Erasmus' New Testament Translation Method

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ERASMUS' METHOD OF TRANSLATION IN HIS VERSION OF THE NEW TESTAMENT[1]

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A shock wave went through Europe in 1516, when a new Latin translation of the New Testament appeared in Basel. For a thousand years, the authoritative text of the Bible had been that of the Latin Vulgate. Now, the authority of the Vulgate was under attack from a competing Latin version. Its maker was the internationally famous theologian and man of letters, Erasmus of Rotterdam. His new Latin version of the New Testament was to be disseminated throughout Europe in over 250 printed editions. It became the most widely known Latin translation of the New Testament after the Vulgate.

What was Erasmus' purpose in making his new translation? Nothing less than the reform of the Christian world. Everywhere, Erasmus saw the corruption of morals; the decay of faith and theology; the immorality and selfish ambition of those whose duty it was to give leadership in the church and society. Erasmus wished to imbue people with a new ideal. After the revival of letters and learning, it was now time for faith and theology to be reinvigorated. People had to be convinced of the wisdom of Christ. By this, Erasmus understood a practical Christian faith, based on love of humanity and of peace, and stripped, as far as possible, of speculation about the supernatural. Such a mild and ethical piety should be the result of spiritual rebirth for every Christian.

To win Europe for this ideal of Christian gentleness, tolerance and responsibility, Erasmus wished, as far as possible, to encourage people to read the New Testament. But the problem was that there was no translation in existence which conformed to the sixteenth century's conception of good Latin. The Vulgate was composed in the ecclesiastical Latin of the fourth century. But

[1] This article was originally published in Dutch in the journal of the Netherlands Bible Society, vol 4, no. 2, 1985, pp. 3–6).

from about 1350, the Latin employed in influential circles, where it was still a living language, had once again been brought into conformity with an older model, that of the first century B C , and in particular that of the orator and statesman, Cicero If Erasmus wished to make the New Testament accessible to the readers of his time, he had to replace the fourth-century Latin of the Vulgate by the language of the classical period, since that was believed by his contemporaries to be the best Latin The New Testament of Erasmus is in fact a radical adaptation of the Vulgate to the Latin of the first centuries B C and A D , an adaptation for which Erasmus took Greek manuscripts as his basis

For Erasmus, the use of an older and more classical form of Latin was by no means merely a question of style He was concerned, in the first place, with greater clarity and comprehensibility, a more precise grasp of the content, and a better rendering of its meaning The Latin of the Vulgate was not suitable for this Far too much had been tolerated in the Latin of the church It contained words, constructions and expressions from widely separated centuries and linguistic levels, so that it was often impossible to say with certainty just what precisely a given expression meant To be clear, Latin had to be modelled as far as possible on the usage of a small number of recognised good authors For Erasmus these were Cicero, Caesar, Sallust, Livy and Quintilian Words and expressions which did not appear in these authors were best avoided by a sixteenth-century author, if he wished to be understood

A clear understanding and a good rendering of the content of the New Testament were so important for Erasmus that, besides his complete new translation, he also published detailed *Paraphrases* in Latin He was even more attached to this work than to his translation, which he regarded as a high point in his work In the context of Erasmus' ideal of reform, the content and the message of the New Testament were more important than the text, the paraphrase more important than the translation, and the translation more important than the Greek text· only the message could reform and improve humanity

So the most important objectives which Erasmus set himself in his translation of the New Testament were 1 clarity, 2 correctness and purity of Latin in conformity with the usage of the classical authors, and 3 simplicity For the sake of clarity he had, for example, to replace "delibor" in 2 Tim 4 6 (for "spendomai", N E B "my life is being poured out on the altar") by "immolor" ("I am being sacrificed") since "delibor" in classical Latin can mean "I am touched", "something is taken from me", "I am tried, tested", but not "I am sacrificed" [2] For the sake of purity of language, all kinds of grammatical faults, neologisms, words from foreign languages and Greek constructions had to be eliminated, e g "aporiamur" in 2 Cor 4 8, "paternitas" in Eph 3 15, and "videbis eticere" in Matt 7 5, expressions which simply mean nothing For the sake of

[2] For these examples and several others quoted in this article, as well as for the relevant bibliography on the subject, see E Rummel, *Erasmus as a translator of the Classics,* Toronto, 1985, 89–102, and H J de Jonge, "The Character of Erasmus' Translation of the New Testament", *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 14 (1984) 81–88

simplicity, unnecessary variation in the translation of a single word was to be avoided Thus, the Vulgate in Mk 15 10–11, for "high priests" has first "summi sacerdotes" and then "pontifices", an unnecessary display of richness of vocabulary, which merely causes confusion

The reader will have already gathered that for Erasmus the integrity of the Latin, as the language of the translation, was the first requirement of a good translation Before all else, the language into which the translation was made had to be employed purely and idiomatically Otherwise, the message would not be conveyed clearly or in full, and the missionary and evangelistic goal would be missed The whole point of Erasmus' translation was that, in comparison with the Vulgate, it should be better Latin, more genuine Latin, or as he himself said repeatedly "more Latin", *Latinius*

