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The character of Erasmus' translation of the New Testament as reflected in his translation of Hebrews 9

H. J. DE JONGE

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the Latin translation of the New Testament by Erasmus of Rotterdam was the most widely used Latin text of the New Testament next to the Vulgate. Erasmus' translation was printed in about 220 editions and reprints in several countries in Europe.¹ Given the wide circulation of this translation and the important role it has played, it is strange that its nature does not seem to have been subjected to a systematic investigation.² The present contribution is a condensed account of such an investigation, based on an exhaustive analysis of Erasmus' translation of Heb. 9 as published in his fifth and final edition of the New Testament (Basle, 1535). In this edition, thirty years of work found their completion. We shall focus on the result of this work rather than on the eventful development which led to it.

Erasmus' translation must always be considered against the background of the Vulgate (Vg.), not only because it was the first alternative Latin text of the complete N.T. that could rival it but also because Erasmus himself regarded and presented his translation as a "revision and improved edition"³ of the current Latin text, that is, the Vg. Since Erasmus' fifth edition of the N.T. does not contain a text of the Vg.,

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1. Jac. le Long, C. F. Boerner, A. G. Masch, *Bibliotheca sacra*, 3 vols., Halae 1778-1785³, III, 591-608.

2. Useful remarks on the character of Erasmus' translation can be found in Richard Simon, *Histoire critique des versions du Nouveau Testament* (Rotterdam, 1690; rpt., Frankfurt, 1967), chs. 21 and 22, pp. 242-64; Fr. Kaulen, *Geschichte der Vulgata* (Mainz, 1868), pp. 319-22; A. Bludau, *Die beiden ersten Erasmus-Ausgaben des Neuen Testaments und ihre Gegner* (Freiburg im Br., 1902), pp. 33-48; and B. Hall, 'Erasmus: Biblical Scholar and Reformer,' in T. A. Dorey, ed., *Erasmus*, Studies in Latin Literature and Its Influence (London, 1970), pp. 81-113; at pp. 98-100.

3. Thus the title of Erasmus' editions of the N.T.: *Novum Instrumentum omne, diligenter ab Erasmo Roterodamo recognitum et emendatum* (Basle, 1516). In later editions *Instrumentum* was changed to *Testamentum*. As there were no Greek editions of the N.T. that could be "revised and improved" in 1516, the title of Erasmus' editions of the N.T. announced only his Latin translation, not his edition of the Greek.

we took the Vg. text included in his fourth edition (Basle, 1527) as the standard for comparing Erasmus' translation with the Vg.

The most conspicuous and striking feature of Erasmus' translation is its resemblance to the Vg., both in choice of words and in syntactical structure. In Heb. 9, Erasmus' version runs to 470 words; 283 out of these 470 words are identical with those in the Vg. This means that for exactly 60 percent, Erasmus' translation concurs with the Vg. Erasmus also agrees with the Vg. in passages where his Greek text could or even should have occasioned a different translation. In v. 16, for instance, the Vg. gives no adequate translation of *φέρεσθαι*.⁴ The Greek means that it is necessary for a death to be "recorded, reported, officially registered." The Vg. has *intercedat*, which is not correct. But Erasmus retained it. A most interesting case occurs in v. 21, where Erasmus' Greek text as printed in his last three editions (1522, 1527, 1535) has a second *πάντα*, inserted between *αἵματι* and *ὁμοίως*. This second *πάντα* is absent from most, if not all known Greek manuscripts; it is probably a misprint in Erasmus' Greek text. The Vg. has nothing that corresponds to it. But Erasmus ought of course to have translated this second *πάντα*. Yet he does not do so, obviously because he simply followed the Vg., even in this case where his own Greek text differs from it. Other instances of Erasmus' adherence to the Vg. in defiance of his Greek text are his word order *noui testamenti* in v. 15 (contra his Greek *διαθήκης καινῆς*) and his word order *secundum legem . . . purificantur* (Vg. *mundantur*; contra the Byzantine Greek text *καθαρίζεται κατὰ τὸν νόμον*) in v. 22.⁵ In the latter two cases the Vg. is based on a Greek reading different to the one known to Erasmus. Nevertheless he followed the Vg., in defiance of his own Greek text. He also followed the Vg. in translating *μήποτε* in v. 17 by *nondum*⁶ and *θανάτου γενομένου* in v. 15 by *morte intercedente*. It is clear that, in the chapter under consideration, Erasmus' translation is not an independent version, but a revision of the Vg. with the aid of Greek manuscripts. Erasmus changed the Vg. text wherever this seemed to him to be necessary or desirable, but otherwise he left it as it stood. Thus he also retained the traditional translation *testamentum* for *διαθήκη*, al-

