Preparing A New Bible Translation in Luther's Day

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Introduction

Dear delegates and friends,

Martin Luther realized as few before him the potential of printing in the service of the Gospel. The transcription of this one man's words and works comprises today over 100 folio volumes of approximately 700 pages each. For those who felt that such schol-arly enterprise was a comfortable activity compared with the hard work of the knight in armour or others who must suffer heat, frost, dust, thirst, and other discomforts, Luther had an answer. "I would like to see the horseman who could sit still for a whole day looking at a book, even if he did not have to compose, think, or read or worry about anything else." "A pen is light, to be sure," he mused, "but at the same time the best part of the human body (the head). . .has to bear the brunt and do the most work. Some say of writers that three fingers do everything, but the whole body and soul take part in the work."[1]

The greatest product of Luther's pen remains his translation of the Bible into German.[2] The great Reformer was quick to acknowl-edge that all his writing efforts were unimportant compared to the text of the Holy Scriptures. In a Christmas sermon published in December, 1522, shortly after his New Testament first came out, Luther frankly told the congregation, "You see from this babbling of mine the immeasurable difference between the Word of God and all human words, and how no man can adequately reach and explain a single Word of God with all his words. . .Go to the Bible itself, dear Christians, and let my expositions and those of all scholars be no more than a tool with which to build aright, so that we can understand, taste, and abide in the simple and pure Word of God: for God dwells alone in Zion."[3]

This awe and reverence which Luther felt for God's Word indi-cate his primary motive for translating the Bible. But in no way does the story of the Bible translation end there. Translation work involved more than respect for the Holy Scripture. The transfer from language to language taxed Luther's writing talents as no other work. The same man who confidently challenged the Roman church by affirming, "God's Word is supreme above all the words of men "[4] likewise complained to his friend Spalatin about the difficulties in translating that Word: "We have so much trouble translating Job, on account of the grandeur of his sublime style, that he seems to be more impatient of our efforts to turn him into German than he was of the consolations of his friends." And then he added with a chuckle, "Either he always wishes to sit upon his dunghill, or else he is jealous of the translator who would share with him the credit of writing his book."[5]

To learn what it meant to prepare a new Bible translation in Luther's day, therefore, we must enter the craftsman's shop, watch him at work, note his techniques, share his problems, and listen to the counsel of experience. Heinz Bluhm in his book Martin Luther: Creative Translator assures us that the effort is rewarding. There are "many breathtaking discoveries to be made in (it)," he relates. "I for one have found every step exciting, and I am con-vinced others, too, will find their own ventures into this rich field equally rewarding."[6] Even non-technicians in the language arts need not fear to step into the dear Doctor's study. The end product of his efforts may remain foreign to us who no longer read

the German Bible. But in spite of the language barrier, the venture can prove beneficial for those who are willing to catch the spirit of the master at work and to learn from his principles.

I. Luther's new Bible Translation

Luther was by no means the first German to attempt a new translation of the Holy Scripture in the vernacular. We have long ago laid to rest the "Protestant legend" that Rome for centuries had hidden the Bible out of man's reach until the young friar, Martin Luther, while rummaging through a monastery library, discovered it and translated it. Ever since the advent of Gutenberg's press in ca. 1450 the demand for Bibles in the people's language was growing, especially in the Holy Roman Empire. Prior to Luther's rendition, no less than fourteen High German Bibles and four Low German editions appeared on the market. In addition, countless "Plenaria," selected Bible readings translated for use in the Mass, were in circulation.

But we have overshot the mark if we imagine that Luther began his work in a friendly atmosphere. The orthodox Catholic questioned whether such ventures were advisable. The authorities opposed promiscuous Bible reading and translation on the grounds that they fostered heresy and sects. Interestingly, the Archbishop of Mainz even expressed doubts whether one were able to transfer the Bible into the German language. Yet in saying so, he was only covering a deeper concern, shared by many: "Who would enable simple and uneducated men, and even women, to pick out the true meaning?"[7] He was not half as harsh as the Dominican Mensing, who voiced his antagonism in no uncertain terms. "The Scripture can deceive," he declared. "The church cannot deceive. Therefore it is perfectly clear that the church is more than the Scripture."[8]

One of Luther's consistent opponents capped the argument against translations by using the Scriptures themselves:

