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Grantley McDonald

Excerpt

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Introduction

The birth of the Trinity

Perhaps the most characteristic of Christian doctrines is that of the Holy Trinity, one godhead in three persons: Father, incarnate Son and Holy Spirit. This doctrine developed out of attempts to understand the relationships between God; Jesus, whom the Christian Scriptures designate as ‘Son of God’; and the Holy Spirit, whom the Scriptures sometimes describe as sent by God, at other times as given by Christ – and all this within the context of monotheism. I say this doctrine *developed*, since it is not expressed unambiguously in the writings which the early Christians accepted as Scripture. Over time it was implied from several episodes in the New Testament, such as the baptism of Christ: ‘And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased”’ (Mk 1:10–11, cf. Ps 2:7). But this episode gave rise to differences of interpretation. Some early Christians concluded that God adopted Jesus as his Son when he was baptised. Other episodes that mention God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit gave rise to similar disagreement. For example, at the end of his earthly ministry, Jesus was said to have commissioned his disciples with these words: ‘Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit’ (Mt 28:19). But some early Christians pointed out that this formulation does not necessarily imply that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are one, or even equal. It is true that Jesus says in the fourth gospel that he and his Father are one (Jn 10:30), but what exactly does that mean, especially considering that Jesus also says in the same gospel that the Father is greater than he (Jn 14:28)? When Paul bade ‘the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit’ be with the church at Corinth (2 Cor 13:13), it is easy to assume from a post-Nicene perspective that he was referring to the Trinity. But Paul’s phraseology might lead a post-Nicene reader to wonder whether Paul implies here that Jesus is

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

not God, or that the Holy Spirit is not God, or simply to doubt whether Paul understood the doctrine of the Trinity. The existence of divergent conclusions in the early church over the theological implications of these passages is sufficient evidence that they are not self-evident, despite what we might assume from our post-Nicene perspective. Nevertheless, on the basis of such passages, several varieties of a doctrine of the Trinity were proposed and defended in vigorous and often acrimonious debate, as the early church attempted to make sense of the witness of Scripture and the tradition of its interpretation.

The ways early Christians made sense of the stories and the texts received from other believers varied widely, and changed over time in reaction to different circumstances and conflicts between rival interpretations. If we want to understand how Christians in the first few centuries came to hold the beliefs they did, we need to forget later doctrinal formulations – or at least suspend them – and acknowledge the strangeness and primeval variety of their ideas. We must also remember that the terms ‘orthodoxy’ and ‘heresy’ are not absolute, but relational and subjective. What one person considers perfectly orthodox may be execrable heresy to another. Moreover, there is no reason to assume that those branded as heretics by those who held a different view perversely set out to give a false account of the faith and of the world. People defend their religious beliefs when they believe that they are right, not when they believe they are wrong. And even if some ‘heretics’ provided an inadequate theological account of Scripture, it should also be acknowledged that they sometimes emphasised or preserved important details neglected by their ‘orthodox’ opponents.¹

Christology, the attempt to define and understand the nature and role of Christ, precedes any attempt to articulate a theory of the Trinity, both conceptually and historically. In the gospels, Jesus receives a number of titles from the Hebrew Scriptures, and the way readers understood these titles partly determined the way they conceived Jesus’ mission, and even his nature. In Mt 27:42, Mk 15:32, Jn 1:49 and Jn 12:13, Jesus is called ‘King of Israel’. In the canonical gospels and Acts, Jesus is called ‘Son of God’ more than two dozen times. These titles are related, since ‘Son of God’ was a royal title given to those who represented God, such as David

¹ Eusebius’ conception of a monolithic, originary Christian orthodoxy from which ‘heretical’ groups fell away was challenged by Bauer 1934 (English trans. 1971). Bauer’s thesis has been challenged and modified in several ways, but his essential argument remains valid; further, see Harrington 1980; Ehrman 1993; Wiles 1996, 1–2.

Cambridge University Press

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Grantley McDonald

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The birth of the Trinity*

3

or Solomon (2 Sam 7:14; Ps 2:7). Did these titles mean merely that Jesus' followers hoped he would become king of a free Israel? Did they imply that Jesus was God? Or something else still? Some maintained that Jesus was a human, albeit one through whom God had chosen specially to proclaim his power. Others insisted that Jesus was in some sense one with God. This latter position is represented by the Johannine Epistles and the theologically sophisticated fourth gospel, in which Jesus is identified as the Word who was in the beginning with God (Jn 1:1).