4. The reader is requested to have at hand an edition of the *textus receptus* of the N.T., e.g., the one printed with Erasmus' Latin translation in Vol. VI of his *Opera omnia*, ed. J. Clericus (Lugduni Batavorum, 1705); space forbids me to quote extensively.

5. That Erasmus did not regard such matters of word order as insignificant can be concluded from his modifications in v. 3.

6. Cf. v. 8, where, both in the Vg. and Erasmus, *nondum* is the translation of *μήπω*.

though he rightly observed in his Annotations at Heb. 9:16, "διαθήκη Graecis *dispositionem* sonat magis quam *testamentum*."⁷

The only other Latin translation which can have influenced Erasmus is the translation of Paul's Epistles by Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples, published first in 1512 and for the second time in 1515.⁸ In Heb. 9 Erasmus and Lefèvre agree in 48 deviations from the Vg. We quote some examples:

| <i>Vulgate</i> | <i>Lefèvre and Erasmus</i> |
|-----------------|----------------------------|
| v. 1 saeculare | mundanum |
| v. 4 fronduerat | germinaverat |
| v. 8 propalatam | manifestatam |
| v. 9 parabola | similitudo |

However, all the readings in which Erasmus' translation of 1535 agrees with that of Lefèvre as against the Vg. can also be found in Erasmus' earliest Latin translation of the N.T. (1506-9) which, although preserved in manuscript, remained unpublished during Erasmus' lifetime.⁹ The agreements between Erasmus and Lefèvre cannot be explained, therefore, as due to the influence of Lefèvre on Erasmus. But they can all be accounted for as the result, *either* of Erasmus' and Lefèvre's being indebted to the same exegetical sources or traditions—e.g., Mutianus Scholasticus' Latin translation of Chrysostom's commentary on Heb., Ps.-Ambrose's (i.e., Alcuin's) commentary on Hebrews, L. Valla's *Annotationes in N.T.*—or of their following a Greek reading different to the one translated in the Vg., or again, of their adherence to the same translation principles (e.g., avoidance of Greek loan words). All in all, there is no reason to assume that Lefèvre exercised any direct influence on Erasmus' translation.

The changes which Erasmus introduced in the text of the current Latin version (the Vg.) in order to bring about his own "revised and improved" translation, can be classed under seven heads, according to the reason or the purpose for which each alteration was made. Several

7. LB (this is the usual designation of the Leiden edition mentioned in n. 4 above), VI, 1007F.

8. J. Faber Stapulensis, *Contenta. Epistola ad Rhomanos . . . Epistola ad Hebraeos, In hac secunda emissionem obiter relegendo commentarios: castigata sunt nonnulla* (Paris, 1515).

9. See now H. Gibaud, *Un Inédit d'Erasmus: la première version du Nouveau Testament . . . 1506-09* (Angers, 1982). I am grateful to Dr. Gibaud for sending me photostats of the pp. 575-76 (containing Heb. 9) of his book when it had not yet been published.

of Erasmus' changes reflect a mixture of motives. Consequently, there is some overlap between the seven categories of alterations with which I shall deal here in the order of their frequency.

(i) In 39 cases Erasmus' alteration reflects his striving for a grammatically better, more classical (i.e., broadly Ciceronian) Latin. A fine example is his use of *manifestatam* in v. 8, where it replaces *propalatam* of the Vg. In classical Latin the verb *propalare* does not mean 'to manifest,' but 'to stake out (a plant).' Only in post-classical Latin does it mean 'to make public, to throw open.' In the Vg. it occurs only here. Obviously, Erasmus wanted to avoid the dubious term and replaced it by a good classical word.¹⁰ In vv. 22 and 25 Erasmus changed the Semitic turn of phrase *in sanguine* into a simple instrumental ablative *sanguine*, v. 22, and into the good Latin expression *per sanguinem*, v. 25. Another marked improvement is Erasmus' use of the accusative in substitution for the ablative after the preposition of direction *in*: in v. 6 he wrote *in prius . . . tabernaculum* instead of *in priori . . . tabernaculo* of the Vg.

