://bibil.unil.ch/bibil/public/indexAdvancedSearch.action?replay=true>), and those in the book, idem, *A Bibliography of Greek New Testament Manuscripts*, 3rd ed., NovTSup 160 (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

⁴⁶In the *Wikipedia* article, "*Comma Johanneum*," the gloss on MS 221 is dated to the fifteenth or sixteenth century, but unfortunately neither reference nor argument are given to justify this conclusion.

629	<i>Codex Ottobonianus</i> from the Vatican	fourteenth to sixteenth century MS	Metzger (1964, 1968, 1992) ^e and Schnackenburg— fourteenth or sixteenth century; Brown, Strecker, and Westcott (1892)—fourteenth or fifteenth century
636 ^{vi}	Naples, Italy	fifteenth or sixteenth century with undated gloss ^f	Metzger—sixteenth century; Brown and Strecker—fifteenth century
918	Escorial from Spain	sixteenth century	Brown, Metzger, and Strecker
2318	Bucharest, Romania	eighteenth century	Brown, Metzger, and Strecker
2473 ^g	Athens, Greece	seventeenth century ^h	Not mentioned by Brown, Metzger, Schnackenburg, Strecker, or Westcott
177 ^{vi}	Munich, Germany	eleventh century MS with marginal gloss from sixteenth century	Not mentioned by Brown, Metzger, Schnackenburg, Strecker, or Westcott, but listed in <i>Wikipedia</i> and commented on by Wallace ⁱ
	<i>Codex Ravianus</i> or <i>Berolinensis</i>	sixteenth century	Brown, Schnackenburg—copy of <i>Complutensian Polyglot Bible</i>

^aOut of the eleven manuscripts listed in this table, the following critical texts omit the last three of the table: *Novum Testamentum Graece* (1974), *Novum Testamentum Graece* (2004), and *The Greek New Testament* (2014). Although Metzger refers to all eight found in *The Greek New Testament* 4th edition (2001) apparatus, he, in his commentary, only comments on seven of them. MS 629, the only one Westcott refers to as evidence for the *comma*, is missing in Metzger's commentary (*A Textual Commentary*, 2nd ed., 647–648).

^bMetzger, *Text of the New Testament*, 101, dated the manuscript to the twelfth century with a gloss from the seventeenth century.

^cThe *Wikipedia* article, “*Comma Johanneum*,” dated this gloss as from the fifteenth or sixteenth century, but gives neither rationale nor reference for this gloss date.

^dThe *Wikipedia* article, “*Comma Johanneum*,” dated this manuscript to the fourteenth century and the gloss to the sixteenth century, without rationale or reference for the gloss date.

^eIn all of the editions of Metzger, *Text of the New Testament*, 101, the manuscript is dated to the fifteenth or sixteenth century.

^fThe *Wikipedia* article, “*Comma Johanneum*,” dated both the manuscript and the gloss to the sixteenth century, again without rationale or reference except for a hyperlink to the *Wikipedia* article, “*Minuscule 636*,” which dated the manuscript to the fifteenth century.

^gThis manuscript evidence is mentioned by *The Greek New Testament* (2014) and the *Wikipedia* article.

^hAland dated this manuscript to 1634 (*Kurzgefaste Liste*, 190). The *Wikipedia* article, “*Comma Johanneum*,” dated this manuscript to the eighteenth century, but gives neither rationale nor reference.

ⁱDaniel B. Wallace, “The *Comma Johanneum* in an Overlooked Manuscript,” 2 July 2010, www.cntm.org/tcnotes/archive/TheCommaJohanneuminanOverlookedManuscript.

Thus, based on the extant Greek biblical manuscripts, the *comma* appears in Greek no earlier than the fourteenth century in the text—or potentially the tenth century as a marginal variant, assuming that the dating of MS 221 is correct. Beyond the biblical manuscript evidence of **table 1**, the earliest Greek attestation of the *comma* in full is from the thirteenth century. The *comma* is included within a Greek translation, from Latin, of the deeds of the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215.⁴⁷ This indicates that the Church in the West considered the *comma* doctrinally authoritative in this period. One could argue that this translation should be included with the Latin evidence of the *comma*, which we consider later in this article. The fact that this is the earliest Greek evidence for the *comma* is a reminder that this version of the text is absent in the writings of the Greek Fathers, even in these early Trinitarian debates where this text could have been used as a powerful argument for or against orthodox belief. This point is emphasized by almost all those who write about the *comma*.⁴⁸ Considering the Greek evidence, it is no surprise that most recent commentaries give no credence to this variant reading of 1 John 5:7–8.

Concerning this Greek manuscript evidence, Brown and Strecker point out that in Arabic, Armenian, Coptic, Ethiopic, Slavonic (Slavic), and Syriac the variant reading has not been found in any extant manuscript “up to the 1500s.”⁴⁹ While the language of Strecker leaves open the possibility that there could be the attestation of the *comma* after the sixteenth century, Brown clarifies in a note that, in Coptic and Ethiopic, the variant is completely absent.⁵⁰ Be that as it may, outside of the Latin documents and the single undated marginal variant in MS 221, the available data indicate that the *comma* is non-existent in any documents before the thirteenth century and in any biblical manuscript before the fourteenth century. This shows a discrepancy among biblical commentators who suggest that the earliest Greek reference to the *comma* is from the twelfth century (too early) or the fifteenth or sixteenth centuries (too late). Regardless of the dates of the Greek manuscripts or marginal variants, Brown summarizes well the state of the matter: “the key to the Comma lies in the history of the Latin Bible in Spain.”⁵¹ It is to Spain and the Latin world of ancient Christianity that we turn now.