Holy Writ warns us, when our Savior says, "It is given to you to know the mysteries of the Kingdom of God, but to the rest in parables," that seeing they see not, and hearing they understand not. Who are those to whom the Lord says, "To you it is given?" Surely it is to the Apostles and their successors, the rulers of Christ's flock. And who are they that should learn by parables? Surely such people who would be better off not knowing the mysteries, lest they gain a greater damnation by misusing them. For "precious stones are not to be cast before hogs," and in all likelihood these are the ignorant lay people.[9]

Such loose talk could not deter Luther from his resolve to translate. His own experience in the church had taught him that "all holy teachers . . . count as nothing over against a single passage of Holy Scripture."[10] Love for his people moved him to bring this sacred treasure into their hands. "The devil hit upon a fine trick when he schemed to tear people away from Scripture," he said. But "every Christian should know the ground of, and reason for, his faith and be able to maintain and defend it if necessary." One month before he set his hand to the translation task, he wrote to a friend, "I am born for my Germans, whom I want to serve."[11] As Doctor of the Bible and lecturer on the same at the University, Luther felt the great burden of his call. At the urging of his friends, especially Melanchthon, he almost abruptly resolved to provide a readable German Bible for the benefit of the people.

Little could Luther forecast at the beginning what a wealth of experience this work alone would bring. In retrospect he could boast without blushing, "The Holy Scriptures are a vast and mighty forest, but there is no single tree in it that I have not shaken with my own hand."[12] The New Testament translation was finished in eleven weeks in 1522. The Old Testament yielded more reluctantly to his efforts. "We are sweating over the work of putting the Prophets into German," Luther confessed. "God, how much of it there is, and how hard it is to make these Hebrew writers talk German! They resist us, and do not want to leave their Hebrew and imitate our German barbarisms. It is like making a nightingale leave her own sweet song and imitate the monotonous voice of a cuckoo, which she detests."[13] Despite the difficulties, the entire Bible came off the press twelve years after the New Testament.

But what Luther learned along the way did not leave him satisfied with the finished product. From the beginning, he had consulted with his colleagues for suggestions to improve the text. By the time the work was reaching completion, he had gathered a sizeable group of advisers who met at his home to revise the text. Luther molded these men into a translation team whose advice he sought in five major text revisions before his death.[14] He liked to refer to them affectionately as his "Sanhedrin." With the modesty of a master craftsman, he credited their participation in the translation process, saying, "If all of us were to work together, we would have plenty to do in bringing the Bible to light, one working with the meaning, the other with the language. For I too have not worked at this alone, but have used the services of anyone whom I could get."[15]

In the final analysis, however, the work was still Luther's, and he bore the responsibility. Fortunately we still possess the protocol of the 1531 and 1539-41 meetings of the revision commission. They remain for us one of the richest sources in getting behind the scenes in the translation process. Present on a regular basis were Melanchthon, a skilled philologist and specialist in Greek; Matthew Aurogallus, Hebrew consultant; Caspar Cruciger, professor of theology; and Luther's famous secretary, George Rorer, who also doubled as corrector for the Lufft printers. On occasion John Bugenhagen, Justus Jonas, Veit Dietrich, Bernard Ziegler, and Caspar Aquila also attended. The protocols of the meetings reveal that Luther not only chaired the sessions, but had the final say regarding additions or corrections to the Bible text.

One of Luther's table companions has preserved the scene of these meetings for us (the scholars usually assembled in the Black Cloister a few hours prior to the evening meal):

Luther prepared himself by reading his own text, and by obtaining information from Jews and linguistic experts, including elderly Germans, who helped him find appropriate words, as when he had several rams slaughtered in his presence, so that a German butcher could tell him the proper name for each part of the sheep. After that he came into the consistorium with his old Latin and with his new German Bible, as well as with the Hebrew original. Melanchthon brought the Greek text along and Cruciger both the Hebrew and Chaldean Bible. The professors also had their rabbinical commentaries available. Bugenhagen, who was thoroughly acquainted with the Latin text, had this in front of him. Each one had studied the text which was to be discussed and had examined the Greek and Latin, as well as Jewish commentators. The chairman introduced the text, gave each an opportunity to state his point of

view and listened to the comments that were based on linguistic scholarship or the early authorities. Wonderful and informative discussions are said to have taken place, of which Master George took notes, which were afterwards printed as glosses and annotations on the margin of the printed Bible.16

Reading the minutes of the Psalms' revision, we can savor the roles of both master and his assistants. When the discussion proceeded to his satisfaction, Luther would often end it with the approval, "That's it!" (das wers) or "I'm satisfied!" (mihi placet). At times he firmly answered, "That's the way I translated before and that's the way it stays!" Or else he freely admitted that he had not found what he wanted, "We just don't have a German word." At other times he felt they had found a perfect expression, but it seemed too daring to place into the text. He would then voice his regrets with a sigh, "that would have been nice!"17

