



Chap. v.

The Text of the New Testament

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According to the explicit instructions of King James that the translation of the Bible he ordered be based on manuscripts written in the original languages of the Bible, Hebrew for the Old Testament and Greek for the New Testament, the two committees assigned the task of providing a translation for the New Testament employed the Greek texts of the day. The Greek text that was ultimately used as the basis for the KJV New Testament was one produced by the French Calvinist Theodore de Beza (1519–1605).

FROM BEZA BACK TO ERASMUS

Beza had come from a prominent Catholic family of Vézelay in Burgundy and had studied law at Orleans before settling in Paris, where he began a career as a lawyer in 1539. Though he would earn a reputation as a capable litigator, his real passion was not law but classical literature, and he would eventually earn some notoriety for publishing a collection of Latin poetry in 1548. Shortly after the publication of this work, he fell seriously ill. When he recovered, he took it as a sign of divine providence and abandoned his legal career in favor of ecclesiastical pursuits. Later that same year, he went to Geneva and joined the Calvinist movement and formally renounced the Catholic faith. In 1549 he became a professor of Greek at the academy in Lausanne, and in 1558 Calvin invited him

to return to Geneva so that he could hold a professorship at the newly founded academy there.

During Beza's time as a professor of Greek at Lausanne, he became very interested in the New Testament—so interested, in fact, that he determined to publish his very own edition. First, in 1556 he published an annotated Latin edition of the New Testament, and then in 1565 he added a Greek text. Over the course of the next forty years, Beza would go on to publish nine different editions of the Greek New Testament.¹

The translators of the King James Bible made extensive use of Beza's 1588–89 and 1598 editions. In fact, they relied so heavily on these editions that the KJV New Testament is basically a translation of Beza's Greek New Testament.² In these editions, Beza provided the text of the New Testament in three columns: in the left the Greek, in the middle a Latin translation of the Greek, and in the right the Latin version of Jerome (Vulgate). For his Greek text, Beza was principally indebted to an earlier Greek text produced by Stephanus, who was in turn dependent on Erasmus; consequently, Beza's text was virtually the same as these earlier editions. However, it should be noted that Beza did attempt with his editions to find older Greek manuscripts upon which to base his Greek text. At times Beza did consult the Peshita, a Syriac translation of the Bible,³ for various readings, and he also would consult what has since come to be known as the Codex Bezae.⁴ This ancient codex (book), which came into Beza's possession sometime after 1562, dated to the fifth or sixth century and contained on the left-hand page the Greek text in a single column and on the right-hand page the Latin text in a single column.⁵ Additionally, it also appears that Beza consulted a second ancient manuscript, Codex Claromontanus, which he had found in Clermont, France. This codex, like Codex Bezae, dated to the fifth or sixth century and contained the Pauline epistles written in parallel columns of Greek and Latin.⁶ Unfortunately, however, because these two manuscripts tended to differ in many respects from the generally received Greek text of the time, Beza tended not to include the variant Greek readings in his actual text but merely mentioned the variants in his annotations.⁷ Consequently, some of these variants, which clearly had an ancient pedigree, never made their way into the KJV translation since they were not in Beza's Greek text but were confined to the notes. Therefore, even though Beza would consult

the Syriac Peshita, Codex Bezae, and Codex Claromontanus, his editions of the Greek New Testament were virtually identical to an earlier Greek New Testament published by Stephanus that was based on much later manuscript evidence.

Robert Estienne (1503–59), more commonly known by the Latin form of his name, Stephanus, was a famous Parisian printer and publisher who had a penchant for printing classical and ecclesiastical literature. Besides producing his famous *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae* in 1532, which was used for many subsequent centuries, he also published a number of Bibles.⁸ He published three editions of the Latin Vulgate (1528, 1532, and 1540) and two editions of the Hebrew text of the Old Testament (1539 and 1544–46). After 1544 he turned his attention primarily to publishing Greek texts and during his lifetime published four different editions of the Greek New Testament (1546, 1549, 1550, and 1551). In his first two editions, he relied principally on the earlier Greek New Testament text published by Erasmus but also to a lesser extent upon the text published under the direction of Francisco Ximenes de Cisneros and known as the Complutensian Polyglot. His third edition (1550) was noteworthy because it was the first Greek edition of the New Testament to include a critical apparatus where textual variants and alternative readings for select passages were noted.⁹ His fourth and final version (1551), the one which Beza principally relied on for his editions of the Greek New Testament, was also very noteworthy because, for the first time, he introduced verse division into the New Testament. The versification introduced by Stephanus was subsequently followed and applied in the KJV New Testament, and it is used in virtually all Bibles today.¹⁰

