HISTORICAL STUDIES

The Impact and Influence of Erasmus's Greek New Testament

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Abstract

Although often eclipsed by the giants of the Reformation, Desiderius Erasmus had a notable influence on the Reformation and the world that followed. Responsible for five editions of the Greek New Testament, his contributions include a renewed emphasis on the Greek over against the Latin of the day, as well as influence on subsequent Greek New Testaments and many translations, including Luther's German Bible and the English King James Version. In God's providence, Erasmus provided kindling for the fire of the Reformation.[1]

"The name of Erasmus shall never perish." Time has proved these words, spoken by one of his friends in the early 1500s, to be true. Today, Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam is recognized as a key figure—especially in regard to his influence on Bible translation and textual criticism. Although his fame has been superseded by the heroes of the Reformation, many of them were beneficiaries of his hard work. The Reformers owed him much. In the English-speaking world, the average person may not know Erasmus's name, yet those who read the Bible today are indebted both to his contribution and to those he influenced.

[1] I would like to thank my friends and colleagues Abner Chou and Will Varner for reading an earlier version of this article and providing valuable feedback.

Much has been written about Erasmus's life, and this article will focus on his work on the Greek New Testament. We will examine the timeline and the sources Erasmus used, as well as his contribution to subsequent scholarship. This is a fitting emphasis on the five hundredth anniversary of the first edition of Erasmus's Greek New Testament in 1516.

I. *Early Life and Academic Training*

Many uncertainties surround Erasmus's birth.[2] This appears to be intentional, as it is widely acknowledged that he was the illegitimate child of a priest, Gerard, and a physician's daughter, Margaret.[3] In a day when a child born out of wedlock did not normally have the opportunities given other children, it appears that Erasmus was intentionally vague in talking about his birth.

Erasmus's parents placed him at a young age in a school in Deventer run by the Fratres Collationarii (Brothers of the Common Life).[4] He did not enjoy this time, although this early education, which most likely included an introduction to Greek, was foundational to his later success.[5]

When his parents died, there were few options open to him, so he entered a convent school at Steyn around 1487.[6] He did not appreciate monastic life, and he left in 1493 to become the secretary for the bishop of Cambray.[7] This opportunity allowed him to operate in a scholarly capacity. Thriving in the more academic circles of France, Erasmus extended his time there, capitalizing on the opportunity to study and further his education in Paris.

In 1499 Erasmus experienced a turning point in his life while traveling in England. It was in England that he made some important friends, chief of whom were John Colet and Thomas More, who inspired him to focus on religious studies. It was also at this time that Greek became a passion for him.[8]

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[2] John Joseph Mangan, *Life, Character and Influence of Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam* (New York: Macmillan, 1927), 1:3; cf. Roland H. Bainton, *Erasmus of Christendom* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1969), 7; Albert Rabil Jr., *Erasmus and the New Testament: The Mind of a Christian Humanist* (San Antonio, TX: Trinity University Press, 1972), 2–3, n. 3; William W. Combs, "Erasmus and the Textus Receptus," *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 1 (Spring 1996): 36. Erasmus himself gives apparently conflicting information as to the year of his birth, as late as 1469. Born sometime between 1466–1469, he seems to this writer most likely to have been born in 1466.

[3] Mangan, *Life, Character and Influence*, 1:3–5; Johan Huizinga, *Erasmus of Rotterdam* (New York: Garden City Books, 1952), 4–5. Since Erasmus had a brother by the name of Peter, three years his senior, it appears this relationship between Gerard and Margaret had been one of length.

[4] Mangan, *Life, Character and Influence,* 1:8.

[5] Ibid., 9.

[6] Huizinga, *Erasmus*, 9.

[7] Ibid., 16.

[8] Edwin M. Yamauchi, "Erasmus' Contributions to New Testament Scholarship," *Fides et Historia* 14.3 (1987): 7. Erasmus was born in a day when Latin was king in the academic world,

Upon his return to Paris, Erasmus devoted himself to the study of Greek. He decided to pursue a doctorate at Cambridge in 1505, but another opportunity came up during a visit to Italy, where many of the refugees from the fall of Constantinople had fled, allowing him to gain insights into the Greek language. Erasmus spent 1506 to 1509 in Italy, studying Greek from the native speakers and perfecting his knowledge of it. By the time he returned to Cambridge, he had progressed so much that in 1511 he was invited to teach Greek there.

Erasmus's education was exemplary. He was able to think and speak fluently in Latin, the academic language of the day. In addition, he was now as well versed as anyone in Greek—which would serve him well for the tasks that lay before him.