⁴⁷Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 777; Westcott, *Epistles of St. John*, 196; idem, 3rd ed., 206. Most likely, when Derickson refers to the thirteenth century, he has this material evidence in mind. See n35 above.

⁴⁸See also comment in n30 above about the presence of the *comma* in early Christianity.

⁴⁹Strecker, *The Johannine Letters*, 189; Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 777.

⁵⁰Regarding 1 John 5:7–8, the critical apparatus of the two most used Greek New Testaments, UBS⁵ and NA²⁸, list only variants from Greek and a selection of Latin that contains the *comma*.

⁵¹Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 776. See similar comment in Schnackenburg, *The Johannine Epistles*, 46.

The Latin “Origins” of the Johannine Comma

It is important to highlight initially that the history of the *comma* in Latin is given little attention in English literature.⁵² There are several reasons for such a dismissal of the Latin history of the *comma*. First, there are relatively few studies on textual criticism of the Old Latin in comparison with the abundance of text-critical studies about the New Testament in Greek. Second, the standard reference works on the topic⁵³ have not been translated from German, and many scholars do not refer to them in their discussions of the *comma*.⁵⁴ Third, after the printing of Erasmus’s Greek New Testament, which was followed by a century of active translation of the Bible into English that culminated with the inclusion of the *comma* by the translators of the KJV (which became the most used English translation of the Bible), it is the Greek history of the *comma* that has shaped the conversation about its validity in the English-speaking world. Thus, it is not surprising that the Latin and earlier history of the *comma* is almost ignored in biblical commentaries written in English.

According to the evidence given by those who discuss the appearance of the *comma* in Latin sources, the earliest biblical manuscripts available to us that attest to the *comma* in full are from no earlier than the sixth century.

⁵²Here is a list of commentaries that discuss (most of them briefly) the Latin manuscripts containing the *comma*: Alford, *Epistles of St. John*, 503–505; Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 198–199; Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 778–786; Philip Wesley Comfort and Wendell C. Hawley, “1–3 John,” in *Gospel of John and 1–3 John*, Cornerstone Biblical Commentary 13 (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2007), 368–369; Derickson, *1, 2, & 3 John*, 513; Jobes, *1, 2, and 3 John*, 223; Peter Rhea Jones, *1, 2 & 3 John*, SHBC 29b (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2009), 215; Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 236–237; Metzger, *A Textual Commentary*, 2nd ed., 647; Schnackenburg, *The Johannine Epistles*, 45–46, 237; Schuchard, *1–3 John*, 511–512; Smalley, *1, 2, and 3 John*, 273; Strecker, *The Johannine Letters*, 189–190; Yarbrough, *1–3 John*, 284; Westcott, *Epistles of St. John*, 193–196; idem., 3rd ed., 202–206.

⁵³See Walter Thiele, “Beobachtungen zum Comma Iohanneum (I Joh 5.7f),” *ZNW* 50 (1959): 61–73; *ibid.*, *Epistulae Catholicae*, vol. 26.1 of *Vetus Latina: Die Reste der Altlateinischen Bibel* (Freiburg: Herder, 1969); Augustinus Bludau, “Das Comma Iohanneum (I Joh. 5,7) in den orientalischen Übersetzungen und Bibeldrucken,” *OrChr* 3 (1903): 126–147; idem, “Das Comma Iohanneum (I Joh. 5,7) in dem Glaubensbekenntnis von Karthago vom Jahre 484,” *TGl* 11 (1919): 9–15; idem, “Das Comma Iohanneum bei Tertullian und Cyprian,” *TQ* 101 (1920): 1–28.

⁵⁴Of the commentaries that discuss the Latin history of the *comma* (see n52 above), only Brown, Schnackenburg, and Strecker refer to Thiele and Bludau. Notice that, of these three, only Brown is originally written in English; the other two commentaries are translations from German. Marshall refers only to Thiele but dismisses the importance of his discussion of the Latin history for establishing the origin of the *comma*, since the epistle was written in Greek (*The Epistles of John*, 237). On the other hand, Osburn refers just to Bludau and not to Thiele (“Johannine Comma,” 3:883). Many of the commentaries refer to Schnackenburg and Strecker, whose works were both originally written in German. They both discuss Thiele, and point to a probable origin of the *comma* prior to Priscillian, who wrote in the fourth century (see below). However, most anglophone commentators ignore the Latin debate entirely.

Here, as in the Greek history of the variant, the dates given are not the same, yet at least these dates are closer in comparison to the dates given for the Greek evidence. In Latin, they range from the sixth⁵⁵ to the seventh⁵⁶ and eighth centuries.⁵⁷ The major issue here of dating the *comma* in Latin as early as the sixth century or later is the inclusion of *Codex Fuldensis* as a witness to this variant.

The earliest attestation of the *comma* in Latin biblical manuscripts, recognized by Westcott, does not include the *comma* variant as part of the actual text of Scripture. Westcott includes the following two sixth century manuscripts:⁵⁸ *Codex Fuldensis*, which has the *comma* in its prologue, and *Codex Frisingensis*, which has it in the margin. Meanwhile, Brown⁵⁹ and Metzger do not include either of them as evidence for the *comma* since these manuscripts do not include the *comma* as part of the biblical text. What is not disputed here is that, as early as the sixth century, the *comma* was known by those who copied biblical manuscripts and was considered either an optional reading or as a comment. The fact that the *comma* was not in the text of 1 John also indicates that these sixth century scribes did not think it appropriate to include it as part of the Bible. But this opinion was not unanimous in early Latin Christianity.

⁵⁵Metzger, *A Textual Commentary*, 647; Westcott, *Epistles of St. John*, 193; idem, 3rd ed., 202). Westcott gives *Codex Fris* (abbreviation of *Frisingensis*) of Munich, which he dated between sixth and seventh centuries (ibid., 205). Metzger cites no manuscript, but only names a century, the sixth century (*A Textual Commentary*, 2nd ed., 647).