A sample of Roerer's minutes illustrates the method of procedure in preparing the text revision. The men regularly conversed in Latin, interspersed with German. The committee in this case was considering Psalm 4:7 in the 1524 edition of the Psalter. There Luther had translated: "Therewith you bring joy into my heart, but they get gross when they enjoy corn and must." Luther began the exchange by getting at the meaning of the words with paraphrases. "Make my heart rejoice," he said, "that is, Thou art the joy of my heart, I have no other joy but Thee; it is Thou that makest my heart rejoice. They puff themselves up because they have so much wine and corn; they do not care for the joy of the heart, but the joys of the belly they desire. Thou makest the heart rejoice, but they are troubled about nothing." In that way the thought was thrown around, seeking expression in words.

Now Melanchthon had evidently added something, for Luther continues, "Yes, that is spoken right softly, genuinely Philiplike and soft stepping. I will speak clearly. They desire to be emperors and though they had an abundance of bread and wine, that is, they attain plenty, they are still not profited, but they only wish that they have to eat and to drink. The meaning of the Psalm verse is: The righteous suffer want, while the ungodly eat and drink. They regard, seek, and value much corn and much wine. They believe in Mammon. Let them have it. Thou delightest my heart, even though they have their fill of corn and wine."18 After the meaning of the text was established in this manner, we are not surprised to read the following simple and smooth rendition of Psalm 4:7 in the 1531 edition: "Thou delightest my heart, even though they have abundant wine and corn."

If this exchange among friends helped to sharpen the understanding of the Bible text, it also compelled Luther to formulate his principles of translating for his co-workers. On one occasion he noted, "Dr. Forster and Ziegler conferred with us about our version and gave us much help." "I gave them three rules," he said and then proceeded to spell them out.19 But, as often happens, the opposition forced him to discuss at length the basic issues of translation. His Roman antagonists had combed through his German Bible and indicated irregularities and additions that had crept in. To counteract what they felt was the sinister influence of the Luther Bible, a "reliable" New Testament translation (1527) came out under the guidance of the ardent Catholic, Jerome Emser. Comparisons revealed that the man actually had plagiarized much of Luther's work and then, in the days before the copyright, palmed off the finished product as his own.

Stung by the unfairness of such action, Luther used the oppor-

tunity to make public a defense of his New Testament. He published it under the title "On Translating: An Open Letter." For the readers' benefit Luther shared the problems he faced in transferring the New Testament into a living German. Within a year he followed with a companion pamphlet, in which he candidly revealed similar difficulties he encountered in bridging the gulf between the Hebrew Old Testament and the German. It was sold under the title "Defense of the Translation of the Psalms." These two pamphlets, added to the minutes of the committee meetings, stand out as mines of information on Luther at work in translation. In them the craftsman opens his heart and our eyes to the secrets of his art.

But Luther did not isolate his work on the Bible text from concerns about its practical use among the people. In the twenty-four years between the Wartburg stay and his death in 1546, he had done more than translate the Bible into German and preside over its revision. He also produced a revised edition of the Latin Vulgate for use among the cultured class. More important, for the common folk, Luther composed "Prefaces" to accompany the books of the Bible. He intended these introductions to help the reader discern the message of God's Word in each book. "Necessity demands," he explained, "that there should be a notice or preface, by which the ordinary man can be rescued from his former delusions, set on the right track, and taught what he is to look for in this book, so that he may not seek laws and commandments where he ought to be seeking the gospel and promises of God."20

Among the Biblical books, the Psalms came in for special treatment. Since the Psalter served best as a Christian prayer-book, the Doctor put out a separate printing of summaries (Summarien) consisting of brief paraphrases of each Psalm's essential message. From the very first edition of the printed Bible, he also placed notes or glosses in the margins. The annotated Bible gave helpful interpretive comments for the reader to ponder. Not a year passed in the life of this busy man without some work related to the Bible publication. From the Wittenberg presses alone twenty-one different editions of the New Testament and eleven editions of the complete Bible appeared during Luther's lifetime. Dr. Luther's new Bible translation was a life-long effort.

