

Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



The New Testament Scholarship of Erasmus: An Introduction with Erasmus' Prefaces and Ancillary Writings

Willis Goth Regier

Volume 42, numéro 2, printemps 2019

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1065142ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065142ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (imprimé)

2293-7374 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Regier, W. (2019). Compte rendu de [The New Testament Scholarship of Erasmus: An Introduction with Erasmus' Prefaces and Ancillary Writings]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 42(2), 213–215. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065142ar>

érudits. Vrai bonheur, cette édition pleine d'intelligence et de fraîcheur est à lire et à savourer d'urgence !

MARIE BARRAL-BARON

Université de la Franche Comté

Erasmus, Desiderius.

***The New Testament Scholarship of Erasmus: An Introduction with Erasmus' Prefaces and Ancillary Writings.* Ed. Robert D. Sider.**

Collected Works of Erasmus in English 41. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019. Pp. xxvi, 1063. ISBN 978-0-8020-9222-9 (hardcover) \$225.

Volume 41 of the *Collected Works of Erasmus* (hereafter *CWE 41*) translates Erasmus's writings inserted into editions of his New Testament. Its eleven pieces include several of Erasmus's most reconsidered writings on Scripture, Christ, and the church. Here are the *Paraclesis*, *Apologia*, *Methodus*, *Ratio seu methodus*, and *De philosophia evangelica*, key texts for understanding Erasmus's theology, ecclesiology, and exegetics. *CWE 41* also includes translations of his New Testament paratexts: title pages, prefaces to individual books, and interspersed letters.

The eleven pieces show that Erasmus's New Testament work gained depth through the years as he meanwhile edited early church fathers: Ambrose, Basil, Augustine, Chrysostom, and Jerome. He loved them for their piety and for their Latin and Greek. Under their authority his own opinions took shelter.

Most of the works in *CWE 41* are in English for the first time. Because we still await the Latin texts in the Amsterdam critical edition (*ASD*), translators chose texts as best they could. The *Paraclesis*, *Apologia*, *Methodus*, and *Ratio seu methodus* follow the editions of Hajo and Annemarie Holborn (1933). The *Capita argumentorum contra morosos quosdam ac indoctos* (*Chief Arguments Answering Some Crabby and Ignorant Critics*), and *The Travels of the Apostles Peter and Paul* follow volume 5 of the Leiden edition (1705). Headers helpfully key pages to those editions.

The volume is a triumph of collaboration. Sider translated three of the eleven pieces; Ann Dalzell translated the *Paraclesis*; John M. Ross translated the *Apologia*; Alexander Dalzell translated titles, prefaces, letters, and "Errors in the

Vulgate”; and Clarence Miller translated the *Capita argumentorum*. Erasmus’s thoughts about translation and its pitfalls recur throughout the anthology (410, 429–30, 467–68, 817–20). All texts are carefully annotated by Sider, the Dalzells, and Jan Krans, linking the pieces to Erasmus’s *Opera Omnia* and his sources.

Sider’s 386-page introduction is a triumph of organization. With extraordinary mastery of his material, he introduces not only *CWE 41* but the series’ next nineteen volumes, too: translations of Erasmus’s New Testament paraphrases and annotations. The introduction is polished and substantial, a reliable guide to all twenty volumes. Piece by piece, part by part, Erasmus’s five editions of the New Testament are described in chronological order, and situated within the events of his life. Sider cites significant additions, omissions, and amendments in the translation, annotations, and apparatus, allowing readers to follow Erasmus’s twenty years of revision.

Throughout, Sider emphasizes Erasmus’s humanism: “he was a humanist eager to adapt the principles of humanist scholarship to a Christian context” (28); “The *Novum Instrumentum* of 1516 was in its design and methodology symbolic of humanist values” (75); “his New Testament scholarship never lost its fundamental character as a humanist philological work” (324). Erasmus was profoundly humanist in his sympathy for the humanity of Christ and the humanity of the Evangelists and church fathers. “The New Testament was not a collection of propositions for a timeless theology or a source of obscure mysteries to satisfy the ingenuity of the illuminated. It was rather a collection of books rooted in a historical context and written by human authors” (59). So, too, the translator of the Vulgate and subsequent copyists were liable to human lapses. They could be forgiven but should be corrected.

Erasmian humanists studied the languages of Scripture: Latin, of course, Hebrew, and especially Greek (428). They commended faithful translations, but distrusted translations, even the best. They read carefully and annotated idiosyncratically (49–55). A thorough humanist, Erasmus read for nuance, character, tropes, allusions, quotations, adages, definitions, drama, emotions *in extremis*, all that the New Testament required. He advised readers to learn the New Testament by heart (693), and did so himself, yet continued to read it anew. He placed Jesus among the poets (438).

Of course, the New Testament was the most important book of his time, the book every pious reader was expected to know or pretend to know. Erasmus called it “the repository of the divine mind” (422). In his *Paraclesis* he summons

readers to “the philosophy of Christ” if they will just read on, promising the transformation achieved by the reading of Scripture. He admits a true Christian can be unlettered, but how much more fortunate are those who can read “the literature of Christ,” and read as it was written, in Greek.

The first edition of his New Testament included the Greek text, a translation, a *Methodus* for reading it, and notes. Erasmus promised readers great rewards for reading: a purer spirit and an opportunity to encounter Christ as if he stood before them (422). Despite his intent, Erasmus knew his edition would provoke critics who thought he was meddling with God’s word. Friends warned him of risks and unruly pride, but still he proceeded. Anticipating squabblers, he added an *Apologia* to his New Testament (455–77) to defend what he’d done, and in 1519 he added the *Capita argumentorum* to answer early critics. The *Apologia* is the only preface that appeared in all five of his editions.

The heart of the anthology is the *Ratio*, a huge expansion of the *Methodus* and his fullest text on the interpretation of Scripture. He dared to propose that “some order of authority” be established among sacred writings (550), and suggested one. Erasmus called the *Ratio* a *perveniendi*, or “short-cut” to theology which, for him, had less to do with fine points of doctrine than with guiding a Christian life. Like the *Paraclesis*, the *Ratio* soon became its own book and went through many printings.

CWE 41 is one of the most essential volumes in the *Collected Works*. It is an ideal vademecum for anyone embarking on the study of Erasmus’s New Testament work and an unrivalled reference for those already embarked.

WILLIS GOTH REGIER
University of Illinois