⁵⁶Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 198; Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 779; Derickson, *1, 2, & 3 John*, 513; Schnackenburg, *The Johannine Epistles*, 45. It is important to highlight that Schnackenburg gives no date to the oldest Latin biblical MSS that contains the *comma*; he just states that it is a palimpsest from Lyon, which is dated by Strecker and Brown. See also Strecker, *The Johannine Letters*, 189. Brown and Strecker are the only ones who give a list of manuscript names and centuries as follows: Palimpsest of Leon from Spain (seventh), *Codex Theodulphianus* and Sangellense (St. Gallen) MSS (eighth/ninth), Fragment of Freising (ninth), *Codex Cavensis* (ninth), *Codex Complutensis* (tenth) and *Codex Toletanus* (tenth). It should be noted that all of them are from Spain or Spain-related. Strecker notes that, outside of Spain, biblical evidence of the *comma* occurs only after the tenth century (ibid.).

⁵⁷Jobes, *1, 2, and 3 John*, 223; Metzger, *Text of the New Testament*, 102; Smalley, *1, 2, and 3 John*, 273. One should notice the language used by Metzger and Jobes. Both of them wrote that the *comma* is absent in the manuscripts of Latin Bibles “earlier than 800.” Does this mean that there is a manuscript from the year 800? If not, this would mean that the earliest evidence is from the ninth and not the eighth century. Compare this to the language used by Derickson, for example, who says that the *comma* appears “after AD 600” (*1, 2, & 3 John*, 513). This could create a difference of almost two hundred years for those who advocate for the seventh or eighth century as the earliest evidence.

⁵⁸Westcott, *The Epistles of St. John*, 195. He dates *Codex Fuldensis* to 546 CE and *Frisingensis* to sixth or seventh centuries.

⁵⁹Brown does mention *Fuldensis* except to say that the *comma* is “absent” (*The Epistles of John*, 779).

In *Liber Apologeticus*, a work from the fourth century, its author, Priscillian of Avila, saw the *comma* as Scripture. Priscillian's clause, "*Sicut Iohannes ait*," "About it [the Trinity] John said,"⁶⁰ could reasonably be assumed to be referring to a Johannine quotation from Scripture. This points toward the conclusion that Priscillian was using a biblical manuscript that already contained the *comma*.⁶¹ The scholarly consensus is that *Liber Apologeticus* is the first extant reference to the complete *comma*.⁶² However, assumptions are not proof. We do not actually have an extant Latin biblical manuscript before Priscillian's time that contains the *comma*. To explain the origin of the *comma* in relation to Priscillian, the commentaries present two potential, but theoretical, trajectories. The first theory suggests that Priscillian, or someone close to him, possibly Bishop Instantius,⁶³ created the *comma*, and it was subsequently added to biblical manuscripts.⁶⁴ This would cast the *comma* as a fourth

⁶⁰The quote in full is as follows: "*Sicut Iohannes ait: tria sunt quae testimonium dicunt in terra: aqua, caro et sanguis et haec tria in unum sunt, et tria sunt quae testimonium dicunt in caelo: pater, uerbum et spiritus et haec tria unum sunt in Christ Iesu.*" The Latin text is from Priscillian Avila's *Liber Apologeticus* or "Tractate I" found in Marco Conti, ed., *Priscillian of Avila: The Complete Works*, OECT (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 34.

⁶¹This possibility of a biblical text containing the *comma*, which predates the author who quotes it in his writings, is also recognized by those who do not accept that the *comma* predates Priscillian. For example, Comfort and Hawley wrote that the *comma* "showed up in the writings of Latin Fathers in North Africa and Italy (as part of the text of the epistle) from the fifth century onward" ("1–3 John," 369; emphasis added). Alford also mentions that Vigilius (fifth century) may have had it as part of his biblical text, since he quotes from it (*Epistles of St. John*, 505). It should be noted that Alford brings Vigilius as the earliest Latin evidence since his commentary was published in 1866, some twenty years before the manuscript of *Liber Apologeticus* was available. It was discovered in 1885 and published in 1886. For more on this work and Priscillian of Avila, see Conti, *Priscillian of Avila*, 6–13; M. Simonetti, "Priscillian—Priscillianism," *Encyclopedia of Ancient Christianity* 3:309.

⁶²Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 781; Comfort and Hawley, "1–3 John," 369; Derickson, *1, 2, & 3 John*, 513; Jones, *1, 2 & 3 John*, 215; Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 236; Metzger, *A Textual Commentary*, 2nd ed., 647; Osburn, "Johannine Comma," 3:882; Schnackenburg, *The Johannine Epistles*, 45; Schuchard, *1–3 John*, 512; Smalley, *1, 2, and 3 John*, 273; Strecker, *The Johannine Letters*, 189; Westcott, *Epistles of St. John*, 2nd ed., 203. In the first edition of 1882, before the discovery of the folio of Priscillian, Westcott gave Vigilius Thapsus a date from c. 490. See Westcott, *Epistles of St. John*, 194.

⁶³Conti is of the opinion that *Liber Apologeticus* (Tractate I) is original, written by Priscillian, while others think that this work was produced by some one very close to Priscillian, reflecting his thought, such as Bishop Instantius. See the debate in Conti, *Priscillian of Avila*, 7–10, 14. It is important to notice here that Priscillian was not considered orthodox in his belief about God and was condemned as a heretic by some Christian leaders of orthodox communities. This is telling because the *comma* was not necessarily a proof-text for the orthodox view on the Trinity.

