

Thomas P. Scheck, *Erasmus's Life of Origen: A New Annotated Translation of the Prefaces to Erasmus of Rotterdam's Edition of Origen's Writings (1536)* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2016), 234 pp.

While the title of Thomas P. Scheck's *Erasmus's Life of Origen: A New Annotated Translation of the Prefaces to Erasmus of Rotterdam's Edition of Origen's Writings (1536)* may suggest that the volume is only the first English translation of Erasmus's *Life of Origen*, the whole work is, in fact, not only such an edition, but also a significant, revisionist secondary work. As such, it seeks to help a reader "understand and appreciate Erasmus's edition of Origen" while arguing that "Erasmus's lifelong exertions in advancing biblical and patristic scholarship demonstrate the sincerity, vitality, and orthodoxy of his program for the renewal of Catholic theology in the first half of the sixteenth century" (xxx, xxix). This later claim seeks to reconsider the common view of Erasmus as an extraordinary and brash scholar who discarded scholasticism and maintained some heterodox theological opinions while concurrently articulating and promoting new methods of study and education. Scheck's book deserves a hearing across multiple disciplines, such as literary studies, intellectual history, and Catholic theology, as he reveals the errors, distortions, and exaggerations in the common view. Because of the pervasiveness of the common view, Scheck designs the book for any "educated but non-specialist general reader," but, in a particular way, he addresses an audience of Catholic theologians and historians of the Church, especially of the Renaissance and Reformation period.

The book is organized into a preface, an introduction, five chapters, and an appendix. The fifth chapter is the translation of Erasmus's preface to Origen's writings, a work first published posthumously in 1536. Let me offer a brief synopsis of the prefatory material, each chapter, and the appendix before offering a few criticisms of this fine work and then drawing further conclusions.

When Erasmus is making a ground-breaking claim in his Preface that the "Commentary on Job," previously attributed to

Origen, is not Origen's work, he critiques that commentary's own preface as failing to build "a road to understanding the work" (165). Scheck's preface, however, paves the way for the meta-purpose of his book by unpacking the many ways that Erasmus's reputation has been shaped by misrepresentations of his character and motives, and by highlighting a handful of recent scholars, especially Henri de Lubac, who have begun to challenge the received account of Erasmus. The introduction then outlines the audiences the book seeks and its more particular aims, delineated above, while summarizing the parts of the book.

Chapter one provides an account of "Erasmus's program for theological renewal," drawing primarily on his *Ratio Verae Theologiae* (1518). Scheck's analyses begin with the familiar parts of Erasmus's program, its return to the Bible and the patristics, and its insistence on knowledge of the original languages and on the use of philology. However, Scheck also highlights the work's pastoral concern for the faithful and its element of Christocentric piety as it encourages "prayer and contemplative study of scripture" (9, 16). Moreover, he gives a nuanced reading of the relation of Erasmus's method to scholasticism and shows that Erasmus's critiques of scholasticism do not seek to eliminate it but to purify it, and to introduce the best scholastic insights into his method of biblical exegesis. The chapter then shows how Erasmus's orthodox position was supported by Thomas More and John Fisher while being critiqued (and sometimes unfairly represented) by Catholic schoolmen, Luther, and Melanchthon. The chapter concludes by treating two more recent Catholic critics of Erasmus and showing their critiques to be inaccurate and unfair.

The second chapter pivots from Erasmus and the sixteenth century to a "survey [of] the life, writings, and exegetical method of Origen of Alexandria (185–254)" (43). The brief critical biography and the account of Origen's writings help prepare readers to better judge the *vita* in Erasmus's Preface in chapter five, as does the account of how Origen was transmitted, especially via Rufinus and Jerome, in the Latin west. Scheck then turns to Origen's allegorical method and reveals that it is based in the historical while also concerning itself with the moral. The chapter does a fine job of showing Erasmus's comprehension of and sympathy for Origen's hermeneutics; it helpfully distinguishes not only between Origen's different types of writings, but also between differences within a type, showing—for example—the different ways he approaches the different parts of the scriptures: the Old Testament, the Gospels, and the Pauline epistles. Lastly, the chapter seeks to contextualize Origen's heretical views by revealing his good intentions and lack of obstinacy while writing well before the Council of Nicaea (325).

Having provided a suitable introduction to Origen in chapter two, in chapter three, Scheck gives a broad-strokes account of "Origen's legacy in the Catholic exegetical tradition" up to the time of Erasmus

(71). He refutes claims that Origen was little known until Pico della Mirandola. These arguments overlook the powerful influence of Origen on the Cappadocian fathers and on the early writings of Jerome. Jerome's subsequent treatment of Origen during the Origenist controversy of the 390s and the proclamation of Origen as a heretic by Justinian, during the Fifth Council of Constantinople (543), did indeed lead to the destruction of many of his works. Nevertheless, he continued to be cited in the medieval era by figures like Cassiodorus, Notker the Stammerer, Peter Abelard, Sedulius Scottus, Augustinus Favaroni of Rome, and William of St Thierry. Origen's influence continued into the early modern period, and he was praised by Ficino. The first printed edition of Origen was published in 1481, and many further editions followed, including Jacques Merlin's 1512 edition in which he, like Pico before him in 1487, offered a complex defense of Origen and his theological opinions.

