CHAPTER 1

Secrets between Philosophy, Biblical Interpretation, and Literature: Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466/9–1536)

Secrecy in Erasmian Anthropology

How can we approach the issue of secrecy in Erasmus’s works? One way is to look at how Erasmus develops his thought by drawing on Origen’s method and spiritual doctrines. Erasmus adapts Origen’s ideas of secrecy and uses them in diverse areas of his thought, notably in the domains of anthropology, theology, and ethics.1 Origen theorized secrecy through his threefold philosophical understanding of the human persona’s structure. Throughout his early and late works, Erasmus adapts Origen’s division of body, soul, and spirit. For instance, between the years 1501 and 1504, while writing his *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, he relies extensively on Saint Paul’s and Origen’s threefold division of the human persona. He uses it to respond to John Colet in their dispute about the nature of Christ’s sacrifice, a dispute that took place in 1499, but that was published in 1503/4. In the domain of ethics, he integrates it into his *Enchiridion* (1503), while in his literary works—such as *The Praise of Folly* (1511) and his *Adages* (in “Sileni Alcibiadis” of 1515, for instance)—he uses Origen to develop a philosophical dimension in Christianity. He deals with the same group of issues in his *Apology Against Jacques Lefèvre d’Etaples* (1517), which addresses the tension between Christ’s humanity and divinity and where he questions whether Christ’s fear in Gethsemane detracted from his dignity as a God.2 In his *Paraphrases on Romans* (1517) and in his later *Expositions on the*

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1 For Erasmus’s use of this Pauline division in his political thought, see David Marsh, “Erasmus on the Antithesis of Body and Soul,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 37, no. 4 (1976): 673–688.

2 On the relations between Lefèvre and Erasmus, see Bedouelle, “Introduction to the *Apologia ad fabrum*,” in *Apologia ad Iacobum Fabrum Stapdensem*, ed. Guy Bedouelle (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), i–xxvii. In his *Quincuplex psalterium* (1509 and 1513) and in his *Commentary on the Epistles of Saint Paul* (1512), Lefèvre d’Etaples insisted that Hebrews 2:7 should not read “Minuisti eum paulo minus ab angelis” but rather “Minuisti eum paulo minus a Deo.” In Lefèvre’s view, Christ was made less than God but not less than angels. Lefèvre considered that such a claim diminished Christ’s divinity, and, insisting on the unity of Christ’s nature, he rejected the view that this abasement occurred only with respect to his human nature. In his *Novum Instrumentum* (1516), Erasmus criticized Lefèvre’s interpretation of Hebrews 2:7, which cites Psalm 8:6. In response, Lefèvre included a critical response to
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Psalms (1528–1531), Erasmus further uses Origen's theory of the human persona, which represents one of the most important philosophical and religious ideas in the history of Western mysticism. While André Godin and Michael J. Heath have discussed Erasmus's use of Origen's threefold structure, the extent to which he develops it and the variety of different uses to which he puts it remain to be explored.

Scholars have shown that between 1501 and 1504, Erasmus steeped himself in the study and translation of numerous Church Fathers, and he had a particular interest in patristic exegesis on Saint Paul. We know that by that time, he had read pseudo-Dionysius, Origen, Cyprien, Ambrose, and Jerome in Italy. Together with humanists such as the earlier Lorenzo Valla (1406–1457) and Jacques Lefèvre d’Etaples (c. 1450–1536), Erasmus worked to rehabilitate Saint Paul as an Apostle of central importance during the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Whereas Lefèvre interpreted the Apostle's works largely in the light of Aristotelian and pseudo-Dionysian thought, and whereas Luther interpreted them in terms of the dualism between flesh and spirit, Erasmus emphasized Paul's and Origen's spiritual anthropology, which he discovered in Origen's Commentaries on Romans. Origen interpreted Saint Paul's threefold Christian anthropology in ways that allowed Erasmus to shift his focus away from the dualism of flesh and spirit in Romans and its later interpreters.

Christ's Fear in Gethsemane

In his earliest work dealing with Christology, Erasmus approaches the significance of Christ's sacrifice by modifying Saint Paul's and Origen's threefold

Erasmus in the second edition of his commentaries (1515, published 1516). Erasmus then wrote the Apologia ad Iacobum Fabrum Stapulensem (1517), which centers on debating Christ's humanity and abasement. He argues that Christ was abased lower than the Father only. Lefèvre went so far to say that Erasmus's reading was “heretical and most unworthy of Christ and God . . . contrary to the spirit and adhering to the letter which destroys.” Cited in Bedouelle, “Introduction,” xix.

3 Erasmus abandoned his commentary on Romans in 1501. In 1504, he found Valla's annotations on the New Testament and had them published in Paris in 1505. Inspired partly by both John Colet and Lorenzo Valla's work, Erasmus translated the New Testament from Greek into Latin in 1506. He published the first edition of his Greek New Testament (Novum Instrumentum) in 1516 with a Latin translation. The Novum Instrumentum was prefaced by his well-known text titled the “Paraclesis.”

4 On the influence of Origen's Pauline commentaries on Erasmus, see Thomas P. Scheck, Origen and the History of Justification: The Legacy of Origen's Commentary on Romans (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008).