

## Reformation History

### 2. Erasmus

Desiderius Erasmus (1466?–1536) was born in Rotterdam the illegitimate son of a priest. An orphaned child, he was forced into taking religious orders in an Augustinian monastery, and in 1492 was ordained a priest. He began studying theology in Paris but ultimately abandoned the venture, having little interest in the scholastic thought of the day. Erasmus was never to have an academic career, nor was he to remain a priest, but he never left the Catholic Church. From his early days he made his living by tutoring and later from the income received from his publications. As with John Calvin later\*, Erasmus was not university trained in theology, but a self-taught scholar who was devoted to his studies, particularly of the church fathers. Except for a short period of time when he was at the Universities of Cambridge in England and Louvain in the Low Countries, he avoided educational institutions altogether, jealous of his independence.

Nevertheless, Erasmus rose to be one of the greatest biblical scholars of his day, and his Greek edition of the New Testament, which appeared in Basel in 1516, was a landmark. Having first sought the study of the ancient classics, Erasmus turned to the Bible when he was just over thirty years old, encouraged by the great figure of the English church, John Colet. It was Colet who led Erasmus to the concept of the philosophy of Christ, by which one lived a life in imitation of the Son of God. Colet encouraged Erasmus to undertake the study of the Bible, which meant the Latin Vulgate of the medieval church. Erasmus believed that in order to take on such a task he would need to learn the ancient languages. He never learned Hebrew, but he did begin an intensive study of classical Greek, which he regarded as preparation for reading the Gospels and Epistles. In 1504 he published what was to become one of his most famous

works, the *Handbook of the Christian Soldier*, in which he outlined his spirituality of the imitation of Christ, a living according to the teaching of the New Testament.

Erasmus brought to the study of the New Testament key principles that he sought to employ for the rest of his life. First, that the Bible should be read topologically, this is the figurative reading of the text in the service of moral guidance. This position was very much in line with his *Handbook of the Christian Soldier*, in which he encouraged men and women to the truly Christian life. The second guiding principle, which was also hugely influential, was Erasmus' argument that philology, the study of language, was essential to understanding the Bible. By this he meant going back to the original sources,

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\*Calvin's father sent him to the University of Orleans to study law.

to study the works of the church fathers and to examine the manuscripts of the biblical texts to determine the best possible readings. Erasmus shared the concern of many scholars and churchmen of his day that the Vulgate was so full of errors that it was no longer Jerome's translation. At the same time as Erasmus was producing his New Testament, which appeared in 1516, he was also editing the works of the great church fathers, Jerome, Augustine, and Chrysostom. Because he did not have Hebrew he focused his studies on the New Testament.

A major turning point in Erasmus' biblical studies came in 1504 when he discovered a manuscript of Lorenzo Valla's annotations on the Gospels. He published the work a year later with his own preface in which he laid out his working method, which was to examine various manuscripts of the New Testament. Further, Erasmus endeavored to use his knowledge of Greek to study the meaning of individual words in light of

classical usage and historical contexts. Erasmus was fiercely criticized by the university professors for daring to make decisions about the Bible on the basis of philology and history and not theology. It was considered by many leading academic theologians an offense against the church to criticize or dare to correct the Vulgate. There was also suspicion of using Greek, because the Latin and Greek churches were divided and the latter were held in the West to be heretical.

At the center of the storm was the place of the Latin Vulgate, which was the bible of the medieval church. Erasmus was at pains to point out that theology and philology were in harmony, and that the study of languages posed no threat to the “queen of the sciences.” As for the Vulgate, he was clear that the text had never been formally established as the authorized Bible of the church, and that Jerome was not the author of the work as it now existed. Erasmus pointed to the differences between the Latin in Jerome’s biblical commentaries and of the Vulgate to demonstrate that the Bible was no longer the father’s work; it had been so thoroughly corrupted by transcription errors over the centuries. Further, there was no evidence that the Vulgate was an inspired work, as was the Septuagint. Jerome, Erasmus argued, had always been clear that translation was a human work requiring diligent study of languages. This was the model that Erasmus claimed for himself, and he frequently sought to portray himself as the new Jerome. Only the scholar who had mastered the biblical languages was fit, Erasmus claimed, to do the necessary work on the text of scripture. His theological opponents, he was clear, did not possess those skills.

