Erasmus had strong views about how to read texts, as he did about many other things, from warfare to justice. But he never went to war or administered justice, and he spent his life arguing about and practising interpretation. At the start of his literary career, he addressed the best way to read Scripture in the *Enchiridion*. He explained how to approach classical literature in his *Adagia* of 1508 and in his treatises on education, the *De ratione studii* of 1511 and the *De copia* of 1512.¹ By the time he returned to the subject in his prefaces to his 1516 New Testament and developed it in the *Ratio verae theologiae*, published and republished in 1518–19, he drew on decades of reflection and argument.

Unlike some other specialists in hermeneutics, moreover, Erasmus put his theories into practice, everywhere from the comments on classical aphorisms in the *Adagia* to his *Annotations* on and *Paraphrases* of the New Testament – not to mention his scholia on the letters of Jerome, which took shape in the same years as his New Testament commentaries. He was still thinking hard about precepts and practices in later years, when he wrote his polemical dialogue on style, the *Ciceronianus*, and compiled his immense manual on preaching, the *Ecclesiastes* – both key documents for his ways of reading secular and sacred literature.

The present volume makes the *Ratio verae theologiae* available in a precise and readable English version. Notes explicate Erasmus’ terminology and identify his sources. The accompanying essays trace the book’s development and set it into its multiple contexts. They show that Erasmus’ manual on how to read and his commentaries and paraphrases

¹ For the versions of commentary theorized and practised in the Renaissance, see Céard ‘Theory and Practices of Commentary in the Renaissance.’
were parts of a single, organic enterprise, which was at the core of his life’s work.

Erasmus’ theories and practices were partly shaped by his inheritances. The *De doctrina Christiana* of Augustine buttressed his claims that one should apply the same literary tools to the Bible and imaginative literature. Jerome’s works supported his argument that the New Testament must be studied in every witness to its oldest form, including the Greek and Old Latin texts – even though doing so revealed that neither Jerome’s Vulgate nor Erasmus’ own protean Latin rendering of the text could claim authoritative status, word by word. Some medieval exegetes had emphasized highly technical questions that Erasmus dismissed as pointless pedantry, unrelated to the real meaning of the New Testament. His mockery of the scholastics led to bitter controversies. But other medieval commentators had insisted on the importance of the literal sense and the usefulness of patristic scholarship, and Erasmus learned from them. The medieval *Glossa ordinaria* supplied him with dozens of samples of older commentary, which he regularly drew on even as he rendered the compilation obsolete by exposing its errors and insufficiencies.²

Ancient writers on grammar, rhetoric, and literature, above all Quintilian, gave him the tools, such as constant comparison of passages, which he applied on every page of textbook and commentaries alike. Above all, the Netherlandish meditative traditions he knew in his youth and the classical rhetorical tradition that judged all utterances by their impact came together in his approach to scriptural reading. Working from this foundation, he argued with compulsive eloquence that the New Testament, properly approached, would transform its readers. Read the text as it should be read, and it would pull you into the scenes of Jesus’ life, ground you in the mysteries of Christian belief, and make you, passage by passage, into as good imitators of Christ as humans could be. Pagan texts – Plato’s account of the *Sileni* of Alcibiades – could also work wonders. But they could not compare to the New Testament revelation of the living Jesus.

No single work – not even the *Ratio* – fully represents the moving target that was Erasmus’ theory and practice of interpretation. Some tools served him in many contexts, over the long term. In the *Ratio* he argued that the reader of Scripture must set the text into history. Doing so helped make the text spring to vivid life: ‘Now if we will learn from historical literature not only the setting, but also the origin, customs,

