

Erasmus, the Protestant Reformation, and the Text of the New Testament

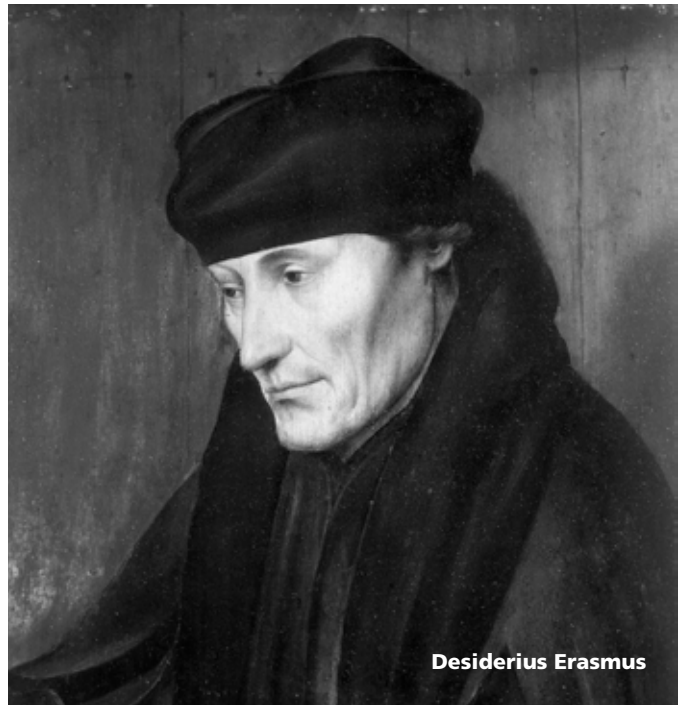
| BY CARL P. COSAERT

This year marks the five-hundredth anniversary of Martin Luther's posting of his revolutionary 95 Theses on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg and the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. While Luther's bold action is often identified as the seminal event that led to the birth of Protestantism, it does not stand alone. It is intimately connected to an event that occurred a year earlier—the publication of the Greek New Testament (NT) in 1516 by the Dutch scholar Desiderius Erasmus. It is in the pages of the Greek NT that Luther discovered the truth of the gospel and found the strength to stand against the secular and religious powers that opposed him. Luther would later base his own German version of the NT on the second edition of Erasmus' Greek text. The Protestant Reformation would certainly have been very different—if it even would have occurred—if it were not for the publication of Erasmus' Greek NT.

Despite the influential role Erasmus' Greek text played at the outset of the Protestant Reformation, his text is no longer widely acclaimed today—at least among the majority of textual scholars. On this historic anniversary of the Reformation, I would like to briefly examine the circumstances that led to its publication as well as the challenges and limitations that ultimately undermined its significance as a definitive edition of the Greek NT. I will then reflect on the current status of the text of the Greek NT as it relates to the modern field of New Testament Textual Criticism, which Erasmus inadvertently helped create.

The Race to Publish the Greek New Testament

The invention of the printing press with its movable type during the middle of the fifteenth century opened up an entirely new era in the history of the world. For the first time, a manuscript could be printed and published in multiple copies—and each of those copies agreed with



Desiderius Erasmus

each other in their entirety. Publishers would no longer be dependent on the varying levels of scribal skill and copying speed. Books could be produced more quickly and efficiently—and more cheaply.

Scholars and publishers rushed to be the first to produce the volumes that would become the definitive work in this new era. Under the leadership of the Spanish cardinal Ximenes de Cisneros, work on a multivolume edition of the Bible in Hebrew, Aramaic, Latin, and Greek was undertaken in 1502. Spanning six separate volumes, the edition, which came to be known as the Complutensian Polyglot, was a huge undertaking. It took twelve years before one of the volumes in the series was finished and printed. It was not volume one that was printed first, however. It was volume five, which contained the New Testament in Greek, with a Greek glossary with Latin equivalents to help the reader. Although it was printed in 1514, a decision was made not to publish the volume until



Left: first page of Ximenes' Polyglot Bible. Right: inside Polyglot Bible, beginning of Matthew recto page (Left to right: Greek, Latin Vulgate, cross-references in the margin).

the entire work was completed and received the Pope's blessing. Unfortunately, it took three years to finish the remaining volumes, and three more years before it received Pope Leo X's official sanction. It was finally published in 1522.