Erasmus originally intended to publish the Vulgate with his extensive annotations that he had been preparing for some time. His publisher, Froben, had heard of the

imminent appearance of the Complutensian Polyglot in Spain, a vast multi-volume work with all numerous languages in parallel columns, and wanted to produce his own edition of the Greek New Testament. Erasmus agreed and included his own Latin translation of the Greek in place of the traditional Vulgate text. The work was completed in March 1516, in great haste, which accounts for the numerous errors in the text. The result was the *Novum Instrumentum*, a Latin-Greek edition of the New Testament with extensive annotations prepared by Erasmus. The Greek and Latin were presented in parallel columns, followed by the notes, with the whole book running to more than a thousand pages. The New Testament was dedicated to Pope Leo X and contained one of Erasmus' most important works on the Bible, his *Paraclesis*, which was an appeal for the diligent study of scripture through the use of the ancient languages. Erasmus' primary intention was to present the New Testament in a fresh Latin version together with his extensive commentary. It was a translation based on the Greek, rather than the Vulgate, and was based on seven Greek manuscripts that Erasmus had carefully examined. It provoked a storm of controversy among church theologians who fiercely rejected Erasmus' new translation that was not officially sanctioned.

The great humanist, however, was not finished. Three years later in 1519 he prepared a second edition, this time known as the *Novum Testamentum*, for which the notes were almost doubled in size. Misprints were corrected and the Greek was revised in hundreds of places. One of the most controversial aspects of Erasmus' New Testament was that in his 1516 and 1519 editions he did not include the so-called Johannine comma (1 John 5: 7b-8), which is found in the Vulgate. The passage reads, "for there are three that bear record [in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are

one. And there are three that bear witness in earth] the Spirit, and the water, and the blood; and these three agree in one.” It was the classic evidence for the place of the Trinity in scripture. Erasmus had excluded it on the grounds that he had found no evidence in the Greek manuscripts, only in later Latin ones. He agreed with Jerome that it had probably been added later in the debate with the Arians over the nature of the Trinity. In his 1522 edition Erasmus restored the comma, and scholars have wondered why. The most persuasive reason is that Erasmus did not want his Latin translation to be disregarded on account of something he regarded as a detail. Although he included the comma from 1522 onward, he clearly did not believe in its verity.

When John Colet received his edition of Erasmus’ 1516 New Testament he claimed that “the name of Erasmus shall never perish.” The Greek text that Erasmus produced, which became known as the ‘Textus Receptus,’ was to remain the standard form until the nineteenth century. In some fundamentalist circles it continues to be regarded as the authoritative text. Today we have more than 5,000 Greek manuscripts available for study, which rather dwarfs the handful used by Erasmus. Nevertheless, Erasmus’ work in using manuscripts and the study of language and history transformed the world of the Bible in the Renaissance. He laid the foundation for the Reformation work of Luther, Zwingli and Calvin, all of whom fully acknowledged their debt to the great humanist. Erasmus established knowledge of the original languages and philology as essential to the interpretation of scripture. He was fiercely opposed by those in the Catholic Church who defended the traditional Vulgate and sought to preserve the authority of the ecclesiastical hierarchy in determining how the Bible should be

interpreted. Erasmus' work began a revolution, although he himself would never leave the Catholic Church.

*Questions for study:*

How is philology, the study of the Bible's original languages, important for understanding it?

What is the import of the existence of multiple versions of the biblical text? Were the problems that Erasmus dealt with different from the various English translations of today?

How does the episode of the Johannine Comma change the way we might think about the text of the Bible?

*For further reading:*

Erika Rummel, *Erasmus* (Bloomsbury, 2004), esp. 73-89. The short book is a helpful introduction to Erasmus.