Some early Christian thinkers, notably the Alexandrian presbyter Arius (c. 256–c. 335), appealed to the triple witness of Scripture, tradition and reason to propose a different understanding of the relationship between God and Jesus. Arius acknowledged that God is one, alone unbegotten, everlasting, without beginning, true, immortal, wise and sovereign. Jesus was created by the Father out of nothing, before the rest of creation (cf. Prov 8:22–23). There was thus a time when Jesus did not yet exist. Since Jesus is part of creation, he cannot be part of the deity, but is subordinate to the Father. Although Jesus is not identical with the one God, the Father, he is nevertheless our Lord, through whom all things, including humans, exist (1 Cor 8:6). When Jesus describes himself as one with the Father (Jn 10:30, 17:11, 17:22), he is referring to a unity of will, not of essence. Jesus carries out the work given to him by the Father (Jn 5:30, 17:4), and is called Lord because of his faithfulness to the Father's will (Phil 2:5–11; Heb 1:8–9). He is thus subordinate to the Father, not equal. But Arian Christology encounters a problem here: it is difficult to reconcile the notion that the Word existed before Jesus' birth with the belief that Jesus was adopted as Son of God.²

By contrast, the ancestors of the orthodox position described Jesus as coeternal and coequal with the Father. The way that Jesus' nature was understood had further implications for the way believers conceived of the Holy Spirit. Dominant strands in Christianity came to agree that God the Father, Jesus and the Holy Spirit are equal in essence and power. At the first council of Nicaea (325) and the council of Constantinople (381), the eternal equality of the Father and the Son was enshrined in credal form.³ (While the equality of the Holy Spirit with the other two persons is not stated explicitly in the Nicene formulation, it is more or less implicit.) Belief in the equality of the Father and the Son thus became

² Wiles 1996, 10–17.

³ The text of both versions is given in Denzinger 2001, 62–64, §§ 125–126 (Nicaea); 83–85, § 150 (Constantinople).

normative for orthodox Christian belief. The orthodox believed that ideas such as adoptionism (espoused by Theodotus, Artemon and Paul of Samosata) and subordinationism (Origen, Arius and many others) injured Jesus' dignity as the Christ, the anointed one of God. For orthodox apologists, such as Athanasius, such ideas also raised the suspicion of idolatry, for if Jesus was created, then worshipping him would mean worshipping the creation rather than the creator. Moreover, if Jesus was merely a creature, he could have no power to save us. Raising a creature to the status of the divine also endangered the strict monotheism that followed from Christianity's Jewish origins. Some believed that conceiving of Jesus as ontologically separate from God created problems for his role as mediator. Distinguishing Jesus from God would suggest that God is too lofty, or too idle, to take an interest in our salvation. Moreover, if Jesus was appointed as our Saviour, then he was created for us, rather than we for God.⁴ Many heterodox ideas were espoused during the Middle Ages, yet with the gradual acceptance of the Nicene formulation of the Trinity and its restatement at Constantinople, the arch-heresy of Arius disappeared – with a few isolated exceptions – for the best part of a thousand years.

Historically, the most explicit Scriptural expression of the consubstantial Trinity – that is, of the Father, the Son and the Spirit as a Trinity united in essence – has been seen in a neatly balanced pair of verses in the fifth chapter of the first letter of John:

⁷ For there are three that bear record [in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one. ⁸ And there are three that bear witness in earth], the Spirit, and the Water, and the Blood, and these three agree in one. (1 Jn 5:7–8; Authorised Version, 1611; brackets added).

⁷ Ὅτι τρεῖς εἰσιν οἱ μαρτυροῦντες [ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ, ὁ Πατήρ, ὁ Λόγος, καὶ τὸ ἅγιον Πνεῦμα· καὶ οὗτοι οἱ τρεῖς ἓν εἰσι. ⁸ Καὶ τρεῖς εἰσιν οἱ μαρτυροῦντες ἐν τῇ γῇ], τὸ πνεῦμα, καὶ τὸ ὕδωρ, καὶ τὸ αἷμα· καὶ οἱ τρεῖς εἰς τὸ ἓν εἰσιν. (1 Jn 5:7–8, as given in the 1633 Leiden edition, which presents the *textus receptus*; brackets added).

