

Erasmus and the Johannine Comma (1 John 5.7-8)

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Abstract

Erasmus's 1516 Latin–Greek New Testament edition differed from the Latin Vulgate in several ways. A small number of textual variants with doctrinal implications involved Erasmus in considerable controversy. Medieval Western theologians had often relied on the “Johannine Comma” (the long reading of 1 John 5.7-8), established in the Latin Vulgate during the late Middle Ages, as an important scriptural foundation for the doctrine of the Trinity. However, when Erasmus showed that this variant was not present in the Greek manuscript tradition, he was accused of promoting Arianism. Erasmus's debates with the cleric Edward Lee and the textual critic Jacobus Stunica exposed tensions between theologians, jealous of their authority in scriptural interpretation, and humanists, who claimed to understand the Bible better than theologians by virtue of their philological skills. This article concludes by exploring the Inquisition's failed attempt to find a consensus on this issue in 1527.

Keywords

Erasmus, New Testament, Trinity, Vulgate, Johannine Comma, humanism, Inquisition, biblical philology

The cultural movement known as the Renaissance was brought about by an increasing recognition of the intellectual, religious, and linguistic distance

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that separated the classical world from the present. A renewed interest in the textual legacy of antiquity led scholars to search monastery libraries for texts that had lain undisturbed for centuries, sometimes since the previous waves of interest in antique literature in comparable revivals that took place in the ninth and twelfth centuries. Scholars soon noticed that not all copies of the texts they found were the same, and not all were equally reliable. When a given text existed in multiple copies, the number of variants increased accordingly, but the textual scholar also had more potentially useful data to work with. Scholars such as Lorenzo Valla and Angelo Poliziano developed techniques that allowed them to determine which textual variants likely reflected the earliest form of the text, and which had been introduced through error or deliberate intervention on the part of an earlier scribe. (Modern textual scholars have now generally abandoned the search for the “original” or “authorial” text, and strive instead to reconstruct the earliest form of the text that can be posited on the basis of the extant textual variants; cf. Epp 1999.) When the surviving documents seemed not to yield a sensible result, these scholars developed techniques for suggesting conjectural emendations to the text (Krans 2006).

A further impulse in the revival of classical literature in Western Europe came when a small number of Greeks were employed to teach their language in Italy. These numbers increased as a result of the Council of Ferrara–Florence–Rome (1438–1445) and the fall of Constantinople in 1453. Greek scholars brought not merely their language, but also valuable manuscripts of classical, biblical, patristic, and Byzantine literature, much of which was unknown in the Western Middle Ages. By the end of the fifteenth century, Western European scholars strove towards the ideal of the *homo trilinguis*, the scholar fluent in the three biblical languages of Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, an ideal exemplified by St. Jerome.

Erasmus of Rotterdam never learned much Hebrew, but began studying Greek sometime in the late 1490s (Markish 1986, 112–41; Rummel 1985, 10–11). Largely self-taught, he soon gained considerable mastery in the language. In 1504, his interest in the textual history of the New Testament was piqued when he discovered a manuscript of Lorenzo Valla’s notes on the text of the Latin Vulgate in the monastery of Park, near Leuven, which he published the following year. He began to examine Greek manuscripts of the New Testament, many of which had been brought to Western Europe by Greek refugees, or copied there on the basis of manuscripts in their possession.

Erasmus began to revise the Latin Vulgate version of the New Testament in about 1511.¹ Traditionally it was believed that Jerome had translated the

¹ See Henk Jan de Jonge’s contribution in this issue for further details.

entire Bible into Latin, in order to replace earlier piecemeal efforts. Modern scholarship has determined that Jerome translated only the Old Testament and the Gospels. The rest of the New Testament was a compilation of earlier translations. Although the Latin Vulgate was not formally authorized in the Western church until the Council of Trent, convened soon after Erasmus's death, it had gained *de facto* canonical status by long usage. Consequently, Erasmus's decision to revise the Latin Vulgate met with considerable resistance. Henk Jan de Jonge has shown that Erasmus's original intention was to revise the Latin Vulgate New Testament. At some points he remained very close to the Vulgate, but at other points his interventions were more radical, especially where he saw that the Vulgate diverged from the Byzantine (or Majority) text, which he mistakenly believed to be the most accurate form of the Greek text. He realized that readers would appreciate—and perhaps even demand—a justification of his editorial decisions. Accordingly, he presented a parallel Greek text to justify his alterations to the Latin. This edition was not intended for all readers, merely for scholars. However, he hoped that it would bring about a renewal of piety and genuine interest in the Scripture.

