

The New Testament of Erasmus (1516)

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ABSTRACT

Erasmus decided in 1515 to offer a new edition of the New Testament to the Christian Europe of his time. Deeply inspired by this text, and seeking to bring about the rebirth of apostolic times, those blessed times of Christianity, he wanted to correct the Vulgate more so than offer a new translation of the work. Wishing to offer Christendom the Word of God free of the imperfections that had built up over the centuries, he imposed three requirements on his philological work: fidelity, lucidity, and purity of language. Thus for the first time in the history of Christianity, Erasmus applied to New Testament writings the rules that applied to all literary texts. However, in doing so, he triggered a shockwave throughout Christian Europe of the time, as touching the Vulgate entailed shaking up the entire secular Christian tradition. Erasmus's New Testament in 1516 was a huge publishing success, one that ensured the eternal glory of its author, but that also tore apart Europe's religious landscape for centuries.



When Erasmus accepted the printer Johann Froben's request in 1515 to embark upon a new edition of the New Testament in Greek, the project was unprecedented, but for all that not improvised. Erasmus was inspired by the New Testament in his heart and soul, and intended for his publication to remind all Europeans of the importance of the Word of God. Through his work on the New Testament, Erasmus sought to bring about the rebirth of apostolic times, those blessed times of Christianity, and to finally offer Christians the possibility of experiencing directly the message of the Gospel.

Convinced of the need for Christians to have access to the Word of God, which was the source of all sacred history, Erasmus demanded that Scripture be made available to all. During the first centuries of Christianity, the translation of Scripture of course imposed itself as a necessity, and there were already innumerable attempts in the early sixteenth century to make the Bible accessible to the greatest number. There were annotated, paraphrased and versified *Bibles*, as well as *Sacred History* in prose, moralized Bibles, and translated Bibles. However, the arrival of the printing press, along with the ability to have access to these translations, which were henceforth offered to a greater number of believers, impassioned the debate during Erasmus's time. Contrary to some, who reserved reading the Bible only for specialists, Erasmus wanted all people to have access to it, from the most humble to the most scholarly. Yet what Erasmus offered Christian Europe in 1516 was an edition of the Greek text of the New Testament, along with a new Latin translation, which improved and clarified the text of the Vulgate. He added to the latter text his *Annotationes* and *Paraphrases* in Latin, but never translated the New Testament into a vernacular language! As paradoxical as this may seem, it was indeed Latin, the sacred language as well as the language of learning, which in Erasmus's view was the ideal instrument for the popularization of Scripture.

Within five or six months, the first edition of the Greek New Testament, accompanied by numerous commentaries and a new Latin translation different from that of the Vulgate, was prepared, typeset and printed. The precious volume, a small folio, was fairly easy to handle, and was printed in two columns: on one side was an edition of the Greek text of the New Testament, and on the other a new Latin translation of the Vulgate, accompanied by the *Annotationes* that clarified and justified it. Erasmus thus became a pioneer in the field of publishing Biblical texts, as the publication of a Greek version of the New Testament was an extraordinary and almost provocative endeavour in 1516. It was even a "manifesto," in the words of Lucien Febvre, that sent shockwaves through a Christian Europe deeply attached to Latin and the Vulgate. Yet Erasmus was solely preoccupied by his philological work; he paid no attention to the criticism levelled against him, and was in no way worried about the reception of his publication in the Europe of his times. If he remained indifferent to the frustrated reactions of his contemporaries, it was because the Vulgate alone was at the heart of his reflections. In fact, his priority was not publishing the Greek text of the New Testament, but rather the Latin translation of Saint Jerome's work.

He believed that thanks to his work as a philologist, he was in a position to revive the Vulgate as established by Saint Jerome, and therefore undertook the most arduous task of carefully eliminating all of the imperfections that had built up in successive layers during the medieval period. He imposed a triple requirement on himself: fidelity, lucidity, and purity of language. He wanted first and foremost to clarify the text and to reconstruct it in perfect Latin, so much so that he did not hesitate to restructure certain sentences, or even to develop others. Thus for the first time in the history of Christianity, Erasmus applied to New Testament writings the rules that were applied to all literary texts. Nevertheless, this philological work was not meant to overshadow the text's purely theological aspect, which Erasmus endeavoured to make clearer, for he was quite determined to remain faithful to the dogmatic content of the Vulgate, a concern that also naturally guided his work. Yet his desire never to betray the Biblical message did not prevent him from taking risks. The philological exercises in which he engaged inevitably led him to alter the meaning of some passages. These modulations would later earn him the wrath of the ecclesiastical establishment. For although translating Biblical writings was in no way an innovation for Erasmus's contemporaries, the responses to the questions raised by the use of these translations were, as was the attribution to Jerome of all or part of the version used in the liturgy, or the status given to these translations, whether considered as "inspired" or as the product of philological work. By producing a text that he deemed faithful to the

spirit of Jerome's work—but that no longer totally corresponded to the Vulgate which for centuries had officially been recognized by the Church as the sole vehicle for the Word of God—Erasmus wanted to teach his readers that even if a text was no longer identifiable with a stable Latin text legitimized by tradition and liturgical use, it could nevertheless be recognized as a source of Christianity. Similarly, in his *Annotationes*, Erasmus was not solely content with clarifying the text of the New Testament, but also tackled those who offered commentary on Scripture. He enjoyed pointing out the absurd, erroneous or ill-adapted commentary provided, through ignorance or insufficient knowledge of the Greek, by not only medieval theologians but also Church Fathers. He took the liberty of criticizing them not to lessen their authority, but out of a love of language and the interest of the *restitutio* of patristic texts.

Both a major upheaval and a publishing success, Erasmus's New Testament prompted reactions of great hostility and strong enthusiasm, based on the readership and on European geographical, cultural, and religious horizons. Scandalized by the fact that Erasmus dared touch the Vulgate, many doctors from the Faculté théologique de Paris, as well as that of Louvain, attacked him fiercely. The situation grew dangerous for him during the years 1521-1524, as zealous Catholics made a heretic of him, seeing him as the inspirer of Luther. They hoped thereby to anger him and provoke him to commit to their side, but Erasmus would hear nothing of it, and either responded to the polemics, or held them in contempt. According to Erasmus, they were only seeking to discredit his philosophy of Christ. For many Lutherans, on the other hand, he was seen as the true guide, he who had helped them understand Luther's message, and who should naturally rally to the cause of the reformers. However, Erasmus would hear nothing of it, and was happy to listen solely to the praise of theologians from Warsaw or Oxford, who ensured a major editorial success across Europe for his edition of the New Testament, as well as an enduring reputation, which would last through the centuries. Henceforth nothing could resist his pen, as John Colet rightly understood when in 1516 he made the famous prediction: "Erasmus's name will never perish."

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