Aware of the forthcoming but delayed publication of Ximenes' Polyglot Bible, Johann Froben, a well-known publisher in Basel, decided to capitalize on the opportunity by publishing an edition of the Greek NT sooner. He first discussed the possibility of the venture with Erasmus in August 1514, but apparently without success. It was not until the following year that Froben finally convinced Erasmus to tackle the project in April 1515—perhaps as result of promising to compensate Erasmus well for his services. If the venture was to be a success, time was of the essence. Working nearly day and night, Erasmus produced his edition of the NT within the span of a mere six months. While it was not the first NT printed in Greek, it won the more important prize when, on March 1, 1516, it became the first published Greek NT. By the time the Complutensian Polyglot Bible

was finally published and made available eight years later, Erasmus' Greek text, which was well-received and already available in a second edition, dominated the market. If Luther would have had to wait for the Polyglot Greek NT, we would not be celebrating the five-hundredth anniversary of the Reformation this year, but perhaps sometime around 2023—if at all.

Problems with Erasmus' Greek Text

As significant and influential as Erasmus' work was at that time, it was far from perfect. In fact, if the truth be told, it was filled with numerous mistakes and flaws.¹ The problems in the first edition were so extensive that even the conservative nineteenth-century textual scholar, Frederick H. A. Scrivener (1813–1891), went so far as to say that it was "the most faulty book" he had ever encountered.² Of course, many of the errors Scrivener lamented were simply the result of the frantic pace at which Erasmus worked in order to complete and publish his Greek text in just six months. While hundreds of the mistakes were the result of poor copyediting on the part of the printer, including the challenge

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the typesetters faced in working directly off the edited Greek manuscripts themselves, Erasmus was also guilty of inaccurately transcribing a large number of Greek manuscripts himself.³ Commenting on the challenge he faced in producing roughly a printed sheet a day, Erasmus admitted to a friend, “The accession of labor, which I thought would be very light, I found in effect to be extremely heavy.... Some things I purposely passed over, and shut my eyes to many points upon which soon after publication I had a different opinion.”⁴

Compounding the issue even further—and ultimately the work’s undoing—was Erasmus’ reliance on only a handful of Greek manuscripts from the tenth to the twelfth centuries. Unbeknown to Erasmus at the time, these manuscripts would later turn out to be of inferior quality. He appears to have selected them based on the convenience of their accessibility rather than on the quality of their text. Of the already limited number of manuscripts available to him, Erasmus based his text primarily on two minuscule manuscripts from the twelfth century, known today as MS 2815 and, for Revelation, MS 2814. This turned out to be a serious problem since the one and only manuscript Erasmus had of Revelation was missing its final leaf—a leaf that contained the last six verses of the book. Not wanting to take the time to obtain another Greek manuscript, Erasmus decided to simply transcribe the missing verses from Latin into Greek—resulting in a form of Revelation that agrees with no extant manuscript today!

While Erasmus corrected most of the typographical mistakes in the second edition of his work, published in 1519, many of the errors inherent in his base Greek text remained. The eighteenth-century NT theologian and textual scholar, John Mill, calculated that the second edition of the text was changed in 400 places—and in his opinion, only 330 of them were for the better. Erasmus continued his attempt to improve the text over three more editions.