II. *Erasmus's Greek New Testament*

In order to understand Erasmus's journey, one must note the significance of Lorenzo Valla's *Notes on the New Testament*, a work he came across in the summer of 1504.[9] It was this work, read and published by Erasmus in 1505, that convinced him of the need to ensure the accuracy of the New Testament readings found in the Latin Vulgate.[10] Like Valla, Erasmus was convinced that in many places the Vulgate readings were deficient. Prompted by Valla's work, he began work on his *Annotationes* on the New Testament, published in 1516 along with the first edition of his Latin and Greek New Testament.

In August of 1514, Erasmus arrived at Basel in search of more manuscripts for use in finalizing his *Annotationes*, with the hope of printing them with the Vulgate. It seems that he originally wanted to work with a printer named Aldus, but the latter had died in February 2015, so he pursued his project with another printer named Froben.[11]

It appears that Erasmus's original intention was to publish his *Annotationes* with the Vulgate in an effort to help demonstrate his corrections.[12]

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while Greek was only in the initial stages of revitalization. It would be Erasmus's own work, coupled with the newfound power of the printing press, that would launch the study of Greek to a prominence unknown for close to a century.

[9] Rabil, *Erasmus and the New Testament*, 68.

[10] Ibid., 59. Rabil writes, "In his preface to these notes, we find Erasmus speaking for the first time, not about the recovery of the old theology through a study of more ancient Greek and Latin authors, but rather about the recovery of the text of the Bible. He recognizes that this is a much more audacious undertaking than the interpretation of the fathers. For his entire letter is cast in the form of a defense of Valla, who went so far as to correct the New Testament."

[11] Combs, "Erasmus and the Textus Receptus," 41–42; Rabil, *Erasmus and the New Testament*, 90.

[12] Erika Rummel, *Erasmus'* Annotationes *on the New Testament: From Philologist to Theologian* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986), 23. Rummel states, "It is likely that he envisaged

In contrast to the academic elite of his day, who prized the Vulgate, Erasmus saw the need for an updated Latin version.[13] In an ironic twist, although he originally intended to publish only his *Annotationes* along with the Vulgate, he was persuaded to publish not only his *own* Latin translation (instead of the Vulgate), but also a Greek text.[14]

This work was published in March 1516 under the title *Novum Instrumentum*. The first edition was rushed in its production, and there were many errors in the printing. Many scholars believe that this was because Froben had heard of an imminent publication of the *Complutensian Polyglot*, a multivolume work containing a Greek New Testament that had been in print since 1514 but was awaiting the necessary papal approval before publication,[15] and was rushing to print Erasmus's work in an effort to precede it.[16]

The quality of Erasmus's 1516 edition leaves much to be desired. Some have described it as a dreadful publication, fit only for a school child.[17] F. H. A. Scrivener describes this first edition as "the most faulty book I know" because of typographical errors.[18] Erasmus himself claimed that the haste of the preparation led to the first edition being "thrown together" rather than edited,[19] and for this reason many of Erasmus's critics decried his work as inferior—especially by comparison with the careful work of the *Complutensian Polyglot*. However, despite its many mistakes, Erasmus's *Novum Instrumentum* was received with such excitement that a new edition was undertaken almost immediately.

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for it the traditional format, that is, the notes appearing on their own or in conjunction with the Vulgate." Cf. István Bejczy, *Erasmus and the Middle Ages: The Historical Consciousness of a Christian Humanist* (Boston: Brill, 2001), 133; Combs, "Erasmus and the Textus Receptus," 41. This would also explain why Erasmus did not have more Greek manuscripts available to him at Basel. Since he did not originally intend to publish a Greek text, he was forced to rely upon those available at Basel.

[13] Preserved Smith, *Erasmus: A Study of His Life, Ideals and Place in History* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1923), 161–62.

[14] Combs, "Erasmus and the Textus Receptus," 42.

[15] Bainton, *Erasmus*, 133. The quality of the *Complutensian Polyglot* was far superior to that of Erasmus's 1516 edition. However, studies have yet to show which Greek manuscripts the Polyglot used. On this point see Bruce M. Metzger and Bart D. Ehrman, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 140; cf. Franz Delitzsch, *Studien zur Entstehungsgeschichte der Polyglottenbibel des Cardinals Ximenes* (Leipzig: Edelmann, 1871).

[16] For the view that Froben and Erasmus were simply motivated to get a Greek New Testament out as soon as possible, see Yamauchi, "Erasmus' Contributions," 10.

[17] Léon Vaganay and Christian-Bernard Amphoux, *An Introduction to New Testament Textual Criticism*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 131.