But as we shall see, the textual history of these two verses is problematic. To begin with, the passage from 'in heaven' (ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ) in v. 7 to 'in earth' (ἐν τῇ γῇ) in v. 8 does not occur in any extant Greek bible older than the fourteenth century. These missing words, indicated above with brackets, are known collectively as the 'Johannine comma' or *Comma Johanneum*. (*Comma* here means not a mark of punctuation,

⁴ Wiles 1996, 7–8.

Cambridge University Press

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Grantley McDonald

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The birth of the Trinity*

5

but a clause or sentence.)⁵ Indeed, the reading of the comma given in the *textus receptus* is not found in any Greek manuscript except a handful copied from printed editions between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. The comma is also absent from the earliest Latin bibles, such as *Codex Fuldensis* (copied by Victor, bishop of Capua, in the 540s), and many others well into the Middle Ages.⁶ The first extant bibles containing the Johannine comma are Latin manuscripts copied in Spain during the seventh century: some fragments in Munich (BSB Clm 6436, the 'Freising fragments' = Vetus Latina 64) and a palimpsest in León (Archivo catedralicio ms 15 = Vetus Latina 67). These two fragmentary sources are closely related, and represent – at least in the Catholic Epistles – a Vetus Latina text resembling that used in the Spanish liturgy.⁷ The introduction of the comma evidently confused some scribes, and in an eighth-century New Testament from Reichenau, the heavenly witnesses have supplanted the earthly ones entirely.⁸ An eighth-century New Testament from Luxeuil shows that the text was already unstable, displaying the 'comparative' reading of the comma ('there are three witnesses on earth ... *just as* there are three witnesses in heaven ...') attested until about the twelfth century.⁹ However, the comma did not appear with any regularity in Latin bibles before the ninth century, and is even lacking from Latin bibles copied as late as the fifteenth century. Moreover, the readings of the comma in these early Latin bibles – where it occurs – are inconsistent and unstable, which suggests that the textual ground upon which they rest is less firm than for the surrounding verses, which do not display the same degree of variation. Yet as long as the Orthodox world remained virtually separate from the Catholic West, and as long as knowledge of Greek in the West remained relatively rare, this textual difference raised only occasional comment.

⁵ The first appearance of the term *comma Iohanneum* seems to be in Kortholt 1686, 87: 'Observa etiam porro, non in solis Graecis exemplaribus quibusdam comma, de quo agimus, Iohanneum desiderari, (quod quidem Bellarminus lectori audent persuadere) sed etiam in aliquibus codicibus vetustissimis mss. editionis vulgatae Latinae.' The term is attested sporadically over the next century: Wolf 1741, 5:311–313; Masch 1778–1790, 1:199: 'Textus graecus ex Erasmica tertia est exscriptus, hinc comma Iohanneum hic exhibetur [...]' Cf. also Masch 1778–1790, 1:198, 247, 248. Other words and phrases used to describe the passage include *particula* (Lefèvre d'Étaples 1527, *31, 61–62; Erasmus, *ASD* IX-4:326; Erasmus 1532, 182; Naogeorgus 1544, 128r–v; Sozzini 1614, 423), *membrum* (Bullinger 1549, 103), *versus* (Mariana 1609, 73; Roger 1713, 99; Maran 1746, 161), *versiculus* (Bèze 1556, 318; Polanus von Polansdorff 1609, 1406; Crell 1680, 19), *dictum Iohanneum* (Kettner 1713), *pericope* (Roger 1713, 120), and *clausula* (Maran 1746, 161).

⁶ Fulda, Hochschul- und Landesbibliothek ms Bonifatius 1, Gregory-Aland ms F, prericensional text; see Fischer 1985, 57–66. For a fuller discussion of the manuscript attestation of the comma and the ways it was used (or not used) by the early fathers, see McDonald 2011.

⁷ De Bruyne 1921, 67; Ayuso 1947–1948, 57; Fischer 1985, 70, 77–78; Gryson 1999–2004, 1:98–99.

