

A Treatise on Erasmus

By
Martin A. Shue

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this treatise to my wife, Stephanie. Her unwavering support in all my studies is greatly appreciated. Thank you for your patience and encouragement as countless hours are spent in studying for the many articles I write. Indeed the scriptures testified of you when it was written, “A virtuous woman is a crown to her husband”.

Introduction

Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam was, and still is, a most fascinating individual. I never realized this for myself until I began to briefly look into his life and works. The effects Erasmus had on society are heralded in many books and publications. There is little disagreement among experts, and novices alike, that Erasmus was a highly influential figure in the church, the ‘state’, the educational process and everyday public life. His larger than life stature touched each one of these institutions profoundly. Nearly every person of repute sought his opinion and advice on a wide variety of subjects. Kings and Queens, Church leaders, University scholars and ‘the man on the street’ frequently uttered his name. The demand for his advice can be seen in the voluminous letters he received as well as wrote. More than 3,000 of his personal letters survive to this day. At one time Erasmus commented that he was writing more than 40 letters a day.

Though opinions of him vary greatly none deny his “brilliant qualities”. The Catholic Encyclopedia, which is no friend of Erasmus’, proclaimed,

“His splendid gifts explain the universal European fame of the man through several decades, public esteem and admiration far excelling in degree and extent the lot of any scholar since his day. He had an unequalled talent for form, great journalistic gifts, a surpassing power of expression; for strong and moving discourse, keen irony, and covert sarcasm, he was unsurpassed. In him the world beheld a scholar of comprehensive and many-sided learning, though neither profound nor thorough, a man of universal observation, a writer whose diction was brilliant and elegant in the highest degree.”¹

Another writer described Erasmus in the following manner,

“Erasmus, during his mature years in the earlier part of the sixteenth century, was the intellectual giant of Europe. He was ever at work, visiting libraries, searching in every

¹ Quoted from the Catholic Encyclopedia at NewAdvent.org

nook and corner for the profitable. He was ever collecting, comparing, writing and publishing. Europe was rocked from end to end by his books which exposed the ignorance of the monks, the superstitions of the priesthood, the bigotry, and the childish and coarse religion of the day. He classified the Greek manuscripts and read the Fathers.”²

His Early Life

Desiderius Erasmus was born the illegitimate son of a priest and a physician’s daughter whose name was Margaret. The date of his birth is not known for sure but most place it on or about Oct. 28th 1466. However, based upon some of Erasmus’ own statements (which seem to contradict one another) some believe his birth was not until 1469. His father, Gerhard, was a priest and a Greek and Latin scholar who worked in Italy making copies of classic authors.³ No doubt Erasmus’ early introduction to the Greek and Latin languages would fuel the fire that burned inside him his whole life for higher learning.

Tragically, Erasmus and his older brother Peter were left orphaned after their parents died of the plague in 1483(4). This left the brothers under the guardianship of Peter Winckel, the schoolmaster of Gouda, who was “a mean, narrow-minded tyrant”.⁴ Within three years Winckel had dissipated the estate and was seeking to force the monastic life upon the boys. When both refused they were sent to school at a place called Brethren at ‘s Hertogenbosch, where Erasmus was encouraged to read ancient authors, including Cicero and Seneca. Here Erasmus came alive.⁵

Those that seek to discredit Erasmus and his work often criticize Erasmus for being a Roman Catholic priest. It is likely that these people are simply ignorant of the facts, having never studied the matter for themselves. True, Erasmus was ordained a priest in 1492 but this was not by his own choosing. He was forced to enter the Augustinian monastery at Steyn by his guardian, Peter Winckel. There Erasmus found himself for “five endless years, his freedom to think so restricted he could barely endure it.” Longing for the day to express himself he put his despair in this verse, which he wrote in Latin:

“Though I had mouths as many as the stars that sparkle in the silent
firmament on quiet nights
Or as many as the roses that the gentle breeze of Spring scatters on the
ground
I could not complain enough of all the evils which now oppress the sacred
art of poetry...”⁶

² Dr. Benjamin Wilkinson, *Our Authorized Bible Vindicated* as found in *Which Bible*, edited by David Otis Fuller p. 225.

³ Genevieve Foster, *The World of Columbus and Sons*, p. 220

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ “Desiderius Erasmus” <http://theosophy.org/tlodocs/teachers/DesideriusErasmus.htm>

⁶ Ibid.

There is no evidence to suggest that Erasmus enjoyed his experience in the monastery at Steyn. In fact, the complete opposite is true. It is the opinion of this writer that this experience is what would lead Erasmus to a life filled with criticism toward the priesthood and the 'backward' way of living in the many monasteries. Finding religious life distasteful, he sought secular employment, and he later received papal dispensation to live and dress as a secular scholar.⁷

In 1493 Erasmus was able to escape the confines of the monastery when he was appointed as secretary to Henry of Bergen, Bishop of Cambrai. The Bishop had been searching for a secretary fluent in Latin that could write his letters and papers with elegance and style. He would soon be making a trip to Rome, where he hoped to be made a Cardinal, and wished to use Erasmus' services to intelligently and efficiently compose his documents.