[18] F. H. A. Scrivener, *A Plain Introduction to the Criticism of the New Testament*, 4th ed. (London: George Bell & Sons, 1894), 2:185.

[19] *Praecipitatum verius quam aeditum.* Cf. Combs, "Erasmus and the Textus Receptus," 42; Yamauchi, "Erasmus' Contributions," 11.

Erasmus and Froben took a risk in publishing the *Novum Instrumentum* without written approval from Pope Leo X. In an effort to pre-emptively appease the pope, Erasmus wrote a letter of dedication as a foreword to his work.[20] The gamble paid off, as Erasmus's work became popular while the *Polyglot* waited authentication for publication.

Erasmus was obliged to rely in his publication on the seven Greek manuscripts that were available to him in Basel, and he compiled his Greek New Testament from these manuscripts and included it along with his Latin translation.[21]

Erasmus's Greek Manuscripts	
Codex 1^{eap}	Twelfth-century minuscule codex containing the whole New Testament except Revelation
Codex 1^{r}	Twelfth-century manuscript containing Revelation, minus Rev 22:16–21 (A transcript of this manuscript was sent to the printer with the last six verses translated into Greek from the Vulgate.)
Codex 2^{e}	Twelfth-century minuscule codex containing the Gospels (This manuscript was the printer's copy for the Gospels.)
Codex 2^{ap}	Twelfth-century (or later) minuscule codex containing Acts and the Epistles (This manuscript also served as the printer's copy.)
Codex 4^{ap}	Fifteenth-century minuscule codex of Acts and the Epistles
Codex 7^{p}	Eleventh-century minuscule codex containing the Pauline epistles
Codex 817	Fifteenth-century manuscript containing the Gospels

Printing of the first edition began in August 1515 and was completed in March 1516, over 1,200 folio size manuscripts being produced. Almost immediately Erasmus wrote to a friend about plans for a corrected edition, urging secrecy so that the first edition would sell.[22]

The second edition in 1519 changed the title from *Novum Instrumentum* to *Novum Testamentum*. It corrected many misprints, but the text itself remained virtually the same as the first edition. For the second edition,

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[20] Robert H. Murray, *Erasmus and Luther: Their Attitude to Toleration* (New York: Macmillan, 1920), 22–23. It is ironic that this work would eventually be one of the main causes of the rift between Leo X and Martin Luther.

[21] Yamauchi, "Erasmus' Contributions," 10–11; Metzger and Ehrman, *Text of the New Testament*, 143–48; Vaganay and Amphoux, *An Introduction to New Testament Textual Criticism*, 131; Combs, "Erasmus and the Textus Receptus," 45. Combs notes, "All of these were the property of the Dominican Library in Basel except for 2^{ap}, which was obtained from the family of Johann Amerbach of Basel. Manuscripts 1^{eap} and 1^{r} had been borrowed from the Dominicans by Johannes Reuchlin. Erasmus borrowed them from Reuchlin."

[22] Epistle 417. From *The Correspondence of Erasmus*, vol. 3 in the *Collected Works of Erasmus*, trans. R. A. B. Mynors and D. F. S. Thomson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976), 299. Erasmus wrote, "Only mind no one gets wind of this for the printer's sake, for his volumes would all stay in the shop if the buyers knew of it." Cf. Yamauchi, "Erasmus' Contributions," 11–12.

Erasmus gained access to a twelfth-century manuscript, the Codex Corsendoucensis, which has the whole New Testament minus Revelation.[23]

The third edition of Erasmus's *Novum Testamentum*, which appeared in 1522, is famous for its inclusion of the *Comma Johanneum* (1 John 5:7–8), which reads: "in heaven, the Father, the Word and the Holy Spirit, and these three are one. And there are three that testify on earth." These verses were not included in the 1516 and 1519 editions due to the lack of a Greek manuscript to support the reading. By refusing to include the text in dispute, Erasmus drew criticism from two of his literary critics, Stunica and Lee.[24] Stunica was an editor of the *Complutensian Polyglot*, which included the disputed passage, though he could never produce a Greek manuscript in support of this reading.[25]

Legend has it that Erasmus boldly promised that if his critics could produce a Greek manuscript that contained the disputed part of 1 John 5:7–8, he would include it in his New Testament. Despite this, there does not appear to be firm evidence that such a promise was ever made.[26] Rather, it appears that Erasmus gave in to the pressure to include the passage when he was informed that a Greek manuscript in England included the text.[27] He claimed in the *Annotationes* that he did not believe the reading to be genuine and furthermore that the sixteenth-century codex that included it was adapted to match the Vulgate reading.[28] However, he ultimately decided to include the reading, perhaps motivated by the desire for broader acceptance of his Greek text. By including it, he opened the way for subsequent Greek texts and translations to include it without question.[29]

Erasmus's fourth edition was published in 1527. By this time, he was able to use the *Complutensian Polyglot*, which aided his work tremendously, especially in the book of Revelation.[30] This fourth edition added the text of the Vulgate to the Greek text and Erasmus's own Latin translation.