Erasmus was one of the philological giants of his time, but his editorial work on the Greek New Testament was not perfect. Fortunately, Erasmus provided us with the means to assess the quality of his work: his detailed annotations on the text, which he revised and augmented for each of his five editions of the New Testament (1516, 1519, 1522, 1527, 1535). These annotations permit us to identify the manuscripts he used. His evaluation of these manuscripts and the textual tradition they transmitted was not always sound. The form of the Greek text he preferred, the so-called Byzantine or Majority text, does not always reflect the earliest form of the text that can be recovered. Furthermore, Erasmus's selection of variants from the manuscripts available to him was at times haphazard. Occasionally (as at Matt 14.12; Mark 1.16; Acts 9.5; and Rev 22.16c-21), he chose to follow the readings in the Latin Vulgate, and adapted the Greek text accordingly, occasionally even translating from Latin into Greek. The first edition of his diglot New Testament (1516) was set badly by the compositors and contained many errors. The radical nature of Erasmus's project was thus undercut by the rather disappointing form in which it was first presented.

Erasmus's annotations revealed at several points that certain doctrines were based on a misunderstanding of the Greek text. Famously, Erasmus showed in his annotations on Matt 3.2 that John the Baptist's call to repent (Μετανοεῖτε) was not a command to perform acts of penance, as "our common people" believed, but was rather an exhortation to undergo a change of attitude towards one's former life. Jerome had translated this word as

“poenitentiam agite,” since the direct translations “poenitete” or “poenitemini” were unidiomatic Latin. As knowledge of the usage of classical Latin disappeared, an indefensible theological interpretation of this verse was developed (Hovingh 2000, 110–12). This annotation chimed with the theology that Luther was developing at precisely the same time. Luther’s *Septembertestament* (1522) is based on the 1519 edition of Erasmus’s text. However, it is not clear if he had seen Erasmus’s 1516 edition before formulating his 1517 theses on justification.²

Some of Erasmus’s annotations touched on Christology and the doctrine of the Trinity. In his annotation on John 1.1, Erasmus observed that Jesus is rarely called God in the New Testament. The term “God” usually refers exclusively to the Father (de Jonge 1983, 124–30). In the preface to his edition of the works of Hilary, Erasmus extended this point, noting that neither Jesus nor the Spirit are generally called God in the New Testament. Hilary never called the Spirit God, and never said that the Spirit was worthy of worship.³

Erasmus’s most controversial contribution to discussions of the biblical basis of the doctrine of the Trinity concerned the so-called “Johannine Comma.” The word “comma” here does not refer to punctuation, but means “clause.” The clause in question is the Trinitarian formula in 1 John 5.7–8.⁴ The manuscripts Erasmus used for his first two editions read, “For there are three that bear record: the Spirit, and the water, and the blood, and these three agree in one” (ὅτι τρεῖς εἰσιν οἱ μαρτυροῦντες· τὸ πνεῦμα, καὶ τὸ ὕδωρ, καὶ τὸ αἷμα·⁵ καὶ οἱ τρεῖς εἰς τὸ ἓν εἰσιν). However, the Parisian edition of the Latin Vulgate, a text-form standardized in the late Middle Ages, gives the following reading of this passage: “*For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one.*”⁶ *And there are three that bear witness in earth, the Spirit, and the water, and the blood, and these three agree in one*” (Quoniam tres sunt qui testimonium dant in caelo: Pater, Verbum et Spiritus sanctus: et hi tres unum sunt.

² Luther also studied the 1527 edition of Erasmus’s New Testament; his copy is in the Groningen University Library, HS 494.

