

# **Beyond What Is Written:**

Erasmus and Beza as Conjectural Critics of the New Testament

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A review article for the course Seminar Historical Theology

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**Beyond What Is Written: Erasmus and Beza as Conjectural Critics of the New Testament.** By **Jan Krans.** Amsterdam: Vrije Universiteit, 2004. viii + 350.<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

*Beyond What Is Written* is the doctoral thesis of Jan Krans (Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam 2004). In 2006 Brill published the revised thesis.<sup>2</sup> Krans is still attached to department of New Testament studies of the Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, where he acquired his Ph.D.

In the early nineties, Krans started to show interest on the subject of conjectural emendation through a study on the conjectures on Matthew's Gospel (2). Based on this short study, he got a threefold impression on the subject. First, conjectures have not always been faithfully transmitted. Second, concentration on the commonly know conjectures limits the theologian. And third, understanding and evaluating conjectures are too often based on second-hand information.

Krans convincingly points out that it is important to let knowledge of the conjectural critics precede judgment of their conjectures (3). While it is more customary to have a diachronic approach, Krans proposes a synchronic approach towards conjectural emendation. The diachronic approach, which is im-

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<sup>1</sup> This article is a review of Jan Krans' dissertation, *Beyond What is Written*. The page numbers of the quotations of this dissertation will be added between brackets. Every other quotation will be added in footnotes.

<sup>2</sup> Jan L.H. Krans, *Beyond What Is Written: Erasmus and Beza as Conjectural Critics of the New Testament*. New Testament Tools, Studies and Documents, 35. Leiden: Brill, 2006.

plicitly present in most critical New Testament editions and textual commentaries, merely wants to use conjectures as stepping-stones towards the 'original' text. The synchronic approach studies conjectures as a way of investigating the historical importance of scribes and critics. This is the main assumption for Krans' methodology. In order to limit his field of research to manageable proportions, he decides to study the work of two sixteenth century critics: the humanist Erasmus and the Calvinist Beza. His reasons are obvious:

These two critics were central to the early history of the Greek New Testament in at least two respects: First, both acted as editors of the Greek text, though the degree to which they are accountable for the text of their editions is not always clear. Second, the editions of both critics were accompanied by a large body of annotations, which turns out to be so rich that not even all conjectures can be discussed in this study (3).

The basic question of the dissertation is threefold: First, what kind of conjectures did both Erasmus and Beza make? Second, which role did these play in their work on the New Testament? And third, within which view on the text are their conjectures to be understood (4)?

Especially the latter is the starting point of Krans' thesis. He does not rely on second-hand information but goes back to the sources, editions or commentaries in which the conjectures were first proposed. In the first place Krans uses the original New Testament editions of both Erasmus and Beza. Erasmus' first Greek New Testament edition was published in 1516 as *Novum Instrumentum*, accompanied with his own Latin translation. This 1516 edition is generally regarded as Erasmus' *opus magnum*.<sup>3</sup> In the subsequent editions, under the more common name *Novum Testamentum*, improvements were made, notes were

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<sup>3</sup> Erika Rummel, "Erasmus as Biblical Humanist," in *Erasmus, Outstanding Christian Thinkers* (London/New York: Continuum, 2004), 73.

added and critics were answered. In total five major editions under Erasmus' editorial responsibility appeared in 1516, 1519, 1522, 1527 and 1535 (11-12). Erasmus' editions were clearly intended as a counterpoint to the then current text of the Bible, the Latin Vulgate (12). He believed the post-twelfth century Vulgate to be in a deplorable condition compared to its earlier state. Erasmus' editions thus cannot be properly understood without the Vulgate as a third element besides the Greek version and his own translation (13). Next to this, Erasmus sees his annotations as an essential part of his editions. In the translation he can only express one meaning of the text, in the annotations he can point out several (19). In his comparing the Greek and Latin text, Erasmus became a pioneer in New Testament textual criticism.

Beza also published five editions of his New Testament, in 1556 (1557), 1565, 1582, 1589 and 1598. The first edition, finished in 1556, was published in 1557 as the New Testament part of Robert Stephanus' last Bible project (179). This edition does not contain a Greek text. The second edition was printed by Robert Stephanus' son: Henri. From this edition on, a Greek text was included. The Latin translation of Beza was revised in every edition (180). Krans shows his acquaintance with the works of both Erasmus and Beza through his abundant critical citations of the original Latin text.

