

The Heavenly Witnesses

1 John 5: 7.

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It is much to be regretted that excellent persons in all ages have been prone to rest some of their defences of the truth on untenable ground. The danger is that when any of these mistakes in proof are set aside, especially by foes of the truth, not only are such uninformed and incautious disputants apt to fight stubbornly for what is indefensible (i.e., really for self), but others, partly through timidity, partly through ignorance, may dread that the truth itself is imperilled, or be even disposed to stand in doubt of it, confounding the ill-conduct of its advocates with its own impregnable evidence.

Thus one hears with humiliation that any man of learning should seek to shelter the famous passage of the three heavenly witnesses from the reprobation which to say the least an interpolated gloss deserves, and from none so heartily as from pious men jealous for the divine glory of the Lord Jesus. Truth is itself too sacred to admit of giving quarter to that which is spurious, the continued sanction of which is hostile to the authority of the Bible, and in particular to the very point which the suspicious article is meant to support. Let us remember that the study of the authorities on which the Greek Testament rests has greatly developed during the last seventy years, and especially perhaps the last thirty. During this time many fresh manuscripts, some of great value and antiquity, have been brought to light, along with a fuller and more exact collation of all that had been previously known; and this makes an error of the kind less excusable and more painful, if it be in a quarter one respects.

I will not cite, however, from any volume of the day, but confront a sentence of the famous J. Calvin with the facts, that every intelligent Christian who may want information, but values nothing but the truth, may be enabled to judge for himself. " Since, however, the passage flows better when this clause [from "in heaven" to "in earth" inclusively] is added (!) and as I see that it is found in the best and most approved copies (!!) I am inclined to receive it as the true reading."* (Calvin, Translation Soc. Comment. on the Cath. Epistles, p. 257. Edinburgh, 1855.) Then, again, Beza, who ought to have known more of the manuscripts, follows in the wake of his leader. Such statements, I confess, are inexplicable, save on the supposition both of strong prejudice and of surprising inattention to the facts of the case. For so decisive is the testimony of ancient documents (whether manuscripts, versions, or citations by the earliest ecclesiastical writers), that if this portion can be allowed to be scripture *against* their testimony, a fatal blow is inflicted on all certainty of evidence *for* the rest of the New Testament; for all the uncials preserve a dead silence as to it, more than 160 cursives, all the lectionaries, all the ancient versions except the Latin, and even of the Latin more than fifty of the oldest and best copies, and of the rest it is in some cases inserted by a later hand, and with that uncertainty of position which often accompanies an interpolation; while it is not once quoted in any genuine remains of the early Greek or even Latin fathers, even where the occasions seem most to call for it. Its supposed citation by Tertullian, Cyprian, Jerome, &c. is an illusion.

* "Quia tamen optime fluit contextus si hoc membrum addatur, et video in optimis ac probatissimis fidei codicibus haberi, ego quoque libenter amplector." — *Comm. in loc.* Ed. Genev. p. 74.

Hence Erasmus, in his first (1516) and second (1519) editions of the Greek New Testament, so far faithfully followed his MS., and did not print verse 7. It would seem that the Complutensian editors

must have boldly translated the Latin version as it stands in the majority of the extant copies; for in the captious attack now before me (*Annotationes Jacobi Lopicis Stunicae contra Erasmus Rot. in defens. translationis N. T.* Complut. 1520), the ablest of them does not pretend to diplomatic authority for the Greek they venture to print, but arraigns the Greek MSS. as corrupted, and backs up the common text of the Vulgate by a quotation from Jerome's (?) *Prologue to the Canonical Epistles*. "Sciendum est hoc loco graecorum codices apertissime esse corruptos: nostros (!) vero veritatem ipsam ut a prima origine traducti sunt continere. Quod ex prologo beati Hieronymi super epistolas canonicas manifeste apparet. Ait enim Quae si sic ut ab eis digestae sunt ita quoque ab interpretibus fideliter in latinum verterentur eloquium: nec ambiguitatem legentibus facerent: nec sermonum sese varietas impugnaret illo praecipue loco ubi de unitate trinitatis in prima Ioannis epistola positum legimus. In qua etiam ab infidelibus translatoribus multum erratum esse a fidei veritate comperimus trium tantummodo vocabula hoc est aquae sanguinis et spiritus in ipsa sua editione ponentibus et patris verbique ac spiritus testimonium ommittentibus in quo maxime et fides catholica roboratur et patris et filii et spiritus sancti una divinitatis substantia comprobatur." [I give the quotation as S. cites it, not as it stands in the Benedictine edition of Jerome's works.]

