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. However,
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. 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. 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. 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 articles and books in English (from the twentieth and

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

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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. 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). Shortly afterward, around 1520, a Codex from Britain came to light, which did contain the variant; it became known as Codex Britannicus or Montfortianus. 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


McDonald, 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. 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?”

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, 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

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13McDonald, “Erasmus,” 51.

1 John 5, and yet contained the *comma*. 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*. For example, the Douay–Rheims Bible (1582) and a critical edition of the New Testament by William Bowyer (1699–1777) 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. Goodwin attacked Roman Catholics, Socinians, and

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15 McDonald, “Erasmus,” 49.
16 English 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.
17 Bruce 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.
18 Lim, *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. 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.”

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. Meanwhile, Jonathan Edwards, the famous preacher of the First Great Awakening, and Ellen G. White, 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. Some early Adventist authors used

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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.


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.

the words “these three are one” to counterargue a particular understanding of the unity between Jesus and God. Other articles employed the same language of unity from 1 John 5 to present a view of divine and ecclesiological unity. Yet another set of articles utilized the same language of unity for anthropological purposes or referred to 1 John 5:7–8 without the comma to explain baptism and the divine witness to Jesus as the Christ. The current, standard understanding of the comma among Adventist scholars can be illustrated by Angel Rodriguez, 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.”

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.

27As 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).


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 com...
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, while others claim it is from the fifteenth, fourteenth, and as early as the twelfth century. Most of them do not explain the variants themselves but refer to or depend upon the works.


33 See “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.


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

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

37 Marshall 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 “636v.” 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 UBS5: 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,\textsuperscript{38} Bruce Metzger,\textsuperscript{39} Rudolf Schnackenburg,\textsuperscript{40} Georg Strecker,\textsuperscript{41} and/or Brooke Foss Westcott.\textsuperscript{42} These latter works\textsuperscript{43} 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 (\textit{Codex Ottobonianus}). This manuscript is dated no earlier than the fourteenth century (for the other manuscript evidences, see tab. 1).\textsuperscript{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\textsuperscript{45} (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.\textsuperscript{46} Clearly, it must be after the origin of the manuscript in the tenth

\textsuperscript{38}Raymond Edward Brown, \textit{The Epistles of John}, AB 30 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1982). Brown recognizes that his information about manuscripts is from Metzger, \textit{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.

\textsuperscript{39}Metzger, \textit{Text of the New Testament}, 2nd ed., 101. In this edition, there is no list of manuscripts provided. See also idem, \textit{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.


\textsuperscript{43}The five authors (excluding Schnackenburg) are also the only references given in the important work of Roger L. Omanson. See \textit{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.”

\textsuperscript{44}Brown, Strecker, and Westcott give a range between the fourteenth and fifteenth century (Brown, \textit{The Epistles of John}, 776; Strecker, \textit{The Johannine Letters}, 189; and Westcott, \textit{The Epistles of St. John}, 3rd ed., 207), while Metzger suggests a range from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century (Metzger, \textit{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, \textit{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.

\textsuperscript{45}This is also the situation in other works on textual criticism, such as Kurt Aland, \textit{Kurzgefasste Liste der griechischen Handschriften des Neuen Testaments}, rev. and enl. ed.,
century, but exactly how long after has not been argued in print. 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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MSS No.</th>
<th>Name/Place</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Discussions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>61</td>
<td>Codex Montfortianus or Britannicus from Dublin, Ireland (used by Erasmus in his 1522 edition, which includes the comma)</td>
<td>sixteenth century MS</td>
<td>Brown, Metzger, Schnackenburg, and Strecker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>88&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Codex Regius of Naples, Italy</td>
<td>eleventh to fourteenth century MS with a marginal gloss from sixteenth or seventeenth century</td>
<td>Metzger (2002)—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</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>221&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Bodleian Library of Oxford</td>
<td>tenth century MS with a marginal gloss that needs dating&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Brown, Metzger, and Strecker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>429&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Codex Wolfenbüttel from Germany</td>
<td>sixteenth century MS with undated gloss&lt;sup&gt;d&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Brown, Metzger, and Strecker</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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<sup>b</sup>In 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.
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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Manuscript</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Authors Referencing the Comma</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>629</td>
<td>Codex Ottobonianus</td>
<td>from the Vatican</td>
<td>fourteenth to sixteenth century MS</td>
<td>Metzger (1964, 1968, 1992) and Schnackenburg—fourteenth or sixteenth century; Brown, Strecker, and Westcott (1892)—fourteenth or fifteenth century</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>636&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Naples, Italy</td>
<td>fifteenth or sixteenth century with undated gloss&lt;sup&gt;d&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Metzger—sixteenth century; Brown and Strecker—fifteenth century</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>918</td>
<td>Escorial from Spain</td>
<td>sixteenth century</td>
<td>Brown, Metzger, and Strecker</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2318</td>
<td>Bucharest, Romania</td>
<td>eighteenth century</td>
<td>Brown, Metzger, and Strecker</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2473&lt;sup&gt;g&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Athens, Greece</td>
<td>seventeenth century&lt;sup&gt;d&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Not mentioned by Brown, Metzger, Schnackenburg, Strecker, or Westcott</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>177&lt;sup&gt;g&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Munich, Germany</td>
<td>eleventh century MS with marginal gloss from sixteenth century</td>
<td>Not mentioned by Brown, Metzger, Schnackenburg, Strecker, or Westcott, but listed in Wikipedia and commented on by Wallace&lt;sup&gt;i&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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</table>

<sup>a</sup>Out 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).