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[23] Yamauchi, "Erasmus' Contributions," 12.

[24] Ibid., 12.

[25] Combs, "Erasmus and the Textus Receptus," 49.

[26] Ibid.; Henk J. de Jonge, "Erasmus and the *Comma Johanneum*," *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 56 (1980): 385.

[27] Combs, "Erasmus and the Textus Receptus," 50. Now housed in Dublin, Codex 61 is a sixteenth-century manuscript that may have been written with the express purpose of refuting Erasmus's position. It is also possible that the manuscript simply showed influence from the Latin Vulgate, the position Erasmus himself held.

[28] De Jonge, "Erasmus and the *Comma Johanneum*," 387. Although the Vulgate contains this reading, there is no Vulgate manuscript before the seventh century that does so.

[29] This reading is preserved in the Greek texts that follow Erasmus; it was also picked up in English, most notably by the King James Version.

[30] Bainton, *Erasmus*, 133; Yamauchi, "Erasmus' Contributions," 12; Metzger and Ehrman, *Text of the New Testament*, 148. Metzger notes that Erasmus wisely changed the book of Revelation in about ninety places due to the influence of the *Complutensian* text.

The fifth and final edition was published the year before Erasmus's death in 1535, largely unchanged, except in that the Vulgate was no longer included.

III. *Erasmus's Positive and Negative Textual Contributions*

Having examined the chronology of Erasmus's work as well as his sources, we now turn to some specific examples of his contributions. Although an in-depth treatment is beyond the scope of this article, something must be said about his use of textual criticism and attempt to secure an original reading of Scripture.[31] Like Valla before him, Erasmus regularly identified places where the Latin Vulgate differed from the Greek texts available. In this process he occasionally engaged in a form of conjecture, proposing an alternative Greek reading based on the Latin.

An example of Erasmus's textual critical acumen is his treatment of Luke 2:22. The Vulgate reads *purgationis eius* (his/her purification), while Origen and many of the Greek manuscripts read *katharismou autōn* (their purification). In evaluating the evidence, Erasmus decided, on the basis of Origen's textual notes and the manuscripts available, to adopt the non-Latin rendering, "their." What is interesting about this example is that although Stephanus followed Erasmus's lead, Beza reverted to the Vulgate reading, reading it as feminine, "her purification."[32] Beza chose this reading because it was in agreement with the *Complutensian Polyglot*, further arguing that purification rituals would only apply to the mother. The Textus Receptus tradition, including in the KJV in the English-speaking world, followed Beza and the Vulgate for hundreds of years. Today, however, based on additional evidence, scholars and modern translations have reverted to Erasmus's original correction of the Vulgate, showing his textual decision to be valid.

Although Erasmus made positive textual contributions, as shown above, his lack of source manuscripts also greatly limited his ability. Such was the case in Revelation 22:16–21, a passage missing from his Revelation manuscript (Codex 1r).[33] Having no access to a Greek source with this passage, Erasmus translated the passage back from Latin into Greek. This retranslation, compared with later evidence, is quite faulty.[34] However, Erasmus intended

[31] For a full treatment of this issue, see Jan Krans, *Beyond What Is Written: Erasmus and Beza as Conjectural Critics of the New Testament*, New Testament Tools and Studies 35, ed. Bruce M. Metzger and Bart D. Ehrman (Boston: Brill, 2006).

[32] Ibid., 293.

[33] Yamauchi, "Erasmus' Contributions," 11; Combs, "Erasmus and the Textus Receptus," 47. Combs counts twenty errors that have remained in the Textus Receptus from this passage.

[34] Krans notes that in Erasmus's retranslation he omits twelve articles and uses a different verb tense six out of seven times. See Krans, *Beyond What Is Written*, 64; Combs, "Erasmus and the Textus Receptus," 47.

this retranslation to be changed should manuscripts be found with the missing portion.[35] So even though this passage was codified in the Textus Receptus tradition, Erasmus never intended it to go unaltered. He simply did the best he could with the poor sources available.