As Stephanus's New Testament editions relied heavily on the Greek New Testament produced by Erasmus, and to a lesser extent an edition produced under Francisco Ximenes de Cisneros, it is worthwhile to discuss these two editions. However, of these two earlier editions, Erasmus's is by far the most important, at least for the purposes of the present study. It essentially formed the basis of almost all subsequent Greek New Testaments published in the sixteenth century, because it was the first widely used Greek New Testament text to appear after the invention of the printing press.¹¹ Consequently, the Greek New Testament text underlying the

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King James Bible is basically the Greek text produced by Erasmus, even though it came to the KJV translators via Stephanus and Beza.

Desiderius Erasmus (1466–1536), the famous Dutch humanist from Rotterdam, was ordained a Catholic priest in 1492. Shortly thereafter, he decided to pursue a doctorate in theology and so in 1495 went to the University of Paris. During the course of his studies in Paris, he determined to seriously take up the study of ancient Greek, since a substantial portion of early Christian literature was written in Greek. As he became more immersed in the study of ancient Greek, he felt he could best pursue his interests elsewhere. So he left Paris in 1499 without finishing his doctorate and eventually enrolled at Cambridge. After only one year he left, again without obtaining his doctorate, and moved to Italy to pursue



Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466–1536), the great humanist scholar, whose Greek New Testament, first published in 1516 and later revised by Stephanus and Beza, became Greek text that underlies KJV New Testament; National Portrait Gallery, London, by Hans Holbein the Younger, 1523.

his study of ancient Greek. At the time, Italy was the real center of Greek learning because a number of scholars had left Constantinople when it had fallen into Muslim hands in 1453 and had relocated to Italy. Erasmus would receive his doctorate at the University of Turin in 1506.

In 1511 Erasmus returned to Cambridge, where he would hold a professorship in Greek. This lasted only about three years, however, because the promised financial support for this position never fully materialized. In the summer of 1514, Erasmus left for Basel, Switzerland, where he was approached by a well-known printer named Johannes Froben about the possibility of producing a Greek New Testament.¹² Erasmus did not immediately agree to the project and returned to Cambridge in the spring of 1515. However, when a mutual friend, Beatus Rhenanus, approached Erasmus on behalf of Froben with a lucrative promise that if he should produce a text, Froben would pay him handsomely, Erasmus readily agreed.¹³ By the summer, Erasmus was back in Basel, and work was promptly undertaken on the project.

Erasmus hoped that there might be some readily available manuscripts of the Greek New Testament in Basel that he could use. However, the only manuscripts he could find required some degree of correcting, and there was no one manuscript that contained the entire New Testament. In total, Erasmus used seven different manuscripts to create his edition of the New Testament, and all but one of them were owned by the Dominican Library in Basel.¹⁴ The manuscripts were all minuscules, meaning that they were written in the cursive, lowercase Greek script common in medieval manuscripts.

The manuscripts relied on by Erasmus may be outlined as follows:¹⁵

1. Codex 1^{cap}, a minuscule containing the entire New Testament except for Revelation, dated to about the twelfth century.
2. Codex 1^r, a minuscule containing the book of Revelation except for the last 6 verses (Revelation 22:16–21), dated to the twelfth century.
3. Codex 2^c, a minuscule containing the Gospels, dated to the twelfth century.
4. Codex 2^{ap}, a minuscule containing Acts and the Epistles, dated to the twelfth century or later.

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5. Codex 4^{ap}, a minuscule containing Acts and the Epistles, dated to the fifteenth century.
6. Codex 7^p, a minuscule containing the Pauline Epistles, dated to the eleventh century.
7. Codex 817^e, a minuscule containing the Gospels, dated to the fifteenth century.