⁶⁴Explicitly, in Comfort and Hawley, "1–3 John," 367; Schuchard, *1–3 John*, 512. They remark that the *comma* spread in Latin after *Liber Apologeticus*, first in writings

century invention. In contrast, the second theory has Priscillian or Instantius reproducing an earlier biblical manuscript that contained a form of the *comma*. This would suggest that the *comma* predates the fourth century.⁶⁵ If the second theory is plausible, then the origins of the *comma* could be very early, as proposed by Walter Thiele.⁶⁶

Now, in order to ascertain the possible origin of the *comma*, a discussion of the usage of Scripture in Christian North Africa is required. Interestingly, only three commentaries address this issue in the context of the *comma*: Brown, Schnackenburg, and Strecker.⁶⁷ These authors use the works of Teofilo Ayuso Marazuela, Augustinus Bludau, and Thiele,⁶⁸ mostly in German, as the main sources in discussing the issue of Latin biblical versions of 1 John 5 in North Africa. It can be supposed that North Africa is the source of the *comma* based on the simple fact that Tertullian, Cyprian, and Augustine of Hippo use the language of 1 John 5:6–8 to present Trinitarian concepts (see **tab. 2**).

of Latin interpreters (Comfort and Hawley “1–3 John,” 369) and then later in biblical manuscripts (Schuchard, *1–3 John*, 512). Implicitly in Derickson, *1, 2, & 3 John*, 513.

⁶⁵Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 582, 783; Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 236; Osburn, “Johannine Comma,” 3:882–883; Strecker, *The Johannine Letters*, 190; Yarbrough, *1–3 John*, 284; Schnackenburg, *The Johannine Epistles*, 46; Smalley, *1, 2, and 3 John*, 273. In contrast to the first theory, the authors in this footnote remark that the first appearance of the *comma* could have been from expansion of biblical text in North Africa around the third century, and it definitely appears in full in Spain by the fourth century, from which environment Priscillian was influenced. Jones and Westcott could be included in this group, but their analysis is not precise on the matter. Jones remarks that the first reference is found in Priscillian and that “perhaps the words began as a comment on the margin of the text only to be inserted eventually into the actual text” (Jones, *1, 2 & 3 John*, 215). Which text? It seems plausible that he is referring to the biblical text used by Priscillian, thus, prior to him. This is coherent with the source he uses, namely Osburn (“Johannine Comma,” 3:882–883). In addition, Westcott recognizes that in North Africa in the time of Cyprian (third century) it would be “natural . . . to form a distinct gloss on v. 7 according” to a Trinitarian reading of John 10:30 and 1 John 5:6–8 (Westcott, *The Epistles of St. John*, 194).

⁶⁶Thiele, “Beobachtungen zum Comma Iohanneum,” 71–73.

⁶⁷See nn52, 54 above.

⁶⁸Teofilo Ayuso Marazuela, “El ‘Comma Joaneo,’” *Bib* 28 (1947): 83–112, 216–235; idem, *Bib* 29 (1948): 52–76. For Bludau and Thiele, see n53 above.

Table 2. Variants of the Latin Johannine *Comma*

Date	Author	Place	Text
c. 215	Tertullian	North Africa	Ita connexus Patris in Filio, et Filii in Paracleto, tres efficit cohaerentes, alterum ex altero, qui tres unum sint, non unus. Quomodo dictum est: Ego et Pater unum sumus [John 10:30].
c. 250	Cyprian (T and C)	North Africa	Dicit Dominus: Ego et Pater unum sumus. Et iterum de Patre et Filio et Spiritu sancto scriptum est: Et hi tres unum sunt.
IV	Priscillian (C)	Spain	Sicut Iohannes ait: <i>tria</i> sunt quae testimonium dicunt in terra: <i>aqua</i> , caro et sanguis et <i>haec tria</i> in unum sunt, et <i>tria</i> sunt quae testimonium dicunt in caelo: pater, <i>uerbum</i> et spiritus et <i>haec tria</i> unum sunt in Christo Iesu.
IV–V	Augustine	North Africa	Sane falli te nolo in Epistola Joannis apostolic ubi ait: <i>Tres sunt testes; spiritus, et aqua, et sanguis; et tres unum sunt</i> [I John v, 8] . . . si vero ea, quae his significate sunt, velimus inquirere, non absurd occurrit ipsa Trinitas, qui unus, solus verus, summus est Deus, Pater et Filius et Spiritus sanctus, de quibus verissimo dici potuit, <i>Tres sunt testes, et tres unum sunt</i> . . .
III–IV	K	North Africa and Spain	<i>tres</i> testimonium perhibent spiritus et aqua et sanguis et <i>isti tres</i> in unum sunt pater et <i>filius</i> et spiritus <i>sanctus</i> et tres unum sunt.
III–V	C	North Africa	<i>tres</i> sunt qui testimonium dicunt in terra spiritus et aqua et sanguis et <i>isti tres</i> unum sunt in Christo Iesu et tres sunt qui testimonium dicunt <i>in caelo</i> pater <i>verbum</i> et spiritus et hi tres unum sunt.
IV–VI	T	North Africa and Italy	<i>tres</i> sunt qui testificantur in terra spiritus et aqua et sanguis et tres sunt qui testificantur <i>in caelo</i> pater et <i>filius</i> et spiritus <i>sanctus</i> et <i>hi</i> tres unum sunt.
IV–V	V	Italy	tres sunt qui testimonium dant spiritus et aqua et sanguis et tres unum sunt.