(ii) A second group of alterations, represented by 26 instances, mirrors Erasmus' intention of enhancing the elegance of the Latin translation. A good specimen is his substitution of *reperta* for *inventata* in v. 12. In his *Paraphrases in Elegantias Vallae* Erasmus explains that *invenire* is 'to find either by chance or after searching,' whereas *reperire* is specifically 'to find what one has not looked for.'¹¹ Erasmus' *reperta* in v. 12 is certainly meant to be more accurate and more elegant than *inventata*. Typically Erasmian elegance is to be found in *siquidem*, in lieu of *enim*, in vv. 2 and 16, and in *quatenus* for *quemadmodum* in v. 27. In the *Paraphr. in Eleg. Vallae* Erasmus states that Cicero used *quatenus* for *in quantum*.¹² The Greek of v. 27 has καθ' ὅσον, literally *in quantum*. But Erasmus prefers the Ciceronian synonym *quatenus*. Another example is Erasmus' turn of phrase *a condito mundo* instead of *ab origine mundi* in v. 26. Finally there is that nicety in v. 27, where the Vg. has *statutum est hominibus*. From Valla's *Elegantiae* Erasmus had learned that *statutum est mihi* means *apud me cogitando firmatum est*.¹³ In Heb. 9:27 this cannot be the meaning intended by the author. The

10. Erasmus (and Lefèvre d'Étaples) may have found *manifestatam* in the Old Latin version by Mutianus Scholasticus of Chrysostom's commentary on Hebrews (Migne PG 63, 336).

11. Erasmus, *Opera omnia* (Amsterdam 1969-) cited below as ASD, I, 4, p. 264, lines 564-65, and p. 310, lines 848-50. It does not matter here that the distinction cannot be substantiated from good classical sources.

12. ASD, I, 4, p. 307, line 764.

13. ASD, I, 4, p. 240, lines 911-12.

Greek ἀποκείται means: 'it is in store, in prospect for all people.' Consequently, according to Ciceronian standards, the rendering *statutum est* is impossible. Erasmus corrected it by introducing an elegant verb with the required meaning: *manere*. As he explained in his *Paraphr. in Eleg. Vallae*, *manere* means *futurum esse*.¹⁴ He adds by way of illustration: eternal punishments await those who are guilty. This is a splendid example of how Erasmus' knowledge of the subtleties of Ciceronian Latin enabled and inspired him to add to the elegance of the Latin Bible.

(iii) There are 26 further changes which show that Erasmus also aimed to make the Latin translation correspond more closely to the Greek. Examples are the addition of *Igitur* in v. 1, corresponding to οὖν, the rendering of the plural ἀγνοημάτων in v. 7 by the plural *ignorantiis* instead of *ignorantia*, and the substitution of *quandoquidem* for *alioquin* as a translation of the causal conjunction ἐπεὶ in v. 17.

(iv) In a fourth group of Erasmian changes, once again 26 instances, one perceives Erasmus' attempts at greater clarity of translation. Under this category we have to class his replacement of *modo* by *nunc* in v. 5, and the insertion of the copula in vv. 3 (*erat*) and 20 (*est*), where the copula was missing in the Vg.

(v) In 9 cases Erasmus' translation differs from the Vg. because he believed he could give expression to an improved exegesis. In reality, virtually all these changes are, from an exegetical point of view, deteriorations. This applies, e.g., to Erasmus' replacement of *iustificaciones culturae* in v. 1 by *iustificaciones*, (*sic*: a comma) *cultus*, as if λατρείας were an accusative, not a genitive.

(vi) A sixth group of alterations consists of 7 cases in which Erasmus removed a textual corruption of the Vg. In v. 5, e.g., *quae* in the Vg. is a corruption of *-que*, which renders a Greek δέ. Erasmus removed the source of the corruption by translating δέ as *autem*. He also restored *offer* instead of *offerret* in v. 7, the future of *purgabit* instead of the perfect of *emendavit* in v. 14, and *vestram* instead of *nostram* in the same verse. In all 7 cases Erasmus recovered the original reading of the Vg. with the aid of the Greek text.

