

Sunday, November 24, 2019—Grace Life School of Theology—*From This Generation For Ever*  
Lesson 101 Erasmus and the Greek New Testament, Part 2 (Erasmus in the Critics Den)

### **Introduction**

- Last week in Lesson 100 we began looking at Erasmus and the Greek New Testament as a monumental achievement in the history of preservation/transmission. In doing so, we covered the following points:
  - The Life & Career of Erasmus
  - Erasmus and the Greek New Testament
- Today we want to build upon this groundwork by considering the following points:
  - Erasmus in the Critics Den
    - The Rushed to Press Argument
    - The Number of Manuscripts Argument
    - The Age of the Manuscripts & Awareness of Variant Readings Argument

### **Erasmus In the Critics Den**

- Critics of the King James Bible, the *Textus Receptus*, and the traditional Byzantine Greek deride the text of Erasmus for a variety of reasons. Alister McGrath, a supporter of the Critical Text and modern versions, reports that:
  - “Erasmus had access to a mere four manuscripts for most of the New Testament, and only one for the final part, the Book of Revelation. As it happened, that manuscript left out five verses, which Erasmus himself had to translate into Greek from the Latin Vulgate. Nevertheless, it proved to be a literary milestone. For the first time, theologians had the opportunity of comparing the original Greek text of the New Testament with the later Vulgate translation into Latin.” (McGrath, 52)
- Dr. William W. Combs of Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary maintains that Erasmus used seven Greek MSS to construct his Greek New Testament as opposed to the five noted by McGrath.
  - “Seven manuscripts were used by Erasmus in Basel to compile the Greek text that was printed alongside his Latin translation.
    1. Codex 1<sup>cap</sup>, a minuscule containing the entire NT except for Revelation, dated to about the 12<sup>th</sup> century.
    2. Codex 1<sup>r</sup>, a minuscule containing the book of Revelation except for the last six verses (Rev. 22:16-21), dated to the 12<sup>th</sup> century.
    3. Codex 2<sup>c</sup>, a minuscule containing the Gospels, dated to the 12<sup>th</sup> century.

4. Codex 2<sup>ap</sup>, a minuscule containing Acts and the Epistles, dated to the 12<sup>th</sup> century.
5. Codex 4<sup>p</sup>, a minuscule containing the Pauline Epistles, dated to the 15<sup>th</sup> century.
6. Codex 7<sup>p</sup>, a minuscule containing the Pauline Epistles, dated to the 11<sup>th</sup> century.
7. Codex 817, a minuscule containing the Gospels, dated to the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

All of these were the property of the Dominican Library in Basel except for 2<sup>ap</sup>, which was obtained from the family of Johann Amerbach of Basel.” (Combs, 11)

- Dr. W. Edward Glenny of Central Baptist Theological Seminary is emblematic of those who seek to deride the Greek New Testament of Erasmus. Glenny contributed two essays to the 1997 publication of Central Baptist Theological Seminary titled, *The Bible Version Debate: The Perspective of Central Theological Seminary*. In “Chapter Four: Defining the Terms” Glenny states the following regarding Erasmus and the Received Text:

- “. . . the *Textus Receptus* (described below) which only represents about a half dozen manuscripts of the Byzantine text-type, (Glenny, 47)

. . . The *Textus Receptus* (TR) is the title given to the 1633 version of the Greek text edited and first published by Erasmus in 1516. Erasmus was a Roman Catholic humanist who came to Basel in 1514 for the purpose of publishing his annotations on the New Testament with a text of the Latin Vulgate. His publisher Froben, pressured him to include the Greek NT in his work. Consequently, in eight months Erasmus edited his Greek NT based on seven manuscripts available to him at Basel. Erasmus described his text as “thrown together rather than edited.” . . .

Of the seven manuscripts which Erasmus used, none contained the whole NT. One was complete except for Revelation, and all the rest had various parts of the NT (1 had only Revelation, except for the last 6 verses; 2 had only the Gospels; 2 had only Acts and the Epistles; 1 had only the Pauline Epistles). All from the 11<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> centuries.