For this reason Erasmus could not accept any method which attempted to make a single word in the translation correspond with one in the original He says himself of this "I hear that some are so superstitious that they do not permit any deviation whatsoever from the words of the evangelists, in translation The result of that is no longer a new version, but perversion Language consists of two things the sounding and written words, and the meaning or sense If it is possible to translate the latter and respect the former, well and good If not, then the translator is going about things the wrong way if he sticks to the individual words but deviates from the meaning If one asserts that every word in the original must be rendered by a single word in the translation, why then does the translator of the Vulgate so often deviate from the words, not infrequently without any cause? If such deviations are permitted, the translator must in any case constantly bear in mind that he renders the meaning faithfully with the most suitable words In any case, the double meaning, the special nuance in the sense of a Greek expression, and the attractions of an idiomatic turn of phrase can often not be adequately rendered "[3] And elsewhere "whoever translates, is regularly obliged to deviate from the details and finer points of the original Let me not be hauled before the judge if each word in the original does not have a word which answers to it in the translation try as you will, it will not succeed If one believes that it is unlawful to deviate from the letter of the original, why did the translator of the Vulgate venture to do so here and there, often without any necessity or advantage? It seems as if he was playing a game, and was completely indifferent on this point But if it is lawful to deviate from the letter – as indeed it is – then do not condemn my new version, if you can establish that I have given a truer rendering of the meaning and intention than the maker of the Vulgate" [4]

Yet Erasmus only allowed the translator a limited freedom That freedom was exclusively allowed in order to attain an idiomatically correct Latin, and to

[3] Erasmus, *Capita argumentorum contra morosos* 1519, nos 28, 29, 68, in Erasmus *Opera Omnia* VI, Leiden, 1705, folios **4 verso and ***1 recto

[4] Erasmus, *Apologia*, ed H Holborn *Ausgewahlte Werke* Munich 1933, 169 and 170

convey as much as possible of the sense of the original Thus the Greek expression "Ti hemin kai soi?" ("What have we to do with you? Matt 8 29) must not be literally translated "Quid nobis et tibi?", as in the Vulgate but by the genuine Latin phrase "Quid tibi rei nobiscum est?" But the translator may only take such liberties insofar as they are necessary for an idiomatically correct translation or one which is adequate to convey the meaning For the rest, according to Erasmus, the display of a varied vocabulary was to be eschewed His criticism of the Vulgate was, *inter alia,* that its maker had demonstrated the richness of his vocabulary in and out of season, by varying the rendering of the same words As long as the receiving language tolerated it in its idiom, and the conveyance of the meaning was not endangered, then in Erasmus' opinion, one word was to be translated by a single equivalent Time and again he rebukes the Vulgate for its wide freedom on this point For example, at Mk 5 37 where "admisit" (he let) is used instead of "dimisit" (he sent away) which is normally used elsewhere, or in Mk 14 72 on which Erasmus remarks "The Vulgate has 'cantavit' [sang] for 'crowed' One and the same Greek verb, 'phonein', is translated by several terms in the Vulgate in v 30 by "vocem dederit" [gave voice], here with 'cantavit' But since this word is repeated in a single narrative, it would be more suitable to repeat the same word in the translation as well The display of a varied vocabulary is out of place here" Erasmus gives elsewhere (Matt 7 6) an excellent reason why such unnecessary variation should be avoided not that the translation is wrong, but in order to prevent the reader being led into needless speculation on the different shades of meaning of the different words used

It is surprising how often Erasmus criticises the Vulgate on the grounds of superfluous or misplaced variations So in John 1 8, where he observes that the Greek word for "light" (phōs) is first translated by "lumen" (v 7) and then by "lux" (v 8) Similarly at Lk 16 10 where he remarks that "in the least" (Greek *en elachisto*) is first translated in the Vulgate by "in minimo", but then in the same verse by "in modico" "But", sighs Erasmus, "the translator has a passion for variation"

Erasmus also sets himself, in his translation, against unnecessary periphrases The Greek "aneleēmon" (uncompassionate) should not be translated as "sine misericordia" (without compassion) but by "immisericors" (uncompassionate) One can regularly catch Erasmus choosing a word in an anxious attempt to reproduce the structure of a Greek compound a naive and pointless exercise

In his translation, Erasmus also tried to improve the Vulgate in other ways, for example by bringing to the fore an exegesis which in his opinion was more correct, by correcting textual corruptions in the Vulgate, and (alas) by replacing good, old readings of the Vulgate by variations based on the Byzantine text But the main point was his attempt to attain greater clarity by replacing the clumsy Late Latin by a clear and idiomatically pure Latin of the classical period The result was a radically revised Vulgate text in which about forty per cent of the words were changed