<sup>b</sup>Metzger, Text of the New Testament, 101, dated the manuscript to the twelfth century with a gloss from the seventeenth century.

<sup>c</sup>The Wikipedia article, “Comma Johanneum,” dated this gloss as from the fifteenth or sixteenth century, but gives neither rationale nor reference for this gloss date.

<sup>d</sup>The 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.

<sup>e</sup>In all of the editions of Metzger, Text of the New Testament, 101, the manuscript is dated to the fifteenth or sixteenth century.

<sup>f</sup>The 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.

<sup>g</sup>This manuscript evidence is mentioned by The Greek New Testament (2014) and the Wikipedia article.

<sup>h</sup>Aland dated this manuscript to 1634 (Kurzgefasste Liste, 190). The Wikipedia article, “Comma Johanneum,” dated this manuscript to the eighteenth century, but gives neither rationale nor reference.

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 nonexistent 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.

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


\(^50\) Regarding 1 John 5:7–8, the critical apparatus of the two most used Greek New Testaments, UBS\(^7\) and NA\(^\text{46}\), list only variants from Greek and a selection of Latin that contains the *comma*.

The Johannine Comma (1 John 5:7–8) . . .

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.32 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 topic33 have not been translated from German, and many scholars do not refer to them in their discussions of the *comma*.34 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.35

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34Of 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 sixth\textsuperscript{55} to the seventh\textsuperscript{56} and eighth centuries.\textsuperscript{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:\textsuperscript{58} Codex Fuldensis, which has the comma in its prologue, and Codex Frisingensis, which has it in the margin. Meanwhile, Brown\textsuperscript{59} 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.

\textsuperscript{55}Metzger, 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).

\textsuperscript{56}Akin, 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 Toledo (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.).

\textsuperscript{57}Jobes, 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.

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

\textsuperscript{59}Brown 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,” 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. The scholarly consensus is that Liber Apologeticus is the first extant reference to the complete comma. 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, created the comma, and it was subsequently added to biblical manuscripts. This would cast the comma as a fourth

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60 The 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 Isu.” 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.

61 This 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.


63 Conti 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.

64 Explicitly, 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 Teofilio 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*).

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\(^65\)Brown, *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).


\(^67\)See nn52, 54 above.

The Johannine Comma (1 John 5:7–8) . . .

Table 2. Variants of the Latin Johannine Comma

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Text</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>c. 215</td>
<td>Tertullian</td>
<td>North Africa</td>
<td>Ita connexus Patris in Filio, et Filii in Paraclete, tres efficit cohaerentes, alterum ex altero, qui tres unum sint, non unus. Quomodo dictum est: Ego et Pater unum sumus [John 10:30].</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV</td>
<td>Priscillian</td>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>Sicut Iohannes ait: <em>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, verbum et spiritus et haec tria unum sunt in Christo Iesu.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV–V</td>
<td>Augustine</td>
<td>North Africa</td>
<td>Sane falli te nolo in Epistola Joannis apostolic ubi ait: <em>Tres sunt testes; spiritus, et aqua, et sanguis; et tres unum sunt</em> [1 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, Tres sunt testes, et tres unum sunt . . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III–IV</td>
<td>K</td>
<td>North Africa and Spain</td>
<td>tres testimonium perhibent spiritus et aqua et sanguis et <em>isti tres</em> in unum sunt pater et <em>filius</em> et spiritus <em>sanctus</em> et tres unum sunt.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III–V</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>North Africa</td>
<td>*tres sunt qui testimonium dicunt in terra spiritus et aqua et sanguis et <em>isti tres unum sunt in Christo Iesu et tres sunt qui testimonium dicunt in caelo pater <em>verb</em>um et spiritus et hi tres unum sunt.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV–VI</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>North Africa and Italy</td>
<td>tres sunt qui testificantur in terra spiritus et aqua et sanguis et tres sunt qui testificatur in caelo pater et <em>filius</em> et spiritus <em>sanctus</em> et hi tres unum sunt.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV–V</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>tres sunt qui testimonium dant spiritus et aqua et sanguis et tres unum sunt.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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

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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. 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."

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. 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, though such is unattested. Marshall and Schnackenburg concur

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73Thiele, “Beobachtungen zum Comma Johanneum,” 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.


\(^75\)This 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.

\(^76\)From 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, 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. 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.\(^7\)


\(^8\)E.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 Sinalo, 4 vols. (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2007–2010), 1:18, 121, 137.

\(^9\)Lombard, 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. 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.”

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.” 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.

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80 As 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.


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 Ocham'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 possibly 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 prooftext. 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.

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. 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-Aland and Weber-Gryson, 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.

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