In total, then, Erasmus had three manuscripts of the Gospels and Acts, four manuscripts of the epistles, and one manuscript of Revelation. Since Erasmus was in such a hurry, he simply submitted Codex 2^e and 2^{ap} to the printer, compared these two manuscripts with the others, and wrote in any corrections or emendations for the printer in the margins or between the lines of the two manuscripts.

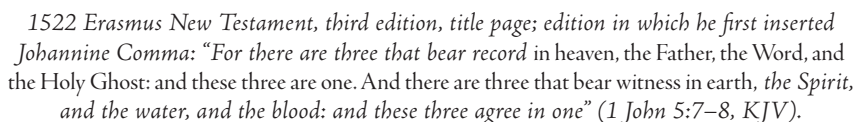
Remarkably, it took Erasmus only a couple of months to finish his edition, and by October 1515 the manuscript was headed to the press. Part of the reason for the extreme haste with which the project was undertaken was that the printer, Johannes Froben, was aware that another version of the Greek New Testament, the Complutensian Polyglot, was also going to be published, and he wanted to ensure that his version came out first. The production of the Complutensian Polyglot was overseen by cardinal primate of Spain Francisco Ximenes de Cisneros (1436–1517).¹⁶ It was printed in 1514, but it was not sanctioned by the pope until 1520 and consequently was not published and widely circulated until 1522. Since Erasmus's copy was the first printed Greek New Testament on the market, it became the standard text.

By March 1516 the first edition of Erasmus's Greek New Testament was printed; it was entitled *Novum Instrumentum Omne* (The Complete New Testament).¹⁷ The book was a Greek–Latin diglot printed in two columns per page with the Greek text always in the left-hand column and the Latin text always in the right-hand column. The annotations were printed following the text.¹⁸ Owing to the extreme haste with which the first edition of Erasmus's Greek New Testament was produced and printed, it was loaded with various typographical errors literally numbering in the hundreds. Besides the typographical errors, however, there were other serious problems with the first edition. These errors arose directly from Erasmus's haste and use of inferior (late) biblical manuscripts. For example, the manuscript that

he relied on for the book of Revelation lacked the final page upon which were written the last six verses (Revelation 22:16–21). To remedy this problem, Erasmus simply used the Latin Vulgate and translated these verses back into Greek. But the problem with the translation supplied by Erasmus was that it was different in many respects from earlier Greek texts and subsequently had the effect of altering and changing certain Greek readings. Elsewhere, when Erasmus ran into difficulties with these Greek manuscripts, he simply provided his own Greek translation based on the Latin text and subsequently introduced a number of Greek variants into the New Testament that were previously unattested in the Greek.¹⁹

In 1519 a second edition was produced²⁰ in which a number of typographical emendations were made, and again in 1522 a third edition was published in which a few substantive changes were made. Perhaps the most significant change between the second and third editions was the insertion of what has come to be known as the “Johannine Comma,” comprising 1 John 5:7b–8a: “*7*For there are three that bear record *in* heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one. *8*And there are three that bear witness in earth, *b*the Spirit, and the water, and the blood: and these three agree in one” (emphasis added). In the first and second editions of Erasmus’s Greek New Testament, he did not include either verse 7b or 8a, because they were not found in any Greek manuscript of the New Testament he had consulted. However, he came under increasing fire from a number of ecclesiastical quarters because these verses were long thought to be important Trinitarian proof texts. Erasmus therefore remarked that if he could find them in a single Greek manuscript, he would include them in a subsequent edition. A Greek manuscript suddenly appeared with these verses, so he included them in his third edition. Scholars have long recognized that this particular manuscript was produced for the very purpose of including these verses.²¹ It is evident that verses 7b and 8a were not original but were latter added to 1 John to promote Trinitarian theology.²²