Besides these basic sources, Krans numerously cites both historical and contemporary works and conveniently divides his bibliography in four parts: classical, patristic and medieval literature; Bible editions and translations; Erasmus' and Beza's works; and other literature. In his use of sources, the author proves having an overall view on the subject of conjectural emendation.

## Summary

The dissertation is about equally divided in two parts: the first part about Erasmus and the second about Beza. Those two parts are preceded by a general introduction on conjectural criticism in Chapter One. In that introduction Krans contrasts his subject with the words of Paul in 1 Cor. 4:6: ἵνα ἐν ἡμῖν μάθητε τὸ μὴ ὑπὲρ ὃ γέγραπται (1). Paul instructs his readers not to go ‘beyond what is written’. Krans helps us to keep in mind the irony that several critics consider these words a scribal accretion to Paul’s letter. In that view Krans defines conjectures as ‘readings not attested in the manuscript transmission, which are proposed and argued for by a critic with the intention of restoring a lost text’ (1). With this definition he points out the main motivation for conjectural emendation: the restoration of a lost text. Elliott adds that most deliberate changes inserted by scribes into the manuscripts they were copying may be described as conjectural emendations of those texts. Modern scholars have speculated about difficult readings found in the Greek New Testament, and some have proposed alternative readings that are not in the manuscripts.<sup>4</sup> For instance, the siglum *cj* (referring to a conjecture) is found 220 times in the apparatus of Nestle-Aland 25<sup>th</sup> edition.<sup>5</sup> Krans investigates what kind of conjectures both Erasmus and Beza made, the role conjectures played in their work on the New Testament, and how their view of the text affected that role.

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<sup>4</sup> Elliot J.K. Review of “*Beyond What is Written: Erasmus and Beza as Conjectural Critics of the New Testament*, by Jan Krans.” *Review of Biblical Literature* (February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2007): 558. [http://www.bookreviews.org/pdf/5467\\_5761.pdf](http://www.bookreviews.org/pdf/5467_5761.pdf) (September 30<sup>th</sup>, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

The first part starts in Chapter Two with a description of Erasmus' view on the New Testament. Krans points out that both in studies that focus on Erasmus' New Testament Editions and in treatises on New Testament textual criticism, Erasmus' textual criticism of the Greek New Testament is a somewhat neglected area (9). According to Erasmus, the textual variation had a twofold origin. On the one hand, some variations were of unintentional origin; the scribe made a logical error. On the other hand, scribes also intentionally altered the original text (28). In that Erasmus seems to have a notice of what today is called 'the principle of the harder reading' (36). Though Krans identifies several elements of Erasmus' reasoning, he admits that this set of 'rules' has to be read between the lines. Erasmus was not always consistent and methodical in applying those 'rules' (46).

Chapter Three gives us insight in Erasmus' editorial decisions and the following Chapter Four shows us the importance of the Vulgate in that decisive process. Krans indicates that Erasmus' Latin text was not merely a way to make the Greek text accessible for the non-Greek reader, it was an evaluation of the post-twelfth century Vulgate.

Krans rightly states that every of Erasmus' conjectural emendations have to be evaluated separately. In Chapter Five Krans provides an overview of Erasmus' conjectures, and in doing so, underlines his statement. Krans divides these conjectures in a few categories. He starts with the ones inspired by the Vulgate, based on striking differences between the Greek text and the Vulgate (81). Erasmus also made some pure conjectures. Krans provides numerous examples of Erasmus' conjectures. The one on Jas. 4:2, reading 'you are jealous' (φθονεῖτε) in stead of 'you murder' (φονεύετε), being one of the most import-

ant, since it deserves a place in the critical apparatus of any modern edition of the Greek New Testament. The long reception history speaks for itself: both Luther and Calvin accept this conjecture, though Calvin seems to imply that the conjecture is his (113). Also the Dutch *Statenvertaling* opts for Erasmus' conjecture (113). The *Herziene Statenvertaling* that is due in Fall 2009 chooses to neglect it, but adds the previous decision in a footnote.<sup>6</sup> Besides the conjectures on the Greek text, Erasmus also provides conjectures on the Vulgate. Next to these categories of conjectures, Krans also categorizes a group of conjectures as 'other'. Finally, he focuses on conjectures wrongly attributed to Erasmus.