Delighted to be free from the monastery Erasmus soon found his life with the Bishop nearly as unpleasant as life in the monastery. He had little time to do the things he wished while traveling with the Bishop. He found life in Brussels a mere 'merry-go-round' and would complain, "In such a bustle and clamor about me, do you think I can find leisure for the work of the Muses?"⁸

At a country house of the Bishop's Erasmus finally found some much-desired time to finish a book he had begun in the monastery at Steyn. Ironically, the book would be titled *Antibarbari*-----Against Barbarism. The book was written in the form of a conversation between friends who had gathered in a garden house outside of a certain town to enjoy a meal and to talk about things of the mind, namely poetry and Latin literature. The friends rather joyfully quote Augustine and Jerome and others to prove that one can be a devout Christian and still appreciate the truth and beauty of Greek and Roman thought. In an apparent attack on the monasterial way of life, war is solemnly declared against those ignorant people who deny this. Erasmus dubs those that oppose education and learning as 'barbarians'.

In the summer of 1495, realizing he would not be accompanying the Bishop to Rome, Erasmus sought permission to travel to Paris, France where he planned to study for his doctorate in theology at the University of Paris. Perhaps the greatest thing to come of Erasmus' time at the university was his renewed interest in the Greek language. From his own writings it appears that what knowledge he gained came from personal study along with the help of a few friends he had made.

In early 1499 Erasmus, being highly disappointed with the University of Paris, would leave without earning his doctorate in order to visit England.⁹ Erasmus found the discussions and debates at the University a waste of time and called those theologians who pursued them "Theologasters" who were "unsurpassed by any in the murkiness of

⁷ "Erasmus, Desiderius," Microsoft Encarta Online Encyclopedia 2003 <http://encarta.msn.com> 1997-2003 Microsoft Corporation. All Rights Reserved.

⁸ Genevieve Foster, *The World of Columbus and Sons*, p. 221

⁹ William W. Combs, *Erasmus and the Textus Receptus*, p. 37

their brains, in the barbarity of their speech, the stupidity of their manners, the hypocrisy of their lives, the violence of their language, and the blackness of their hearts”.¹⁰ The Paris University was described as “a filthy place with foul food, spoiled eggs, and squalid bedrooms full of fleas. And the teaching of theology was absurd.”¹¹

While in England Erasmus would become acquainted with Thomas More and John Colet. Erasmus attended lectures at Oxford on the meaning of the Bible, which were given by Colet. Erasmus found these lectures so stimulating that the course of his life was changed. He determined to make the serious study of the Bible the object of his life. Being equally impressed with Erasmus, Colet requested Erasmus to teach the meaning of the Old Testament at Oxford. To this Erasmus replied, “Ah no, my dear Colet, no. How should I teach that which I have not learned? You cannot get water from a stone.”¹²

In December of 1499 Erasmus would return to Paris more determined than ever to master the Greek language. Regarding the importance of knowing Greek Erasmus would write:

“It may be asked why I am so pleased with the example of Cato the Censor, as to be learning Greek at my age. I answer, reverend father, that if I had had this mind when a boy, or rather if the times had been more favorable to me, I should have been the happiest man in the world. As it is, I am determined that it is better to learn late than to be without the knowledge which it is of the utmost importance to possess. We had a taste of this learning a long time ago, but it was only with the tip of the tongue, as they say; and having lately dipped deeper into it, we see, what we have often read in the most weighty authors, that Latin scholarship is crippled and imperfect without Greek. For whereas we Latins have but a few small streams, a few muddy pools, the Greeks possess crystal-clear springs and rivers that run with gold. I can see what utter madness it is even to put a finger on that part of theology which is specially concerned with the mysteries of the faith unless one is furnished with the equipment of Greek as well, since the translators of Scripture, in their scrupulous manner of construing the text, offer such literal versions of the Greek idioms that no one ignorant of that language could grasp even the primary, or, as our own theologians call it, literal, meaning.”¹³

In March of 1500 Erasmus had thrust himself so much into the study of Greek that he penned a letter to his friend saying, “Greek is nearly killing me, but I have no time and no money to buy books or take a master. By lucky chance I got some Greek books which I am copying day and night....Afterwards (I shall) devote myself entirely to the sacred learning after which my soul has been hankering for a long time. I am in fairly good

¹⁰ “Desiderius Erasmus” http://theosophy.org/tlodocs/teachers/Desiderius_Erasmus.htm

¹¹ Genevieve Foster, *The World of Columbus and Sons*, p. 291

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 292

¹³ Epistle 149. *The Correspondence of Erasmus*, vol. 2 in the *Collected Works of Erasmus*, trans. R.A.B. Mynors and D.F.S. Thomson, p. 25; hereafter cited as *CWE*.

health, so I shall have to strain every nerve this year.” By fall of 1502, Erasmus declared that he could properly write all he wanted to in Greek.¹⁴

In 1506, Erasmus was finally afforded the opportunity he had longed for for many years---the opportunity to visit Italy. In Italy he hoped to perfect his Greek since there were many Greeks teaching Greek. As it happens, the Italian physician of King Henry VII requested Erasmus to accompany his two boys to Bologna, and to there act as their tutor for one year. Looking on the ‘job’ (which he soon came to regret) as an opportunity to reach his dream of visiting Italy Erasmus took the offer and was soon on his way to Bologna. While in Bologna Erasmus had written to a Venetian scholar/printer named Aldus Manutius, who had agreed to publish a new enlarged edition of his *Adagia*, a book that is said to consist of 3,260 Latin quotations (i.e. adages) as well as Erasmus’ commentary and had made Erasmus famous. Erasmus had seen another of Aldus’ publications and had expressed his admiration for the new slanted letters that Aldus had designed that was based upon Italian handwriting and was called “italics”.