A similar case is Acts 9:5–6, where the Vulgate reading is longer than the Greek text available to Erasmus.[36] The history of his treatment of this passage is interesting.[37] In the 1516 edition, he includes the Vulgate reading retranslated into Greek. In the 1519 edition, his annotations include a defense of this passage by stating that "most Greek manuscripts" had this reading.[38] However, in 1522 Erasmus began to doubt the reading and even criticized his reliance upon the notes he had made in the margins of his Greek manuscripts.[39] Finally, in 1527, he stated that even the Vulgate tradition did not firmly establish the longer reading.

These examples illustrate that though Erasmus worked responsibly with the resources available, his work, which formed the basis for the Textus Receptus and eventually the King James Version, was marked by both positive contributions and occasional inaccuracies. However, he did practice the methods of textual criticism that scholars follow today.

IV. *Erasmus's Contribution to New Testament Scholarship and Translation*

Having considered the early life of Erasmus and some of his positive and negative contributions to the development of the Greek New Testament, we now examine his influence on those who followed him. While making a number of changes and original contributions, his successors essentially reproduced Erasmus's Greek Testament, and although the 1516 edition was defective in many ways, the Textus Receptus had its genesis in Erasmus, and his work continued to develop after his passing.[40]

One important feature is the contribution of Erasmus to the order of the New Testament that we follow. As shown above, Erasmus utilized late

[35] See *Resp. ad annot. Ed. Lei*, *Opera omnia Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami* IX–4, p. 278 ll. 35–43 (hereafter ASD).

[36] The Vulgate reading translates as "It is hard for you to kick against the goad. Trembling and astonished he said: Lord, what will you have me to do?" The Greek manuscripts (except for those in the TR tradition) omit this reading in favor of a much shorter dialogue between Paul and the Lord.

[37] For a reconstructed chronology, see Krans, *Beyond What Is Written*, 59–62.

[38] *In plerisque Graecis codicibus*, see ASD VI–6, p. 240 l. 460.

[39] Krans, *Beyond What Is Written,* 60. Krans points out that Erasmus criticized the notes in the margins of these Greek manuscripts that he made back in 1516.

[40] Metzger and Ehrman, *Text of the New Testament*, 149.

Byzantine manuscripts for his compilation of his Greek text. As far as canonical order is concerned, manuscripts in the Byzantine tradition have the epistles of Paul after the book of Acts, but before the General Epistles, with Hebrews placed after Philemon.[41] This coincides with the New Testament order followed by the Vulgate, which Erasmus dutifully followed. In contrast to the order followed by Erasmus, manuscripts older than the eighth century (with very few exceptions) insert Hebrews in the Pauline corpus between 2 Thessalonians and 1 Timothy, and Acts before the General Epistles.[42] Thus, the older codices to which we have access (e.g., Sinaiticus, Vaticanus, and Alexandrinus) have a different order of books for the New Testament.[43] Although these older codices are generally considered by the scholarly community to have more weight than their later Byzantine counterparts, even the current textual critical edition of the NA[28] follows the Byzantine order adopted by Erasmus's Greek edition.[44] Thus, although it is not often noted, the Textus Receptus and the English-speaking community trace the New Testament canonical order to the decision of Erasmus to follow the Vulgate and Byzantine traditions. In addition, Erasmus's text was used as a base text for subsequent Greek editions, as well as contemporary translations. One of the most important of these was Luther's German translation.

In 1521, four years after Luther nailed his ninety-five theses to the church door in Wittenberg, he was excommunicated by the very pope to whom Erasmus had dedicated his *Novum Instrumentum*. Following this, Luther began translating the New Testament into German, completing and publishing it in 1522. The basis for his translation was Erasmus's 1519 edition.[45]

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[41] David Trobisch, "The KJV and the Development of Text Criticism," in *The King James Version at 400: Assessing Its Genius as Bible Translation and Its Literary Influence*, ed. David G. Burke, John F. Kutsko, and Philip H. Towner (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2013), 229.

[42] Ibid.

[43] David Trobisch, *The First Edition of the New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 24–25. Codices Vaticanus and Alexandrinus have the Gospels, Acts, Praxapostolos, the Pauline Epistles (including Hebrews), and Revelation, although Vaticanus is missing from Hebrews 9:14 onward. Sinaiticus has the Gospels, the Pauline Epistles (including Hebrews), the Praxapostolos (fronted by Acts), and Revelation.

[44] Trobisch, "The KJV and the Development of Text Criticism," 231–32.