In Chapter Six, Krans shows us Erasmus as an evaluator of conjectural criticism of other theologians. In doing that the reader is shown the riches of Erasmus' sources. Erasmus shows his acquaintance with early Christian writers such as Origen and Jerome, thus proving himself relying on a great number of ancient sources (41, 140vv.), but also with the textual criticism of (for that time) more recent scholars such as Valla (143vv.) and contemporaries such as Lefèvre d'Étaples (145vv.), Stunica and Titelmans (150vv.). Of Jerome for instance, Erasmus derived the idea that scholarship played a role in the interpretation of the Bible, and one needed not to depend merely on divine inspiration.<sup>7</sup> Erasmus' citation of medieval authors is rare in his first edition, but increases in the later ones.<sup>8</sup> Chapter Six is concluded with the reception history of Erasmus' conjectures. Rummel indicates that Erasmus was at first not well received because of

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<sup>6</sup> Preview available on <http://herzienestatenvertaling.nl/bijbel.php?boek=JAS&hoofdstuk=4>

<sup>7</sup> Rummel, "Erasmus as Biblical Humanist," 75.

<sup>8</sup> Albert Jr. Rabil, *Erasmus and the New Testament: The Mind of a Christian Humanist* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1993), 116-117.

his moderate position. Neither Catholics nor reformers appreciated the *Mittelhauf*, as Melancton called these moderates.<sup>9</sup> Despite these attacks on Erasmus' New Testament, Luther himself used Erasmus' New Testament editions as the starting point for his exegesis, even though participating in the attacks on Erasmus' position.<sup>10</sup>

Chapter Seven gives a concluding overview of Erasmus' conjectural criticism, where we again meet Erasmus as a great thinker who, often out of intellectual curiosity, gained great insight in Scripture and made a priceless contribution to the New Testament research. Rabil cites Erasmus' first edition, saying: 'Some people think that this Translator [of the Vulgate] never made a mistake and that he wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. I challenge them then to make sense out of [his translation of] this passage, if they can.'<sup>11</sup>

In the second part of the dissertations Krans treats the conjectural emendations of Beza. First, in Chapter Eight Krans identifies Beza's treatment of the New Testament text. Beza edited five editions of the New Testament, using the Greek readings of Robert Stephanus and the *Codex Bezae* (173). Through his work, Beza provides the definitive translation of the New Testament for the Protestant (Calvinistic) world (173-174). Though his Catholic critics rejected these editions, they played a major role in the history of the English Bible, amongst others (174-175). Unfortunately, none of Beza's editions is translated into modern

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<sup>9</sup> Rummel, "Erasmus as Biblical Humanist," 89.

<sup>10</sup> Cornelis Augustijn, *Erasmus* (Baarn: Ambo, 1986), 167.

<sup>11</sup> Rabil, *Erasmus and the New Testament*, 122. Citing Erasmus, referring to difficulties in the Vulgate text of Romans.

languages; there is no critical edition and not even a facsimile edition (178-179). Beza's main concern was his Latin translation. He reviewed this translation for every edition and did this in a more systematic way than Erasmus did his (181).

In Chapter Nine, Krans gives us an in depth image of Beza as editor of the New Testament. Krans points out that Beza's use of sources is not very reassuring. Most of Beza's text-critical information was second-hand, that is, derived from Robert Stephanus' collations and Robert or Henri Stephanus' editions. Also the Syriac and Arabic were used indirectly. Nowhere do Beza's annotations convey the impression that he did a real collation of two texts (215). Krans concludes that the general description of Beza as a conservative textual critic is largely correct. He took Stephanus' text and only changed it occasionally. The printed text functioned as 'received' (216).

Chapters Ten and Eleven contain an overview of Beza's conjectures, Chapter Ten focussing on style, Chapter Eleven on content (this division is unfortunately not very well indicated by the author). Krans divides them further in philological, grammatical, stylistic, logical and contextual, harmonising, and theological. Finally he adds a category with conjectures that anticipate nineteenth- en twentieth-century source criticism (274vv.).