³ Erasmus 1523a, aa6v: “Pater frequentissime deus uocatur, filius aliquoties, spiritus sanctus nunquam. Atque haec dixerim, non ut in dubium uocem, quod nobis è diuinis literis patrum orthodoxorum tradidit autoritas, sed ut ostendam, quanta fuerit antiquis religio pronunciandi de rebus diuinis.” Cf. Erasmus 1524, c6v: “Eadem religione fuit sanctus Hilarius, qui post diuturnum silentium, duodecim libris instantissime contendit, ut filium doceat esse uerum deum, quum solus pater dictus sit in Euangelio uerus deus: spiritum sanctum nusquam quod sciam audet pronunciare deum, nec adorandum profiteatur, sed promerendum.”

⁴ Modern scholarship tends to the conclusion that the Johannine Epistles were not written by the same person as the fourth Gospel, but in Erasmus’s day, all these documents were attributed to the evangelist. See Lieu 2008, 8.

⁸ *Et tres sunt qui testimonium dant in terra: Spiritus et aqua et sanguis: et hi tres unum sunt*). The Johannine Comma comprises the words “in heaven” in v. 7 to “in earth” in v. 8, indicated above in italics. Theologians of the Western Middle Ages regularly cited the Johannine Comma as the most explicit reference to the Trinity in the entire Bible. While some episodes in the New Testament, such as Jesus’ baptism in Mark 1.10–11, mention God, Jesus, and Spirit, these three persons are only described as “one” (an important element of the doctrine of the Trinity) in the Johannine Comma. When Erasmus failed to find the Comma in any of the three Greek manuscripts he had consulted at this point, he was evidently perplexed.⁵ In his annotations on this passage in the first and second editions of the New Testament, he laconically reported the shorter reading he found in his Greek manuscripts. More controversially, he stated that the phrase “are one” does not refer to a numerical unity, but a unity of purpose.⁶

How could Erasmus fail to find the Comma in his manuscripts? In fact, only one Greek manuscript copied before Erasmus’s birth is known to contain the Comma, a bilingual manuscript copied in the last third of the fourteenth century, in which the Greek text has been altered extensively to conform more closely to the parallel Latin text.⁷ The textual evidence suggests that the Comma developed within the Latin tradition as an allegorical gloss to the phrase “these three are one,” which occurs as a Trinitarian formula in several early Latin creeds and creed-like statements. The Comma is absent from the earliest Latin Bibles, but is found in almost all by the thirteenth century, probably under the influence of credal formulations and the perceived theological utility of the passage.

Erasmus’s edition and the accompanying annotations polarized opinion. While some hailed the work as the morning star of a new age, others decried it as blasphemous and even heretical. Alongside his other literary productions, Erasmus continued to collate variants in New Testament manuscripts for two decades, refining his readings, expanding his annotations, and responding to critics. In 1517 he moved to Leuven, seat of the oldest university in the Low Countries, where Edward Lee, an English cleric studying at Leuven, offered him a series of comments on his edition and

⁵ GA 1^{cap} (Basle, Öffentliche Bibliothek der Universität [UB] ms A. N. IV. 2); GA 2815^{ap} (Basle, UB ms A. N. IV. 4); GA 2816^{ap} (Basle, UB ms A. N. IV. 5); Gregory–Aland (GA) numbers refer to the manuscripts listed in Aland et al. 1994.

⁶ Erasmus 1516, 618: “Tres sunt qui testimonium dant in coelo.) In graeco codice tantum hoc reperio de testimonio triplici: ὅτι τρεῖς εἰσιν οἱ μαρτυροῦντες, τὸ πνεῦμα καὶ τὸ ὕδωρ, καὶ τὸ αἶμα id est quoniam tres sunt qui testificantur, spiritus, & aqua, & sanguis. Et hi tres unum sunt.) Hi redundant. Neque est, unum, sed in unum, εἰς τὸ αὐτὸ id est siue in idem.”

⁷ Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana ms Ottob. gr. 298, GA 629^{ap}.

the accompanying annotations. It is unclear whether Lee offered these comments spontaneously or (as Lee claimed) at Erasmus's request, but the young man was evidently offended when Erasmus declined to take his comments seriously. When Erasmus discovered that Lee intended to publish his comments, he did his best to prevent this from happening, but the book finally appeared in early 1520.⁸