[45] Yamauchi, "Erasmus' Contributions," 17; Metzger and Ehrman, *Text of the New Testament*, 145. Among other things, Luther agreed with Erasmus's annotations that the *Comma Johanneum* should not be included in 1 John 5. For discussion of Luther's view that this text was added by the Catholic Church as an anti-Arian polemical text, see Franz Posset, "John Bugenhagen and the *Comma Johanneum*," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 49.4 (October 1985): 246–48. It is notable that Luther was indebted to Erasmus even before he began working on his German New Testament. Luther had already been using Erasmus's 1516 edition for his lectures on the latter half of Romans before he was excommunicated. On this point, see Rabil, Erasmus and the New Testament, 160–61. For a study into Luther's dependence on and interaction with Erasmus, see the work of Heinz Bluhm, *Martin Luther, Creative Translator* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1965).

Another source indebted to Erasmus, though not as popular as Luther's translation, was the small two-volume New Testament produced in Venice and edited by Melchiorre Sessa. Published in 1538, this text appears not to have had much popularity and is a rare find today.[46] The text itself was comprised of selections from Erasmus's 1522 and 1535 editions, the 1518 Aldine text, and a variety of other unique contributions.[47]

Erasmus also left his mark on Robert Estienne (better known as Stephanus), who in 1546 published the first of four editions of the Greek New Testament (the others coming in 1549, 1550, and 1551). The first three were published in Paris with government funding, and the final edition in Geneva. The 1546 and 1549 editions was a mixture of work from the *Complutensian Polyglot* and from Erasmus. However, beginning with his third edition (1550), Stephanus's text matches most closely Erasmus's 1527 and 1535 editions. The 1550 edition of Stephanus's Greek New Testament contained the first critical apparatus, in which he gave variant readings on the basis of fifteen Greek codices, as well as the *Complutensian Polyglot*.[48] Also notable is that the 1551 edition is the first edition to contain verse divisions, a task accomplished while Stephanus was traveling.[49]

One of the best-known scholars who utilized and edited the Greek text left by Erasmus was John Calvin's successor in Geneva, Theodore Beza. In his lifetime he published nine editions of the Greek New Testament between 1565 and 1604.[50] Of these editions, the 1565, 1582, 1588–89, and 1598 editions were independent while the rest were reprints. They contained the Greek text, Jerome's Latin Vulgate, Beza's own Latin translation, and significant textual annotations based on numerous manuscripts that Beza had collated.[51] Beza's Greek New Testament was essentially equivalent to Stephanus's 1551

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[46] Metzger and Ehrman, *Text of the New Testament*, 149; W. H. P. Hatch, "An Early Edition of the New Testament in Greek," *Harvard Theological Review* 34 (1941): 69–70. Hatch notes that this edition of the New Testament is largely ignored by scholars who write on the text of the Greek New Testament "because its role in the history of the printed text of the New Testament was unimportant."

[47] Hatch, "Early Edition," 78.

[48] Stanley E. Porter, *How We Got the New Testament: Text, Transmission, Translation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 41; Combs, "Erasmus and the Textus Receptus," 52; cf. Metzger and Ehrman, *Text of the New Testament*, 150, who only count fourteen manuscripts, one of which was Codex Bezae, which was in Italy at that time.

[49] Metzger and Ehrman, *Text of the New Testament*, 150. Legend has it that this verse division took place while Stephanus was traveling on horseback. Though that is possible, Metzger notes that it is just as likely that Stephanus could have worked while resting at inns on his journey. Perhaps it was a combination of both.

[50] A tenth edition appeared after his death in 1611.

[51] Notable among these manuscripts were Codex Bezae and Codex Claromontanus.

edition.[52] In comparison with those whose work he relied upon, he had more manuscript information available. However, it appears that Beza made relatively little use of the best manuscripts he had (Bezae and Claromontanus), since he made relatively small changes to the text received from Stephanus's 1551 edition. Most of the popular New Testaments of the time were in some way related to Erasmus's work. His contribution to the scholarly world of Greek is a monumental achievement, and his Greek New Testament also left an indelible impact on the English-speaking world.