After arriving at the printing plant Erasmus immediately got to work due to the fact that he had not yet completed his new enlarged edition. Being eager to get something accomplished, Erasmus recorded, “and with great temerity on my part we began to work at the same time, I to write, Aldus to print.” The two worked at such a rapid pace that Erasmus said he “had no time even to scratch his ears”.¹⁵

To Erasmus’ delight he found that Aldus had gathered around him a small group of Italian and Greek scholars who ate, slept, and worked together, while pledging themselves to speak only Greek.¹⁶ Alas, Erasmus had perfected his Greek just as planned during his three years in Italy.

Erasmus and His Greek Text

An event that would change the course of Erasmus’ life, and perhaps the course of the Christian world, occurred in 1504 while he was working at the library of the abbey of Parc, near Louvain. It was here in this library that Erasmus discovered a valuable manuscript left behind by Lorenzo Valla (1407-1457). Valla had spent much of his life researching and writing this manuscript. It will perhaps benefit my readers if we pause for a moment to consider this man.

Valla was a specialist in Latin translation and philology (study of words). He took a great interest in examining ancient and modern authors and their style of writing. In particular, he became the first scholar, perhaps unwittingly, to examine ancient documents in order to verify their authenticity. This was a rather tedious and laborious task but, much like Erasmus, Valla seemed to enjoy this type of work. In a study entitled “Great Teachers Series” Valla is described as, “Anticlerical and undogmatic, Valla’s Christianity was moral and humanitarian, and though a master of theology, he was indifferent to creed and

¹⁴ Genevieve Foster, *The World of Columbus and Sons*, p. 293

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 320

¹⁶ William W. Combs, *Erasmus and the Textus Receptus*, p. 38

ritual and rejected scholastic theology in favour of the Gospels and the earliest fathers of the church. He had grave doubts about the value of monasticism as a cloistered practice rather than a spiritual ideal. Just as Nicholas of Cusa had dared to show that the Decretals of Isidore were fabrications, so Valla demonstrated in 1440 that the Donation of Constantine, giving the bishop of Rome precedence over all others, was a forgery. He held that the early church doctors were bees making honey whilst those in his time were wasps stealing grain.”¹⁷

Valla, armed with the belief that the Vulgate contained significant mistakes, made a critical study of Jerome’s Latin Vulgate. In his study he carefully compared the Vulgate to what Valla considered the authentic documents---the ancient Greek manuscripts (mss.). By doing this Valla presented in his final work a “collatio,” a comparison of the Latin Vulgate with the Greek New Testament. Exactly which Greek mss. Valla used is uncertain; however, it is believed that he used many texts and the best, most ancient ones he could find. In such a critical work it is hard to believe otherwise. For to make the claims that Valla was about to make one would need undeniable proof and this is exactly what Valla produced by evaluating the Vulgate in light of ancient Greek copies.

Valla found many passages vitiated by unlearned or negligent copyists; others he found corrupted by conscious alteration on the part of audacious scribes; still others he found inaccurately translated from the Greek. In his, “collatio,” Valla annotated these passages in order to offer Latin Christians the clearest possible understanding of the New Testament.¹⁸ Additionally, he raised troubling questions about some of Jerome’s word choices, such as Latin ‘paenitentia’ (“penance”) for the Greek ‘metnoia’ (“repentance”). Valla essentially suggested that the Catholic church’s entire system of penance and indulgences rested on a mistranslation.

Valla’s work had a very profound influence on Erasmus, so much so, “that he (Erasmus) devoted much of his career to the task of developing, refining, and extending Valla’s methods.”¹⁹ Erasmus, himself, described Valla as “a man who with so much energy, zeal and labor, refuted the stupidities of the barbarians, saved half-buried letters from extinction, restored Italy to her ancient splendor of eloquence, and forced even the learned to express themselves henceforth with more circumspection.”

I do not apologize for tarrying so long on the work of Lorenzo Valla and the influence he had upon Erasmus. I believe it is essential for the reader to have a good knowledge of these things in order to better understand the events surrounding the subsequent publication of Erasmus’ Greek text. Valla’s investigations into the textual errors in the Vulgate spurred Erasmus to undertake the study of the Greek New Testament.

A year after Erasmus discovered Valla’s manuscript he published it under the title “Adnotationes in Novum Testamentum”. Again, this is important because in this ms.

¹⁷ “Desiderius Erasmus” Theosophy Library Online—Great Teacher Series.
http://theosophy.org/tlodocs/teachers/Desiderius_Erasmus.htm

¹⁸ Jerry H. Bentley, *Humanists and Holy Writ* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), Chapter 2.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 69

Erasmus had access to all the research Valla had completed. It is certain that Erasmus had at his fingertip readings from very ancient Greek codices. These, no doubt, were either used or referenced later when Erasmus was performing his own critical study of the Latin Vulgate in light of the original Greek manuscripts. We must also take into consideration that Erasmus traveled greatly. Everywhere he went he searched every nook and cranny in hopes of finding a Biblical manuscript or at least a piece of one. Erasmus was able to purchase some mss. while others were simply given to him. And because of his fame he was allowed to examine many mss. in libraries and monasteries all over Europe.

It has often been stated that Erasmus was not qualified to produce a Greek text because his understanding of Greek was “less than adequate”. I will just briefly remind the reader that Erasmus was so proficient in the Greek language that he taught Greek at Cambridge University from 1511 to 1514. This brings us to the date when Erasmus left England for Basel, Switzerland to meet with a printer named Johann Froben. For some time Erasmus had been in correspondence with Froben, and was anxious to meet him.