Erasmus had already replied to our notorious countryman, Edward Lee (afterwards Popish archbishop of York), that he did not find in the Greek what was so common in the Latin, and edited accordingly, without expressing approval or blame; that he had at different times seen seven manuscripts, in none of which was anything that answered to the ordinary Vulgate. "Porro quod *Hieronymus* in Praefatione sua testatur hunc locum ab haereticis depravatum, si velim uti jure meo, possem appellare ab *Hieronymi* auctoritate, quod *Leus* facit quoties ipsi commodum est." And then he proceeds to expose the exaggeration of Lee, and to propose a conjectural correction in the citation from the prologue. (*Desid. Erasmi. Opp. tom. ix., coll. 275, 276.*) The truth is, that, by the common consent of the learned, including the Benedictine and other editors of Jerome's writings, this prologue is confessed not to be his production, but of a much later age, and by an inferior hand. To his Spanish critic he answers, "Hic ex auctoritate Hieronymi [which we have just seen is no authority at all, being a forgery], docet Stunica Graecos codices palam esse depravatos. Sed interim ubi dormit codex ille *Rhodiensis*? Porro nos non susceperamus negotium emendandi Graecos codices, sed quod in illis esset, bona fide reddendi." Then, after a long argument intended to neutralize the alleged statement of Jerome's (which Erasmus says, and no wonder, he does not quite understand), he adds, "Cum Stunica meus toties jactet Rhodiensem codicem, cui tantum tribuit auctoritatis, mirum est, non hic adduxisse illius oraculum, praesertim cum ita fere consentiat cum nostris codicibus, ut videri possit *Lesbia requla*. Veruntamen ne quid dissimulem, repertus est apud Anglos Graecus codex unus, in quo habetur, quod in vulgatis deest. Scriptum est enim hunc ad modum: Ὅτι τρεῖς εἰσὶν οἱ μαρτυροῦντες ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ, Πατήρ, Λόγος, καὶ Πνεῦμα [ἅγιον is omitted], καὶ οὗτοι οἱ τρεῖς ἐν εἰσίῃ. καὶ τρεῖς εἰσὶν [οἱ is omitted] μαρτυροῦντες ἐν τῇ γῆ, πνεῦμα, ὕδωρ, καὶ αἷμα, εἰ τὴν μαρτυρίαν τῶν ἀνθρώπων, &c. Quanquam hand scio an casu factum sit, ut hoc loco non repetatur, quod est in Graecis nostris, καὶ οἱ τρεῖς εἰς τὸ ἐν εἰσίῃ. Ex hoc igitur codice *Britannico* reposuimus, quod in nostris dicebatur deesse: ne cui sit causa calumniandi. Quanquam et hunc suspicor ad Latinorum codices fuisse castigatum. Posteaquam enim *Graeci* concordiam inierunt cum *Ecclesia Romana*, studuerunt et hac in parte cum *Romanis* consentire." (*Ib. coll. 351-353.*)

Therefore Erasmus in his third edition (1522) inserted verse 7, correcting two errors and supplying the omission at the end of verse 8 in what he called the Cod. Brit. (or Montfort MS.), which probably had the Acts and Epistles added *about this very time* to the Gospels written a few years before, as the Revelation was added by another hand later still — copied, it would seem, from the well-known Leicester MS. Erasmus put in the passage to keep his promise, not because he counted it

genuine. Is it too strong to fear that a document so framed, which cannot be traced beyond a friar named Froy, and which came in so opportunely to supply an apparent authority for a Greek text (of which more presently) for the three heavenly witnesses, points to a dishonest source?

