

In my previous posts I have indicated that the King James Version includes verses in some places that are almost certainly not “original” – that is, passages that were not written by the original authors but were added by later scribes. I chose three of the most outstanding and famous examples: the explicit reference to the Trinity in 1 John 5:7-8; the story of the woman taken in adultery in John 7:53-8:11; and Jesus’ resurrection appearance in the longer ending of Mark’s Gospel, Mark 16:9-20.

The thread actually began somewhere else, with my discussing not the King James Bible but the New Revised Standard Version, which is my preferred translation. One might ask: how are these three passages presented in the NRSV? Since virtually all scholars agree the passages were not original to the New Testament, are they printed there?

As it turns out, the three passages are handled differently. The first, the affirmation of the doctrine of the Trinity (1 John 5:7-8), is not in any of our most ancient manuscripts at all. It shows up in one manuscript of the fourteenth century, one of the fifteenth, another of the sixteenth, and finally one of the eighteenth. Yes, that’s right, the eighteenth. Scribes were producing manuscripts long after the invention of printing (just as my students today take notes with pen and paper, even though they all own laptops). It can be found in the margins of four other, equally late, manuscripts, as a possible variant reading. The result, though, is that no one except the most avid fundamentalist thinks that the verses have any claim to belong to the “original” text of the New Testament.

And so how does the NRSV present the text at this point? It...

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