

Sunday, December 22, 2019—Grace Life School of Theology—*From This Generation For Ever*
Lesson 103 Martin Luther & the German Bible

Introduction

- Lessons [100](#), [101](#), and [102](#) have been devoted to a consideration of Erasmus and the Greek New Testament. In this Lesson we want to consider what happened when the Erasmine Greek text began to be translated into the vernacular languages of Europe. This was done for the first time in 1522 by the father of the Protestant Revolution, Martin Luther.
- Luther’s German Bible not only solidified the Protestant notion of *sola scriptura*, it also served to establish the German language. In this Lesson we will cover the following points and sub-points:
 - The German Bible Before Luther
 - Luther’s German Bible
 - New Testament
 - Old Testament
 - Features, Reaction & Response
 - Conclusion: Impact

The German Bible Before Luther

- S.L Greenslade is the editor of *The Cambridge History of the Bible: The West from the Reformation to the Present-Day*. This 3rd Volume of *The Cambridge History of the Bible* contains an exceptional entry on Luther and the German Bible that discusses the state of the German Bible before Luther.
 - “A German Bible printed by Sylvan Otmar at Augsburg did indeed appear during 1518—only a few months after Luther had published his thesis. But it belonged to the series of editions of the German translation made in about 1350 and first printed in 1466 by Johann Mentelin of Strassburg. In the next fifty years or so there were thirteen further editions. This translation was not made from the original languages but only from the Vulgate, and was moreover—despite several revisions, especially in 1475 and 1483—clumsy in the linguistic form, and partly incomprehensible. Hence it answered neither of Luther’s two requirements for such a translation, that it should be based on the original texts and should use a German comprehensible to all; and it is not surprising that this medieval version did not have Luther’s approval.” (Greenslade, 94)
- Before the early 1520s Luther had already utilized the Greek text of Erasmus in some of his teaching and preaching.
 - “He [Luther] had already used the Greek original in his lectures on Romans in 1515-16, and the Hebrew in his commentary on Hebrews in 1517-18. And since it was one of his cardinal principles that the Scriptures were the only true key to the faith, it is not surprising either that he decided to translate the Bible into German himself. It seems as if

the idea of such a translation was already current in Wittenberg in 1520.”
(Greenslade, 94)

Luther's German Bible

- Alister McGrath, author of *Christianity's Dangerous Idea: The Protestant Revolution—A History from the Sixteenth Century to the Twenty-First*, states the following about Luther's use of both German and Latin:
 - “In 1520, Luther took the decisive step that would lead to the fledgling Reformation breaking free from the limited confines of academia and becoming a popular movement. He began writing works in German, rather than the more scholarly Latin.

Luther would continue to use Latin when it suited him; after all, he wanted his ideas to travel throughout Europe, and Latin was the cosmopolitan language of his day. Yet Latin was a language of exclusion, which ensured that common people could not share in the political and religious discussions of the elite. Luther chose the most accessible and inclusive language of the region to reinforce his message of reform.” (McGrath, 50)
- The publication of *The Appeal to the German Nobility* in 1520 stated that the laity should have the right to read and interpret the Bible for themselves. Making the Bible available in the German language thus became a priority. Luther argued that the medieval church had built walls around the Bible, in an attempt to exclude ordinary Christians from reading and interpreting it. (McGrath, 50-52)

The New Testament

- While in Wartburg, Luther began making his landmark translation of the New Testament into German, thus implementing his own demand that God's Word be made available to all people.
- During his ten-month confinement at Wartburg, Martin Luther, with pen in hand, translated the New Testament into the German language of the common people from Erasmus' 1519 2nd Edition of the Greek New Testament. (Brake, 83, 235)
- After being reviewed by his associate Melancthon, Luther published his German Bible in September 1522. (Miller, 748) Regarding this pivotal event, Eric Metaxas states the following in his recently published book *Martin Luther: The Man Who Rediscovered God and Changed the World*:
 - “Without question, the largest of the projects Luther ~~not~~ faced was translating the entirety of the Bible into German. The manuscript of the New Testament translation that he brought back from Wartburg in early March was breathtakingly impressive, although not quite finished. Luther knew that it still required the close and rigorous attention of Melancthon. The linguistic savant knew the Greek better than anyone alive and now spent many weeks carefully combing through the text for nits, which he and Luther picked out.” (Metaxas, 290)
- Returning from Wartburg to Wittenberg on March 6, 1522, Luther and his associates battled the clock in their efforts to complete the publication of the Bible by September in time for the Frankfurt Fair. Because of these realities, Luther's 1522 New Testament is commonly called the

“September Testament.” (Pettegree, 186) Regarding these circumstances, Andrew Pettegree, author of *Brand Luther*, states the following:

- “The Frankfurt Fair was by this time Europe’s principal emporium for the wholesale trade in books, dwarfing the other major seasonal fairs established over the course of the previous centuries. It took place twice a year, at Easter and in September, and was attended by publishers and booksellers from all of Europe’s major book markets. . .