By the time of Erasmus’s fourth edition in 1527, which proved to be the definitive edition (although a fifth and final edition came out in 1535), some of the more serious text-critical problems with his manuscript were finally addressed. By this time the Complutensian Polyglot was available, and so Erasmus judiciously made use of it and corrected certain readings



that he had either created via his Latin-to-Greek translations or were the result of the generally inferior nature of the manuscripts he had consulted in Basel to create his Greek text. Notwithstanding the many improvements that were made in the fourth edition, a number of problems still persisted, but because Erasmus's Greek New Testament was the first widely accessible copy of the New Testament, it gained natural popularity that gave it a status of prominence. In fact, the Greek text of Erasmus would eventually become the standard Greek text of the New Testament for the next two hundred years because it was largely transmitted by Stephanus and Beza. In a 1633 edition of the Greek New Testament produced by two Dutch printers, Bonaventure and Abraham Elzevir, which was basically a reprint of Beza's 1565 edition, they made the following remark in the preface: *Textum ergo habes, nunc ab omnibus receptum, in quo nihil immutatum aut corruptum damus* ("Therefore you have [dear reader] the text, now received by all, in which we give nothing changed or corrupted").²³ From this remark, the Greek text produced by the Elzevirs, which came via Erasmus to Stephanus and then to Beza, came to be regarded for many centuries as the *Textus Receptus*, the received or standard text of the New Testament.

CONCLUSION

While the King James Bible effectively set the standard for all subsequent English translations of the Bible and its New Testament translation was regarded with special reverence for many years, it has come under increasing criticism in the past century. The central criticism leveled at the King James New Testament has not so much to do with the actual English translation but rather with the textual basis of the Greek subtext. The textual basis for the King James New Testament is essentially a handful of late Greek manuscripts that range in date from the twelfth to the fifteenth century and that were known to Erasmus during the time he put together his Greek New Testament in Basel. Over the course of the last four hundred years, a number of Greek manuscripts, as well as fragments of other manuscripts, have been discovered that predate by over one thousand years the "Erasmian" text used by the translators of the King James New Testament. In fact, complete copies of the Greek New Testament have been discovered that date to the fourth century (i.e., Codex Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus).²⁴ One of the most significant contributions of

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these “newly” discovered texts is that they sometimes contain readings for various verses that differ markedly from those found in the King James Version.²⁵ These textual variants, as they are called, are significant because in many cases it is likely they more accurately represent the original text of the New Testament. Consequently, the King James New Testament, which was produced long before many of these manuscripts came to light, contains some readings that are clearly secondary interpolations not attested in the oldest and most reliable New Testament manuscripts. While this is clearly a shortcoming of the King James New Testament, these textual discrepancies do not substantially affect more than twenty to thirty verses in the entire New Testament, and in only about five or six of them do these variants significantly alter the meaning of a verse or passage. Therefore, the shortcomings of the King James New Testament should not be exaggerated. All the same, neither should they be disregarded and ignored.²⁶

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NOTES

1. A tenth and final edition of Beza's Greek New Testament was published posthumously in 1611. Only four of the editions published by Beza (1565, 1582, 1588–89, and 1598) were independent editions, as the others were simply smaller reprints. See Bruce Metzger and Bart Ehrman, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 151–52.
2. See F. H. A. Scrivner, ed., *The New Testament in Greek: According to the Text Followed in the Authorised Version together with the Variations adopted in the Revised Version* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1908), vii.
3. In 1569 a Syriac translation of the New Testament was first published by Emmanuel Tremellius. In Beza's subsequent editions (post-1569), he consulted the Syriac. On Tremellius's Syriac New Testament, see Kenneth Austin, *From Judaism to Calvinism: The Life and Writings of Immanuel Tremellius* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2007), 125–44.
4. This codex was subsequently named after Beza. The reason for the different spelling, Bezae instead of Beza, is that it reflects the Latin genitive case, which typically