All of the information of chapter three sets up the final chapter before Scheck's translation. This fourth chapter is dedicated to "Erasmus's reception of Origen" (99) and it unpacks his "irenic approach to Origen." Erasmus found a great deal of insightful exegesis from a holy man in Origen's writings without assenting to or promoting his errors. Throughout his corpus, Erasmus admits that Origen errs both in certain uses of "human philosophy" and in "excessive allegorizing" (104). However, Erasmus also notes Origen's writing happened in a very early period before some doctrinal understandings were developed and that his work was of good will and had an investigative rather than dogmatic posture. (In his Preface, Erasmus will draw a contrast between Origen's attitude and that of Tertullian and Arius.) All told, Scheck reveals that Erasmus believes that Origen deserves gratitude more than criticism. The chapter shows that in the Preface itself, Erasmus's irenic approach can be distinguished from Merlin's. Even while Erasmus does not explicitly retrace his view on Origen's doctrinal errors in the Preface, he is clear that Origen is not completely orthodox, even while being "worthy of emulation" (112). Scheck's preview of the Preface also unpacks Erasmus's many critical insights, his unfair treatment of Rufinus, and the many moments in which the reader can glimpse particularities or enactments of Erasmus's own method and spirituality through what he is saying about Origen.

The final chapter provides Scheck's translation of Erasmus's Preface to his edition of Origen's writings. A reader who works through the introductory chapters will feel well prepared to be an astute reader of the text itself, and the translation is rich in annotations that offer

further insights. The translation is crisp and easy to read, but Scheck's many annotations can conceal this strength of the translation. Perhaps it is obvious that the translation is a highlight of the work. English-language scholars and students certainly owe their gratitude to Scheck for providing a translation of a text that has never before been translated. Perhaps the opening words of Richard L. DeMolen's foreword capture this sentiment of gratitude well: "At long last!"

The book's lengthy appendix returns explicitly to the preface's larger concern with the distorted reputation of Erasmus's character and motives by providing a detailed account of Erasmus's reception across the sixteenth century. While Scheck himself points to much work that still needs to be done to understand Erasmus's reception more fully, he is again persuasive in showing how certain figures (some knowingly and others through ignorance) began or perpetuated untruths about Erasmus.

While Scheck has provided an excellent book, I want to offer three small critiques. First of all, while I have stated more than once that Scheck is persuasive in his chief aim, revealing the distortions in those who mistake Erasmus for a "proto-modernist," "free-thinking Protestant liberal," or "Voltairean skeptic and mocker of religion" (xvi), he at moments pushes further, suggesting the saintliness of Erasmus (according to the canons of the Catholic Church). In this claim, he is less than fully persuasive. Scheck largely takes care to distinguish this claim as more of a speculation (xxviii), but even though the Preface was written at the very end of Erasmus's life, it would take a book-length treatment that surveyed all of Erasmus's life and works to make truly good on such an argument, especially as the figure whose holiness is in question was caught up in reform movements and Reformation debates, and given both to irenicism and acerbic impatience (admittedly, as other saints have also been). To make up for the inevitable lack of breadth required to make good on this thesis, Scheck often relies on the authority of de Lubac and his capacious *Exégèse médiévale*. While I am happy to grant that de Lubac should be thought of as an authority, he is not an infallible one and, therefore, the frequent uses of this great ressourcement thinker prove insufficient. Secondly, the text can be a bit repetitive. This is almost inevitable in a corrective argument, but Scheck takes this weakness and lessens the flaw by frequently gesturing directly towards other related moments in the book. Lastly, for all the merits of the translation itself, this reader would have liked to have the Latin and the English side-by-side. Perhaps Scheck wanted to follow the custom of omitting the Latin as is done in the University of Toronto Press's ongoing Collected Works of Erasmus project, but future scholars would have been especially well-served by having the robust annotations (which take up around

a quarter of each page) enriched with a dual-language edition. The translation and notes currently take up forty-seven pages, and even with the Latin, the book would have remained under 300 pages, which is a manageable length.

In spite of these small criticisms, Scheck's secondary criticism is compelling and his translation is needed. Thomas Scheck has done an excellent service for all those who study Erasmus, the early modern period, and the Reformation. As with all recent Catholic University of America Press books, Scheck's is a handsome volume; it has a suitable cover, helpful charts, an admiring foreword, a well-organized bibliography, and a usable index. It becomes clear across the work that Scheck himself is a prolific author and translator, and he gestures more than once toward areas in need of further study. Let us hope that he will turn his critical powers to Erasmus again, perhaps to take up his speculation on the Renaissance scholar's saintliness or to explore other areas that he suggests need further study. In the meantime, Scheck has offered an excellent treatment of Erasmus that has the potential to reshape for the better thinking about Erasmus and the whole of the trans-Alpine humanist movement of which he was a part.

Benjamin V. Beier, Hillsdale College, Michigan, USA

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