In the concluding Chapter Twelve, Krans states that Beza was actually even more critical than Erasmus, but that was limited by his pious convictions. Interesting is that Beza, according to Krans, in essence fits his definition of a conjectural critic, but was obstructed by this religiosity (285). Krans concludes:

The phrase, 'I do not want to change anything out of conjecture', can be found numerous times. However the function of these repeated statements must be determined with more precision. It seems that more is at stake

than a simple practical decision, or insight into the uncertain and unwarranted nature of conjectural emendation. There are criticisms to be prevented, and there is uncertainty to be silenced. What is that uncertainty? Doubts about the correctness of the biblical text. It is after his many conjectural digressions that Beza uses this reassuring, almost imploring closing formula. Not only does he propose conjectures *despite* his firm reluctance towards conjectural emendation; he also has to *assert* his scruples *because* of the many conjectures he propose. But why then are the conjectures still mentioned at all? Here the words 'intellectual honesty' first come to mind: some problems, as Beza perceived them, simply did not go away (285).

Krans points out that 'of the two, Erasmus was far the better and bolder textual critic; Beza was both conservative and timid, and (due to heavy reliance on Stephanus' text) never grappled with critical issues as did Erasmus. Yet with respect to conjectural emendation, he went further than Erasmus. This odd situation,' Krans suggests, 'is rooted in their differing views of the text: for Erasmus, the New Testament was to be treated as any other classic text, whereas for Beza it was Holy Scripture (and thus not to be altered), which was extant, however, only in imperfect copies (and thus in need of emendation).'<sup>12</sup>

### Larger context

Krans indicates that especially in the Dutch history there has been research for conjectural criticism (342). Krans has opted for a new method, not merely investigating conjectures, but including a theological school or the specific research of a scholar as the starting point. In that he follows Hort, stating that the conjectural critic precedes the conjecture. The consequence of this approach is that the New Testament scholar is not merely concerned with the New Testa-

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<sup>12</sup> Michael W. Holmes, Review of *Beyond What is Written: Erasmus and Beza as Conjectural Critics of the New Testament*, by Jan Krans," *Religious Studies Review* 34, no. 2 (June 2008): 97.

ment and textual criticism, but that he includes church history in his research (343).

Holmes evaluates the dissertation as an important participant 'in the paradigm shift under way in NT textual criticism, in which manuscripts are viewed as historical products that deserve to be studied as wholes and variant readings acquire historical significance as mirrors of scribal convictions and conventions.'<sup>13</sup> Recently more attention has come to the subject of conjectural emendation. Krans' contribution to that subject is of enormous value because of his provision of a historical continuum in the text critical methodology. As Backus states: 'Although written from the perspective of a New Testament scholar rather than a Renaissance and Reformation historian, the present work will be welcomed by the latter for its discussion of textual conjecture to throw an interesting light on how New Testament criticism functioned in the sixteenth century.'<sup>14</sup> It is indeed a somewhat remarkable study for a New Testament scholar to participate in this sixteenth century debate, but nonetheless a very important contribute to current New Testament criticism *and* to the historical understanding of sixteenth century views on the New Testament.

### Evaluation

Let me continue by saying, as remarked before, that Krans' work is of great value. His research is applicable for numerous scholars in different theological

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Irena Backus, Review of "*Beyond What Is Written: Erasmus and Beza as Conjectural Critics of the New Testament*, by Jan Krans," *Renaissance Quarterly* 60, no. 2 (Summer 2007): 608-609.

departments. I agree with Krans that in the past, the accent of conjectural studies has been too much on the diachronic approach. Even though some conjectures are valuable as such, a thorough investigation of this textual criticism is impossible without knowledge of the context of the conjectural critic. Krans' dissertation should motivate any New Testament scholar to include these considerations in his evaluation of a specific conjecture. When we fully investigate the conjectural critic's motives in the view of his background, we can grasp their historical reading of texts, and in doing so, understand those motives. Krans is somewhat a pioneer in his synchronic approach and I expect that his work will encourage other scholars to follow in his footsteps. It is my impression though, that Krans wants to put the synchronic before the diachronic approach. While I do agree that the synchronic approach deserves more attention, I think the roles should not be reversed. The diachronic approach still maintains its value. Especially in order to study or evaluate our current Greek text versions, it is important to know the whole history of that text, and conjectures can help us with that. Krans accuses this approach to neglect the synchronic method, but in doing so he seems to exaggerate to the other side. This is especially the case in his conclusions, wherein Krans only focuses on the context of the decisions of both Erasmus and Beza. Krans is especially concerned with this context of the sixteenth conjectures, in the process somewhat neglecting the theological meaning of these annotations. This seems to show a contrast between his view on the importance of the New Testament and the view of one of his study subjects: Beza. Beza clearly is in the first place concerned with good theology. All of his conjectures are made within this frame: the quest for good theology. Of course it is normal that Krans focuses on the synchronic approach, but in my view he