Erasmus arrived in Basel by ship in August of 1514 anxious to finally meet Froben and even more anxious to get to work on his newest project. Upon arrival, Erasmus decided on the way to Froben’s print shop that he would play a joke on Froben. When he reached the print shop Erasmus pretended to be a messenger sent by Erasmus. He would later write, “I said I was also entrusted with the publishing of his works, so that whatever I did would stand as if done by Erasmus himself. At last I added that I was so like him that whoever saw me saw Erasmus. Froben then broke into a laugh as he discovered the hoax.”²⁰

Beatus Rhenanus, an employee of Froben, described Erasmus’ arrival with these words, “Erasmus of Rotterdam, a great scholar, has arrived in Basel most recently, weighed down with good books, among which are the following: Jerome revised, the complete works of Seneca revised, copious notes on the New Testament, a book of similes, a large number of translations from Plutarch, the adages...”²¹ I draw attention to Rhenanus’ comment “copious notes on the New Testament”. Though much is made of what mss. Erasmus had or didn’t have little is said of the additional notes he brought with him. That these notes were very vast can be seen in a letter Erasmus wrote on July 8, 1514 (this would’ve been just before he arrived in Basel), to a friend. In the letter Erasmus states, “After collation of Greek and other ancient manuscripts, I have emended the whole New Testament, and I have annotated over a thousand passages, not without benefit to theologians.”²² Here we have in the testimony of Erasmus himself that he had just finished collating “Greek and other ancient manuscripts” and had corrected (i.e. ‘emended’) the entire New Testament (Latin). Additionally, he had made notes on “over a thousand passages”.

When Erasmus began work on his Annotations is not certain. While researching for this treatise I encountered various opinions regarding this matter but no one seemed positive.

²⁰ Genevieve Foster, *The World of Columbus and Sons*, p. 367

²¹ William W. Combs, *Erasmus and the Textus Receptus*, p. 41

²² Epistle 296, CWE 2:300

About the only thing we can be sure of is that based upon his own letters he had made ‘considerable progress’ by his stay at Cambridge University (1511-1514). It also seems clear that the only real goal Erasmus set out to do in Basel was to publish his Annotations along with the text of the Vulgate. It wasn’t until he was well into the project that he was persuaded to include his own Latin translation and the Greek text. Erasmus recalled the circumstances in a letter to Bude as follows, “When the work was already due to be published, certain people encouraged me to change the Vulgate text” (Ep 421:50-2) He reaffirmed this later in 1533 when he wrote, “When I had first come to Basel I had not even thought about translating the New Testament” (Ep 2758:12-14)

Myths About Erasmus

I have learned that there is much misinformation given out by all sides regarding Erasmus. Most of it has been repeated for so long that it is accepted as fact now. In this section I would like to examine a few commonly accepted facts (sic) about Erasmus to see if they are accurate or not.

1) Erasmus wanted to be the first to publish a Greek text.

No doubt you have heard that Erasmus produced his Greek text in haste because he wanted to be the first person to publish a Greek text. The Complutensian Polyglot had already been printed but had not been published as of yet. Many proclaim that this drove Erasmus and that this is why he rushed to produce his own Greek text. But is this accurate?

James White writes, “Erasmus’ interest in the text of the Bible, seen in his publishing of Valla’s work, prompted him to begin work on publishing the first printed edition of the Greek New Testament....He obtained the assistance of John Froben, a printer there at Basel. Froben encouraged Erasmus to hurry with his work, possibly because he had heard that Cardinal Ximenes had already printed his *Complutensian Polyglot*, which included the Greek New Testament, and was merely waiting for approval to arrive from Rome before publishing his work. Time was running out to be the first to actually publish the Greek New Testament.”²³

Here White intimates that Erasmus rushed his publication to press because he wanted to be the first person to actually publish a Greek text. This is indeed a myth and has been parroted by so many ‘scholars’ that it is now a commonly accepted fact. To dispel this myth I offer the following facts.

Henk J. De Jonge, an expert on Erasmusian studies, has confirmed that “Erasmus and his contemporaries regarded the *Nouvum Instrumentum* and its later editions in the first place as the presentation of the NT in a new Latin form, and not as an edition of the Greek text”²⁴ De Jonge gives several reasons backing up his claim that Erasmus never intended to produce a Greek text. First, the name Erasmus used to publish his work was “Novum

²³ James R. White, *The King James Only Controversy*, p. 15

²⁴ De Jonge, *Novum Testamentum a Nobis Versum*, pp. 395ff

Instrumentum...recognitum et emendatum”, which means, “The New Instrument...revised and improved”. This is a clear reference to the Latin text and not a Greek text. For there was no Greek text that could be “revised and improved”.

Second, in his dedication to Pope Leo X, Erasmus writes, “I perceived that that teaching which is our salvation was to be had in a much purer and more lively form if sought at the fountain-head and drawn from the actual sources than from pools and runnels. And so I have revised the whole New Testament (as they call it) against the standard of the Greek original...I have added annotations of my own, in order in the first place to show the reader what changes I have made, and why; second, to disentangle and explain anything that may be complicated, ambiguous, or obscure.”²⁵ Again, there is no indication from Erasmus that his purpose was to produce a Greek text. On the contrary, he plainly states that he had ‘revised’ the New Testament (i.e. the Latin Vulgate) against the Greek ‘original’ and had printed his annotations to explain his alterations. As stated above, Erasmus’ real goal was to publish his “Annotations” along with the Latin Vulgate NT. He never indicates in this dedication, or elsewhere, that he planned to produce any Greek text. From all indications Erasmus sought only to correct the text of the Vulgate.