Erasmus had been preceded by John Wycliffe, rightly heralded for translating Scripture into English in the fourteenth century.[53] This was an important first step in a world that viewed the Latin Vulgate as the only true Scripture and any translation as heretical. Wycliffe began a movement that was continued by the young William Tyndale a century later. In 1524 Tyndale left England, since it was illegal to print an English Bible there, and traveled to Hamburg, Germany.[54] After traveling through Wittenberg, he set up in Cologne, where communication with England was easier. In the spring of 1526, Tyndale's English New Testament was exported to England.[55] It was a masterly achievement and largely dependent upon his contemporaries. Tyndale utilized the 1522 edition of Erasmus's Greek New Testament, the Latin Vulgate, and Luther's German translation, which was based on Erasmus's 1519 edition.[56]

Tyndale's work, influenced both directly and indirectly by Erasmus, was completed by Miles Coverdale in 1535, when the first complete English Bible was printed.[57] Coverdale's translation was by and large a compilation of other translations, mainly Tyndale's, and others where his work was incomplete.[58] Due to the quality of Tyndale's translation, his work was used by many subsequent English translations, being standardized in the King James Version in 1611.[59]

In the English-speaking world, the King James Version (KJV), commissioned by James I in an effort to limit the influence of the popular Geneva

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[52] Metzger and Ehrman, *Text of the New Testament*, 151.

[53] For more on Wycliffe's important contribution to the impending Reformation, see Peter A. Lillback, "The Forerunners of the Reformation," *Unio cum Christo* 1.1–2 (Fall 2015): 87–89; Christopher K. Lensch, "The Morningstar of the Reformation: John Wycliffe," *Western Reformed Seminary Journal* 3.2 (August 1996): 17-18.

[54] W. E. Campbell, *Erasmus, Tyndale and More* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1949), 107.

[55] Ibid., 109.

[56] John B. Taylor, "William Tyndale: Bible Translator," *Anvil* 12.1 (1995): 37.

[57] Alister E. McGrath, *In the Beginning: The Story of the King James Bible and How it Changed a Nation, a Language, and a Culture* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 89–90.

[58] Ibid., 90.

[59] Ibid., 176; Yamauchi, "Erasmus' Contributions," 18. Yamauchi proposes that as much as eighty percent of Tyndale's readings were utilized by the KJV.

Bible, reigned supreme for hundreds of years. Through Richard Bancroft, the new archbishop of Canterbury, King James gave the translators fifteen principles to follow.[60] The first principle stated that the Bishops' Bible was to be used as a base text for the authorized version, and the fourteenth principle was that the Tyndale, Matthew, Coverdale, Whitchurch, and Geneva Bibles were to be used rather than the Bishops' Bible when they conveyed the meaning of the original languages more accurately.

These translation principles seem to indicate that the goal of the translators of the KJV was not so much to create a new translation as to revise and collate those already available.[61] In order to ensure that the English translation accurately represented the Greek text, the translation committee relied on Stephanus's 1551 and Beza's 1598 Greek texts, both of which reproduced Erasmus's Greek text with minor changes.[62] So the majority of the sources used in the production of the KJV were directly or indirectly influenced by Erasmus's Greek text.[63]

The last notable publication of the Greek New Testament is that of the Elzevir brothers. Bonaventure and Abraham Elzevir published seven editions of the Greek New Testament from 1624 onwards.[64] The text they used was mainly from Beza's 1565 edition, which is essentially the same as Stephanus's

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[60] These principles can be found in McGrath, *In the Beginning*, 173–75.

[61] Trobisch, "The KJV and the Development of Text Criticism," 227. William W. Combs, "The Preface to the King James Version and the King James-Only Position," *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 1 (Fall 1996): 258; McGrath, *In the Beginning*, 177. Indeed, the KJV translators write, "Truly, good Christian Reader, we never thought from the beginning that we should need to make a new translation, nor yet to make of a bad one a good one … but to make a good one better, or out of many good ones one principal good one, not justly to be excepted against; that hath been our endeavour, that our mark." See F. H. A. Scrivener, *The Authorized Edition of the English Bible (1611): Its Subsequent Reprints and Modern Representatives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1884), 295–96.

[62] James White, *The King James Only Controversy*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 2009), 104–5, "One can trace the text from Erasmus, who died in 1536, through Stephanus (d. 1559), through Beza (d. 1605), to the KJV translators."

[63] At the same time, we must note that the translators did not rely upon any one source exclusively. Decisions were made that departed from the texts of Erasmus, Stephanus, and Beza. An example of this is 1 John 2:23b, which reads, "But he that acknowledgeth the Sonne, hath the Father also." This phrase is not found in Erasmus, the *Polyglot*, Stephanus, or Beza, but the KJV translators choose to accept it as utilized by the Vulgate and the variant notes from Geneva 1560 and the text of the Rheims. For more discussion about some of the unique utilization of sources by the KJV translators, see John R. Kohlenberger III, "The Textual Sources of the King James Bible," in *Translation That Openeth the Window: Reflections on the History and Legacy of the King James Bible*, ed. David G. Burke (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 43–53.