A good sale at Frankfurt was considered critical, since it had been decided that the September Testament should be published in a huge edition of some three thousand copies.” (Pettegree, 186)

- Early copies were sent to Luther’s friends and supporters including Spalatin and Prince Fredrick the Wise. When the work was made available to the public it could not be kept in print.
 - “Three thousand copies were initially printed, all of which sold quickly. The second printing of an additional two thousand copies occurred in December. . .But the popularity of this epochal and groundbreaking book was so extreme that three months after the second printing, all copies had been sold, at which point the price going forward was tripled.” (Metaxas, 291)
- That Luther had doubts regarding the canonicity of James and Revelation is well known. The first edition of his Bible from 1522 has famously called the book of James an “epistle of straw.” While later editions removed this statement, it is clear that Luther viewed certain New Testament books as setting forth “the true kernel and marrow” of the Gospel. At the end of the New Testament he wrote:
 - “John’s Gospel and St. Paul’s epistles, especially that to the Romans, and St. Peter’s first epistle are the true kernel and morrow of all the books. They ought properly to be the foremost books, and it would be advisable for every Christian to read them first and most, and by daily reading to make them as much his own as his daily bread. For in them you do not find many works and miracles of Christ described, but you do find described in masterly fashion how faith in Christ overcomes sin, death, and hell, gives life, righteousness, and salvation.” (Metaxas, 292)
- Luther’s placement of Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation in his Bible speaks to his misgivings regarding their canonical status:
 - “As for the sequence of the biblical books, Luther followed Erasmus and not the Vulgate or the old German version in the New Testament in that Acts follows the Gospels, not Hebrews, and the apocryphal Epistle to the Laodiceans is left out. But he placed Hebrews and the Epistle of James, together with Jude and Revelation, at the end of the New Testament instead of before I Peter, and as non-apostolic writings did not give them numbers in the table of contents. . .” (Greenslade, 100)
- Placing God’s word into the German language for the first time was not without its challenges.
 - “Luther also required extraordinary help with the very end of the book. In fact, it was with the penultimate chapter of the ultimate book Revelation, that he needed assistance. In that chapter the New Jerusalem is described as having foundations covered with every

kind of Jewel. But how in the world to figure out the German word equivalents of such rare gems as chrysoprase, chrysolite, jasper, beryl, and carnelian? For this conundrum, he turned to his friend Lucas Cranach, who was creating twenty-one original illustrations which were heavily influenced by Durer—for the book of Revelation, which would be published with the New Testament itself. Cranach in turn appealed to his friend Frederick, asking whether he and Luther could borrow some of the gems from his treasury, which they did, enabling them to identify each one by color.” (Metaxas, 290)

- Regarding the popularity of the September Testament, Pettegree writes:
 - “Luther’s September Testament was the first of more than 443 whole or partial editions of the Bible that would appear between 1522 and Luther’s death in 1546. It swiftly became a mainstay of the printing industry in Germany, a text so popular that it would justify repeated reprints in all of the major places publishing Luther’s words and others besides.” (Pettegree, 188)

The Old Testament

- Regarding Luther’s work on the Old Testament, Metaxas records the following:
 - “Despite all else he was doing, Luther’s greater and far more ambitious project of translating the entire Bible into German would not lie fallow, even in 1522. Not long after handing his New Testament manuscript to Melancthon, Luther sprang into this years-long project. His plan was to attack it from the beginning books first and publish it in stages. The Pentateuch (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy) would naturally be the first part. Luther and his team consisting of Melancthon, Amsford, and others, got through these five long books with such speed they were able to nearly finish the first volume of the Old Testament in late December of that year and actually publish it in February 1523. But translating from the Hebrew presented fresh and sometimes extraordinary difficulties. For one thing, the Latin Vulgate was riddled with errors, which Luther was thrilled to discover and correct, although knowing they had been promulgated by the church for centuries must have caused him pain too.