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² de Jonge ‘Erasmus und die Glossa Ordinaria zum Neuen Testament’
institutions, culture, and character of the peoples whose history is being narrated or to whom the apostles write, it is remarkable how much more light and, if I may use the expression, life will come to the reading’ [19]. Reading historically enabled the reader to penetrate to the true sense of allegories, which remained opaque to those who could not identify the stones and plants, animals and customs that served as their outer shell. Above all, reading historically made clear that certain commands and practices of the early Christians were responses to the particular conditions they had faced in a rapidly changing world, and should not bind the modern church: ‘There are many other things of this kind that were instituted for use in those times but have later been consigned to oblivion or changed; for example, many sacramental ceremonies. Many rites were then not observed that we are now told to observe; for example, feast days and perhaps the private confession of sins – would that at the present time we might use it as profitably as we use it indiscriminately!’ [48]. The same sensitivity to change in culture and language later underpinned Erasmus’ argument, in the Ciceronianus, that modern Christians could not adopt the language of Cicero without making it impossible to discuss their own religion – not to mention the many other customs and technologies that set their world apart from the ancient one.

Yet building a method was the work of decades. Erasmus forged and reforged many of his tools in the course of a lifelong confrontation with ancient and modern models, in the course of which his positions changed with new experiences of editing, commenting, and revision. In the Ratio he uses the example of Aelius Donatus, the fourth-century commentator on Terence and Virgil with whom Jerome had studied, to clarify the way in which Origen had applied secular learning to the exegesis of Scripture: ‘[Origen] does for the divine books exactly what Donatus does for the comedies of Terence in laying bare the intent of the poet’ [27]. As a younger man, Erasmus had sharply criticized the old master. In 1508, commenting on a line from Terence’s Phormio in the Adagia, he noted with asperity that Donatus had offered three conflicting interpretations of it without choosing one of them. He dismissed this approach as ‘guesswork,’ the result of ‘variable and uncertain conjectures.’ Erasmus was right to point out that Donatus had deliberately compiled variorum commentaries. But not everyone agreed with

4 For Donatus’ working method, see now Zetzel Critics, Compilers and Commentators 122, 132–6.
him that this approach was pointless. When Jerome defended himself against Rufinus, who had denounced him for including heretical material in his commentary on Ephesians, he argued that compilation was the central task of the commentator: ‘they quote the opinions of many individuals and they say “Some interpret the passage in this sense, some in another sense.”’ The decision lay, as it should, with the ‘prudent reader,’ who, ‘like an expert money-changer, will reject the falsely minted coin.’

This striking image caught the attention of many Renaissance interpreters, including Azariah de’ Rossi, who used it to describe the task of the prudent reader in his massive work on the interpretation of the Hebrew Bible, the works of Philo and many other texts, the *Light of the Eyes*.

The Erasmus who saw the value of Donatus’s commentaries had realized that the endless cycles of questioning and speculation in Origen’s *Homilies on Genesis* focused the reader’s mind on the essential elements of such biblical dramas as the sacrifice of Isaac. He had also supervised the 1516 Froben edition of Jerome’s works, and learned to see Jerome’s teacher as an exemplary figure in the history of commentary.

Over time, Erasmus included more materials from the tradition of exegesis in his editions of the New Testament, and engaged more intensively with them in his *Annotationes*. The 1519 edition, for example, contains the Greek Canon Tables of Eusebius, with their preface, also in Greek: an ingenious system for lining up the passages in the Gospels that were parallel in content without disturbing the order of the texts themselves. One of the central forms of literary interpretation since the ancient world had been bio-bibliography: the provision of basic information about the author of a text and the rest of his or her writings, as an introduction – called an *accessus* in the Middle Ages – to the work itself. Drawing on Eusebius and others, Jerome had compiled a stately series of bio-bibliographical notices in his *De viris illustribus*. Erasmus incorporated Jerome’s notices on the four evangelists into the 1519 and later editions of his New Testament, putting them at the beginnings of the Gospels. He also engaged with Jerome in the *Annotations*, making clear that he saw Luke, for example, as a human writer, whose work had a particular context and intention.

6 See Veltri *Alienated Wisdom* 51–2.
7 Clark ‘Reading the Life Cycle’
8 Vessey ‘The Actor in the Story’ 62–9
Mark Vessey points out in his introductory essay below. But as he has also shown, it makes clear as no other approach can the full complexity and richness of what Erasmus wrought.