It was in his third edition, in 1522, that Erasmus made the unfortunate decision to give into pressure from church clerics who were upset that his Greek text did not include the popular Trinitarian statement found in the Latin Vulgate in 1 John 5:7–8 that states “the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one. And there are three that bear witness in earth.” Known as the Johannine Comma (meaning a short clause), this reading is clearly not original. It does not appear in manuscripts of the



Albrecht Dürer, *Portrait of Erasmus*

Latin Vulgate before the ninth century, and it is found in only eight late-Greek manuscripts, four of which include it merely as a marginal reading.⁵

Erasmus made an additional ninety changes to his Greek text of Revelation in the fourth edition of his work, published in 1527. Surprisingly some of the erroneous readings he had inadvertently invented from translating Latin into Greek in his first edition were left unchanged! Outside of these changes to the Greek text, Erasmus made only ten other changes to the text. A fifth and final edition was published in 1535, just a year before his death. With mere four corrections made to his Greek text, this edition was nearly identical with his earlier edition.

Assuming Erasmus’ Greek Testament was firmly established, his text became the basis upon which later editions continued to be produced in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. His text became so commonly accepted by scholars and readers of the Greek NT that Abraham and Bonaventure Elzevir refer to it in an edition they published in 1633 as “the text [textum] now received

[receptum] by all, in which we have given nothing changed or corrupted." It is from this description, originally written in Latin, that the Greek text published by Erasmus came to be known as the Textus Receptus, that is, "the text received by all."

In spite of this flattering terminology, there was a growing awareness that Erasmus' Greek text was not as well established as many had once thought. In his 1550 edition of the Greek NT, Stephens compared Erasmus' text with fourteen other Greek manuscripts and noted in the margins all the places where he discovered variant readings. The real challenge came in 1707 when John Mill published the results of his comparison of the Textus Receptus with 100 other Greek manuscripts from that same era. The results revealed over 1,000 differences. This news shocked the faith of many. Fearing that the trustworthiness of the Scriptures was itself under attack, a number of Christian apologists rose up to defend Erasmus' Greek text at all costs—an unfortunate decision which lives on in some church circles today. Lest one conclude that Mill's work was somehow unfairly biased against Erasmus, it is important to note that conservative textual scholars who favor the majority readings present in the later manuscripts over the much earlier copies, which are the basis of most modern Bibles, themselves note that there are over 1,800 places in which Erasmus' text differs from the majority reading of the manuscripts in his day.⁶

Despite the obvious shortcomings of Erasmus' Greek text, the spiritual darkness of the day was so dense that even a less than perfect NT still had a powerful influence—and it is an influence that we can and should be thankful for today. While Froben's interest in hurriedly publishing an edition of the Greek NT may have been primarily commercial, Erasmus had a much more worthy goal in mind. This can be seen in the words that appear in the preface of his work:

I totally disagree with those who are unwilling that the Holy Scriptures, trans-

lated into the common tongue, should be read by the unlearned. Christ desires His mysteries to be published abroad as widely as possible. I could wish that even all women should read the Gospel and St Paul's Epistles, and I would that they were translated into all the languages of all Christian people, that they might be read and known not merely by the Scots and the Irish but even by the Turks and the Saracens. I wish that the farm worker might sing parts of them at the plough, that the weaver might hum them at the shuttle, and that the traveler might beguile the weariness of the way by reciting them.⁷

With such a worthy goal in mind, we must not be too critical of the shortcomings of Erasmus' work. After all, Martin Luther was one of the types of individuals whom Erasmus hoped his Greek NT would touch. If Luther would have had to wait until 1520 for the Polyglot Greek NT, history would have certainly been very different.

In a sense we are also indebted to the limitations of Erasmus' Greek NT. Its shortcomings inadvertently led to the desire to produce an edition of the NT that was a more faithful witness of the original—in fact, even more than that, the desire to recover, as far as possible, the text of the original NT itself. This lofty goal led to the search for and discovery of older and better copies of the NT and gave birth to the modern NT discipline known as Textual Criticism and the edition of the Greek NT available to us today.