In a letter to Spalatin, Luther rather desperately asked help from him in solving the riddle of many obscure animal names found in Leviticus and Deuteronomy. By the time of his letter, the manuscript was essentially finished, but before it could go to print, there remained a handful of sticky taxonomic wickets to be negotiated. One can only imagine what Spalatin thought in reading this letter and in being urgently tasked with these overwhelming details:

Please make your help available to us, and describe for us the following animals, classifying them by their species:

Birds of prey: kite, vulture, hawk, sparrow hawk, the male sparrow hawk.

Game animals: gazelle, chamois, ibex, wild goat, or forest goat.

Reptiles: Is *stellio* correctly translated as “salamander,” and *lacetra limacio* as “orange-speckled toad”?

. . . Among the Hebrews, Latins, and Greeks [the names of] these animals are terribly confused, so that we have to guess at what they are on the basis of the genus and species of the animals. If possible, therefore, I want to know the

names, species, and nature of all birds of prey, game animals and venomous reptiles in German. . .

I don't know what [the Vulgate] is thinking when [it] mentions among the kosher animals the goat, stag, antelope, and giraffe.

I wish that you would undertake this part of the work. Take the Hebrew Bible and try to find out all about these animals through careful research, so that we can be sure about these things. I do not have so much time." (Metaxas, 293-295)

- In terms of the Old Testament project, Pettegree paints the following picture in *Brand Luther*:
 - “Through all of this sound and fury Luther and his brain trust worked steadily on with the translation of the Old Testament. At first this progressed well enough. Luther and Melanchthon moved smoothly through the Pentateuch, which was ready for Lotter [the printer] by the end of 1522, and could thus conveniently occupy the presses once the second edition of the New Testament was finished. Luther, ever mindful of the pockets to potential purchaser, had always intended that the Old Testament would be published in three parts. This was helpful to publishers; it gave them three manageable projects with separate sales, and purchasers could then bind together the whole work when it was finished. In any event, this would take much longer than expected. Joshua to Ester was ready by the end of 1523, to be published in the following year. But then progress slowed dramatically. Because Job had occupied more time than Luther had expected, the poetic books (Job to Song of Songs) were issued as a separate fascicule in the autumn of 1524.

Then other responsibilities intervened. In 1525 and 1526 Luther's attention was entirely taken up by the fallout from the Peasants' War and the dispute with Erasmus then in 1527 the university moved to Jena because of an outbreak of plague. Although Luther and Bugenhagen both remained at Wittenberg, the work on the Prophets could not be continued in the absence of Melanchthon; this was doubly frustrating because Luther had, in fact, prepared a translation of the Prophets for his lectures in 1524. Because it was now obvious that this section of the Bible would not be finished immediately, Isaiah was released for separate publication in 1528.

The years 1529 to 1530 brought new difficulties, thanks to Melanchthon's renewed absence at the Diet of Speyer and then at the Diet of Augsburg. Luther poured out his frustrations by translating the book of Daniel: in apocalyptic mood after his work with Daniel's prophecies he now wondered if the end of the world could come before the Bible translation was finished. Only in 1532 had he and Melanchthon managed to find time to sign off on the Prophets, now published once again as a separate volume. That left only the Apocrypha, never Luther's favorite: this he prepared to delegate largely to Melanchthon and Justus Jonas. Their task was completed finally in 1534, clearing the way for the much-delayed complete Wittenberg Bible." (Pettegree, 190-191)

- In 1534, Luther published the entire Bible in German for the first time. The culmination of more than twelve years of labor.

Features, Reaction & Response

- Metaxas reports that Luther’s German Bible was a “masterpiece of the bookmaker’s art:”
 - “. . . in large part because of Luther’s extensive clarifying commentary and margin notes. It can hardly be seen by us as it was first seen, because thanks to Luther so many today are familiar with the Bible and what is in it. But if we imagine a population that had never seen the Bible in a language they could read and had no ideas of what was in the book, we may understand it as a revelation to almost all who first saw it, and not less than historic and indeed revolutionary. Luther’s commentary prefaces in front of each book were for many Germans the very first explanation they had of what was in this book that had been for centuries hidden from them. There are innumerable examples of simple clarifying explanation that would have forever changed how people viewed things. In the beginning of the New Testament, for example, Luther explains the meaning of the word “gospel” as “good news,” and he explains that although the four Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—are all the stories of Jesus’s life, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension nonetheless the actual true Gospel is to be found all through the New Testament. The whole of the story is the Gospel.” (Metaxas, 291-292)
- According to Metaxas the following factors contributed to Luther’s New Testament becoming a powerful “sensation:”
 - “For one thing, its language was powerful. Many phrases were so good that they entered the German language forever. Luther did not write a book to read so much as a book to read aloud. It was deftly attended to the ears of the average German, and this would give it wings and legs both.

