Erasmus von Rotterdam. Novum Instrumentum. Basel 1516. Faksimile-Neudruck mit einer historischen, textkritischen und bibliographischen Einleitung von Heinz Holeczek. Stuttgart - Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1986. Pp. xli, 629.

For almost six months - from September 1515 through February 1516 - printers scurried, presses clattered, and Erasmus scribbled.

The printing firm of Johann Froben must have seemed the picture of chaos during that half-year when Erasmus' New Testament emerged from the press in Basel. Erasmus of course had completed much of his own work on the New Testament during the previous five years: he had examined a fair number of manuscripts of both the Greek and the Latin scriptures; he had noted numerous variant readings and studied the works of Church Fathers for evidence on the textual history of the scriptures; he had annotated hundreds of passages where his philological researches illuminated the meaning of the New Testament or points of biblical theology. Yet on the very eve of printing, much work remained undone, many decisions untaken. Erasmus hastily marked up a handy manuscript of the Greek New Testament and used it as printer's copy for his edition of the Christian scriptures in their original language. At the instigation of his fellow workers, he introduced numerous revisions into the text of the Latin Vulgate, so as to render it a more accurate reflection of the Greek New Testament. At the same time, too, even as Froben's printers set the scriptures in type, Erasmus vastly expanded his annotations to the New Testament. Even basic questions of format - would the Greek and Latin texts appear successively and separately, or together in parallel columns? - remained undecided until the last minute.

Little wonder, then, considering the hasty preparation of the work, that scholars have often found fault with Erasmus' New Testament of 1516. In the early years, controversy centred on Erasmus' revision of the Vulgate as a translation of the New Testament and on those of his annotations that challenged traditional ways of understanding the scriptures. Conservative scholars and theologians expressed shock and dismay at Erasmus' willingness to entertain alternatives to time-honoured formulae and interpretations of the New Testament. In more recent times, the Greek text has replaced the Latin translation and the annotations as the prime target of scholarly criticism. It is marred by hundreds of typographical errors, so the critics have charged; it rests on too slender a basis in Greek manuscripts; it does not always present the best text offered in the manuscripts available to Erasmus; it even retranslated six verses of the Apocalypse from Latin back into Greek, since Erasmus' manuscript lacked the last leaf of the book.

Despite its faults - and they are many - recent scholarship has concentrated on assessing the positive importance of Erasmus' New Testament. The editors of the Spanish Complutensian Bible had prepared an edition of the Greek New Testament and had seen it through the press at Alcalá in 1514. But they obtained

a license to publish their edition only in 1520, so that their achievement stood in the shadow of Erasmus' work. Even with its defects, Erasmus' Greek New Testament performed a genuine scholarly service: it offered a common text to scholars and theologians in all parts of Europe; it invited improvement on the basis of new discoveries in manuscripts; and it encouraged re-examination of Christian doctrine in the light of the Greek scriptures. In the second place, quite apart from his edition of the Greek New Testament, Erasmus offered a revised Latin translation in his New Testament of 1516. In it he removed many of the Vulgate's glaring errors, and in numerous passages he provided a far more clear and accurate reflection of the Greek scriptures than western Christians had ever known. Speaking more generally, his work helped to bring about a reconsideration of the whole enterprise of biblical translation, its methods and purposes. In the third place, Erasmus equipped his New Testament with thousands of annotations, in which he discussed points of philology and theology concerning individual passages. His notes do not read like the observations of modern textual critics or biblical theologians, but in large measure they helped to found the disciplines that modern scholars continue to develop. The annotations prove in abundant measure that Erasmus knew how to think about textual problems – how to recognize and remove textual corruption – and further that he knew how to think about the larger moral and theological implications of basic textual scholarship. Rarely in western history has an individual achieved such a harmonious blend of scholarly precision with moral and religious concern as did Erasmus in his New Testament scholarship.

The volume under review stands as a tribute to the long-term significance of Erasmus' New Testament. Heinz Holeczek provides a short introduction discussing Erasmus' scholarly career, his biblical studies, his efforts to prepare Greek and Latin editions of the New Testament, and the contribution his work made to biblical scholarship. The remainder of the volume reprints the first edition (1516) of Erasmus' Greek New Testament, revised Latin translation, and annotations. Students and scholars especially will welcome the opportunity to consult Erasmus' New Testament, which in the original edition survives in only a few hundred copies. This volume performs a genuine service in the field of Renaissance studies, since it makes available to a large audience one of the most important scholarly publications of the entire sixteenth century.

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