The last of Lee's twenty-five annotations on Erasmus's annotations on the New Testament dealt with the Johannine Comma. Lee relied heavily on a prologue to the Catholic Epistles, widely believed at the time to have been written by Jerome, but now generally regarded as an early forgery surreptitiously passed off as Jerome's handiwork.⁹ This prologue stated that the Johannine Comma had been removed by "unfaithful translators." On the basis of this claim, Lee suggested that the evidence provided by any given manuscript is doubtful. Moreover, he insinuated that Erasmus had reproduced the reading found in a manuscript corrupted by a heretical scribe, and had not bothered to check it against other manuscripts. If Valla had failed to find this passage in his manuscripts, he certainly would have noted it. But more importantly, Lee feared that the omission of the verse would lend support to the Arians, who denied Jesus' equality with the Father, and thus rejected the doctrine of the Trinity. According to Lee, the Comma provided an effective refutation of such heresies.

In a printed response to Lee's criticisms, Erasmus repeated his assertion that the Comma was absent from the manuscripts he had consulted. If Valla failed to note the absence of the Comma from his manuscript, then it was by error or oversight. Even if Valla's manuscripts did contain the Comma, Erasmus could not be blamed for not having had access to the same manuscripts. In any case, he claimed to have consulted more manuscripts than Valla. He denied that the prologue to the Catholic Epistles proves that the Comma was originally part of the Greek text. (He did not question the traditional ascription to Jerome here, though his omission of the prologue from his edition of Jerome's works is suggestive of his attitude.) In any case, Jerome's judgement was not always reliable or consistent. Sometimes he approved parts of Scripture that he had earlier rejected. Since he rejected parts of the Scripture that were still read in church, such as the Old Testament Apocrypha, his opinions on the canon of Scripture evidently diverged from the opinion of the church at large. Moreover, Lee's own interpretation of the prologue was problematic. Jerome claimed that variations between rival Latin translations of the Catholic Epistles caused confusion. In fact, Jerome

⁸ Lee 1520.

⁹ PL 29:825–32.

himself was accused of changing the commonly accepted formulations of Scripture. It was clear then that Jerome's Vulgate did not represent the text of the Bible as it was commonly read in the fourth century. Indeed, other orthodox fathers, such as Cyril and Bede, cited the immediate context of 1 John 5, but omitted the Comma. Erasmus agreed with Lee that the textual evidence provided by any one manuscript is unreliable, but since every manuscript of the Bible contains variants, then none can be said to transmit the text with absolute fidelity. The editor's task is simply to present the evidence of the available manuscripts. Lee had insinuated that Erasmus's reading of 1 John was based on one faulty manuscript, but Erasmus claimed to have inspected a great number of manuscripts in Basle, Brabant, and England. (This was bluff. Erasmus's reading of the Catholic Epistles still rested only on the three manuscripts he had seen in Basle.) If Lee could produce a Greek manuscript in which the Comma was transmitted, and if he could show that Erasmus had access to that manuscript, then he could accuse Erasmus of negligence. Lee's accusation that Erasmus had tried to deceive his readers said more about him than about Erasmus. Erasmus had no reason to hide evidence, especially when such evidence might so easily be discovered by others. He had just as little desire to promote Arianism. In any case, this heresy had been suppressed a millennium earlier. Even if Arians were to reappear, they would certainly not be silenced by the Comma. In any case, apologists could draw on other passages of Scripture to defend the doctrine of the Trinity. However, they would need to prove that passages such as John 10.30 and John 17.22 referred to a unity of substance rather than one of witness, function, or will. Not even Augustine managed to do this very effectively. But Lee's criticisms also revealed a problematic attitude to the text of Scripture. He was afraid that the entire edifice of Scripture would fall if this one detail were found to be corrupt, but the text of Scripture is full of such textual pitfalls (*Responsio ad Annotationes Lei novas* in Rummel 2003, 323–28). For his part, Erasmus's response revealed an anxiety that Lee's accusation of heresy might damage the reception of his edition, and thus undermine his dream of reviving Christianity through a pious "philosophy of Christ." Lee did not respond to Erasmus in print, though he actively stirred up opposition to him in France and Spain.