Thirdly, in a section entitled ‘*Apologia*’ (a defense of his work) it is clear that what Erasmus is ‘defending’ is his new Latin text and not the Greek text. Erasmus goes so far as to say that the “Greek text has been ‘added’ so that the reader can convince himself that the Latin translation does not contain any rash innovations, but is solidly based.”²⁶ This certainly does not sound like the words of a man that was rushing to publish the first Greek text as White and many others suppose. It is clear from Erasmus’ own words that he merely ‘added’ the Greek text to substantiate his changes in the Latin Vulgate.

Fourthly, had Erasmus’ purpose been to produce a Greek text he no doubt would’ve at some time or another published a book containing solely his ‘new’ Greek text. However, he never did this despite the fact that he was greatly encouraged to do so. Each of his 5 editions focused upon his Latin text and his ever-growing ‘*Annotations*’. In fact Erasmus even added the Latin Vulgate in a third column in his fourth edition. This was afterward removed in the printing of his fifth and final edition.

2) Erasmus used inferior manuscripts.

This is perhaps one of the most often repeated myths concerning Erasmus and the Greek text he printed. To better understand why this claim is made one must realize that behind this statement lies the notion that Codices Vaticanus and Sinaiticus are far superior to other manuscripts. Without exception, this is precisely what is referenced when the above declaration is made. Again we ask, is this a fact or just another myth?

First it is quite comical to read what some have to say about the mss. Erasmus used. For example, here are a few quotes I gathered regarding the number (or supposed number) of mss. Erasmus actually had on hand:

²⁵ Epistle 384, CWE 3:222-23

²⁶ de Jonge, “*Novum Testamentum a Nobis Versum*,” p. 400

“In creating the Textus Receptus, Erasmus, although a great scholar, had access to only eight manuscripts, all from the so-called Byzantine family of biblical manuscripts. (George W. Reid, Director – Biblical Research Institute, *The Authority of the Bible*)”

“In constructing and editing the text, Erasmus had the feeblest of manuscript resources. He chiefly used one manuscript of the Gospels, dating from the twelfth century, and one manuscript of Acts and the Epistles, also from the twelfth century. These he edited and corrected, using one or two additional manuscripts of each section, along with his Latin Vulgate. For Revelation, Erasmus had but one Greek manuscript which, though of better than average quality (so says Hort), yet lacked the last six verses of the book. (Doug Kutilek, *Erasmus, His Greek Text and His Theology*)”

“Vaganay's INTRO TO NT TC (1986, English trans. Heimerdinger, 1991), p. 131, explains, “In order to get it finished as quickly as possible, he gave the printers three manuscripts which he had to [sic, at] hand, namely codex 2e (Gospels), 2ap (Acts and the Epistles) and 1r (Revelation); and he simply used a few other manuscripts (1eap, 4ap, 7p) to make some slight alterations to the text.)”

These manuscripts (with their current Gregory numbers in parentheses and dates) are located as follows (from Aland's KURZEGEFASSTE LISTE):

1eap (1), XII cen., Basel, Univ. Bibl., A.N.IV.2

1r (2814), XII cen., Ausburg, Univ. Bibl., Cod. I.1.4.1

2e (2), XI/XII cen., Basel, Univ. Bibl., A.N.IV.1

2ap (2815), XII cen., Basel, Univ. Bibl., A.N.IV.4

4ap (2816), XV cen., Basel, Univ. Bibl., A.N.IV.5

7p (2817), XI cen., Basel, Univ. Bibl., A.N.IV.11”

(written by Stephen Carlson and posted to the “B-Greek Mailing List”, <http://lists.ibiblio.org/pipermail/b-greek/2000-September/013398.html>)

“He [Erasmus] was disappointed when he found only five, but he set to work with these.....He drew from barely half a dozen Greek manuscripts in his initial work, not including those he would have examined in England. (James White, *The King James Only Controversy*, p.15 & p. 54)”

“Seven manuscripts were used by Erasmus in Basel to compile the Greek text which was printed alongside his Latin translation. (William W. Combs, *Erasmus and the Textus Receptus*)”

“Thus the text of Erasmus’ Greek New Testament rests upon a half-dozen minuscule manuscripts. (Bruce Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament*, 3rd edition, p. 102)”

I believe it is clear from these few quotes that no one knows for sure just how many mss. Erasmus had on hand when he published his *Novum Instrumentum*.

Most Bible critics that condemn Erasmus for using only a few Greek mss. are being hypocritical in their judgement. While they criticize Erasmus and his text they defend the Greek text that underlies nearly every modern version. This is ironic because the Greek text of the modern versions is based on far fewer mss. than Erasmus’ was. In fact, one knowledgeable authority stated that “the text of B—with which, indeed, the Greek text of Westcott and Hort is, with some unimportant exceptions, substantially identical, coinciding in more than nine tenths of the passages.”²⁷

So, what of these mss. Erasmus used? Were they really ‘inferior’ as we’re lead to believe? No, this is just another myth started by those who wish to cast doubt upon our Authorized Version. Consider the following facts.