⁸ Karlsruhe, Badische Landesbibliothek Codex Augiensis CCXXII, 55r.

⁹ Wolfenbüttel, Herzog August Bibliothek ms Weissenburgensis 99, 117v.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-12536-0 - Biblical Criticism in Early Modern Europe: Erasmus, the Johannine Comma and Trinitarian Debate

Grantley McDonald

Excerpt

[More information](#)

In 1516, Erasmus of Rotterdam (c. 1466–1536), the greatest textual scholar of his generation, published an edition of the New Testament containing a humanistic revision of the Latin Vulgate and a parallel Greek text to support his revisions.¹⁰ Since the Johannine comma was absent from all the Greek manuscripts Erasmus consulted, he did not include it in his text. He was immediately censured for this decision by critics, notably the Englishman Edward Lee and the Spaniard Diego Lopez de Zúñiga (better known under his Latin name, Stunica). Erasmus defended his choice by pointing out that he had merely recorded the readings in the Greek manuscripts available to him. Lee argued that since the comma is the most explicit Scriptural reference to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit as a Trinity, its omission could hardly be interpreted as a neutral editorial decision. He even accused Erasmus of promoting the long-dormant error of Arius. This charge had no basis in fact, and Erasmus was naturally keen to shake it off. During this acrimonious debate, Erasmus was presented with a Greek manuscript from England which contained the disputed passage in its body text. On the strength of this one textual witness, Erasmus included the comma in his next edition of the New Testament to avoid further criticism. However, in the accompanying annotation on the passage he suggested that the text presented in this ‘British codex’ had been altered to conform to the Vulgate.¹¹

Erasmus’ ambivalent decision to include the comma within the text while questioning its textual legitimacy in the *Annotationes* prompted vigorous debate, becoming one of the hinges on which wide-ranging social debates in early modern Europe turned. Many of these debates were associated with the revival, real or imagined, of the ideas of Arius. In his important monograph on Arius (1987), Rowan Williams highlighted the difficulty of defining Arianism in late antiquity, and noted that the picture of Arius and of his followers bequeathed to the later church was derived from the polemical constructions of Athanasius. Arianism is no less difficult to define in the early modern period. The term could be used in a strict sense to distinguish Arius’ ideas from the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity on one side and from alternatives such as Sabellianism or Socinianism on the other. It was also used in a looser sense to indicate a sceptical stance towards the orthodox formulation of the Trinity and a critical attitude towards its Scriptural basis. It could also be used in a looser sense still, as a catch-all term, for any heterodox conception of God.

¹⁰ De Jonge 1984b. On the date of the Latin translation, see A. J. Brown 1984; de Jonge 1988a, 1988b.

¹¹ A translation of Erasmus’ annotations on this passage is given in the appendix.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-12536-0 - Biblical Criticism in Early Modern Europe: Erasmus, the Johannine Comma and Trinitarian Debate

Grantley McDonald

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The birth of the Trinity*

7

The debate over the Johannine comma was not simply a matter of a few words here or there. It touched a raw hermeneutical nerve. Much more than Roman Catholic theologians, the Protestant reformers emphasised the importance of Scripture as the sole source and rule of doctrine. While Roman Catholics could rely on the church's teaching office as repository and conduit of traditions of interpretation where the Scripture was not entirely clear, Protestants were obliged to determine exactly what Scripture says in order to develop and justify their doctrines. In the absence of a body like the Inquisition to define doctrine and enforce conformity, the Protestant churches shattered into a broken mosaic of sparring groups. Radical understandings of Scripture and doctrines such as baptism or the Trinity often accompanied social ideas feared as potentially subversive by those who bore state power. When drawn into broader discussions about the Trinity, the debate over the Johannine comma invariably assumed a wider social significance.