As a result of his editing of these seven manuscripts, in 1516 Erasmus produced a new Greek text which had never existed before. Remember, that closest manuscripts differ from each other 6-10 times per chapter [Note that Glenny says nothing about the nature of these differences]. He took the manuscripts he had available from different parts of the NT and edited them to make a new text. He used two main manuscripts and wrote his corrections and changes on them, and the printer then used these to make the printed text. A comparison of Erasmus’ notes and the 1516 edition of the TR shows that at times the printer did not accept Erasmus’ corrections, and at other times the printer made revisions not made by Erasmus. (Glenny 48-49)

. . . the TR is only based on seven late manuscripts.” (Glenny, 51)

- Regarding the situation with publication of the 1516 Greek text of Erasmus, Dr. William Combs paints a slightly different picture than did Glenny. Combs states:

- “Thus Erasmus had three manuscripts of the Gospels and Acts; four manuscripts of the Pauline Epistles; and only one manuscript of Revelation. However, the main sources for his text were Codices 2<sup>e</sup> and 2<sup>ap</sup>. Erasmus did not compile his own Greek text from the manuscripts at his disposal, few as they were; instead, Codices 2<sup>e</sup> and 2<sup>ap</sup> themselves served as the printer’s copy for all of the NT except Revelation. They still contain Erasmus’ corrections written between the lines of the text and occasionally in the margins, which came from the other four manuscripts, though he made little use of them. A comparison between the manuscripts used by the printer and the printed text indicates that the printer did not accept every correction that Erasmus proposed, and that the printer made some revisions not authorized by Erasmus.” (Combs, 12)
- All told, there are basically three reasons why Glenny and, to lesser degree, Combs deride the Greek Text of Erasmus. Firstly, the project was rushed to the press in only eight months by Erasmus’ publisher Froben and is therefore of suspect quality. Secondly, in their view, the Erasmian text is based on only five to seven Greek MSS and therefore is not comprehensive enough. Thirdly, working off the assumption that “oldest is best”, the Erasmian text is based on a handful of recent late Medieval Byzantine MSS and is therefore not emblematic of the oldest form of the text.

#### *The Rushed to Press Argument*

- Supporters of the Critical Text and modern versions often compare the amount of time that Erasmus spent compiling his Greek text with Westcott and Hort in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is commonly asserted that Westcott and Hort spent nearly thirty years editing and compiling their Greek New Testament, Erasmus spent only eight months. Therefore, on this basis alone, the Westcott and Hort text is of superior quality to the Erasmian text, in the mind of Glenny.
  - 1853, Apr. 19—in a letter to Rev. John Ellerton, Hort announces his joint plan with Westcott to edit a Greek NT based upon material provided by Lachmann and Tischendorf.
    - “He and I [Westcott] are going to edit a Greek text of the N. T. some two or three years hence, if possible. Lachmann and Tischendorf will supply rich materials, but not nearly enough; and we hope to do a good deal with the Oriental versions. Our object is to supply clergymen generally, schools, etc., with a portable Gk. Test., which shall not be disfigured with Byzantine corruptions.” (Hort, *Life and Letters Vol. I*, 250)
- Judging from this dated letter it seems reasonable to conclude that Westcott and Hort began working on their project in 1853 some 28 years before it was published in 1881. Why did it take them so long? The following dated letter from Hort to the Reverend John Ellerton reveals that the discovery of Codex Sinaiticus in 1859 by Constantine Tischendorf greatly delayed the release of Hort’s joint project with Westcott, a reality that brought dismay to Hort.
  - 1859, Jun. 6—in a letter to Rev. John Ellerton, Hort acknowledges the discovery of Codex Sinaiticus by Tischendorf and expresses Westcott’s desire see it before publishing their Greek NT.

- “Tischendorf’s new discovery may delay our N. T. greatly, as Westcott wishes (not I) to wait for it; but there can be little doubt of its importance.” (Hort, *Life & Letters Vol. I*, 410)
- So, had Tischendorf not discovered Codex Sinaiticus in 1859 the Westcott and Hort Greek Text would have been available much sooner, perhaps as soon as 1859, a period of only six years as opposed to almost thirty. Second, none of this discussion touches upon how Westcott and Hort presented an unpublished copy of their Greek New Testament into the 1870 Revision Committee, a full ten years before it was published for public consumption. Consequently, it was in use for over decade before it was published in 1881. It was from this unpublished copy of the Westcott and Hort Greek New Testament that the sweeping textual changes exhibited by the Revised Version (1881) were made. Moreover, to deride Erasmus based upon the amount of time he spent compiling the text for his 1516 edition clouds the true purpose of this edition, to present his Latin translation. Furthermore, it overlooks the four later editions in which Erasmus sought to improve his Greek text. Lastly, the delay on account of the Tischendorf’s discovery changed precious little about the Westcott and Hort text since ninety percent of it is based upon the lone witness of Codex Vaticanus.
- Erasmus’ previous work over a decade earlier on Origen’s *Hexapla* also exposed Erasmus to many more Greek readings than he had in front of him in Basel in 1515/1516.
  - “As unwitting preparation for that moment in the library in 1504 [when he discovered Valla’s *Adnotationes*], Erasmus had already discovered Jerome. He had gone on to study Origen’s *Hexapla*.” (Daniell, 114)