It is important to remember what Erasmus was setting out to do when taking into account the Greek mss. he employed. Erasmus was seeking to ‘correct’ the Latin Vulgate, which was considered heresy in his day, by comparing it to ‘the original Greek’, as Erasmus called it. It is ridiculous to believe or assert that Erasmus used ‘inferior’ Greek manuscripts. Had he done so he would’ve been the laughing stock of his day. What Erasmus was doing was a very serious matter and one that can hardly be understood by readers today. Literally, Erasmus’ life was at stake. The Catholic Church could’ve put him to death for any one of the many changes he made in the Latin Vulgate. Are we to believe Erasmus would stake his very life on a few ‘inferior’ mss.? God forbid!

Erasmus was a very thorough scholar and had examined many mss. prior to coming to Basel. The reader should also keep in mind that he had his *Annotations* with him, which he claimed was a textual commentary on the entire New Testament. Dean John William Burgon comments, “If the objection be made, as it probably will be, ‘Do you then mean to rest upon the five manuscripts used by Erasmus?’ I reply that the copies employed were selected because they were known to represent the accuracy of the Sacred Word.” On this point I agree with Burgon.

Others have attested to the integrity of the Greek mss. utilized by Erasmus. Dr. F.H.A. Scrivener affirmed “that Irenaeus and the African Fathers and the whole Western, with a portion of the Syrian Church, used far inferior manuscripts to those employed by Stunica, or Erasmus, or Stephen thirteen centuries later, when moulding the Textus Receptus”²⁸

In 1951 Dr. Alfred Martin[†] presented his dissertation entitled *A Critical Examination of the Westcott-Hort Textual Theory* to the faculty of the Graduate School of Dallas

²⁷ F. C. Cook, *The Revised Version*, p. 6

²⁸ Scrivener, *Plain Introduction*, p. 264

[†] Dr. Martin would later become the Vice President of Moody Bible Institute

Theological Seminary. After careful research Dr. Martin came to the conclusion that, “The text used by the Church Fathers from Chrysostom’s time on was not materially different from the text of Erasmus and Stephanus.”²⁹ This is the same text that even Westcott/Hort admit was the dominant text from the fourth century onward.

In his delightful book, *The Revised Version of the First Three Gospels*, Canon Cook defends the Textus Receptus and answers two members of the Revision Committee of 1881 in a short section near the close of the book. I offer the following lengthy quote by Canon Cook:

“The Revisers were convinced, as a body, or as the majority of a body, that the purest, the only thoroughly trustworthy authority for the Greek text, speaking generally, is that supplied by the two oldest manuscripts, the Vatican and the Sinaitic.....But speaking on my own behalf, and on behalf of others who hold the same views, I say this: the Textus Receptus is entitled to such preference as is claimed for it, not so much on the ground that it has been generally accepted by scholars and others for more than three centuries, but because those of its readings which are of supreme importance, so far certainly as the first three Gospels are concerned, have in their favour a decided preponderance of ancient authorities, as compared with the readings of the Vatican and Sinaitic manuscripts. That Textus Receptus was taken in the first instance [here he refers to Erasmus’ text] from late cursive manuscripts: but its readings are maintained only so far as they agree with the best ancient Versions, with the earliest and best Greek and Latin Fathers, and with the vast majority of uncial and cursive manuscripts.

We have in fact the formal admission that the old Received Text agrees in the main with that used by the Fathers of the fourth and following centuries in the Eastern Churches: especially with the text used by Chrysostom throughout his homilies. This has been previously noticed as a fact recognized by Dr. Westcott and Dr. Hort; it is satisfactory to find that it is formally recognized by the two representatives of the Committee of Revision.”³⁰

The tract that Dr. Cook is responding to was titled *The Revisers and the Greek Text of the New Testament*, by two members of the *New Testament Company*. Bishop Ellicott, who was the Chairman of the Revising Committee, and Archdeacon Palmer, wrote it. In this tract the two men make the following declaration,

“The manuscripts which Erasmus used, differ, for the most part, only in small and insignificant details from the bulk of the cursive manuscripts – that is to say, the manuscripts which are written in running hand and not in capital or (as they are technically called) uncial letters. The general

²⁹ Dr. Martin’s dissertation is found in part in *Which Bible* edited by David Otis Fuller, quote on p. 149

³⁰ Cook, *The Revised Version*, pp. 225-226

character of their text is the same. By this observation the pedigree of the Received Text is carried up beyond the individual manuscripts used by Erasmus to a great body of manuscripts of which the earliest are assigned to the ninth century.”³¹

It is my sincere hope that by now you realize Erasmus’ Greek text was not based upon a few “inferior” mss. as is commonly alleged. As I mentioned before, those that espouse such foolishness are no doubt insinuating that Erasmus’ mss. were ‘inferior’ to Vaticanus and Sinaiticus. Most even proclaim that Erasmus didn’t have knowledge of or have access to these two codices. While this is true of Sinaiticus, for it had not been discovered (need I say ‘rescued’!) , this is not true of Vaticanus. There is proof that Erasmus had knowledge of and access to Vaticanus but made no use of its readings.

Dr. Benjamin Wilkinson, in his book *Our Authorized Bible Vindicated* (edited by David Otis Fuller), makes the following observations, “We are informed by another author that, if Erasmus had desired, he could have secured a transcript of this manuscript.³² There was no necessity, however, for Erasmus to obtain a transcript because he was in correspondence with Professor Paulus Bombasius at Rome, who sent him such variant readings as he wished.³³”³⁴ Sir Frederick Kenyon also testified to this fact when he wrote, “A correspondent of Erasmus in 1533 sent that scholar a number of selected readings from [Vaticanus], as proof of its superiority to the received Greek text.”³⁵ Erasmus was supplied with 365 readings by J.G. Sepulveda that agreed with the Vulgate over against Erasmus’ Greek text. He hoped to influence Erasmus away from the Traditional Greek text in favor of the Alexandrian readings but Erasmus wisely rejected all 365 readings Sepulveda sought to foist upon him.