(vii) A seventh category of changes is made up of 5 cases in which Erasmus translated a Greek reading different to the one underlying the Vg. Here we are confronted with a very serious drawback of Erasmus' translation. In fact, the Greek manuscripts he used were all of the Byzantine branch of the textual tradition, but the Vg. contains

14. ASD, I, 4, p. 274, lines 872-75.

many readings that are older than and superior to the corresponding Byzantine variants. In revising the Vg. (which remained the basis of Erasmus' version) after Byzantine manuscripts, Erasmus not only confused different branches of the textual tradition, he also replaced good early readings transmitted in the Vg. by inferior ones from the Byzantine text. Remarkably, Erasmus was well aware of this embarrassing effect of his procedure. But since he had undertaken to translate from the Greek whatever his Greek manuscripts might give, he did not feel free to retain readings of the Vg. which in his view were better than the Byzantine variants. "There are readings in which the Vulgate or the Vetus Latina of Ambrose is to be preferred to the Greek manuscripts," Erasmus declared.¹⁵ But "I am translating what the Greek manuscripts give."¹⁶ Unfortunately, Erasmus did not realize that, as he did not make a fresh translation but only a revision of the Vg., he inadvertently retained (as we mentioned above) several typical Vg. readings at places where his Greek manuscripts required another translation. As a result, Erasmus' translation is a monstrous mixture of Vg. and Byzantine elements.

In Heb. 9, Erasmus replaced five times the Vg. reading by a Byzantine reading:

| <i>Vulgate</i> | <i>Erasmus following the Byzantine text</i> |
|--|--|
| v. 9 iuxta quam < καθ' ἣν | in quo < καθ' ὅν |
| v. 13 hircorum . . . tauro- rum < τράγων . . . ταύρων | taurorum . . . hircorum < ταύρων . . . τράγων |
| v. 14 sanctum < ἁγίου | aeternum < αἰωνίου |
| v. 14 nostram < ἡμῶν | vestram < ὑμῶν |
| v. 26 suam < αὐτοῦ | sui-ipsius < αὐτοῦ |

In four out of these five cases the Byzantine reading translated by Erasmus is inferior to that of the Vg. The exception is *aeternum* in v. 14; here the Byzantine reading is original, so that in this case Erasmus had the good fortune to produce a better Latin reading than the Vg.

15. Erasmus, *Apologia*, ed. H. Holborn, *Des. Erasmus Rot., Ausgewählte Werke* (Munich, 1933; reprint, 1964), pp. 170-71; LB VI, fo.**3, lines 2-3.

16. Erasmus, *Apolog. resp. lac. Lop. Stum.*, LB IX, 287C-D: "ubique clamo . . . me vertere quod habetur in Graecorum voluminibus, nec usquequaque mihi probari lectionem illorum." That Erasmus was aware that the readings of the Vg. might in some places be better than those of his Greek manuscripts has rightly been noticed by Bludau, *Die beiden ersten Erasmus-Ausgaben*, p. 41, and W. Schwartz, *Principles and Problems of Biblical Translation* (Cambridge, 1955), p. 143.

This one improvement does not counter-balance, however, the great disadvantage of Erasmus' version, that is, his systematic confusion of Byzantine and Vg. readings. For the rest it should be remembered that the Vg. too is a blend of textual traditions; Erasmus did nothing worse than the makers of the Vg. had done eleven centuries before.

Conclusion

The main feature of Erasmus' translation of Heb. 9 is its dependence on the Vg., to which it owes 60 percent of its text. Its further characteristics are in order of numerical importance:

1. A striving for grammatically more correct, more classical Latin;
2. A striving for more elegant Latin;
3. A striving for closer agreement with the Greek text;
4. A striving for greater clarity and avoidance of ambiguity;
5. Attempts to give an exegetically better translation, without great success;
6. Successful attempts to correct textual corruptions in the Vg.;
7. The adoption of Byzantine readings in substitution for readings of the Vg.

Both from an exegetical and a text-critical viewpoint Erasmus' version is a failure. Only linguistically, by the standards of humanistic Latin, is it an improvement.