#### *The Number of Manuscripts Argument*

- Both Glenn and Combs charge the Erasmine text with being incomplete since it was only based on seven Greek MSS. Both of these men maintain that one must consult the totality of the MSS witnesses in order to produce a comprehensive Greek text. Some of their objections appear to have been anticipated by the 19<sup>th</sup> century defender of the Traditional Greek Text John William Burgon:
  - “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 with accuracy the Sacred Word; that the decision of the text was evidently guarded with jealous care, just as the human genealogy of our Lord was preserved; that it rests mainly upon much the widest testimony; and that where any part of it conflicts with the fullest evidence attainable, there I believe that it calls for correction.” (Burgon, 15)
- In other words, Glenn leaves one with the impression that Erasmus had never seen a Greek MSS before he came to Basel in 1514. This notion is absurd given all we have studied about the life and career of Erasmus. Even Combs is forced to admit:
  - “Besides the seven previously mentioned manuscripts that Erasmus used in Basel for his Greek text, his *Annotationes* indicate that he had examined and collected a few other manuscripts in his various travels. One of these that can be identified with certainty, is Codex 69, a 15<sup>th</sup> century manuscript of the entire NT with minor gaps. In a few places Erasmus selected distinctive readings from this manuscript.” (Combs, 14)

- On this point Dr. Edward F. Hills author of *The King James Version Defended* weighs in with the following:
  - “Did Erasmus use other manuscripts besides these five in preparing his Textus Receptus? The indications are that he did . . . It is well known also that Erasmus looked for manuscripts everywhere during his travels and that he borrowed them from everyone he could. Hence although the Textus Receptus was based mainly on the manuscripts that Erasmus found at Basel, it also included readings taken from others to which he had access. It agreed with the common faith because it was founded on manuscripts which in the providence of God were readily available.” (Hills, 196)
- There is no doubt that Erasmus knew of and had inspected more Greek MSS on his journeys than what was available to him at Basel in 1514 to 1516. The Basel texts are emblematic of a host of other MSS found in the Byzantine majority that are in substantive agreement with each other and are represented in printed fashion through the *Textus Receptus* of which the Erasmine edition was the first. In this way, the TR first published by Erasmus bears the hallmarks of the preserved text in that it is witnessed by a multiplicity of copies that were available and in use by the body of Christ during the dispensation of grace.
- Therefore, Glenney’s charge that Erasmus “produced a new Greek text which had never existed before” is only accurate when viewed through the assumption of *verbatim identity*. While it is true that Erasmus was practicing textual criticism when he edited his text, he did so using MSS that were in substantive agreement with literally thousands of other witness that he could have used. Put another way, Erasmus utilized MSS to which the Biblical principles of preservation attested, namely *multiplicity, availability, and use* – not some MSS that were hidden away in an inaccessible library or were not even known to exist for another 350 years. Lastly, unless Erasmus had access to a complete MS of the New Testament, which he did not, how else was he supposed to print the New Testament in Greek in its entirety if he did not edit a text for publication? Such reasoning on the part of Critical Text advocates is suspect at best since their textual darling Codex Vaticanus does not contain the complete New Testament (it is missing I and II Timothy and Titus) yet 90% of the modern Critical Text is based upon its witness.
- The objection that Erasmus’ 1516 Greek New Testament was flawed because he only used seven Greek MSS is seriously dubious when one considers the position of the folks asserting it. We have already observed in previous Lessons that the modern Critical Text is based principally on only two Greek MSS, the Codex Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus. Recall the following from [Lesson 73](#):
  - “. . . they usually gave primary weight to one Greek manuscript (B, known as Vaticanus) even when every other Egyptian and Byzantine manuscript supports a different reading. Though there are 5,262 Greek manuscripts currently extant, and tens of thousands of early versions, the following manuscripts carried the most weight in the UBS Text [modern Critical Text]:
    - 90% of the time these editors based their reading on the primary weight of only one Greek manuscript: Vaticanus (B). In practical terms, this manuscript is the authority.