But more than the translations excellence were the prefaces, which helped explain and frame everything. Of course this idea was itself central to Scripture, that the Scriptures could not be understood unless someone explained them to us. . .

It is often overstated that Luther opened the Bible for everyone to read, because this implies that all interpretations of it are equal, which Luther clearly did not believe. He set himself up as a guide and teacher and knew that there was not a substitute for this any more than there was a substitute for the people reading the Bible on their own. He had no difficulty in seeing that either one taken to an extreme would create grave problems. Anyone reading the Bible without an understanding of what he read was certain to fall into error, just as anyone who refused to read the Bible and only allowed others to interpret it made it possible that he would be listening to interpreters who were theologically wrong. Just as no one can die for us, no one can have a relationship with God for us, and therefore no one can take full responsibility for how we read the Scriptures. At some point we have personal responsibility to be involved.

So all of Luther’s commentaries were meant to be helpful, but none of them were meant to be exhaustive or definitive.” (Metaxas, 295)

- Church historian Edward Miller also heaps high praise upon Luther’s translation:
 - “Even the papal historian, Maimbourg, confesses that “Luther’s translation was remarkably elegant, and in general so much approved, that it was read by almost everybody throughout Germany. It was a national book. It was the book of the people-

the book of God. This work served more than all Luther's writings to the spread and consolidation of the reformed doctrines. The Reformation was now placed on its own proper foundation—the word of God which liveth and abideth for ever.

The following statistics show the wonderful success of the work: “A second edition appeared in the month of December and by 1523 seventeen editions had been printed at Wittenberg, thirteen in Augsburg, and twelve at Basle, one at Erfurt, one at Grimma, one at Leipsic, and thirteen at Strasburg.” (Miller, 748)

Conclusion: Impact

- Luther's formally equivalent translation of Erasmus's Greek New Testament is the first complete Bible translation from the original languages into a modern vernacular language of Europe. Luther's German Bible served as the source for the following vernacular translations:
 - 1523—Dutch New Testament
 - 1524—Danish New Testament
 - ???—Swedish New Testament
 - 1540—Icelandic New Testament
 - 1541—Hungarian New Testament
 - 1562—Croatian New Testament
 - 1584—Hebrew New Testament used for missionary work amongst the Jews of Slovenia
- Metaxas comments upon how the technology of the printing press applied to the printing of vernacular language Bibles, spearheaded the Reformation.
 - “There is no question that Luther's future ability to have his own vernacular German translation of the Bible printed en masse would dramatically help him in the wider work of the reformation that Wycliffe had hoped for in his own time.” (Metaxas, 21)
- Lastly, Luther's German Bible forever altered the German language.
 - “As for the significance of Luther's version, it is far more than a mere translation, for it does not adhere slavishly to the style and syntactical structure of the originals, but is both wholly rendered into German and at the same time linguistically exact in detail. Luther's principles are set out in his preface to the Old Testament of 1523, in his ‘Letter on Translation,’ and his ‘Summaries on the Psalms and on the grounds of the translation.’ Luther's Bible was a literary event of the first magnitude, for it is the first work of art in German prose. Luther showed himself to be a poet of genius, and with a true feeling for the properties of other languages—even though he was less of a scholar than his learned collaborators Melanchthon and Aurogallus. The bible first became a real part of the literary heritage of the German people with Luther. He believed—contrary to the teaching of the Catholic Church—that the Holy Scriptures were the only true key to faith and doctrine, and so his translation was the sure foundation of the Reformation. In the history of the language his version is also a factor whose significance cannot be overestimated in the development of the vocabulary of modern literary German.” (Greenslade, 101)
- In the next Lesson we will begin looking at William Tyndale's translation of the Erasmian Greek into English.

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