

1 JOHN 5:7

THE SWORD OF THE LORD

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“For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost:
and these three are one.”

In I John 5:7,8 the Received Text presents us with two sets or triads of witnesses, one in heaven, the other on earth, and asserts the unity of the first triad in one. In the revised Greek text underlying the modern versions all this is omitted, and all reference to a trinity is obliterated. The significant fact to which we would draw attention is that many of the variations proposed by modern scholars which have any doctrinal importance appear to undermine the doctrine of the Trinity, and particularly the doctrine of Christ's deity. The various readings in the manuscripts and versions may be counted by hundred thousands, but the vast majority are insignificant. Among the few important various readings there are several that bear on this one doctrine - a doctrine which was keenly debated between orthodox believers and heretics just before the three most ancient existing copies were made.

The Sabellian and Arian controversies raged in the 3rd and 4th centuries and the copies now held in such high repute among scholars were written in the 4th and 5th centuries. The hostility of these documents to the Trinitarian doctrine impels the mind to the conclusion that their omissions and alterations are not merely the chance errors of transcribers, but the work of a deliberate hand. When we remember the date of the great Trinitarian contest in the Church, and compare it with the supposed date of these documents, our suspicion becomes much more pronounced. Did the party of Athanasius introduce spurious testimonies into the text to advance their Trinitarian doctrine, or--did the party of Arius expunge authentic testimonies from copies of the sacred text in order to obscure the doctrine?

The so-called oldest codices agree with each other in omitting a number of striking testimonies to the Divinity of Christ, and they also agree in other omissions relating to Gospel faith and practice. Was this because these ancient documents represent the views of copyists who regarded the Athanasian Trinitarians as corrupters, or can it be established that the omissions were deliberately made by the Arians to expunge the Scriptural evidence against their case?

All the critics vote against the authenticity of 1 John 5:7 but let us see whether the case is quite as clear as they would have it. The arguments in favor of its claim to genuineness carry a good degree of probability and this text is a good instance of the value of that internal evidence which recent critics profess to discard. The full text follows with the disputed word in brackets:

HOTI TREIS EISIN HOI MARIUROUTES (EN TO OURANO; HO PATER, HO LOGOS, KAI TO HAGION PNEUMA; KAI HOUNI HOI THIS HEN EISI. KAI TREIS EISIN HOI MARTUROUTES EN TE GE) TO PNEUMA, KAI TO HUDOR, KAI TO HAIMA; KAI HOI TREIS EIS TO HEN EISIN.

The internal evidence against the omission is as follows:

1. The masculine article, numeral and participle HOI TREIS MARNROUTES, are made to agree directly with three neuters, an insuperable and very bald grammatical difficulty. If the disputed words are allowed to remain, they agree with two masculine and one neuter noun HO PATER, HO LOGOS, KAI TO HAGION PNEUMA and, according to the rule of syntax, the masculine among the group control the gender over a neuter connected with them. Then the occurrence of the masculine TREIS MARTUROUTES in verse 8 agreeing with the neuters PNEUMA, HUDOR and HAIMA may be accounted for by the power of attraction, well known in Greek syntax.
2. If the disputed words are omitted, the 8th verse coming next to the 6th gives a very bald and awkward, and apparently meaningless repetition of the Spirit's witness twice in immediate succession.

3. If the words are omitted, the concluding words at the end of verse 8 contain an unintelligible reference. The Greek words KAI HOI TREIS EIS TO HEN EISIN mean precisely "and these three agree to that (aforesaid) One." This rendering preserves the force of the definite article in this verse. Then what is "that One" to which "these three" are said to agree? If the 7th verse is omitted, "that One" does not appear, and "that One" in verse 8, which designates One to whom the reader has already been introduced, has no antecedent presence in the passage. Let verse 7 stand, and all is clear, and the three earthly witnesses testify to that aforementioned unity which the Father, Word and Spirit constitute.

4. John has asserted in the previous six verses that faith is the bond of our spiritual life and victory over the world. This faith must have a solid warrant, and the truth of which faith must be assured is the Son-ship and Divinity of Christ, See verses 5, 11, 12, 20. The

only faith that quickens the soul and overcomes the world is (verse 5) the belief that Jesus is God's Son, that God has appointed Him our Life, and that this Life is true God. God's warrant for this faith comes:

FIRST

In verse 6, in the words of the Holy Ghost speaking by inspired men.

