Kaspar von Greyerz, Silvana Seidel Menchi, Martin Wallraff (eds.)


The fifteen essays collected in the volume here reviewed focus our attention on the *Novum Instrumentum* within the broad context of historical, cultural, and philosophical movements of the early modern period. Written by senior scholars and proven experts in Erasmus, and finely edited, the essays range widely in subject-matter and scope but never lose sight of the fact that the first printed edition of the Greek text and Latin translation of the New Testament was published in Basel in 1516. Following a clearly written Preface (ix–xix) which rightly anticipates that the scholarly impact of this collection as a whole will be greater than the sum of its parts, the chapters situate the *Novum Instrumentum* against the background of the Middle Ages, its immediate setting in the Reformation, and its reception within Roman Catholic and Protestant circles.

For the purposes of this review the essays are grouped into three types: 1) those that present an *état de la question* of some aspect of Erasmus’ biblical scholarship, while at the same time offering new insights; 2) those that present innovative approaches or revise long-held preconceptions; 3) and those that locate the *Novum Instrumentum* within the traditions of Bible production, print culture, reading practices, and biblical learning generally.

1) In a concise appraisal of the polemics between biblical humanists and scholastic theologians which propelled much of Erasmus’ scholarship on the Bible, Erika Rummel (27–41) demonstrates how in his debates with conservative Roman Catholic critics Erasmus purposefully manipulated the opposition between medieval speculative theology and humanist methods of grammar and philology in order to advance his own program. The opposition also exposed differences in the understanding of divine inspiration, which, as far as the humanists were concerned, was restricted to the original authors and the tenets of the Christian faith. The texts, however, and the actual writing of them, could be fallible and therefore subject to clarification. The question whether Erasmus’ intentions in this regard should be characterized as innovative or subversive is explored by Marie Barral-Baron (239–254). Rather than to pass judgment on the meaning of a Bible text in the manner of scholastic theology, Erasmus introduced elements of doubt or ambivalence, even about basic questions of authorship. Though his detractors would charge Erasmus with overturning biblical truths and church traditions, Erasmus’ goal was nothing less than the rebirth of pristine Christianity. Another salutary review is offered by Ignacio Pinilla (59–77), on modern discussions about the relative chronology of
the Novum Instrumentum and the Complutensian Polyglot, printed—but not published—as early as 1514. While the first documented evidence for Erasmus’ use of the Polyglot are references to it in the Annotations of 1527, on the basis of a fresh comparison of select passages Pinilla argues that Erasmus had access to some detailed information from one volume of the Polyglot as he prepared the 1522 edition. How Erasmus defined and described the Annotations and the other writings in his New Testament enterprise is summarized by Miekske van Poll-van de Lisdonk (175–186). In re-evaluating Erasmus’ use of the terms annotamenta, scholia, commentarioli, annotatiunculae, enarratio, and commentarius, she also broaches larger questions about the genre of the Annotations and Paraphrases, rightly identifying the inter-relationship between these two theological writings as worthy of further investigation.

2) It was long held that Erasmus’ interest in biblical studies developed slowly over a period of two decades before 1516. Regarding the plan to publish a bilingual edition of the New Testament, Mark Vessey (3–26) argues convincingly that this plan actually germinated in the late-summer of 1514 in Basel, and not earlier. Building on P.S. Allen’s chronological reconstruction of Erasmus’ career between 1511 and 1516, Vessey analyses the epistolary evidence (esp. Epp. 302, 305) in order to argue that it was shortly after Erasmus’ arrival in Basel that the idea arose to publish the extensive notes which he had compiled on the New Testament, together with a Greek text of the New Testament and a Latin translation. The history of the Greek manuscripts which Erasmus consulted for that edition are surveyed by Patrick Andrist (81–124). He highlights the role of John Stojkić of Ragusa, who had acquired several manuscripts in Constantinople and bequeathed them to the Dominicans in Basel, where Erasmus accessed them. Erasmus used as many as eight direct witnesses to the Greek text of the New Testament; several of them belong to the Byzantine tradition of manuscripts (especially of the Pauline epistles), and this is reflected in the Novum Instrumentum. Since the nineteenth century, however, textual critics have on the whole rejected the Byzantine tradition. Andrew J. Brown (125–152) re-examines the evidence for this view, especially as it pertains to Erasmus as textual critic. He also mounts a case in support of Erasmus’ use of the Byzantine tradition of manuscripts, while at the same time questioning the superior status of the Alexandrian stemma.

Two essays cast much-needed light upon the lesser, apparently peripheral materials in the Novum Instrumentum, that is, the Greek hypotheses, the argumenta and the subscriptiones. In tracing the history of these paratexts and Erasmus’ adaptation of them, Martin Walraff (145–173) illustrates how the editor purposefully facilitates, indeed controls, the reader’s approach to the main body of the text. In similar manner Jan Krans (187–206) draws our attention to