The Italian lawyer and theologian Fausto Sozzini was the most prominent of several sixteenth-century thinkers who rejected the traditional account of the Trinity. Sozzini also developed distinctive ideas on human nature, will and responsibility, as well as the duties of the individual to the state. After his followers, the Socinians, were expelled from Poland, many ended up in the more tolerant Netherlands, and some moved on from there to England. Many churchmen in England, both Anglican and Nonconformist, feared that Socinianism would promote a laxity of doctrine which would lead inexorably to a chic liberalism or even worse. John Edwards (1695) asserted that 'in the very *Socinian* Doctrine it self there seems to be an *Atheistick* Tang'.¹² Many also considered Socinianism a threat to the unity of a nation recently reunited under a Protestant flag. In 1693, William Sherlock, dean of St Paul's London, warned that 'these Disputes about the Trinity make sport for Papists'. Should they continue, he admonished, 'we shall certainly be conquered by France'.¹³ By the nineteenth century, British Unitarians (heirs both to the continental Socinians and to native traditions of dissent) resented the fact that they were still liable to punishment – or at least stigmatisation and social exclusion – because of their beliefs.¹⁴ Many other minority religious groups in Britain, most notably Roman Catholics, shared this sense of disenfranchisement.

¹² John Edwards 1695, 64.¹³ Sherlock 1690, 23.¹⁴ Unitarians distinguished themselves from Socinians, particularly on the issue of the worship due to Jesus (see Kell 1830), but such distinctions had as much to do with theological niceties as with the desire to avoid further persecution and legal discrimination.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-12536-0 - Biblical Criticism in Early Modern Europe: Erasmus, the Johannine Comma and Trinitarian Debate

Grantley McDonald

Excerpt

[More information](#)

When Socinians and Unitarians used the philological advances won by pious critics like John Mill to advance their theology and its attendant attitudes towards society, the worst fears of conservative commentators seemed to be realised.

By the late seventeenth century, the authenticity of the Johannine comma had become an issue on which any educated person could be expected to have an opinion, and tempers ran high on both sides. According to Isaac Newton (1690), the comma was ‘in every bodies mouth’.¹⁵ For Thomas Long (1703), the comma was ‘one of the plainest Proofs of the Trinity, which is the first and most fundamental Article of the Christian Religion’, and anyone who doubted its genuineness was ‘a greater Friend to the *Socinians* and *Arians*, than to the Church of *England* and her Articles’.¹⁶ The comma was discussed in sermons and public lectures. With the spread of Enlightenment scepticism in the eighteenth century, traditional Christian doctrine, including the Nicene formulation of the Trinity, came increasingly under the spotlight. These tensions reached a head when Edward Gibbon dismissed the Johannine comma as an interpolation in the third volume of his *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1781). Gibbon was attacked by the clergyman George Travis, whose misdirected defence of orthodoxy was in turn exploded by the philologists Richard Porson and Herbert Marsh. The work of these men represented the culmination of Erasmus’ attempt to understand the documents of Christianity in their historical, literary and linguistic context. But ever since Erasmus’ time, fears had been voiced that impious investigation into the text of Scripture would lead to a scepticism and disbelief that could only undermine doctrine and faith. Literary and theological journals were deluged with essays attacking or defending the comma with varying degrees of competence, from the fatuous to the vertiginously erudite. The heat generated by this debate is difficult to appreciate until one leafs through the smart journals like the *Journal Britannique*, the *Gentleman’s Magazine*, and *The Eclectic Review* from the 1750s through to the 1830s. Fascination with the Johannine comma, minutely dissected by dozens of learned critics and untold thousands of lay commentators, became a cultural phenomenon. Popular attitudes displayed what sociologists call an ‘informational cascade’ (or informally the ‘bandwagon effect’), in which individuals opt to follow group tendencies, even ignoring their

¹⁵ Newton 1959–1977, 3:90.

¹⁶ Long 1703, 44, 47.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-12536-0 - Biblical Criticism in Early Modern Europe: Erasmus, the Johannine Comma and Trinitarian Debate

Grantley McDonald

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The birth of the Trinity*

9

own information, and even when the choice is incorrect.¹⁷ The mythology surrounding Erasmus' inclusion of the comma in the third edition of his Greek text became a weapon easily deployed in interdenominational polemic. As late as 1887, during the modernist debate within the Roman Catholic church, Jean-Pierre Paulin Martin could assert that the status of the comma was 'a burning question, one of those by which one can sometimes judge a man's tendencies'.¹⁸