Once again we see another myth about Erasmus disappears when the light of facts is shown upon it.

3) **Erasmus added 1 Jn. 5:7 after hastily issuing a challenge regarding the verse.**

When reading about or discussing Erasmus and his Greek text invariably 1 Jn. 5:7 is brought to the forefront. James White declared that 1 Jn. 5:7 is “The most famous textual variant”³⁶ While this may be true Erasmus did not include the verse in his Latin or Greek texts in his first two editions. Many have charged Erasmus with hastily making a challenge to include the verse if a Greek manuscript was produced that contained the reading. Is this just another myth attributed to Erasmus or is this a fact? As before let’s have a look at the facts and see what they reveal.

The common allegation against Erasmus goes something like this, “The combination of accusations of Arianism, with Erasmus’ thin-skinned sensitivity to criticism, caused him

³¹ *The Revisers and the Greek Text of the New Testament*, p. 11

³² Bissell, *Historic Origin of the Bible*, p. 84

³³ S. P. Tregelles, *On the Printed Text of the Greek Testament*, p. 22

³⁴ Fuller, *Which Bible*, p. 253

³⁵ Kenyon, *Our Bible and the Ancient MSS.*, online at <http://www.katapi.org.uk/index.htm>

³⁶ White, *The King James Only Controversy*, p. 150

to rashly vow that if any Greek manuscript could be found to include the words in question, he would add them to his text.”³⁷ The only problem with such accusations is that there is no evidence to prove such a vow was ever made. However, this myth has been repeated for so long that it is accepted as fact without anyone examining the actual facts of the event.

James White joins Kutilek in this misrepresentation of the facts by declaring, “The story of how this passage ended up in the King James Version is very instructive...In responding to Lee, Erasmus challenged him to “produce a Greek manuscript that has what is missing in my edition.”³⁸ Indeed Erasmus did defend himself to Lee but he never issued a ‘rash challenge’ as is supposed by Kutilek and White.

Bruce Metzger, long time critic of the Textus Receptus and King James Bible, use to make a similar charge against Erasmus. Here are Metzger’s words that no doubt influenced Kutilek and certainly James White (for he merely repeats Metzger’s words),

“Among the criticisms leveled at Erasmus one of the most serious appeared to be the charge of Stunica, one of the editors of Ximenes’ Complutensian Polyglot, that his text lacked part of the final chapter of 1 John, namely the Trinitarian statement concerning ‘the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one. And there are three that bear witness in earth’ (1 John v. 7-8, King James version). Erasmus replied that he had not found any Greek manuscript containing these words, though he had in the meanwhile examined several others besides those on which he relied when first preparing his text. In an unguarded moment Erasmus promised that he would insert the *Comma Johanneum*, as it is called, in future editions if a single Greek manuscript could be found that contained the passage. At length such a copy was found----or was made to order!”³⁹

However, after apparently examining the facts Metzger has retracted his former statements. Below is Metzger’s full note on the matter:

“What is said on p. 101 above about Erasmus’ promise to include the *Comma Johanneum* if one Greek manuscript were found that contained it, and his subsequent suspicion that MS. 61 was written expressly to force him to do so, needs to be corrected in the light of the research of H. J. de Jonge, a specialist in Erasmusian studies who finds no explicit evidence that supports this frequently made assertion; see his ‘Erasmus and the *Comma Johanneum*’, *Ephemerides Theologicae Louanienses*, 1vi (1980), pp. 381-9.”⁴⁰

³⁷ Doug Kutilek, *Erasmus, His Greek Text and His Theology*, <http://www.tegart.com/brian/bible/kjvonly/doug/erasmus.htm>

³⁸ White, *The King James Only Controversy*, pp. 60-61

³⁹ Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament*, p. 101

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* p. 291

William Combs in his informative dissertation on Erasmus concurs with Metzger. Combs avows that de Jonge has sufficiently ‘demonstrated that nothing in Erasmus’ writings indicates he formally made such a promise’. De Jonge insists that this myth began from a misinterpretation of Erasmus’ response to Edward Lee. Erasmus wrote to Lee, “If a single manuscript had come into my hands, in which stood what we read then I would certainly have used it to fill in what was missing in the other manuscripts I had. Because that did not happen, I have taken the only course which was permissible, that is, I have indicated what was missing from the Greek manuscripts.”⁴¹

It should be noted in passing that the stir was not so much about Erasmus’ Greek text as it was his new Latin translation. There was little regard for his Greek text as most couldn’t read Greek anyway. The Catholic Church considered Greek a heathen language and those seeking to master it were frowned upon by the Church. As a result of this few could read the Greek portion of Erasmus’ book even though it was published widely. The controversy therefore, was not so much that Erasmus didn’t include it in his Greek text (though that was a point of contention) but that he had removed it from the Latin translation. The verse stood strong in the Latin Vulgate and Erasmus had dared to remove the sacred words in his Latin translation. This caused much grief for Erasmus and his newly published book.