Problems Facing New Testament Textual Critics Today

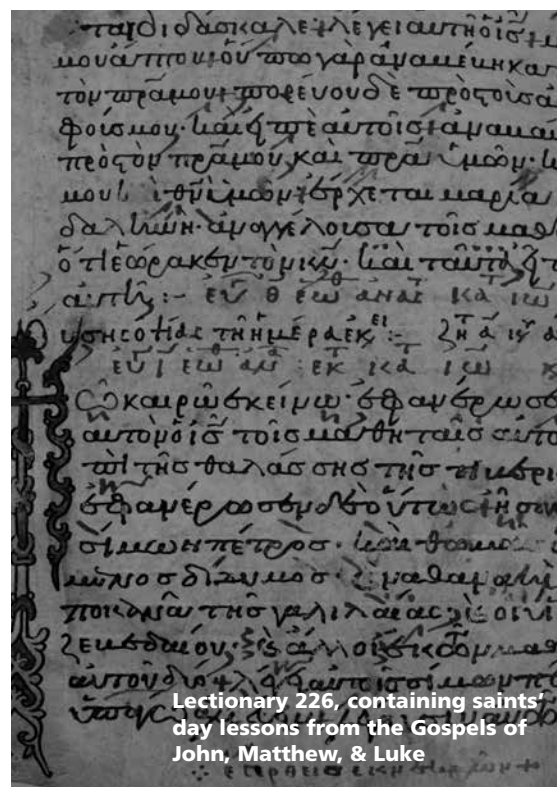
The fundamental challenge Erasmus faced in the publication of his Greek NT was the lack of sufficient Greek manuscripts upon which his text was based. That is not the problem that textual scholars face today. The difficulty today is just the opposite—we have far more copies

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Greek Minuscule 447, Gospel of Matthew



Lectionary 226, containing saints' day lessons from the Gospels of John, Matthew, & Luke

of the NT than any scholar could ever hope to encompass. While Erasmus had a mere half dozen manuscripts of the NT, and those only covered portions of the NT, today there are over 6,000 copies of the NT in Greek alone. The number increases by an additional 2,400 if we include Greek Lectionaries—copies of liturgical readings in which various portions of the NT is cited.

Scholars have divided these primary Greek manuscripts into four basic categories: (1) Minuscules; (2) Lectionaries; (3) Majuscules; and (4) Papyri.

Minuscules

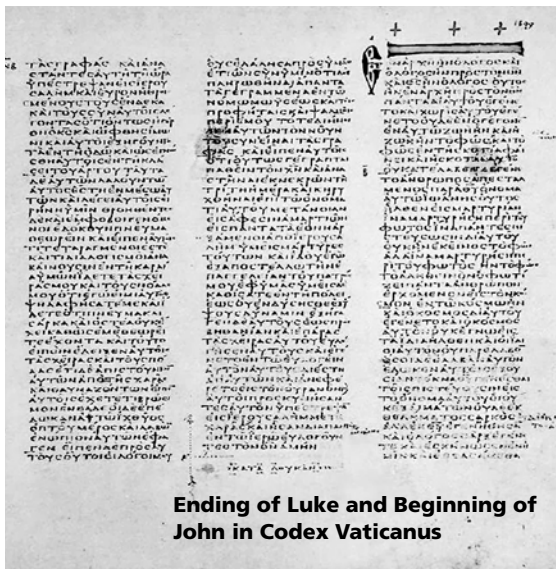
Minuscule manuscripts are copies of the NT written between the ninth and eighteenth centuries in a small cursive script that had arisen to facilitate the ease of writing. All of the manuscripts Erasmus consulted fall into this category. Since these manuscripts are more recent than the others they make up the largest portion of extant NT manuscripts, totalling 2,936 as of November 2017, including two not yet catalogued.⁸ A small number of these include copies of the entire NT, while most contain only por-

tions of it. The number of manuscripts in this category increases by a dozen or so every year.