XIV–XVI	?	Vatican	Quia tres sunt qui testimonium dant in celo, pater, verbum, et spiritus sanctus, et hi tres unum sunt. Et tres sunt qui testimonium dant in terra, spiritus, aqua et sanguis.
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Note: The biblical reconstructions are based primarily on the critical edition of the *Vetus Latina* by Thiele, *Epistulae Catholicae*, 361–365. The following explanation, based on the prologue of Thiele’s work, about the text-types of 1 John (or original sources), indicates from where the variant reading is reconstructed. The text-types are based presumably from *all* the readings available of 1 John 5:6–8 in Latin. Text-type K is based primarily on Cyprian and other documents from North Africa. Text-type C is prior to T and V and is also based mostly on Cyprian (third century), but also taken from Tyconius (fourth century), Augustine (fourth to fifth century), and Optatus (fourth century). Text-type T is mostly based on texts from Italy, such as those of Epiphanius (fourth to fifth centuries) and Cassiodorus (sixth century), and also from North Africa, such as those of Augustine (fourth through fifth centuries), Fulgentius Ferrandus (sixth century), and Facundus (sixth century). Based on the widespread use in North Africa in the fourth through fifth centuries, it is plausible that this type was preferred in North Africa. Text-type V includes the variants of the Vulgate, similar to Greek manuscripts and *Codex Alexandrinus*. Major witnesses are Jerome (fourth through fifth centuries) and Caelestius (fourth through fifth centuries), a “Pelagian” from Rome who interacted with North Africa Christians against Augustinian views. V is mostly based on the Vulgate of Jerome, but it is different in some places. The differences between the Greek and Old Latin are fixed in this type, and large texts of V were already deleted in T, except for the *comma*, which is in T and not in V. Text-type V changes with time and presents mistakes (*ibid.*, 80–87). For the primary references of the non-biblical documents, we used different versions for the Latin. The primary reference and translation for Priscillian is from *Liber Apologeticus* (Tractates 1) in Conti, *Priscillian of Avila*, 34–35. For Cyprian, Tertullian, and Augustine the primary references are from *Patrologia Latina* (PL) and the *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina* (CCSL). The English translations are from the *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (ANF) and *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (NPNF). See Tertullian, *Against Praxeas* 25.1 (ANF 3.621, PL 2:221); Cyprian, *On the Unity of the Church* 6 (ANF 5.423; PL 4:519 or CCSL 3:254); Augustine, *Contra Maximinum* (NPNF1 7.526; PL 42:794–795).

Of these three Latin Fathers, Cyprian presents the most challenging example. In Cyprian’s elucidation concerning the Trinity, he uses the formula *scriptum est*, meaning “it is written,” to refer to the last phrase of 1 John 5:8, “and these three are one.” What does this indicate?

On the one hand, since the phrase applied to Cyprian’s Trinity elucidation is the same phrase found in 1 John 5 and applied to the Spirit, the water, and the blood in verse 8a, it could be a simple reference to the text and a reapplication of it to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Along these lines, there are biblical commentators⁶⁹ who see this as merely an allegorical expansion of the text of 1 John 5 (without the *comma*) or simply a loose usage of this phrase for a dogmatic purpose, similar to the way that Tertullian and Augustine used it (see **tab. 2** for texts). To put it another way, these commentators see the thought process of what would eventually become the *comma* in third-century

⁶⁹Marazuela and Bludau are followed by Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 784 and Strecker, *The Johannine Letters*, 188, 190.

North Africa but do not view it as existing before Cyprian.⁷⁰ In support of this argument, they point out that major tractates on the Trinity in Latin, even those quoting Cyprian on the topic, did not use the *comma*. Furthermore, they assert that the biblical manuscripts would only have it centuries after Priscillian. Thus, according to this line of reasoning, the later inclusion of the *comma* in biblical manuscripts was a product of Trinitarian readings in North Africa between the third and fourth centuries. The argument continues, claiming that such Trinitarian readings probably started with Tertullian and Cyprian and were later added to the margins of biblical manuscripts. Then, with time, they were inserted into the main text of 1 John 5. Brown also suggests the possibility that the invasion of Vandal Arians in North Africa created a situation in which Trinitarian theologians used this kind of reading more frequently. Brown, therefore, concludes that the kind of reading that is found in Cyprian is in accordance with the “patristic tendency to invoke any scriptural group of three as symbolic of or applicable to the Trinity.”⁷¹

On the other hand, Thiele sees in Cyprian’s statement a direct reference to the *comma* or an existing biblical manuscript which contained this variant. His main argument concerns the known additions to the Old Latin versions (*Vetus Latina*) of the Greek New Testament. These include Cyprian’s usage of 1 John, which attests an expanded version of the text compared with the extant Greek versions that were contemporaneous to Cyprian.⁷² According to Thiele, when the Latin text was later accommodated to the Greek versions, these probable additions were mostly removed. Thus, the *comma* would be an exception, since it remained in the later manuscripts of the Vulgate even though it was not part of the Jerome’s Vulgate translation in the fifth century. Therefore, Thiele speculates that some of the so-called “additions” within the Old Latin biblical manuscripts could actually be original phrases which were lost or “removed” from the Greek in the transmission of 1 John. He suggests the possibility of a third or even second century version of the *comma*,⁷³ though such is unattested. Marshall and Schnackenburg concur

⁷⁰H. A. G. Houghton, *The Latin New Testament: A Guide to Its Early History, Texts, and Manuscripts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 178–179. In his brief commentary on the *comma*, Houghton states that its origins as a biblical text appeared “possibly as a gloss at the end of the fourth century” (ibid., 178). He also dismisses Thiele’s argument about Cyprian’s usage of an actual biblical text.

⁷¹Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 784. See also Michael Graves, *The Inspiration and Interpretation of Scripture: What the Early Church Can Teach Us* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 25. For one example of Trinitarian reading of Scripture, see Rodrigo Galiza, “Philological Problems In Isaiah 6: An Investigation of the Dead Sea Scrolls Evidence,” (paper presented at the Eighth Annual Andrews University Celebration of Research & Creative Scholarship, Berrien Springs, MI, 4 November 2016), <http://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/cor/2016/Breakout/6/>.