- expresses possession. Codex Bezae literally means “Codex of Beza.” In 1581 Beza donated this Bible to Cambridge University, where it remains to this day.
5. This codex contains most of the books in the New Testament, with the exception of Matthew 1, 6–9, 27; Mark 16; John 1–3; Acts 8–10; 22–28; Romans 1; James; 1 and 2 Peter; 1, 2, and 3 John; Jude; and Revelation. It is believed that prior to coming into Beza’s hands, this codex had come from Lyon, France. On the history of Codex Bezae, see David C. Parker, *Codex Bezae: An Early Christian Manuscript and Its Text* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 46–48.
 6. This codex contains the Pauline Epistles. The first seven verses of Romans (in Greek) are missing due to a lacuna. Additionally, Romans 1:27–30 and 1 Corinthians 14:13–22 are the additions of later hands. The ordering of the Pauline epistles is standard, and Hebrews is placed after Philemon. On this codex, see Kurt Aland and Barbara Aland, *The Text of the New Testament: An Introduction to the Critical Editions and to the Theory and Practice of Modern Textual Criticism*, trans. Erroll F. Rhodes (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 110.
 7. Metzger and Ehrman, *Text of the New Testament*, 151.
 8. For an in-depth biographical sketch of Stephanus, see Elizabeth Armstrong, *Robert Estienne, Royal Printer: An Historical Study of the Elder Stephanus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954).
 9. Since his critical apparatus contained a number of textual variants, it created a stir in Paris and provoked a series of severe attacks from the Sorbonne. To escape the hostilities, the following year (1551) he moved to Geneva, where he would later become a Calvinist.
 10. The chapter divisions as we know them today were first introduced in the thirteenth century by Stephen Langton.
 11. There are a couple of reasons why it took over half a century after the invention of the printing press in the middle of the fifteenth century for a printed edition of the Greek New Testament to appear. First, since Latin was the official ecclesiastical language of the church and Jerome’s Vulgate was regarded as *the* biblical text, Greek was initially seen as secondary in importance. Second, Greek fonts were more difficult to manufacture than Latin fonts, especially since Greek required a number of diacritical marks. See Metzger and Ehrman, *Text of the New Testament*, 137–38.
 12. There may have been earlier negotiations between Froben and Erasmus about producing a Greek edition of the New Testament, but this is not certain. See Metzger and Ehrman, *Text of the New Testament*, 142.
 13. Metzger and Ehrman, *Text of the New Testament*, 142.
 14. One manuscript, which contained Acts and the Pauline letters (Codex 2^{ap}), was obtained from the family of Johann Amerbach of Basel. See William W. Combs, “Erasmus and the *Textus Receptus*,” *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 1 (Spring 1996): 45.
 15. On these manuscripts, see Metzger and Ehrman, *Text of the New Testament*, 142–44; P. Y. Brandt, “Manuscripts grecs utilisés par Erasme pour son édition de *Novum Instrumentum* de 1516,” *Theologische Zeitschrift* 54 (1998): 120–24; Aland and Aland, *Text of the New Testament*, 4–6; C. C. Tarelli, “Erasmus’s Manuscripts of the

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- Gospels,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 44 (1943): 155–62. Codex 1^{cap} simply means that this codex contained *e* (Gospels [= evangelists]), *a* (Acts), *p* (Pauline Letters).
16. Though Francisco Ximes de Cisneros originally conceived of the project and played a critical role in its publication, there were numerous other scholars who helped out. When the project was completed, it occupied six volumes. The first four volumes covered the Old Testament, the fifth volume the New Testament, and the sixth and final volume contained various Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek dictionaries and study aids. While the fifth volume was completed and printed in 1514, its publication and dissemination had to wait until 1517, when the four volumes of the Old Testament were completed. As a set, its publication was further delayed until Pope Leo X sanctioned it, which he did in 1520. Thus it did not begin to be distributed very widely before 1522. The name of this Bible is derived from the Latin name of the town Alcalá (Latin: *Complutum*) where it was printed. The word *polyglot* is of Greek origin and simply refers to any book that contains a side-by-side version of different languages of the same text. For the Old Testament, the pages contained the Hebrew text along with Jerome’s Latin Vulgate and the Greek Septuagint in three parallel columns. For the New Testament, there were simply the Greek and Latin texts in parallel columns. For a more detailed treatment of this Bible, see Julián Martín Abad, “The Printing Press at Alcalá de Henares, The Complutensian Polyglot Bible,” in *The Bible as Book: The First Printed Editions*, ed. Kimberly Van Kampen and Paul Saeger (New Castle, DE: Oak Knoll Press, 1999), 101–18; Metzger and Ehrman, *The Text of the New Testament*, 138–42.
 17. Erasmus chose the phrase *Novum Instrumentum* instead of *Novum Testamentum* because he believed that the word *Instrumentum* better conveyed the idea of a decision put down in writing than did the word *Testamentum*, which “could also mean an agreement without a written record.” See H. J. de Jonge, “*Novum Testamentum a nobis versum*: The essence of Erasmus’ Edition of the New Testament,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 35 (1984): 396. In the second edition of Erasmus’s Greek New Testament, he would change the title to *Novum Testamentum*.
 18. De Jonge, “*Novum Testamentum a nobis versum*,” 395, describes the first edition as follows: “The Latin and Greek texts of the Gospels and Acts fill pages 1–322, the texts of the Epistles and Revelation pages 323–4 and a second series of pages numbered from 1 to 224. Immediately after this, the *Annotationes* fill pages 225–675.” It was designed more as a new Latin translation than a Greek one, where the Greek came to be used to support his various Latin readings.
 19. Metzger and Ehrman, *Text of the New Testament*, 145. In 1518 the Venetian printer Aldus Manutius issued a Greek New Testament that was essentially a copy of Erasmus’s first edition. In fact, it so closely copied Erasmus’s text that many of the typographical errors were simply reprinted. Somewhat ironically, in later years Erasmus would not infrequently defend certain of his readings by reference to the Aldine version without realizing that this version was simply a recopy of his own text.
 20. All told, between the first and second editions about 3,300 copies were produced. See Metzger and Ehrman, *Text of the New Testament*, 145. When Luther issued his