The vast majority of these manuscripts represent a text that dates back to a form of the text that began to emerge in the fifth century. It is referred to as the Byzantine or the Majority text. Referring to it as the Majority text is somewhat of a misnomer, however, since this text does not appear in any Greek manuscript before the fourth century, and it only became the dominant form of the text around the ninth century. The Majority text appears to represent an attempt in the Church to produce a more standardized form of the text in light of the diversity of readings found in the early forms of the text that had not been as carefully copied as they were later, when professional scribes were used to perform the task.⁹

Lectionaries

The second category of manuscripts is the lectionaries. As the name implies, lectionaries are copies of the NT that were read as part of a liturgical worship service. Dating back as early as the fifth century, these manuscripts tend to be older than the minuscule manuscripts. Their value



Ending of Luke and Beginning of John in Codex Vaticanus

is also limited, however, by the fact that they do not contain continuous portions of the NT Scriptures. They merely contain a random selection of passages drawn together from various books within the NT. Today 2,460 lectionaries are extant—including sixteen not yet cataloged.

Majuscules

Majuscule manuscripts represent an older collection of Greek manuscripts that were copied in larger block letters. The majuscule script was the conventional way of writing in the earliest centuries of the common era up until around

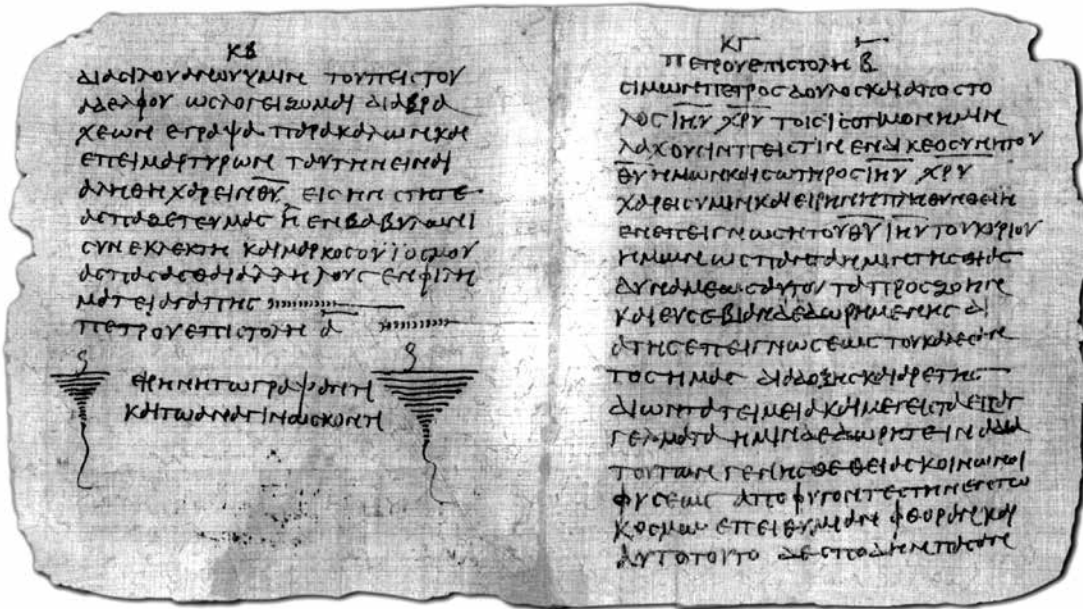
the tenth century. At the moment, there are only 323 of these NT manuscripts that are extant. The oldest and most celebrated of these manuscripts are known as Codex Vaticanus, since it was found in the archives of the Vatican library, and Codex Sinaiticus, which was discovered at the St. Katherin Monastery at the base of Mount Sinai in Egypt. These manuscripts appear to have been copied during the middle of the fourth century, and have led some to conclude they may have been part of—or at least like—the fifty copies of the scriptures Constantine commissioned to be produced for the new churches he proposed to construct in Constantinople around AD 331.¹⁰

Papyri

While the vast majority of the NT manuscripts are over a thousand years removed from the originals, the twentieth century witnessed the discovery in Egypt of a number of papyrus manuscripts that have narrowed the gap between the original autographs of the NT and their copies to only a couple hundred of years and, in some cases, even less than a hundred years.