By the middle of the twentieth century, scholarly debate had led to a consensus: the comma was an interpolation, with no right to be included in the Greek text. The issue was solemnly declared dead and buried. But the comma is an unquiet corpse, and has been clamouring for exhumation for some time now. The revival of the Christian right, especially in Evangelical circles, has reanimated the debate over the comma as part of a wider defence of the *textus receptus*. Attention to this issue on the Internet shows that the Johannine comma has again become a hot-button issue, since it seems to pose questions concerning the accuracy and reliability of Scripture, and raises suspicions of ecclesiastical conspiracy, anxieties stoked by recent popular fiction. As a result of an informational cascade amongst non-scholarly believers, the divide between academic consensus and lay conviction is growing. In a poll taken on the website puritanboard.com, nearly half the respondents replied that they believe the comma to be a genuine part of Scripture.¹⁹ Some conservative churches and religious organisations explicitly defend the comma as genuine Scripture.²⁰ Many of those who defend the comma are convinced that textual and historical criticism of the bible compromises the integrity of Christianity by chipping away at its foundations, minutely but persistently. Some are led by such suspicions to dismiss and even revile academic biblical studies, in order to justify their rejection of scholarly criticism of the *textus receptus*. But adherence to the *textus receptus* and translations based upon it, notably the Authorised Version, is not simply a textual or literary preference. It frequently underlies a conservative social and moral program. In recent decades, some who hold such views have attempted to influence

¹⁷ Bikhchandani et al. 1992.

¹⁸ J.-P. P. Martin 1887, 98.

¹⁹ www.puritanboard.com/showthread.php/37481-Johannine-Comma/ (accessed 1 January 2016).

²⁰ The 2006 *Report of the Religion and Morals Committee of the Free Church of Scotland*, 17, criticises the omission of the comma from the English Standard Version; <http://www.fpchurch.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Religion-Morals-Report-2006.pdf>. See also G. W. and D. E. Anderson, 'Why 1 John 5:7–8 is in the bible', www.tbsbibles.org/pdf_information/40-1.pdf (accessed 1 January 2016).

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-12536-0 - Biblical Criticism in Early Modern Europe: Erasmus, the Johannine Comma and Trinitarian Debate

Grantley McDonald

Excerpt

[More information](#)

public education policy, such as the teaching of evolution in schools, and the regulation of sexual and reproductive issues, such as the availability of abortion and the legality of same-sex relationships. In the last few decades, the Johannine comma, one of the clearest instances of a conflict between academic critics and biblical conservatives, has thus regained its power to raise considerable passions.

Whenever the Johannine comma is discussed, Erasmus inevitably appears as a central player. He was responsible not only for formulating the basis of the familiar Greek wording of the comma and including it in the text form which would dominate the scene from the early sixteenth to the late nineteenth centuries, but also for questioning the authority of his only manuscript source for the verse. The story of his decision to include the comma has often been altered in the telling. Some variants in this narrative seem innocuous enough, but they frequently conceal further motives. According to a popular legend still recounted widely, Erasmus promised to restore the comma to his published text if a single Greek manuscript could be found in support of the reading, and challenged his adversary Edward Lee to produce such a manuscript. When such a manuscript was produced, Erasmus is alleged to have honoured his promise by including the comma in the third edition of his Greek New Testament (1522a). This myth, however appealing, suggests misleading conclusions about Erasmus' character and his editorial standards. More significantly, it implies that he ultimately came to be convinced of the authenticity of the comma. In 1980, Henk Jan de Jonge roasted this old chestnut, showing that there is no evidence that Erasmus ever made such a promise, and that the story grew from a careless misreading of Erasmus' published reply to Lee. However, like all good stories which are not true but really ought to be, the myth of Erasmus' promise to Lee refuses to go away, and is still cited in scholarly and popular literature on biblical criticism.²¹ Even more important than Erasmus' contribution to the story of the comma was his development of an approach to Scriptural study that was both respectful and objective. Building on foundations laid by Lorenzo Valla, Erasmus was one of the first scholars to appreciate that the text of Scripture is dynamic, subject to corruption through impersonal physical processes as well as deliberate intervention. He also realised that Christian doctrine is not a lapidary whole, but has been subject to

²¹ De Jonge 1980b, cites many nineteenth- and twentieth-century authorities who cite the myth; see also *ASD* IX-2:12, 259; Rummel 1986, 132–133.