Perhaps the most damaging criticism directed at Erasmus came from James Lopez de Stunica, one of the editors of the elegant Complutensian Polyglot. The Complutensian Polyglot was the invention of Francis Ximenes de Cisneros, Cardinal Archbishop of Toledo, and Regent of Castile. The concept for the Polyglot Bible seems to have arisen from the desire of Ximenes to celebrate the birth of Emperor Charles V in 1502. The project, which spanned from 1502 to 1514, was very laborious and costly⁴². The first volume to be printed was the fifth volume in which was contained the New Testament in two parallel columns, Greek and Latin. The colophon on the last page of Revelation states that it was completed January 10, 1514. Though printed prior to Erasmus’ Greek text the Polyglot was not published until 1522. And even then it was not widely circulated, only 600 copies were ever printed.

Erasmus wisely made use of the Complutensian Polyglot after its publication. The Polyglot was far superior to Erasmus’ first edition in elegance and, in some aspects, in text. Dr. Scrivener rightly describes the fifth volume as “very bold and elegant”. As mentioned above the Complutensian Polyglot contained the very famous *Comma Johanneum*. Since Stunica was one of the editors of the Polyglot he took great offense to the fact that Erasmus had omitted this verse from both his Latin and Greek texts. Stunica frequently made reference to a certain Greek text that was used to compile the Polyglot in his conversations with Erasmus. Stunica repeatedly defended the manuscript as containing 1 John 5:7. James White essentially accuses Stunica of lying by saying that “in this case he had not brought this text forward, correctly assuming that even Zuniga’s [i.e. Stunica] manuscript agreed with Erasmus’ reading.” However, to this end Mr. White offers no evidence at all. It is rather presumptuous of Mr. White to jump to such a

⁴¹ De Jonge, *Erasmus and the Comma Johanneum*, p. 385

⁴² Scrivener says the cost exceeded 50,000 ducats, “a vast sum in those days”.

conclusion especially considering the fact that he, nor anyone else, knows exactly which Greek manuscripts were used for the New Testament of the Complutensian Polyglot. This has been debated for a long time and though many have speculated no one has been able to without doubt determine how many manuscripts were consulted nor which ones were employed. Metzger notes, “What manuscripts lie behind the text of the Complutensian New Testament has never been satisfactorily ascertained. In his dedication to Pope Leo X, after mentioning the pains which he had taken to secure Latin, Greek, and Hebrew manuscripts, Ximenes continues: ‘For Greek copies indeed we are indebted to your Holiness, who sent us most kindly from the Apostolic Library ver ancient codices, both of the Old and the New Testament; which have aided us very much in this undertaking’”⁴³ Further, F. H. A. Scrivener concludes, “Thus we seem cut off from all hope of obtaining direct information as to the age, character, and present locality of the materials employed for the Greek text of this edition.”⁴⁴ So, how Mr. White can be so certain that Stunica’s copy didn’t contain 1 Jn. 5:7 is as much a mystery as to which manuscript it was that Stunica had on hand. As usual we read and marvel at Mr. White’s scholarship.

Returning to the matter at hand: it is clear from research that Erasmus did not make any rash challenge regarding the *Comma Johanneum*. Those that continue to assert such a notion are guilty of promoting nothing more than a myth in hopes of furthering their agendas. That Erasmus found the verse in his Latin copies can be seen by his Annotation on the verse. Erasmus commented, “I have restored the text...so as not to give anyone an occasion for slander.”⁴⁵

Conclusion

Erasmus of Rotterdam was no doubt a very prominent figure whose influence transcends the time in which he lived. The impacts of his works are still being felt today. It is my hope that this treatise has been beneficial to the reader in better understanding who Erasmus was and dispelling some of the myths commonly associated with Erasmus.

Early in the summer of 1536 Erasmus knew that he was dying. He made preparations by finalizing his will and writing a few last letters to what dear friends he had left. The last letter we have of his writing is dated June 28th and was written to his old friend Goclenius, who had advised him to write to a lady of the house of Nassau. The letter reads in part, “Had you known exactly (he says) the state of my affairs, you would have sent word to this lady, that I had been obliged to leave Friburg on account of my ill health, with design to go to Bezancon as soon as I had finished my *Ecclesiastes*, that I might still continue in the Emperor’s territories. But my complaint growing worse, I had been obliged to pass the winter at Basle. For though I am here with my best friends and such as I could not have at Friburg, yet because of the difference of religious sentiments, I could have been glad to end my days elsewhere, I wish Brabant were nearer at hand.”

⁴³ Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament*, pp. 97-8

⁴⁴ Scrivener, *Plain Introduction*, p. 179, Vol. II

⁴⁵ White, *The King James Only Controversy*, p. 61

For nearly a month Erasmus was seriously ill with dysentery and he knew full well that he would not recover from his bed. Prior to his death Amerbach, Froben and Episcopius came to visit their sick friend. Erasmus said that in them he beheld the three friends of Job and asked smiling why they had not rent their clothes and put ashes on their heads.

On the night of July 11, 1536 he began to repeat "I will sing the mercy and the judgement of the Lord!". Even though he knew death was imminent he refused to send for a priest to hear confession and administer extreme unction. With his last breath he uttered, in the language of his childhood, "*Lieber Gott*" (*Dear God*). He died calmly on the 12th of July, and was buried with a great concourse of attendants in the Cathedral Church of Basel.

Years before in 1516 when John Colet, a dear friend of Erasmus', saw the *Novum Instrumentum* he declared, "Nomen Erasmi nunquam peribit", which means "the name of Erasmus will never perish". Indeed Colet was right!