The manuscript evidence for the NT radically changed in 1897 when two Oxford scholars,

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Papyrus 72, containing fragments of Jude, 1 Peter, and 2 Peter

Today there are a total of 133 papyrus manuscripts—though in many cases the fragments are no larger than the size of a credit card.



Majuscule 0177, Greek-Coptic manuscript containing text of Luke 1:59-73

Bernard Grenfeld and Arthur Hunt, stumbled upon a treasure trove of some forty thousand pieces of ancient documents written on papyrus at the site of an ancient Egyptian town called Oxyrhynchus.¹¹ Classical scholars by training, Grenfeld and Hunt had no real interest in finding ancient Biblical manuscripts. They had gone to Egypt in hopes of discovering copies of Greek classics that had disappeared over the centuries. Instead, they discovered all kinds of non-literary papyri (e.g., personal letters, tax receipts, bills of sale, divorce proceedings), as well as fragments of the oldest copy of the Gospel of Matthew, portions of the Gospel of Luke, John, the writings of Paul, and more. Today there are a total of 133 papyrus manuscripts—

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Before the discovery of these manuscripts, as noted earlier, the oldest evidence for the NT Scriptures dated to one or two manuscripts from the middle of the fourth century. Now we have sixty-two older manuscripts that scholars date to around the turn of the third/fourth centuries or earlier.¹² In fact, one of these manuscripts, referred to as Papyrus 52, contains five verses from John 18 and has been dated to about the year AD 125. Assuming John wrote his gospel around AD 85–90, the discovery of Papyrus 52 potentially narrows the gap between the original and the copies to less than fifty years! Discoveries of this nature are unheard of!

The discovery of these manuscripts has provided scholars with far more evidence for the text of the NT than Erasmus would have ever dreamed. As the number of ancient manuscripts continued to increase over the last several centuries and reached further and further back into the distant past, textual scholars could confidently boast that there was more evidence of the NT than any other ancient writing. They also became quite optimistic that the goal of reconstructing the definitive text of the original NT was easily within their grasp. As it turns out, however, they were too optimistic; the goal of reconstructing the original text of the NT ended up being more elusive than they imagined.

The problem is not that we do not have enough manuscripts. It is the inability to accurately number, evaluate, and classify the thousands of manuscripts that are available. There are simply too many documents to deal with and not enough information about their history. Complicating the situation even more is the simple fact that no two manuscripts of the NT agree with each other in their entirety. Every single manuscript needs to be evaluated individually and then compared to all the others—a project that is well beyond the scope of any one scholar's life and the accumulation of more data than any human could process.

The challenge of accessing the wealth of NT manuscripts and the differences between them has led some in the discipline to question not only whether the goal of recovering the original text of the NT is possible, but even to call into question the reliability of the NT itself. As Porter notes, "the impression sometimes given in discussions of the text of the New Testament is that the text itself is entirely fluid and unstable, and that it was subject to so much variation and change through especially the first two centuries that its very stability is threatened."¹³ This latter sentiment can be seen in the following statement in Bart Ehrman's popular work entitled, *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why*.

