Book Reviews


The three works included in this volume were the product of the last years of Erasmus’ life: *Enarratio Psalmi 38* (1532), *De Sarcienda Ecclesiae Concordia* (his commentary on Psalm 83, written in 1533), and *De Puritate Tabernaculi sive Ecclesiae Christianae* (on Psalm 14, published in early 1536). The last two in particular are among Erasmus’ more famous works. All three reflect his response to the religious polarization of the early 1530s and to the fact that while people had hardened their positions, there was still at that point hope for a resolution.

Erasmus dedicated his commentary on Psalm 38 to the Bishop of Olmütz, Stanislaus Thurzo, a patron of humanistic learning to whom Erasmus had dedicated his edition of Pliny’s *Natural History* seven years earlier. Psalm 38 begins “For the end, to Idythun, a song of David,” and Erasmus comments at length on the meaning of this mysterious introductory verse. He is particularly concerned with the name “Idythun” (in Hebrew, “leaping over them”), which gives him occasion to develop the theme of “leaping over” human desires and preoccupations in order to attain to the life of the spirit. Idythun (or “Jeduthun”) is described in 1 Chronicles 16:41–42 as one of David’s musicians. Thus Erasmus’ theme of leaping intertwines with that of harmony, as he develops allegorically the question of both what makes for a truly harmonious musical work and what disrupts that harmony. His conclusion is that harmony is achieved when what is on the outside reflects accurately what is on the inside—a familiar trope in Erasmus’ writing.

During this time, the question of harmony was certainly uppermost on his mind. As he expands on this theme, Erasmus discusses the many ways in which harmony may be disrupted: in the case of the Jews, by an exclusive focus on the literal sense of scripture; in the case of Origen, by too great a focus on allegory at the expense of the literal reading. Origen, like Tertullian and Arius, also fell short by allowing heretical errors to creep into his theology. Even orthodox Christians can fail to achieve harmony if their intentions and actions do not match their pious avowals.
The next verse of the psalm, “I have said: I shall guard my ways that I may not sin with my tongue,” gives rise to a lengthy discussion of the power of the tongue and of speech. Readers of Erasmus’ *Lingua* will find much that is familiar here, especially Erasmus’ assertion that the tongue is the single source of both healing and poison. King David’s patience in enduring the insults of Shimei in 2 Kings / 2 Samuel 16:13 is a type of Christ’s silence in the face of the taunts of his tormentors and a model for how Christians should persevere in the face of pain and humiliation. In the current climate, Erasmus reasons, everyone would benefit by exercising restraint in speaking or writing. Erasmus enumerates in detail the errors of the Fathers, the councils, and even of the popes, who regularly overrule their predecessors’ opinions. When such learned, wise, and holy individuals as these can go astray, people today should be slow to attack one another and brand others as heretics. He then reflects on the vanity of human life and the brevity of the human lifespan, which even at its greatest extent leads to misery in old age; and he chides those who place their trust in their own capabilities rather than in Christ in terms that remind the reader of the *Praise of Folly*.

The commentary, as is the case with so much of Erasmus’ writing, includes several unfavorable references to the Jews. Erasmus compares Psalm 38 to the one preceding it, which is more exclusively penitential, lacking the sense of faith in God’s promise of redemption. As for the thirty-eighth psalm, Erasmus believes that “there is nothing to prevent one applying [it] to Christ, the head of the church, or to the church itself, the mystical body of Christ, ... or to any one individual fighting under the banner of Christ” (p. 39). Yet despite the biblical message, that those who suffer pain and temptation may in the end leap over these trials to the promised victory, Erasmus finds that the psalm still has “a certain Jewish content and does not present us with an example of Christian perfection, but of a man still wrestling with the flesh” (p. 119).

While the commentary on Psalm 38 may have been timely in certain of its themes, it had little exposure during Erasmus’ lifetime. This is not the case for the next commentary, on Psalm 83, subtitled “On Mending the Peace of the Church.” This work appeared in the summer of 1533 with a dedication to Julius Pflug, a German churchman who began a correspondence with Erasmus after having attended the 1530 Diet of Augsburg, in the hopes that a moderate voice such as Erasmus’ could overcome the divisions in the church. The psalm itself is an excellent vehicle for a discussion of peace within the church, beginning after its heading with the words, “How delightful are your tabernacles, O lord of hosts.”

Erasmus does not merely use the commentary of Psalm 83 as a springboard for reflecting on church unity, however, but he develops the commentary throughout the greater part of the work. His reflection on the heading, “Towards the end, for the wine-presses, a psalm to the sons of Korah,” does not reach the length or complexity of his similar reflection for Psalm 38, but he does make a point of dis-