German translation of the New Testament in 1522, he relied principally on Erasmus's 1519 edition.

21. This manuscript, known today as Codex Montfortianus, or by Erasmus as Codex Britiannicus, dates to the early sixteenth century. It contains the entire Greek New Testament written in miniscule script with one column per page. It has long been recognized that this manuscript was basically produced to induce Erasmus to include the Johannine Comma, since there was now a Greek manuscript that contained these verses. It is currently housed at Trinity College in Dublin. See Aland and Aland, *Text of the New Testament*, 129.
22. On the dubious nature of the Johannine Comma, see Bruce Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1994), 647–49; Michael Welte, “Earliest Printed Editions of the Greek New Testament,” in Van Kampen and Saenger, *Bible as Book*, 120–21.
23. Quoted in Metzger and Ehrman, *Text of the New Testament*, 152.
24. Codex Vaticanus is a fourth-century codex that contains complete copies of all the books in the New Testament with the exception of part of the Epistle to the Hebrews (chaps. 9–13), all the Pastoral Epistles (1 and 2 Timothy, Titus), and Revelation. It also contained the Septuagint. It is written with capital Greek letters (uncial script) and is laid out with three columns of text per page. Codex Sinaiticus is a fourth-century codex that contains complete copies of every book in the New Testament. It also contained the Epistle of Barnabas and the Shepherd of Hermas along with the Septuagint. Along with Codex Vaticanus, Codex Sinaiticus may have been one of the fifty Bibles commissioned by Constantine in the year AD 331 and produced under the direction of Eusebius of Caesarea (Eusebius, *Vit. Const.* 4.36).
25. It may be noted, however, that Erasmus might have known about Codex Vaticanus even though he did not use it in any substantial way in the making of his Greek New Testament. In his *Annotationes in Novum Testamentum*, when defending his omission of the Johannine Comma (1 John 5:7b–8a) in the first two editions of his Greek New Testament, Erasmus reports that he had the librarian of the Vatican consult a very ancient copy of the Greek New Testament and that it did not contain these verses: “To this Paolo Bombasio, a learned and blameless man, at my enquiry described this passage [1 John 5:7–8] to me word for word from a very old codex from the Vatican library, in which it does not have the testimony ‘of the father, word, and spirit.’ If anyone is impressed by age, the book was very ancient; if by the authority of the Pope, this testimony was sought from his library.” Translation of the Latin text is my own. Latin text taken from Anne Reeve and M. A. Screech, eds., *Erasmus’ Annotations on the New Testament: Galatians to the Apocalypse* (Leiden, Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1993), 770.
26. For this subject, see Lincoln H. Blumell, “A Text-Critical Comparison of the King James New Testament with Certain Modern Translations,” in *Studies in the Bible and Antiquity* 3 (2011).