It is one thing to say that the originals were inspired, but the reality is that we don't have the originals.... Moreover, the vast majority of Christians for the entire history of the church have not had access to the originals, making their inspiration something of a moot point. Not only do we not have the originals, we don't have the first copies of the originals. We don't even have copies of the copies of the originals, or copies of the copies of the copies of the originals. What we have are copies made later—much later. In most instances, they are copies made many *centuries* later. And these copies all differ from one another, in many thousands of places. ... these copies differ from one another in so many places that we don't even know how many differences there are... Most of these differences are completely immaterial and insignificant. A good portion of them simply show us that the scribes in antiquity could spell no better than most people can today... Even so, what is one to make of all these differences? If one wants to insist that God inspired the very words of scripture, what would be the point if we don't *have* the very words of scripture? In some places...we simply cannot be sure that we have reconstructed the original text accurately. It's a bit hard to know what the words of the Bible mean if we don't even know what the words are!¹⁴

While it is true that some manuscripts were copied more carefully than others, this does not mean that, due to scribal mistakes along the way, we are unable to have a reliable idea about the contents of a form of the text of the NT that is close to the original. A comparison of the established text of the two main text-types, the later Byzantine text and the earlier Alexandrian text, reveals that roughly 90 percent of the

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text points us in the same direction. We might be unsure about the inclusion of an article, conjunction, particle, tense of a verb, or even a word itself, but that does not undermine the message of the text itself—and in the end, that is what matters the most. The presence of these sorts of variants do not pose a major obstacle to claiming that the text of the NT is reliable.¹⁵

What about the remaining ten percent? There are a small number of passages in the NT where the manuscript evidence is divided between different readings and where some scholars are still divided on what should be the earliest form of the text. Some of these passages include the short or longer ending of the Gospel of Mark (Mark 16:8 or 9–20); the pericope of the woman caught in adultery (John 7:53–8:11); Jesus' bloody sweat (Luke 22:44); the angel who supposedly stirred the water in the pool of Bethesda (John 5:3b–4), to name a few of the more notable examples. While decisions about the best readings of these passages have already been incorporated into modern copies of the Bible, whether or not one agrees with those decisions, not a single one of them fundamentally undermines the cardinal teachings of the NT itself. As Porter notes,

Even when all of the possible passages [that] have been brought forward for discussion are taken into account...there remain many other passages that were not changed, corrupted, or otherwise altered. Rather than seeing major theological tendencies in the various textual changes to manuscripts, we should at best probably see theological fine tuning in a few noteworthy passages.¹⁶

Ellen White addressed this question over the possibility of the inclusion of mistakes or errors in the textual history of the Bible over a century ago. Her counsel then is just as relevant today:

I saw that God had especially guarded the Bible, yet when copies of it were

few, learned men had in some instances changed the words, thinking that they were making it more plain, when in reality they were mystifying that which was plain, by causing it to lean to their established views, which were governed by tradition. But I saw that the Word of God, as a whole, is a perfect chain, one portion linking into and explaining another. True seekers for truth need not err; for not only is the Word of God plain and simple in declaring the way of life, but the Holy Spirit is given as a guide in understanding the way to life therein revealed.¹⁷

Ellen White addressed the same issue a few years later in 1888, when she said,

Some look to us gravely and say, "Don't you think there might have been some mistake in the copyist or in the translators?" This is all probable, and the mind that is so narrow that it will hesitate and stumble over this possibility or probability would be just as ready to stumble over the mysteries of the Inspired Word, because their feeble minds cannot see through the purposes of God. Yes, they would just as easily stumble over plain facts that the common mind will accept, and discern the Divine, and to which God's utterance is plain and beautiful, full of marrow and fatness. All the mistakes will not cause trouble to one soul, or cause any feet to stumble, that would not manufacture difficulties from the plainest revealed truth.¹⁸

Conclusion

In comparison to the textual base upon which Erasmus based his Greek NT text, our knowledge of and access to extant NT manuscripts has improved significantly over the last 500 years. While we might wish that Erasmus had been more careful in the way he formulated his