It is remarkable too, as Sir I. Newton noticed long ago, that there is a marginal note by the side of this passage in the Complut. Polyglot, as in 1 Cor. 15: 51 and Matt. 6: 13, where the Vulgate is in conflict with the Greek MSS. It is a pity, however, that they were not as explicit on 1 John 5: 7 as there, and that they did not cleave to the Greek against the Latin, as they did in rejecting its absurd misrepresentation of 1 Cor. 15: 51. They do indeed cite Thomas Aquinas for 1 John 5: 7. "Now to make Thomas thus in a few words do all the work was very artificial" (says Sir I. N., Works, vol. v. p. 522); "and in Spain, where Thomas is of apostolical authority, it might pass for a very judicious and substantial defence of the printed Greek. But to us Thomas Aquinas is no apostle. We are seeking for the authority of Greek manuscripts."

To what then is the passage due? It is as clear as anything of the sort can be, that what we call verse 7 sprang from Augustine's remarks on what now stands as verse 8, possibly suggested by words of Cyprian to a similar effect. Compare his treatise contra Maximinum Arian. Episcop. 1. ii. c. 22. (Tom. viii. col. 725, ed. Ben.) Not that the celebrated bishop of Hippo cites the passage: what he says is professedly his comment or gloss on the words spirit, water, and blood. "Si vero ea, quae his significata sunt, velimus inquirere, non absurde occurrit ipsa Trinitas, qui unus, solus, verus, summus est Deus, Pater, et Filius et Spiritus sanctus, de quibus verissime dici potuit, *Tres sunt testes, et tres unum sunt*: ut nomine Spiritus significatum accipiamus Deum Patrem: de ipso quippe adorando loquebatur Dominus ubi ait, *Spiritus est Deus*. (Id. iv. 24.) Nomine autem sanguinis Filium quia, *verbum caro factum est*. (Id. i. 14.) Spiritum sanctum," etc. From the reputation of Augustine this fanciful idea at first gained currency and acceptance, though not always in precisely the original shape; then it seems to have been inserted in the margin as a gloss, till at length, through the ignorance of the transcribers and the clergy in general, it positively crept* into that text which the Council of Trent, with a temerity as amazing as the lack of knowledge it betrays, pronounced authentic. Hence the danger of demoralising Roman Catholic scholars, some of whom, like R. Simon, were doomed to do a perpetual violence to their conscience, while others, bolder in evil, misdirect every weapon that ingenuity can devise to make the worse appear the better reason. Most, no doubt, entrench themselves with a sort of blind honesty in their last stronghold: they believe what the church believes — a pitiful answer where it is a question of revealed truth.

* Jerome (Epist. cvi. ad Sunn. et Fret.) speaks of a similar course of mistake in copying his own version. "Et miror quomodo e latere Adnotationem nostram nescio quis temerarius scribendam in corpore putaverit, quam nos pro eruditione legentis scripsimus hoc modo," etc. (S. Hieronymi Opp. tom. i. p. 659, Ed. Ben.) But we need not go outside the commonly received text of the Greek New Testament in order to find another instance of what was first, a marginal gloss, which at length crept into the text; for such seems to be the history of Acts 8: 37. It is curious that here the conditions are reversed as between Erasmus and the Complutensian editors; for *he* owns the verse wanting in his Greek copies, yet inserts it in deference to the Latin, whilst *they* follow the Greek spite of the Latin.

As to internal evidence, it is equally conclusive against the passage foisted in. To bear witness "in heaven" is nonsense; to say "on earth" is superfluous; for earth is the constant scene of testimony. Again, the Father and the Son are the true scriptural correlatives — never the Father and the Word, which last is in correlation with *God*, as we see in John 1. Further, since Pentecost the Holy Ghost is distinctively said to be sent down from heaven, and this with a view to the testimony of the gospel, instead of bearing record in heaven with the Father and the Son. Lastly, those who adopt the passage as

it stands in the vulgar Latin copies are led to lower the character of the witness borne; for as they of course treat the first three as *divine*, so they regard the last three as *earthly* and *created* witnesses, making the πνεῦμα to be no other than "the created soul of Christ which he breathed forth on the cross, thus witnessing that he was true man." It would be awkward to make the same Spirit witness both in heaven and on earth.