⁷²See evidence given in Brooke, *Johannine Epistles*, 197–223; Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 130; Westcott, *Epistles of St. John*, 194.

⁷³Thiele, “Beobachtungen zum Comma Iohanneum,” 72–73. Yarbrough, in his commentary of 1 John, is open to a Trinitarian understanding of the passage being

on the point that the date of origin of the *comma* in North Africa cannot be fully ascertained.⁷⁴

In our estimation, it is very improbable that some variation of the *comma* was already in existence in Greek around the third century. The two most compelling arguments against Thiele's thesis are the absence of any Greek manuscript with the *comma* prior to the late Middle Ages, and, most importantly, the absence of it in the Trinitarian debates in the early Christian centuries. It is unlikely that the Greek text of 1 John included the *comma*, but it somehow disappeared from the Greek, was maintained only in theological memory, was transmitted in some circles of Latin manuscripts for more than one thousand years, and, afterward, re-appeared in the East. This complex historical reconstruction from Thiele seems very improbable.

The Johannine Comma in the Tradition of Latin Christianity

Despite our disagreement with Thiele's conclusion of the *comma* as existing previously in Greek, his work on the Latin history of the *comma* is very helpful. This is due to his collection of theological uses of this biblical passage in the Latin world. Established on the data gathered in Thiele's critical edition of the *Vetus Latina*, which is based primarily on how Christians used biblical texts in their writings rather than on actual extant biblical manuscripts, there is a possibility that many Latin biblical variants of the whole chapter of 1 John 5 were in existence around the third century.⁷⁵ As the comparison of *Codex Fuldensis* with Priscillian's *Liber Apologeticus* demonstrates (more examples could be mentioned here), there was no unanimous Latin reading of 1 John 5:7–8 throughout history from the third century and beyond.⁷⁶ Though it is clear that the language of unity, as found in 1 John 5:8, was used by some

intended by John himself but without the explicit mention of the Trinity as it is found in the *comma*. He writes, "In citing three witnesses, John may have been . . . moved by the insight that just as the threefold Father, Son and Spirit constitutes God's heavenly self-disclosure, so there are three foundational underpinnings to Christ's earthly self-disclosure" (1–3 *John*, 284). Therefore, he concludes, this theological association may explain later Christian expansion of the text found in Latin Christianity in the third century (ibid.). Thus, he is suggesting that a Trinitarian reading of 1 John 5 is as early as the author of the epistle.

⁷⁴Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 236; Schnackenburg, *The Johannine Epistles*, 46.

⁷⁵This is because the language of Cyprian and the evidence gathered by Thiele is ambiguous as to whether the language of the *comma* about the Father, Son and Holy Spirit was in a biblical manuscript that was available in North Africa around the third century but is no longer extant. This is an important question that needs to be addressed but is beyond the intention of this article. Our suggestion is that future studies should explain the usage of the Latin preposition *de* in Cyprian's *Unit. eccl.* 6, in the context of Trinitarian debates of the period. See **table 2**.

⁷⁶From the time of Cyprian, many sources have used 1 John 5:7–8 in North Africa and Southwest Europe with and without the *comma* in many variations. For all the variant readings from the third century on, see Thiele, *Epistulae Catholicae*, 361–365. For some of these readings, see **table 1**.

authors—such as Tertullian, Cyprian, and Augustine—it is not explicitly clear whether or not they were quoting an existing biblical manuscript that contained a variant suggestive of the *comma*, as Priscillian did. What *has* been established is that there are more Latin biblical manuscripts that render 1 John 5 without any version of the *comma* than those that contain it before the ninth century. Additionally, the fact that the majority of Christian documents that deal with the topic of the Trinity before the ninth century do not use the language of the *comma* should be factored into this equation. By the late Middle Ages, the *comma* became authoritative and its rendition in theological treatises became standard in Latin, or Western, Christianity.

Two examples might suffice to show that the rendition of 1 John 5:7–8 which includes the *comma* was widespread in late Medieval Christianity: the writings of Lombard and Aquinas. Both of these scholastic theologians used the *comma* in their articulations of the doctrine of the Trinity. Since Lombard and Aquinas were the main synthesizers and school masters of theology in the late Middle Ages,⁷⁷ they are good reference points to estimate how Christian theologians read 1 John 5:7–8 at that time.

Lombard's influential systematic work on Christian thought, *The Sentences*, quotes the *comma* in his argumentation for the Trinity.⁷⁸ However, he recognizes that the text, in itself, is not a definitive and unquestionable proof for the orthodox view of the Trinity. Priscillian, for example, who we noted as using the *comma*, was believed to be a Sabellian or modalist—someone who thought the three manifestations of God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) were different modes of the same being, not distinct persons. In contrast, the defenders of Trinitarian orthodoxy, such as the three Cappadocian Fathers (i.e., Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus), did not use it. Therefore, Lombard, in order to explain his concept of the unity of God in three distinct persons against that of other views about God, not only uses John 10:30 and 1 John 5:7—as did Tertullian (with the difference that Tertullian used only one phrase from 1 John, “these three are one”)—but also understood these passages to mean the following:

When we answer three persons—we say as follows: It is indubitably true that no one other thing is to be found there which those three are, except essence: for those three are one thing, that is, divine essence But since the Catholic faith professed there to be three, as John says in the canonical Epistle: *There are three who give witness in heaven*, the question arose about what those three might be.⁷⁹

⁷⁷Marcia L. Colish, *Peter Lombard*, Brill's Studies in Intellectual History 41.1–2 (New York: Brill, 1994), 1.2; Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Aquinas's Summa: Background, Structure, & Reception*, trans. Benedict M. Guevin (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 86–105.