NT, if he would have had access to all the texts available today, his work may never have been published. Yet in spite of all its limitations, on the whole his Greek NT provided a largely reliable witness to the sacred writings entrusted to the early church—a witness that gave birth to the Protestant Reformation and the rediscovery of the gospel. In this process, Erasmus may be likened to the numerous unnamed scribes who faithfully sought to transmit the NT Scriptures to the generations that would come after them, even though they themselves were not always as careful or accurate in the process as we would like. While mistakes were made in the process, those mistakes do not undermine the text itself. Although the work of NT Textual Criticism is far from over, we can be confident that the NT Scriptures are a faithful representation of the original authors. ■



Carl Cosaert is a professor of Biblical Studies at Walla Walla University. He has a passion for helping others understand the wonderful news of what God has done for the human race in Christ. A graduate from Union College in Lincoln, Nebraska, his desire to better understand Scripture has led him to complete two masters degrees and a doctorate in New Testament and Early Christianity at the University of North Carolina. He has been teaching in the School of Theology at Walla Walla University since 2005.

Footnotes:

1. For an informative account of the issues involved with Erasmus' Greek text of the New Testament, see Samuel P. Tregelles, *An Account of the Printed Text of the Greek New Testament* (London: Samuel Bagster and Sons, 1854), 1–29.

2. F. H. A. Scrivener, *A Plain Introduction to the Criticism of the New Testament*, 4th ed., v. 2 (London, 1894), 185.

3. Bruce Metzger and Bart Ehrman, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 145–48.

4. As quoted in Albert Rabil, *Erasmus and the New Testament: The Mind of a Christian Humanist* (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1972), 91–92.

5. This addition included a further 118 changes from the second edition.

6. Daniel B. Wallace, "Majority Text Theory: History, Methods, and Critique," in Ehrman and Holmes, *Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research: Essays on the Status Quaestionis*, ed. Bart D. Ehrman and Michael W. Holmes; SD 46 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 302, n28.

7. Cited in F. F. Bruce, *History of the Bible in English: From the Earliest*

Versions, 3rd ed. (Guildford: Lutterworth, 1979), 29.

8. A current list of NT manuscripts is accessible online at the Virtual New Testament Manuscript room operated by the Institut für Neutestamentliche Textforschung in Münster, Germany (<http://ntvmr.uni-muenster.de/liste>) and at the Center for the Study of New Testament Manuscripts founded by Daniel Wallace (<http://www.csntm.org/Manuscript>).

9. See discussion in Stanley E. Porter, *How We Got the New Testament: Text, Transmission, Translation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 60–61.

10. See discussion in Metzger, *Text of the New Testament*, 15–16.

11. For an intriguing anecdotal guide to the life and letters of this ancient city, see Peter Parsons, *City of the Sharp-Nosed Fish: Greek Lives in Roman Egypt* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2007). For a more scholarly account of the discoveries made at Oxyrhynchus see, A. K. Bowman, et. al., *Oxyrhynchus: A City and Its Texts* (London, Egypt Exploration Society, 2007). A wealth of information concerning the discoveries made at Oxyrhynchus can also be found online at <http://www.papyrology.ox.ac.uk/POxy/> and <http://www.csad.ox.ac.uk/POxy/frame1.htm>.

12. Eldon Epp, "The Papyrus Manuscripts of the NT," 6. Epp, "NT Papyri and the Transmission of the NT," in *Oxyrhynchus: A City and Its Texts*, 315–331.

13. Porter, *How we Got the New Testament*, 24.

14. Bart D. Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 10–11.

15. See the helpful discussion in William Warren, "Who Changed the Text and Why? Probable, Possible, and Unlikely Explanations," in *The Reliability of the New Testament: Bart D. Ehrman and Daniel B. Wallace in Dialogue*, ed. Robert B. Stewart (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 105–123.

16. Porter, *How we Got the New Testament*, 25.

17. Ellen G. White, *Early Writings* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1882), 220–21.

18. Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, vol. 1 (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1958), 16 [MS 16, 1888].