

On my handout 1 John 5:7-8 read like this

⁷ For there are three that testify:

⁸ the Spirit
and the water
and the blood;
and these three agree.

Depending on what Bible version you are using, you may think there is a printing error at this portion of Scripture.

If you have a KJV Bible (and there are others as well), you will see there are more words in the KJV.

1 Jn. 5:7-8 KJV For there are three that bear record <u>in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one.</u> ⁸ And there are <u>three that bear witness in earth, the Spirit, and the water, and the blood: and these three agree in one.</u>	1 Jn. 5:7-8 ESV For there are three that testify: ⁸ the Spirit and the water and the blood; and these three agree.
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Note that the ESV text is missing that whole middle section. What's going on and why was it omitted?

The issue is one of Greek manuscripts of the New Testament from which our translations are derived. There are some Greek manuscripts that contain that text and some that do not.

The biggest differences between the two Bible translations are 1) date of their publication and 2) the philosophy of using the Greek manuscripts.

1) Date of their publication

The KJV was published in 1611. The ESV was published in 2001.

While it wasn't the first English translation of the Bible, it has remained the most influential. For the New Testament they used a Greek edition by a man named Theodore Beza (1519-1605), who himself used a Greek edition by Robert Estienne (sometimes referred to as Stephanus) (1503-1559) (whose biggest claim to fame for you and me is the fact that he is the one who added verse references to the New Testament), who in turn used the Greek edition of a Roman Catholic

scholar named Erasmus (whose edition of the Greek was a source for Martin Luther when he translated the Bible into German, but I should note that Martin Luther did not include this sentence in his own translation).

It was not initially in Erasmus’ version of the Greek New Testament, but because people were familiar with it from the Vulgate (Latin translation of the Bible), they pressured him into including it. Erasmus said he would not include it unless it was shown to him to be present in the Greek manuscripts. The only evidence found was one Greek manuscript that was quite late. But true to his word, Erasmus then included it. Robert Estienne subsequently included it in his version.

So the KJV included this sentence because the primary Greek source that it relied on contained this sentence.

But why then does the ESV exclude it? Because in the nearly 400 years between the publication of these two Bible translations we have discovered many more Greek manuscripts and through the scholarly task called textual criticism, we have sorted through these manuscripts and have put together newer editions of the Greek New Testament. With more evidence available, scholars have come to the conclusion that this sentence likely was not part of the original text of John’s epistle, and so they excluded it. But because it is such a well known verse, they usually mark this area with a footnote that will say something like “Some later manuscripts add these words....” In short, the ESV (and most other modern translations) do not include this verse because the Greek text they’re translating from did not include it either.

2) The philosophy of Greek manuscripts

One of the “problems” that scholars of the Bible have is that few scholars who study ancient texts have is the embarrassment of riches available to them. There are over 5,800 complete or fragmented Greek manuscripts that have been identified. They are found in various places throughout the world (e.g. universities, museums, libraries). No other ancient writing has anywhere close to this magnitude of evidence available.

But because of so many manuscripts existing it is inevitable that there are differences between them. The vast majority of the differences amount to differences of spelling (e.g. payed vs paid) or small mistakes in writing (a missing letter or word or a reduplication of a word). These differences do not alter the meaning of the text and are quite understandable. There are also places where

some manuscripts have additions or subtractions of words (such as in this 1 John 5:7-8).

So scholars have to make a decision as to whether one manuscript or the other has the “correct” reading. Some basic rules of thumb (and I’m greatly simplifying this) they use are “The shorter text is usually the original” “the older manuscript is not necessarily the better, but often it is,” “the distribution of manuscripts geographically matters,” and so forth.

But not all scholars will agree on every difference and there is one basic split among scholars that is still debated today. That split is over what is sometimes called the Received Text (or Majority Text) and the critical or eclectic text. Those who follow the Received Text thought believe that the text that was used for the KJV which was widely found in later manuscripts of the Greek New Testament should be preferred because they were so numerous and so influential in the Middle Ages. Those who believe the critical text is more important instead argue that a reading isn’t decided merely on how many texts it is found in, but rather one must look to ancient manuscripts too. If something isn’t found in earliest manuscripts, but is found later, it is not necessarily the right reading.

The KJV translation has come to be strongly associated with the Received Text proponents, while the ESV is translated from an eclectic, critical text. And to some people, the critical text is outright rejected and they often speak as if the people who support it remove words from God’s Word.

So where did this reading come from?

The earliest evidence of this text is from a Latin manuscript by a Spanish heretic named Priscillian (who died in 385) and quoted it as part of the text of 1 John. From that point in time it started to appear in Latin manuscripts of the New Testament (but it was not found in earlier versions of Latin).

The most probable explanation for how it got into the Bible is that came from someone who knew this sentence and then added a note to their text of the Bible. Then the note got copied as an addition to the text, but put in the text itself. And once that happened, no one would have known that it once was not part of the text of the Bible.

If you choose to believe that this was part of John's original text, you must instead believe that it was omitted (either accidentally or intentionally) by copyists in many different places, in many different times of hundreds of Greek manuscripts as well as by all translators of ancient versions (Syriac, Arabic, Ethiopian, Coptic, Sahidic, Armenian, etc.) of the New Testament .

Another reason to believe that it's unlikely that this sentence was part of the main text is because it very clearly says that the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit are one, which we recognize as a confession of the Trinity. In the early church, the belief in the Trinity was foundational, but it was very controversial because it doesn't rationally make sense (3 persons cannot be 1). However, in the defense for the orthodox belief in the Trinity this verse was never cited, which is baffling. It's clarity would immediately have silenced all detractors. There would be every reason to keep this sentence in Scripture if you were copying the text. However, the fact that it was not cited in any of these early Trinitarian debates is usually mentioned as another strong reason that this sentence simply did not exist in Scripture in the early centuries of Christianity, but was added later.