- Another 7% of the time their disagreement with the Majority Text is based on a reading from Sinaiticus (Ⲛ). We have already seen that Sinaiticus disagrees with Vaticanus well over 3000 times in the Gospels alone. This shows that one or both of these manuscripts are highly unreliable.
  - 2.5% of the time, their distinctive reading is based on Alexandrinus (A).
  - Less than half a percent of the time the readings of modern versions are based on other Alexandrian manuscripts when one or more of them disagree with the previous three. (There are about 200 Alexandrian manuscripts.)” (Kayser & Pickering, 4)
- In his book *Which Greek Text? The Debate Among Fundamentalists*, Dr. Charles L. Surretts states the following in response to the objections raised by Glenny and company.
  - “It appears to this author that the opponents of Erasmus and the TR textual tradition are criticizing Erasmus for doing what they themselves are doing. . . textual criticism. How odd that they would make such an issue of the small number of MSS used by that editor when they follow a position that espouses the minority of extant MSS as superior today! Had Erasmus’ few MSS disagreed with that which local churches were using, there would be reason to reject his work, but if he purposely chose the texts that best represent the churches’ traditions, the results seem legitimate.” (Surretts, 67-77)

#### *The Age of the Manuscripts & Awareness of Variant Readings Argument*

- Another objection to the Erasmine text that is commonly raised by modern supporters of the Critical Text is that textual discoveries since the early 16<sup>th</sup> century have uncovered the existence of variant readings that were unknown to Erasmus. Put another way, Erasmus’ Greek New Testament is antiquated and not based upon the most recent research in the field of textual criticism.
- Codex Vaticanus (B), the principle MS upon which the Critical Text is based was not even known to exist until the late 15<sup>th</sup> century.
  - 1481—Codex Vaticanus (B) is registered in the Vatican library in Rome. First known existence:
    - Not in 1475 catalog, according to some reports.
    - Is missing the Pastoral Epistles (I and II Timothy and Titus)
- Dr. Hills points out that Erasmus was fully aware of most of the principal textual variants of consequence discussed by modern textual critics.
  - “Through his study of the writings of Jerome and other Church Fathers Erasmus became very well informed concerning the variant readings of the New Testament text. Indeed, almost all the important variant readings known to scholars today were already known to Erasmus more the 460 years ago and discussed in the notes which he placed after the text in his editions of the Greek New Testament. Here, for example, Erasmus dealt with such

problem passages as the conclusion of the Lord's Prayer (Matt. 6:13), the interview of the rich young man with Jesus (Matt. 19:17-22), the ending of Mark (Mark 16:9-20), the angelic song (Luke 22:43-44), the woman taken in adultery (John 7:53-8:11), and the mystery of godliness (I Tim. 3:16).

In his notes Erasmus placed before the reader not only ancient discussions concerning the New Testament text but also debates which took place in the early Church over the New Testament canon and the authorship of some of the New Testament books, especially Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude, and Revelation. Not only did he mention the doubts reported by Jerome and the other Church Fathers, but also added some objections of his own. However, he discussed these matters somewhat warily, declaring himself willing at any time to submit to 'The consensus of public opinion and especially to the authority of the Church.'" (Hills, 198-199)

- There is also historical evidence that Erasmus knew about the existence of Codex Vaticanus (B) in his lifetime and rejected it as corrupt.
  - 1521—Erasmus is supplied with a transcript of I John 4:1-3 and I John 5:5-11 from B by his friend Bombasius.
    - I John 5:7 is missing from Codex B.
    - B is rejected by Erasmus as corrupt.
  - 1534—a series of letters between Erasmus and his friend Sepulveda discuss various aspects of Codex B.
    - Sepulveda mentions 365 readings. The exact list of readings has not survived history.
    - Erasmus views B as part of a Medieval move (Council of Florence 1431-1499) to conform Greek MSS to the Latin Vulgate.
- Erasmus was aware of nearly every major variant reading in the New Testament, yet he never adjusted his Greek text to cohere with Codex B. Recall from Lesson 100 that Erasmus also did an extensive study of the Church Fathers as part of his desire to revive Biblical literacy. Therefore, his rejection of B as a Medieval move to conform Greek MSS with the Vulgate was based on his knowledge of the Greek MSS and the Church Fathers.

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