

**Review: James McConica, *Erasmus*, Pan Piper, London, UK, 1991
(1996 edn.)**

Pages: 103

The Man Behind the Greek New Testament

This fills a gap on the oft-quoted but little-known creator of the Greek text behind all the Reformation Bibles.

Erasmus' life was struck by tragedy due to the plague causing his parents' death, leaving him with no other option but turn to religious houses. There he found meanness and stifling, but through perseverance and ability managed to rise to great heights.

The material on sources for the NT is detailed enough; while all are from Catholics, they are late and of the authentic Byzantine type.

John Colet and Luther take aim at his Humanism, the latter becoming an enemy due Erasmus' refusal to break from Rome.

The opinion between Luther and Erasmus' approach to reforming Rome is instructive as to what Humanism really is; making man the final authority rather than God. This seems to have been the hurdle which Erasmus stumbled at his whole life.

Introduction (pp. 1-3)

Erasmus was the "Reformation's Orphan".

Luther found him equivocal and cowardly.

Despite standing by Rome, she placed all his books on the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*.

I) The Making of the Grammarian (pp. 4-17)

Erasmus copied Greek manuscripts in Italy.

Humanists favoured art and rhetoric over logic and metaphysics.

His mother and father succumbed to the plague in 1483, so he and his brother were sent to a Brethren hostel. His guardians advised a religious life to escape poverty.

Erasmus: “Their chief purpose, if they see a boy whose intelligence is better ... than ordinary ... is to break their spirit and depress them with corporal punishment ... taming him ... for the monastic life. On this ground they are popular ... with the Dominicans and Franciscans ... no places produce young men more coarsely educated or more depraved in character.” [p7]

Erasmus held pagan achievements were part of the divine plan.

The grammarian’s mandate was master of all literature.

Doctus implies moral integrity as well as learning.

Plato: “For the gods must clearly be supposed to call things by their right and natural names.”

II) The Educational Mission (pp. 18-29)

Erasmus was ordained a priest in 1492, then entered Paris University in 1495 to study theology.

“Greek ... and Latin ... everything worth learning is set forth in these two languages.” [p20]

The best memory is based on understanding, system, and care, for memory largely consists in having thoroughly understood.

“The greatest instruction of all comes from teaching others.”

Erasmus’ pupils included Thomas Grey and Robert Fisher.

At his death, Erasmus’ *Adagiorum collectanea* had 4,151 adages.

Donatus: “a proverb is a saying which is fitted to things and times.”

Diomedes: “a proverb is a taking over of a popular saying, fitted to things and times, when the words say one thing and mean another.”

Erasmus: “a proverb is a saying in popular use, remarkable for some shrewd and novel turn.”

Proverbs are the oldest form of instruction.

Pythagoras: “between friends all is common.”

Hesiod: “The half is more than the whole.”

III) Adorning the Temple of the Lord (pp. 30-44)

John Colet lectured at St Paul’s from the Vulgate. He had some influence on Erasmus, however, he reproached him for spending his life entirely on secular literature and held it had no benefit for scriptural study.

Colet: “theology is the great queen of all sciences”. The adoption of Aristotelian logic was a necessary framework for theological sciences.

Erasmus thought accumulated errors in Jerome’s Vulgate disqualified it from matching the original.

Erasmus began NT work in 1505-6, using:

- Dominican manuscripts of Cardinal Stojkovic of Ragusa (from 1443).

- A 12thC Byzantine Gospels text.

- Dominican’s Byzantine text with commentary by Theophylact.

- A 12thC manuscript from Reuchlin missing Revelation.

- A 12thC Acts and Epistles codex of Johann Amerbach

- A 12thC Revelation from Reuchlin which lacked 21.16-21 so he translated from the Vulgate into Greek here.

Erasmus continued searching for manuscripts, although the text remained the same from 1519. This was the basis for Luther's translation, and via Robert Estienne's 1550 NT influenced Theodore Beza (source of the AV translation).

He went to Italy for a doctorate in theology.

He moved to Cambridge as a Greek lecturer, also translating the Mass from Greek.

IV) A he Philosophy of Christ (pp. 45-62)

Men cannot love what they don't know.

"It is as if the strength of the Christian religion consisted in men's ignorance of it."

"Only a very few can be learned, but all can be Christian, all can be devout."

By the mid-13thC, Aristotelian rationalism had conquered the Faculty of Arts at Paris.

"Passion strives to take reason captive."

V) The Problem of Luther (pp. 63-80)

Erasmus drew inspiration from anti-Christ Lucian of Samosata of the 1stC.

Luther was young enough to be Erasmus' son.

Leo X was pontifical patron of Erasmus' NT.

Luther called the Aristotelian system the death of the soul.

In January 1522, Pope Adrian of Utrecht told the University of Louvain to burn Luther's books and force his recantation. He also requested Erasmus use his education to defend the church (which he didn't do).

The heart of Erasmus' position was the Holy Spirit would not permit error in Rome for 1,300 years.

He opposed the priesthood of all believers (God would more probably communicate his Spirit to those who have been ordained).

VI) In Praise of Folly (pp. 91-99)

In 1523 Erasmus left Louvain for Basle.

In 1536, he died and left Amerbach as administrator of 5,000 florins. He invested this at 5% and established the Legatum Erasmianum to benefit the poor and disabled.

“Those who strive after wisdom are the furthest from happiness.”

“Wise men have nothing but misery to offer their prince; they are confident in their learning and sometimes aren't afraid to speak harsh truths.”

Erasmus earned most from patronage rather than book sales.