[64] In contrast with the others in this list, the Elzevir brothers appear to have been motivated commercially and did little critical adjustment to the text, relying mainly on the text produced by Stephanus and Beza. See J. Harold Greenlee, *An Introduction to New Testament Textual Criticism*, rev. ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 65.

1551 edition and heavily dependent upon Erasmus's 1527 and 1535 editions. The renown of the Elzevir brothers comes from the second edition of their New Testament (1633), which contains a sentence that reads *Textum ergo habes, nunc ab omnibus receptum, in quo nihil immutatum aut corruptum damus* ("Therefore, you have the text now received by all, in which we give nothing changed or corrupted"). The phrase, "*Textum … receptum*" has given rise to the title Textus Receptus, used in general of the Greek New Testament from the first edition of Erasmus (1516) up to that of the Elzevir brothers.[65]

Erasmus's scholarship therefore had tremendous influence on the production of the New Testament. Although initially desiring to improve the Latin translation of the Bible, he is best known today for his work on the Greek New Testament, and his influence is not limited to the academic realm of Greek and Latin. The most popular Bible in the English-speaking world, the King James Bible, is directly (through Stephanus and Beza) and indirectly (through Tyndale and Coverdale) influenced by his work, summarized chronologically as follows:

Cumplutensian Polyglot	Erasmus	Luther's NT	Stephanus	Beza	Tyndale/ Coverdale*	KJV	Elzevir Brothers
1514–1522	1516 1519 1522 1527 1535	1522	1546 1549 1550 1551	1565 1582 1588–89 1598	1526 1534 1535*	1611	1624 1633†

* At the risk of oversimplification, Coverdale's translation can be viewed as a completion of the work started by Tyndale.

† Although there were five editions following, it was in the preface to this second edition of the Elzevirs' New Testament that the phrase Textus Receptus came into existence.

[65] Combs, "Erasmus and the Textus Receptus," 35. Cf., Metzger and Ehrman, *Text of the New Testament*, 152. Metzger notes, "Partly because of this catchword the form of the Greek text incorporated in the editions that Stephanus, Beza, and the Elzevirs had published succeeded in establishing itself as 'the only true text' of the New Testament, and was slavishly reprinted in hundreds of subsequent editions. It lies at the basis of the King James version and of all the principal Protestant translations in the languages of Europe prior to 1881. So superstitious has been the reverence accorded the Textus Receptus that in some cases attempts to criticize or emend it have been regarded as akin to sacrilege. Yet its textual basis is essentially a handful of late and haphazardly collected minuscule manuscripts, and in a dozen passages its reading is supported by no known Greek witness."

Conclusion

In a tale both ironical and providential, a man by the name of Desiderius Erasmus published a New Testament to improve the Latin translation of the day. In so doing, his well-received work and its subsequent editions led to great improvement of the quality of the Greek text. This text became the foundation for both the scholars and the Reformers who followed Erasmus.

Erasmus strongly believed that Christians ought to return to the original Greek sources to gain understanding of Christian wisdom, rather than relying on the Latin sources of the day.[66] He has been called The Forgotten Reformer, a fitting title that acknowledges that his Greek text was used by Luther, Tyndale, Calvin, and Beza.[67] His work gave the Reformers the tools necessary for focusing their efforts on the original Greek in a world that held the Latin Vulgate to be the official Bible of the church.

Not only did Erasmus's influence extend to those Reformers and scholars who came directly after, but his influence has been felt in the English-speaking world through the KJV. With a Greek text that had its origin in Erasmus's, and with various English translations related to his work, the publication of the KJV has influenced language, culture, and churches for over four hundred years.

"The name of Erasmus shall never perish." This has proved to be the case. On the five hundredth anniversary of Erasmus's first New Testament edition, we can look back and see God's providence at work giving the Reformation the tools it needed when it needed them.

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[66] Yamauchi, "Erasmus' Contributions," 7–8. Erasmus is noted as having said, "It was not for empty fame or childish pleasure that in my youth I grasped at the polite literature of the ancients, and by late hours gained some slight mastery of Greek and Latin. It has been my cherished wish to cleanse the Lord's temple of barbarous ignorance, and to adorn it with treasures brought from afar, such as may kindle in generous hearts a warm love for the Scriptures" (quoted in P. S. Allen, *Erasmus: Lectures and Wayfaring Sketches* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934], 42–43; cf. Ep. 124: 72–74, Mynors and Thomson, 1:252).

[67] See David Bentley-Taylor, *My Dear Erasmus: The Forgotten Reformer* (Fearn, UK: Christian Focus, 2002). For more on Erasmus's role as a forerunner to the Reformation, see Lillback, "The Forerunners of the Reformation," 96–99.