⁷⁸E.g., Peter Lombard, *The Sentences*, 1.2.5.3, 1.21.3.2, 1.25.2.4. The translation used here is from Peter Lombard, *The Sentences*, trans. Giulio Sinalò, 4 vols. (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2007–2010), 1:18, 121, 137.

⁷⁹Lombard, *The Sentences*, 1.25.2.4; emphasis original.

Despite the rendering of 1 John 5 with the *comma* in the time of Lombard, there were still questions about how one should understand the being of God and the characteristic of unity or oneness. Again, the *comma* was not definitive evidence for what became orthodox Trinitarianism because the text could be used (and was used) otherwise.⁸⁰ Aquinas also faced the same problem and gave a similar answer: “To ask, What? is to refer to essence. But, as Augustine says in the same place, when we read *There are three who bear witness in heaven, the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, and it is asked, ‘three what?,’ the answer is, ‘Three persons.’* Therefore ‘person’ signifies the essence.”⁸¹

Both Lombard and Aquinas depended heavily on Augustine; however, we cannot find the *comma* in Augustine’s writings as Aquinas referenced him. As noticed by recent editors of the *Summa*, here Aquinas “is probably telescoping words from Peter Lombard.”⁸² In other words, the above statements from Aquinas were his traditional (Trinitarian) readings of Augustine and Scriptures via Lombard. The text of 1 John 5 was read in Trinitarian terms because this was the spirit of the time. Thus, by the time of the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 (the time of the earliest known Greek appearance of the *comma*), this reading was standard in Latin and remained so until the sixteenth century, when Erasmus raised the question of its authenticity with his printed editions of the Greek New Testament.

Summary

This article surveyed the current state of the question of the textual variant in 1 John 5:7–8, known as the Johannine *comma*, within recent scholarly works in English, as well as its probable origins and transmission in Latin and its late appearance within Greek theological literature and biblical manuscripts. According to the data available, the earliest biblical manuscript in Greek that contains the *comma* in the text is dated no earlier than the fourteenth century. It is possible to see a tenth-century presence of the *comma* within the margin of a biblical manuscript only if the marginal variant in MSS 221 is dated to the same century as the manuscript itself. In Latin, however, the existence of this variant reading dates back to the third or fourth century. It is in the Latin history of this text that the probable origin of the *comma* is to be found, yet very few works in English discuss the actual origin of the *comma* or its history in Latin.

⁸⁰As Schnackenburg concludes after reviewing the transmission of the *comma*, the text *per se* “does not have the kind of dogmatic significance that has been attributed to it” (*The Johannine Epistles*, 46). But by the time of Lombard and Aquinas, the late Middle Ages, the text did have dogmatic significance for most theologians.

⁸¹Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* Ia question 29 article 4. The translation used here is from Ceslaus Velecky, ed., *St Thomas Aquinas Summa Theologiae: Latin Text and English Translation, Introductions, Notes, Appendices and Glossaries*, 60 vols, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964–1966), 6:57; emphasis original. See also *ibid.*, Ia 30 article 2, (*ibid.*, 6:69), and Ia 36 article 1.3, (*ibid.*, 7:53).

⁸²*Ibid.*, 6:56.

It is without question that the first extant manifestation of the *comma* in its full form is from Priscillian's *Liber Apologeticus*, which was written in the fourth century. It is also known that, in the middle of the third century, Cyprian used the language "these three are one" in a Trinitarian way and with a form of scriptural reference. Two main theories have been proposed to explain how the *comma* originated, and their conclusions raise important questions about the validity of this biblical text. All of the arguments of both theories center around the text of Cyprian.

According to Thiele, Cyprian's text suggests that there was a version of the *comma* already in his times. In other words, the *comma* should be dated to the third century or before. However, Brown and others suggest that Cyprian's text can only attest to a theological Trinitarian reading of 1 John 5:7–8 and nothing more. This is because the language of unity, as found in 1 John 5:8, has been applied to the Trinity in Latin theological contexts since the third century. When writers, such as Tertullian, Cyprian, and Augustine, used the theological phrase, "these three are one," there is no clear indication that they were getting that phrase from a manuscript of Scripture. In the case of Cyprian, when he used a normal formula for introducing Scripture, "it is written," he could easily be applying the unity language of the text of 1 John 5:8 to his theological context of the Trinity, thus effectively creating the *comma*. Given that there is neither any biblical manuscript evidence for the *comma* before Cyprian in either Greek or Latin nor is there any theological discussion using the language of the *comma* before Cyprian, it seems probable that Cyprian created the *comma*. Even after Cyprian, there is no theological use of the language of the *comma* in Greek before the thirteenth century, suggesting a Latin origin. If we allow for the view that Priscillian was quoting the *comma* as Scripture in his fourth century *Liber Apologeticus*, then either Cyprian created the *comma*, and it somehow found its way into some manuscripts of Latin Scripture before Priscillian, or Cyprian found the *comma* in one of the many variable Old Latin manuscripts of 1 John, which is no longer extant. Therefore, we are left with actual evidence that Cyprian may have created the *comma* or an argument from silence that he is the first to quote the *comma* from a hypothetical manuscript. If one applies the principle of Ockham's razor to this question, the simplest answer is that Cyprian created the Johannine *comma*. Either way, the majority of Latin theological documents and biblical manuscripts do not use the *comma* until the ninth century, after which it becomes the standard reading in Latin.

Conclusions

If Brown is correct in saying that the *comma* originated in a theological reading of Scripture rather than from the author of 1 John, which is the stronger possibility than that of Thiele's thesis, then what are the implications of this debate for theology and the life of the church?