Soon after Lee's book appeared, another set of criticisms appeared from a more substantial critic, Jacobus Stunica. Stunica's opposition to Erasmus may have been motivated in part by personal animus, since he was one of the editors of the Complutensian Polyglot edition of the Bible. When Erasmus published his diglot New Testament in 1516, he narrowly snatched the honour of publishing the first Greek New Testament from the Spanish editors, and they never forgot it. Stunica asserted that the text

of 1 John 5.7-8 as transmitted in the Greek manuscripts was corrupt, but that the “true” reading was transmitted in the Latin Vulgate. As evidence, Stunica cited the prologue to the Catholic Epistles. The Complutensian New Testament contains the Comma. The identity of the manuscript sources used for this edition remains unclear. According to one improbable story, they were later used to make skyrockets. In any case, the reading of the Johannine Comma given in the Complutensian New Testament is not found in any manuscript predating that edition. Stunica’s comments seem to admit that the editors, dismissing their Greek manuscripts as corrupt at this point, had simply made good the lack by translating the Comma from Latin into Greek. Thomas Aquinas mistakenly believed that the phrase “these three are one” in 1 John 5.8 (referring to the Spirit, water, and blood) had been added by Arians, and later Latin scribes often omitted it on his authority. The inclusion in the Complutensian edition of a footnote reporting Aquinas’s opinion on this passage, and the omission of the phrase “these three are one” in the Latin reading, lend support to the suspicion that the Complutensian editors allowed theological priorities to guide their textual judgment at this point. The inclusion of a reading of the Comma found in no earlier manuscript, and the omission of the phrase “these three are one” from the Greek reading of 1 John 5.8, sharpen this suspicion even further.

Erasmus wrote a reply to Stunica’s book between June and September 1521.¹⁰ Erasmus taunted Stunica with the fact that he could not produce any Greek manuscript in support of the Comma. He also pointed out that the Greek fathers who cited the immediate context of 1 John 5 in their writings against the Arians all failed to mention the Comma. Although absence of evidence does not necessarily amount to evidence of absence, this is still a remarkable circumstance. Erasmus also reported the absence of the Comma from a number of old manuscripts he had seen in Bruges, and from the Codex Vaticanus. All this evidence called the reliability of the prologue to the Catholic Epistles into doubt. Erasmus also argued that Stunica, like Lee, laboured under a faulty attitude towards the Bible. One should not read the Bible, Erasmus admonished, in order to build theological systems, but to draw closer to God. In any case, the Comma, whose meaning was far from clear, was powerless to refute heretics.

Erasmus kept his last surprise until the end. He announced to Stunica that a Greek manuscript had been found in England which contained the Comma, and lacked the phrase “these three are one” in 1 John 5.8. He used this manuscript to restore the Comma to his text, splicing it into the reading

¹⁰ Erasmus, *Apologia respondens ad ea quae Iacobus Lopis Stunica taxaverat in prima duntaxat Novi Testamenti aeditione*, in de Jonge 1983.

he had established for his 1516 edition. However, he expressed his reservations about this manuscript, suggesting that it had been adapted to agree with the Latin Vulgate.

Erasmus's suspicions about this "British codex"—housed since the seventeenth century in the library of Trinity College Dublin (ms 30)—were well founded. One of its parent manuscripts was copied in England in the late fifteenth century. This fact gives an earliest possible date for the creation of the codex, and suggests that it was probably written in England. The watermark in its paper indicates that it was manufactured in the decades around 1500. One of the first owners of the manuscript was Francis Frowyk, minister general of the Observant Franciscans in England. It later belonged to John Clement, foster-son of Thomas More, who arrived in Leuven in the late summer of 1520. At Leuven, Clement spent time with Erasmus and studied with Erasmus's friend Juan Luis Vives. Erasmus did not mention the manuscript in his response to Lee, published in early 1520, but had evidently seen it before publishing his first response to Stunica in October 1521. It is likely that Clement brought the manuscript with him from England, and showed it to Erasmus some time over the coming year. Despite his suspicions about the textual value of the manuscript, Erasmus recognized it as a way out of the dispute with Lee and Stunica. He adapted its reading of the Comma for the third edition of his New Testament (1522), and inserted a long discussion of the Comma, lifted primarily from his first response to Stunica, in the accompanying annotations. Erasmus had thrown a sop to those readers who believed that the Comma was a genuine part of Scripture, but had also provided critical readers with further evidence of its spuriousness. The ambivalence of this decision caused considerable disagreement amongst those who read his work.