SECOND

In verse 7, in the words of the Father, the Word and the Spirit, asserting and confirming by miracles the Son-ship and unity of Christ with the Father.

THIRD

In verse 8; in the work of the Holy Ghost applying the blood and water from Christ's pierced side for our cleansing.

FOURTH

In verse 10, in the spiritual consciousness of the believer himself, certifying to him that he feels within a divine change.

How harmonious is all this if we accept the 7th verse as genuine, but if we omit it, the very keystone of the arch is wanting, and the crowning proof that the warrant of our faith is divine (verse 9) is struck out. We must also consider the time and circumstances in which the passage was written.

John tells his spiritual children that his object is to warn them against seducers (2:26) whose heresy was a denial of the proper Son-ship and incarnation (4:2) of Jesus Christ. We know that these heretics were Cerinthians and Nicolaitanes. Irenaeus and other early writers tell us that they all vitiated the doctrine of the Trinity. Cerinthus taught that Jesus was not miraculously born of a virgin, and that the Word, Christ, was not truly and eternally divine, but a sort of angelic "Aion" associated with the natural man Jesus up to his crucifixion. The Nicolaitanes denied that the "Aion" Christ had a real body, and ascribed to him only a phantasmal body and blood. It is against these errors that John is fortifying his "children" and this is the very point of the disputed 7th verse. If it stands, then the whole passage is framed to exclude both heresies. In verse 7 he refutes the Cerinthian by declaring the unity of Father, Word and Spirit, and with the strictest accuracy employing the neuter HEN EISIN to fix the point which Cerinthus denied - the unity of the Three Persons in One common substance. He then refutes the Nicolaitanes by declaring the proper humanity of Jesus, and the actual shedding, and application by the Spirit, of that water and blood of which he testifies as an eyewitness in the Gospel - 19:34, 35.

When we see that John in his epistle warns his "children" against "seducers" who taught error regarding the true divine Son-ship of the Lord Jesus Christ and regarding His incarnation and true humanity, and when we further see John precisely expose these errors in verses 7 and 8 of Chapter 5, we are constrained to acknowledge that there is a coherency in the whole passage which presents strong internal evidence for the genuineness of the "Received Text".

THE MANUSCRIPTS

It is true that the disputed verse has little support from Greek copies and has been found in only two - the Monttort MS in Dublin University Library and the Codex WIZANBURGENSIS of the 8th century. The chief manuscript authority for 1 John 5:7 is in the Latin versions and it is found, with few exceptions in all the codices of these, both in the Vulgate and in the Old Latin. Among ancient writers who refer to or allude to the disputed words are Tertullian and Cyprian and many later Latin authors. The passage is asserted as genuine Scripture with the almost unanimous agreement of Latin Christendom from the earliest ages. It should be remembered that the Old Latin was translated from the Greek at a very early age, certainly within a century of the death of the Apostles. The African churches did not lose their sacred books to the same extent as the Greek churches during the great persecutions and it is in African Latin writers that we find some of the earliest citations of the disputed verse. Another relevant fact is that the ancient Latin churches were not so much tainted with the Arian heresy, the suspected source of so many corruptions. In the contest with the Arians, the Council of Carthage, and other early "Fathers" appeal to this verse with unquestioning confidence as a decisive testimony against them.

Origen exercised a powerful influence over the transmission of the Greek text in the period before some of the most ancient copies now in existence were written. Mosheim describes him as "a compound of contraries, wise and unwise, acute and stupid, judicious and injudicious; the enemy of superstition, and its patron; a strenuous defender of Christianity, and its corrupter; energetic and irresolute; one to whom the Bible owes much, and from whom it has suffered much". He was the great corrupter, and the source, or at least the channel, of nearly all the speculative errors which plagued the Church in after ages. Nolan asserts that the most characteristic discrepancies between the common Greek text and the texts current in Palestine and Egypt in Origen's day are distinctly traceable to a Marcionite or Valentinian source, and that Origen's was the mediating hand for introducing these corruptions into the latter texts.

It is highly significant that the important texts bearing on the Trinitarian doctrine, which appear in the Greek and Latin are lacking in the old MSS of the Palestinian and Egyptian. The disputed texts were designed to condemn and refute the errors of the Ebionites and Gnostics, Cerinthians and Nicolaitanes. It is not surprising that the influence of Origen should result in the suppression of some of these authentic testimonies in the Greek copies, while the old Latin which circulated in areas not much affected by Origen's influence, should preserve such a reading as that found in 1 John 5:7.

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