should have described the relation between both synchronic and diachronic approaches more thoroughly, since it is the starting point of his research.

The image we get from Erasmus is a generally acclaimed one: Erasmus as an intellectual critic. Rummel points out that Erasmus' view on the Biblical text was as follows: "The scriptural text was in need of revision because it had been corrupted by the carelessness or ignorance of scribes and by a translator who nodded or was under a delusion."<sup>15</sup> Erasmus used this argument against his own critics: he was merely concerned with a correct usage of the New Testament.<sup>16</sup> Of these motives, Krans convinces his readers through his carefully citing Erasmus.

What to say about Krans' evaluation of Beza? The image we get from Krans, shows us Beza as a man torn between his intellectual capacity and his religious convictions. Here I believe Krans' evaluation to be coloured by his own point of view: a historical critical one. Though it is off course never possible to have a complete objectivity, it would have been in the benefit to his thesis to explicate his own presumptions. Though it is, in view of Krans' position, fairly normal that Krans sees Beza's religious convictions as a barrier for true conjectural criticism, this does not necessarily need to indicate this position. I do believe that textual criticism and orthodoxy need not exclude one another. Though Beza clearly states his reluctance towards conjectures, he does mention them. Backus points out that 'Beza's actual annotations [...] were as scant as Erasmus'

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<sup>15</sup> Rummel, "Erasmus as Biblical Humanist," 76.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 85.

own, only the preface gave away the author's intentions.<sup>17</sup> This is an indication of his religious motives: his starting position is the believe in the authority of the New Testament. His reluctance towards conjectures helps Beza to approach this most precious Christian source with the necessary awe and respect. It does not inevitably imply that Beza is limited by his religious convictions. It implies that Beza approaches the New Testament in a different way than he would approach another source. As Rabil points out, when investigating the authority of the New Testament, the authenticity of the source of Christianity itself is being questioned.<sup>18</sup> One wonders whether Beza realizes this more than Krans.

As far as the thesis and its structure is concerned, in some degree the book lacks unity between Part One and Part Two. In my view, it would have been better if Krans added an overall concluding chapter. Further, though the two parts have a somewhat similar structure, Krans could have opted for an even bigger similarity. It is for instance not very clear why he divides the conjectures of Beza into two chapters and adds no chapter about Beza's view on conjectural history and the reception of his conjectures. Especially for the reader, not so familiar with conjectural criticism, this would have been a great advantage.

Nevertheless, this thesis is a real piece of thorough investigation. Krans captures the reader from the beginning until the end with a fluent writing, explaining and justifying his method with each new step in the process. The reader cannot stay indifferent to the nicely illustrated and documented conjec-

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<sup>17</sup> Irena Backus, "The Church Fathers and the Canonicity of the Apocalypse in the Sixteenth Century: Erasmus, Frans Titelmans, and Theodore Beza," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 29, no. 3 (Autumn 1998): 661.

<sup>18</sup> Rabil, *Erasmus and the New Testament*, 122.

tures of both Erasmus and Beza. Krans challenges his public to dive into the minds of two of the greatest sixteenth century thinkers. Holmes ends his review by saying that the dissertation of Krans will 'be warmly welcomed by readers in many fields of study.'<sup>19</sup> I support this statement. Both scholars working on textual criticism of the New Testament and scholars investigating sixteenth century views on the New Testament should carefully examine Krans' work and let his exhaustive research contribute to their own line of duty. Anyone critically studying the Greek Testament text should get a hold of this book. It provides an encyclopaedic overview of the textual criticism of two of the most important (if not, *the* two most important) sixteenth Greek text editors.

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<sup>19</sup> Holmes, Review of "*Beyond What Is Written*," 97.

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