Objections to the omission of verse 7 have been imagined, as many are aware, for various reasons, all of which seem to me weakness itself. 1. As to the supposed breach of connection, one has only to read verse 6 in order to be convinced that, on the contrary, the three heavenly witnesses come in most strangely between the water and the blood and the Spirit, of which that verse treated, and verse 8, which pursues the same subject. Internally therefore, as much as externally, verse 7 can only be viewed as an intrusion. The Trinity (fundamental a truth as it is, and without it Christianity is a myth) has no possible link with the context. Christ in death, yet withal life eternal, is the point on which the three witnesses converge with their one testimony. 2. The expression οἱ μαρτυροῦντες, said of the Spirit, the water, and the blood, is no difficulty without verse 7, because they are evidently *personified*. 3. The wonder is great how Bishop Middleton, the able investigator of the usage of the Greek article, could have so palpably erred as to say that the τὸ before ἔν in verse 8 presupposes ἔν in verse 7, and therefore that both verses stand or fall together. Previous reference is only one of the sources of the article. Ἐν, I grant, might be used of the persons in the Trinity (compare John 10: 30 for the Father and the Son); but τὸ ἔν is absolutely necessary for the Spirit, the water, and the blood, where identity of nature is not in question but unity of scope. Compare Phil. 2: 2. Other arguments, such as that founded on two editions of the Epistle, or on the influence of Arians, or on the negligence of transcribers, do not call for a detailed consideration in this place if at all.

Of the state and manner in which the passage is found in the few real or factitious Greek manuscripts that contain it, we may observe, (1) that both in the Graeco-Latin Cod. Ottobon. (Vat. 298) and in the Greek Cod. Montfort. (Trin. Coll. Dubl. G. 97) the three heavenly witnesses are set down without the Greek article to any one of them (πατήρ, λόγος, καὶ πνεῦμα ἅγιον) ! — a construction which indicates not obscurely the hand of one used to Latin (which has no article) and grossly ignorant of Greek; (2) that the same Cod. Ottobon. gives ἀπὸ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ, translated in the corresponding Latin by *in celo*, though not ἀπὸ, as Scholz has strangely read, but, ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς; (3) that whilst the Cod. Ottobon. represents that the Father, Word, and Holy Spirit (εἰς τὸ ἔν σίσι) "are to one purpose," or agree in one, (translated by itself *unum sunt!*) Cod. Montfort. says ἔν εἰσι, "are one;" and both (like the Complut. Polyglot) leave out the grand point of the genuine scripture; for neither gives the smallest hint of the revelation that the three witnesses, the Spirit and the water and the blood, conspire in one testimony. I may say that the Montfort MS. unquestionably *Latinizes* elsewhere in 1 John, and in the immediate context, in opposition to all other Greek manuscripts.

As for the only other documents as yet produced in favour of the amplified text, suffice it to say that the Codex Ravianus of Berlin is now (as well as one of those at Wolfenbüttel) acknowledged to be a forgery, copying the very characters (in themselves peculiar) of the Complutensian Polyglot, and even repeating some of its misprints! That which Scholz cited as 173 in his list is the Codex Regius Neapolitanus, which in the text really confirms the truth, but adds on the margin in more recent characters the disputed clause. Here only, as compared with Codd. Ottobon. and Montfort., the article is duly inserted; but there is this unfortunate flaw in its value, that while the manuscript was written in the eleventh century, the edition cannot claim a higher antiquity than the sixteenth, if indeed so high. Such evidence as this might be easily multiplied by dishonest hands; but the weight of it all would be nil.