First, the *comma* is a theologically neutral text. It can and has been used by both Trinitarians and non-Trinitarians alike. Priscillian, the first obvious user of the whole *comma*, was himself condemned as a modalist and was

using the *comma* to promote his non-Trinitarian theology. Even if the text was originally written by the author of 1 John, and we think it was not, it cannot be ascertained that this is a definitive proof of the doctrine of the Trinity. As our survey shows, some non-Trinitarians use it, while many Trinitarians of old and of recent times do not use this passage in their articulation of the Trinity. The doctrine of the Trinity does not depend on this passage nor on any isolated passage but on the reading of the whole of Scripture.

Second, this study indicates that even though the Scriptures were greatly valued and handed down with careful intentionality, some texts of the Bible were changed in this process of transmission. The apparent harmonization of the Gospels, the smoothing of rough texts, and, as may be the case in 1 John 5, the theological enrichment of the text suggest that, for many Christians in history, the belief in the Bible as sacred text did not entail an absolute fixed text.⁸³ This same attitude was evident among the Israelites during the time of Jesus (second temple period).⁸⁴ This means that traditions shaped biblical texts and that Scripture was used dogmatically, for teaching purposes, as 2 Tim 3:16 suggests. The consequences of this history, of how Christians have used Scripture, need to be kept in mind when Christians today discuss how one should use Scripture in the church. Here we limit our comments to the usage of the *comma* in 1 John 5:7–8.

Our assessment is that, even though the language of the *comma* has been found useful for doctrinal purposes (teaching), as by Tertullian and Cyprian, the evidence strongly suggests that the words of the full *comma* originated in Latin. If so, they could have never been a part of the original Greek of 1 John. Furthermore, it looks as if the *comma* may well have been created as a theological argument, later finding its way into the text of 1 John. Therefore, it would seem tautological to use words of a theological argument, later than the text itself, as a theological proof-text. Not only was the *comma*

⁸³Ellen G. White agreed, stating, “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. Yes, they would just as easily stumble over plain facts that the common mind will accept, and discern the Divine, and to which God’s utterance is plain and beautiful, full of marrow and fatness. 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” (*Selected Messages*, 3 vols. [Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1958, 1980], 1:16). For a recent treatment on the different ways Seventh-day Adventists understood revelation and inspiration, see Denis Kaiser, “Trust and Doubt: Perceptions of Divine Inspiration in Seventh-day Adventist History (1880–1930),” (PhD diss., Andrews University, 2017); Alberto R. Timm, “Adventist Views on Inspiration: Part 3,” *Perspective Digest* 14.1 (2009): 44–56.

⁸⁴See, for example, John J. Collins, *Scriptures and Sectarianism: Essays on the Dead Sea Scrolls*, WUNT 332 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014); Sidnie White Crawford, *Rewriting Scripture in Second Temple Times*, Studies in the Dead Sea Scrolls and Related Literature (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

probably created as a theological argument, but it has been used to argue for a variety of conceptualizations of the Godhead, including modalism, as we have demonstrated. As both tautological and ambiguous, it seems logical to refrain from using the *comma* in debates on the doctrine of the Trinity.

Recommendations for a Way Forward

No *status quaestionis* is complete without recommendations for what could come next in scholarship that would benefit the status under consideration. For the Johannine *comma*, the immediate need in regard to the Greek texts is a more complete dating analysis of the marginal variants. This is especially needed for the marginal variant of the *comma* in MS 221. It seems improbable that this marginal variant of the *comma* is nearly as old as the tenth-century manuscript, but, until it is dated conclusively, it remains possible for it to be the earliest Greek witness to the *comma*.

The greatest needs regarding the Latin witnesses are more difficult to fulfill. There is a need to update and expand the research of the Old Latin done by Thiele. Though we disagree with his conclusions concerning the *comma*, Thiele's raw data is very useful both within the few manuscripts of the Old Latin Scripture that are extant, as well as within the fragments of Scripture gleaned from the early Christian Latin writers. An expansion is needed along the lines of what Bart Ehrman has been doing with the efforts to understand the Greek texts and text types behind the biblical quotations and allusions in the early Christian Greek writers. Also, more work is needed on the textual critical history of the Latin Vulgate.⁸⁵ Of course, as translations, the Latin editions of the NT balance the desire to be true to the meaning and readings of the Greek text with the aim of providing a critical record of the history of the NT text in Latin. In regard to the Johannine *comma*, neither of the two most current critical texts of the Latin NT, Nestle-Aland⁸⁶ and Weber-Gryson,⁸⁷ contain the *comma* in the text of 1 John 5:7–8, but they give scant evidence concerning the *comma* as a variant. Additional study of the history of the text is what would further benefit the question of the *comma*. A manuscript-by-manuscript inspection as to the text of 1 John 5:7–8 cannot be derived from the critical editions as printed. There is generally more text-critical information available in print for the Greek NT than for the Latin NT.

When more work is accomplished on the history of the Latin text of 1 John and a more complete analysis of the dating of the marginal variant readings in the Greek manuscripts of 1 John is conducted, then there may need to be another *status quaestionis* on the *comma* to update what has been provided here.

⁸⁵See Houghton, *The Latin New Testament*. This is one of the few most-up-to-date works in English on the subject.

⁸⁶Eberhard Nestle, ed., *Nestle-Aland Novum Testamentum Latine: textum Vaticanum cum apparatu critico ex editionibus et libris manu scriptis collecto imprimendum curavit* (Stuttgart: Württembergische Bibelanstalt, 1961).

⁸⁷Robert Weber and Roger Gryson, eds., *Biblia Sacra Iuxta Vulgatam Versionem* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2007).