This potent brew found many eager consumers. Most histories of hermeneutics say little about Renaissance humanism – except to acknowledge its new emphasis on historical interpretation – and pass directly to the Reformation, when elaborate manuals were written and the term itself was coined. Yet the Reformation’s theorists of hermeneutics, Philipp Melanchthon and Matthias Flacius Illyricus, hatched the egg that Erasmus had laid. One task, for Erasmus, confronted every interpreter: identifying the *scopus*, translated below as ‘target point,’ of the text. The best way to help tyros learn to read the Scriptures, he argued, would be to provide them not with a training in scholastic argumentation but with the *scopi* to look for as they worked their way through the text. These would enable them to harvest its central lessons as they read: ‘It would be more to the point, in my opinion, to hand down to our young tyro doctrines reduced to a compendium and to their chief particulars, and this above all from the Gospel sources, then from the apostolic Epistles, so that everywhere he might have clearly defined target points with which to set in line his reading’ [35]. Protestants did not agree that Erasmus had found the true *scopi*: he concentrated on the conduct and virtue of the first Christians rather than on their doctrines, which all Protestants saw as the core of the Scriptures. But they took over his method eagerly, and used it for everything from scriptural exegesis to church history. Flacius, for example, taught generations of young Protestant readers to believe that every text had a single *scopus*, or goal. The reader must strip each book down to its central point as a surgeon strips the flesh from a human body to reveal the structure of its bones (the analogy was Flacius’s own).9 The young men who compiled the patristic and medieval sources for the Protestant church history that Flacius organized, the *Magdeburg Centuries*, organized their notebooks around the *scopi* of their sources, which they used to organize the excerpts from which the history was drawn.10 Erasmus would not have used the analogy to anatomy, which was characteristic of the interdisciplinary culture at Wittenberg.11 But he might have felt

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10 See Lyon ‘Baudouin, Flacius, and the Plan for the Magdeburg Centuries.’
11 See Ross ‘Anthropologia.’
an ironic pleasure, had he lived long enough, in seeing the leader of
the rigorously scripturalist Gnesiolutherans apply to Scripture and the
world of the early church a method of analysis that he had first devised
for schoolboys reading the classics.\textsuperscript{12} Catholic preachers, especially in
France, found inspiration in Erasmus’ demonstrations of how to read
Scripture for homiletic purposes, even if his \textit{Ecclesiastes} was too cum-
bersome and repetitive – and suspect – to be very useful at the level of
the ordinary mendicant.\textsuperscript{13}

‘Books that show in detail how humanists worked are few.’ So wrote
Arnaldo Momigliano, a great historian of scholarship, in 1949.\textsuperscript{14} Recent
studies of Renaissance humanism have made this one of the rare sen-
tences in Momigliano’s work that are now obsolete. But no group
of scholars has done more to show modern readers how a humanist
worked than the world’s specialists in Erasmus – especially those who
have translated and explicated so much of his interpretative writing
for the University of Toronto Press’s Collected Works of Erasmus. And
no book adds more to our knowledge of humanism as a living practice
than this rich combination of text and commentary, which enables us to
watch over Erasmus’ shoulder as he urges readers to join him in trans-
forming the study of the Scriptures and being transformed by them.

\textsuperscript{12} On the notebook method that Erasmus took over from fifteenth-century educators
and publicized with great success, see the pioneering treatment in Bolgar \textit{The Classical Heritage and Its Benefciaries} 265–75, 431–4, and also Moss \textit{Renaissance Truth and the Latin Language Turn} 157–88; for its impact especially in Protestant theology, see more
generally Christ-von Wedel \textit{Erasmus of Rotterdam}.

\textsuperscript{13} Worcester ‘The Catholic Sermon’; Michelson \textit{The Pulpit and the Press in Reformation
Italy} 52.

\textsuperscript{14} Arnaldo Momigliano, review of José Ruysschaert, \textit{Juste Lipse et les Annales de Tacite: une méthode de critique textuelle au xvi\textsuperscript{e} siècle}, \textit{Journal of Roman Studies} 39 (1949): 190–2 at 190.