It may be worth while to mention, as corroborating the testimony to the source of this mistake, not without fraud, that its earliest known occurrence in Greek is in the Greek version of the Acts of the fourth Lateran Council (in 1215), where it stands thus: ὅτι τρεῖς εἰσὶν οἱ μαρτυροῦντες ἐν οὐρανῷ ὁ πατήρ, λόγος, καὶ πνεῦμα ἅγιον· καὶ τοῦτοι (sic!) οἱ τρεῖς ἐν εἰσίν. εὐθύς τε προστίθησι καθῶς ἐν τισὶ κώδηξιν (sic! = ἀντιγράφοις) εὕρσκεται. So the passage stands both in Hardouin's Collection (tom. vii. p. 18) and in Mansi's (tom. xxii. p. 984). I can hardly doubt that this it was which encouraged the Complutensian editors to venture on their daring importation into the Greek New Testament of a passage which, however well meant doctrinally, bears the indelible trace of human infirmity, even after Stunica and his companions did their best to make decent Greek of it by inserting τῷ before οὐρανῷ, ὁ before λόγος, and τὸ before (not πν. but) ἅγιον πνεῦμα,* correcting also τοῦτοι, which was no doubt a blunder for οὔτοι. But they went a little too far when they changed ἐν into εἰς τὸ ἐν after the first three, and left out εἰς τὸ ἐν after τὸ πνεῦμα καὶ τὸ ὕδωρ καὶ τὸ αἶμα where these words beyond controversy ought to be. No doubt they were guided by Latin copies made since Th. Aquinas' day and that council. They refer in their marginal note to the perverse doctrine of Joachim on the Trinity, which was condemned at this very council of the Lateran.

* Hence Calecas in the fourteenth century, and Bryennius in the fifteenth, as Bishop Marsh noticed, being native Greeks, and feeling the deficiency of the Lateran Acts in Greek, wrote ὁ λόγος καὶ τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον, The copyist of the Montfort MS. omitted the article even before πατήρ, not to speak of the other words which require it.

If we turn to Thomas Aquinas, as referred to, the erroneous statement is sufficiently startling. He cites verse 7 as it stands in the later Latin copies, and reasons on the heterodoxy of Joachim, who applied the unity there, not to essence, but to affection and consent. Then, quoting verse 8, he says, "In quibusdam Libris attexitur: *et hi tres unum sunt*; sed hoc in veris exemplaribus non habetur (!), sed in quibusdam Libris dicitur esse appositum ab haereticis Arianis ad pervertendum intellectum sanum auctoritatis praemissae de unitate essentiali trium personarum (!!)." (Divi Thomae Aquinatis. Opera, tom. viii., p. 83, Venetiis, 1776.) This probably accounts for the omission of the clause that concludes verse 8 in the Complutensian Polyglot, as well as in some of the Greek copies manufactured after the fourth Lateran Council. Some excuse may be allowed for one like the "angelic doctor," who was unacquainted with the Greek scriptures; but why then did *he* dogmatise on so serious a subject? Total ignorance is the only conceivable palliation of his assertions, which are notoriously opposed to truth. And what can one think of the deliberate sanction given to all this by Cardinal Ximenes and his editors in the renowned Polyglot of Alcalá? Are we to shelter them also under such a plea? If not, what then?

Again, what can one judge of the knowledge or the moral integrity of keeping up such a note to 1 John 5: 7 in modern reprints of Jerome's works (*e.g.* the Abbé Migne's, Paris, 1845) as the following? "Caeterum nota sunt pro ejus versiculi germanitate testimonia Patrum Africanorum, Tertulliani, Cypriani, Eugenii, Fulgentii, Vigili, Victoris, e[st] quatuor centum Episcoporum in fidei professione, quam Vandalorum regi obtulerunt. Major omni exceptione est Cassiodorus," etc. (Patrologiae Curs., tom. xxix., coll. 846.) Not to speak of the silence of the Greek fathers on a question of the Greek text, it has been proved repeatedly and minutely that not one of these could have read the passage in the Greek as it now appears in the Vulgate. All that can be fairly drawn from Victor Vitensis' story of the symbol of faith presented by the African bishops to Hunneric is that the three heavenly witnesses must have been then read in their Latin copies. But it is certainly not so in the oldest and best Latin manuscripts that are extant, as all intelligent Romanists must know.