Erasmus's attitude to the Comma remained ambivalent. In his devotional paraphrase of the Catholic Epistles (1523), he included the Comma, interpreting the heavenly witnesses (Father, Word, and Holy Spirit) as witnesses to Christ's divinity, and the earthly witnesses (Spirit, water, and blood) as witnesses to his humanity. However, he maintained his earlier position that the unity of the persons of the Trinity was one of witness, not one of essence. His paraphrase of John 10.30 likewise indicated that the unity with the Father of which Jesus spoke here was one of testimony and judgement (Erasmus 1523b, li5v-6r).

In the summer of 1527, the Spanish Inquisition invited a group of theologians to Valladolid to respond to a series of articles drawn from Erasmus's writings.¹¹ Amongst these accusations was that Erasmus had argued against

¹¹ The responses of the delegates are edited in Beltrán de Heredia 1970–1973, 6:16–120. Commentary and analysis can be found in Homza 1997. See the contribution of Alejandro Coroleu in this issue for broader coverage of the Valladolid conference.

the Trinity. Specifically, it was alleged that in his annotations on the Comma he attacked its authenticity, defended corrupt manuscripts, dismissed Jerome as inconsistent, promoted Arianism, and claimed that the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity can only be demonstrated by reason, not by using scriptural evidence. The responses of the delegates showed much variation. While some maintained that Erasmus's entire undertaking was essentially impious, others were more sympathetic. Some even maintained that the inquisitor's articles sometimes misrepresented Erasmus's position. While some delegates responded positively to Erasmus's humanistic style of exegesis, others considered his rejection of theological system-building a threat to the scholastic method, through which doctrine had been taught for centuries. Some delegates also believed that Erasmus, by questioning the canonicity of this passage, had destabilized the notion of the scriptural canon. 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? Some delegates pointed out that the church is custodian of traditions not explicitly mentioned in Scripture. Even if the Comma was not transmitted strongly in the manuscript tradition, the church's use and approval of this passage conferred canonicity upon it. Sancho Carranza de Miranda pointed out that a judgement of Erasmus's orthodoxy depended on distinguishing clearly between the manuscript attestation of a passage and its canonicity. Erasmus reported the absence of the passage from the manuscripts he used for his first edition, but submitted to the authority of the church in restoring it in the third edition. On the radical end of the spectrum, Santiago Cabrero suggested that Erasmus would have been within his rights as an editor to persist in excluding the Comma from his text, since it was still represented only in a minority of his manuscripts.

Most of the delegates evidently believed that the church had transmitted a stable text of Scripture, and that textual variants in any given manuscript were simply unimportant deviations from the putative perfect text of the tradition. They therefore found it unaccountable that Erasmus should give such consideration to variants found in individual manuscripts. A small minority acknowledged Erasmus's insight that the ways in which the fathers cited—or failed to cite—a given passage of Scripture could provide important information about its textual history.

It then rested on the delegates to decide what should become of Erasmus and his edition. This depended on his motivations for first excluding the Comma, and then readmitting it into his text. Some traditionalists suggested that Bibles lacking the Comma should be banned from sale. Some suggested that denying the genuineness of the Comma should be made a capital

offence. Some agreed that Erasmus's position smelled like Arianism. If he continued to express his doubts about the passage, he would stand under clear suspicion of heresy. Others suggested that offensive parts of the annotations could be deleted in existing copies, and amended in future editions. One even suggested that Erasmus should be required to affirm the authenticity of the Comma unambiguously in the next edition of his New Testament. More sympathetic voices pointed out that none of the delegates at Valladolid had seen the manuscripts used by Erasmus. They would do better to trust the opinions of Erasmus, who had seen the manuscripts, than Lee, who had not. Erasmus had often asserted that it was impossible to prove the doctrines of the church to heretics simply by citing Scripture at them; instead, one needed to use reason. This claim drew a variety of responses from the Spanish delegates. Some claimed that Scripture is self-evidently clear and sufficient to demonstrate the truth of doctrine. Others agreed that some doctrines, including the doctrine of the Trinity, can only be demonstrated by a combination of Scripture and reason. Some of the delegates maintained that the Comma expresses the ontological unity of the Father, Son, and Spirit. A minority agreed with Erasmus (and the *Glossa ordinaria*) that the unity of the heavenly witnesses could also refer to an agreement of will and witness, and conceded that it is therefore of little use in convincing heretics.

