

NOTES ON ERASMUS

From page 75 of The Norton History of Modern Europe (six authors, 1971):

Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466-1536) applied . . . critical techniques to the Bible. In his Latin translation of the New Testament, published with his famous edition of the Greek text in 1516, he omitted the verse . . . in the First Epistle of John that is the scriptural basis of the doctrine of the Trinity. Both in the Vulgate (the Latin translation by St. Jerome, c. 340-420, which was authoritative in the Middle Ages and in the Roman Church) and in the King James version, the text of I John 5:7-8 reads as follows: "And there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one. And there are three that bear witness in earth, the spirit, and the water, and the blood: and these three agree in one." Erasmus proved the first of these verses to be apocryphal. He found it in no Greek manuscript. It was missing in several of his oldest Latin manuscripts. He discovered that it was unknown to any Christian writer before the fourth century. He argued, with perfect cogency, that if the text had existed, it would surely have been quoted by orthodox writers in a period when the doctrine of the Trinity was the center of theological controversy; and he concluded—modern scholarship confirms him—that the text must have been interpolated into the New Testament after the Council of Nicaea (325) in order to give biblical sanction to the Trinitarian formula adopted there.

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And from Chapter One of The Cambridge History of the Bible (England, 1963):

. . . Erasmus cannot be considered a great textual critic. He used only a few manuscripts for his edition of the Greek New Testament, and did not correctly evaluate those employed. But his contribution is not to be minimized, for it was he who first made universally accessible any text whatsoever of the New Testament in the original tongue. The first edition came from the press of Froben in 1516. Cardinal Ximenes rendered the same service for the Old Testament in the Complutensian Polyglot published in 1522, though it had been printed earlier by the Jews. These publications disclosed discrepancies from the Vulgate, in some instances not because the original had been misunderstood but because the same text had not been employed

In the case of the New Testament Erasmus shocked contemporaries by omitting the famous proof text for the Trinity in I John 5:7. Erasmus could not find this spurious addition [about 'the Father, the Word, and the Spirit'] in any Greek manuscript, and therefore omitted it. Such was the outcry that he rashly promised to insert the reference to the heavenly witnesses could it be found in any Greek manuscript. One was discovered at Dublin, late and worthless. Erasmus, having sworn to deliver the head of John the Baptist, made the insertion in his second edition in 1519. Happily Luther in his translation did not follow him at this point. But others did, including the King James Version. As late as 1897 the Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office, with the endorsement of Pope Leo XIII, declared the passage to be authentic. Forty years later this decision was reversed. In general it may be said that the 16th century became aware of textual problems but made no great stride toward their solution.