The variety of opinion displayed by the delegates at Valladolid, despite the unsympathetic presentation of his position in the inquisitor's articles, reflects the ambivalence of reactions to his work, from hostile and vindictive rejection to a generous but critical evaluation of the strength of his arguments and evidence. The delegates at Valladolid submitted their responses under a certain pressure of time, and thus present valuable gut reactions to Erasmus's work. Yet even the most positive of the reactions show that few readers understood the nature of Erasmus's project, or fundamental philological issues such as the editor's need to judge the authority of individual codices and the broader textual traditions to which they belonged. These responses also revealed the desirability of an authoritative text of Scripture to which all contestants in a debate could refer. This matter would finally be decided at the Council of Trent in favour of the Latin Vulgate. In the last third of the sixteenth century, several prominent Roman Catholic scholars, especially at the University of Leuven, engaged in producing authoritative editions of the Vulgate.

In his printed response to the inquisitor's articles (1528), Erasmus denied the accusation that he defended corrupted codices. He simply communicated what he had found in the Greek manuscripts. He denied that his remarks about the Comma constituted an attack on the Trinity, as the inquisitors alleged. None of the Greek fathers cited the Comma, even in

those disputes against the Arians in which they might have been expected to cite it. And the prologue to the Catholic Epistles raised more questions than it answered. If the Comma was missing from the Latin and Greek codices, from where did Jerome restore it? And who were the “unfaithful translators” who had omitted the Comma? If they were Arians, how could they corrupt all the codices of the orthodox? And why did they not also delete verses like John 10.30 while they were at it? But if the Arians argued that John 10.30 referred to a unity of will rather than one of essence, surely they would argue that the Comma did likewise. Heaven help the church if its doctrines are so imperilled by doubts about the authenticity of a single passage of Scripture (Erasmus 1528, 28–31).

Conclusion

When Erasmus first raised his doubts about the authenticity of the Johannine Comma, he could hardly have imagined the troubles in which he would become mired. Yet the Johannine Comma was not just any verse. Western theologians, relying exclusively on the Latin Vulgate, had praised this verse for centuries as the most important scriptural witness to the doctrine of the Trinity. The fathers of the church had struggled to find a satisfactory explanation of the nature of the Trinity, Christ, and the Holy Spirit, and disagreements about these doctrines continued to haunt the church for centuries. Many of Erasmus’s readers feared that interrogating the authenticity of this verse would destroy this hard-won consensus. Their fears were compounded by the fact that other clerics, notably Martin Luther, had recently questioned other major doctrines, with disastrous effects for the unity and order of the church. A *prima facie* reading of the prologue to the Catholic Epistles suggested that unfaithful translators omitted the Comma from the biblical text as early as the fourth century, to the detriment of doctrine. Erasmus’s attempt to do the same was met with open hostility. Without openly calling the authenticity of this prologue into question, Erasmus nevertheless pointed out that the conclusions that could be drawn from this document were not as straightforward as they first seemed. Erasmus also pointed out that the unity of the earthly witnesses (Spirit, water, blood) was one of witness, not of essence. The same could equally be said of the unity of the Father, Word, and Holy Spirit as described in the Comma. However, this realization led to unappealing theological conclusions. Apologists would do better not to rely on this verse to refute Arians or other heretics. For Erasmus, it was clear that the Comma was not merely textually dubious, but too ambivalent to be of any use in apologetics. Nevertheless, the absence of the Comma from Erasmus’s first two editions of the New Testament caused a storm

of controversy that was not stilled even when he included the Comma in his third edition, on the basis of a manuscript which he suspected of being “adapted” to agree in several details to the Latin Vulgate.

In recent debates over the textual authority of the *textus receptus* and translations made from texts close to it, such as the Authorized Version and the Dutch States Version, the authenticity of the Comma has once again taken on an iconic status as a symbol of the integrity of the “traditional” text as a bulwark against textual criticism, which many conservatives decry as a Trojan horse of liberalism and disbelief. The currency of this debate demonstrates Erasmus’s ongoing legacy in Christian attitudes towards Scripture.

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Abbreviation

PL Patrologia Latina (see Migne 1844–1864 in References)