II.   Translating into the vernacular

The translation of the Luther Bible speaks for itself. At least, so Luther would have us believe. With characteristic modesty he offered his Bible to the world for criticism. "I translated. . . to the best of my ability," he stated. "I have compelled no one to read it, but have left that open, doing the work only as a service to those who could not do it better. No one is forbidden to do a better piece of work."21 In response, the German-speaking world has ever since applauded his effort as a high-water mark in the development of their language. Even Luther's bitterest opponent, John Cochlaeus, admitted to the popularity of the Luther Bible: "The taylor and the cobbler, yes even women and other simple idiots who become adherents of the new Lutheran Gospel, eagerly read (his New Testament), . . although they have only learned to read a little German."22

Cochlaeus has provided us with one clue to the secret of Luther's success as translator. The Reformer consciously sought to shape the translation to meet the people's need. He selected those words which could be read and understood by all classes of people. He took the raw material from court language and from the marketplace. By his own analysis, the language of the Saxon court was peculiarly suited to his purposes because of its universal appeal in the Empire.

"I speak in agreement with the usage of the Saxon court, which is favored by the princes and kings of Germany, and which is therefore the most universal form of the language," he explained, "and then stated the reason why this happened to be the case. "Maximilian (the Emperor) and Fredrick the Wise (Elector of Saxony) have been able to unite all local dialects into one form. Thus it will be possible for me to be understood in different sections of the country."[23]

While the official language of his province provided a base of operation from which to work, the word choice in Luther's Bible is actually a blend between the dignity of the court and the directness of street language. On one occasion Luther confessed, "I try to speak as men do in the marketplace. Didactic, philosophic, and sententious books are, therefore, hard to translate, but narrative easy. In rendering Moses, I make him so German that no one would know that he was a Jew."[24] Luther himself attributes the freshness of his style over against that of others to his ventures out among the common folk. "We do not have to inquire of the literal Latin, how we are to speak German, as these asses do. Rather we must inquire about this of the mother in the home, the children in the street, the common man in the marketplace. We must be guided by their language, the way they speak, and do our translation accordingly. That way they will understand it and recognize that we are speaking German to them."[25]

One illustration will help us understand Luther's concern. The Scripture passage comes from Matthew 12:34. Jesus is making the point that our speech reveals what is in the heart, just as a tree shows whether it is good or bad by its fruits. In Latin this passage reads, as in English, "Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks." "Tell me," Luther asks, "Is that speaking German? . . What is the 'abundance of the heart'? No German can say that. . . For 'abundance of the heart' is not German any more than 'abundance of the house,' 'abundance of the stove,' or 'abundance of the bench' is German. But the mother in the home and the common man say this, 'What fills the heart overflows the mouth.' That is speaking good German, the kind I have tried for."[26]

Luther supplemented this deep sensitivity to modes of expression in the mother tongue with an equally great concern for reproducing the text from the original language. His Hebrew studies began early in his career. Already as a student at Erfurt University, he had obtained, soon after the book appeared, a copy of the first Hebrew grammar published in Germany. Later he worked from the Brecian edition of the Hebrew Bible, but out by the Soncino press. But Luther's Hebrew knowledge was, for the most part, self-taught. "I have learned more Hebrew by continuing to read and by comparing one text with another, than by working with a grammar," he freely admitted. "I am no Hebrew student according to the rules of linguistics, for I go my own way, unbound."[27]

By this expression Luther meant that he was not satisfied with a mere grammatical approach to the study of Hebrew. He wanted to savor the language in its own uniqueness. "The Hebrew language has its own flavor, which distinguishes it from Greek, Latin, and German," he explained. "It is the best of all and richest in vocabulary. It does not need to 'beg' as do other languages that do not have a word of their own for many things and who must therefore borrow parts of other words and combine them into a new one."[28]

The word "heart" is a good example. "With the word 'heart' we mean a part of our bodies," he informs us. "But we say also that someone has no heart, and then mean that he is afraid and fearful.

We also use the expression 'my heart tells me.' And 'his heart burns in him,' by which we mean that he is angry. The Hebrew, however, has a distinctive word for all such cases. And yet this language is simple, and at the same time majestic and glorious."[29]

In the preface to the 1524 edition of the Psalms, he further explained the importance of knowing the original language. "The Hebrew language is so rich that no other can compare with it. It possesses many words for singing, praising, glorifying, honoring, rejoicing, sorrowing, etc., for which we have but one. Especially in sacred and divine matters is it rich in words. It has at least ten names with which to name God, whereas we have only one word. It may therefore be rightly called a holy tongue."[30] We can well imagine from this description the difficulties Luther experienced in transferring expressions from the richness of the Hebrew language to the vocabulary of the Saxon peasant.

Learning Greek proved to be less difficult for Luther, even though he began to study Greek later than he did Hebrew. The earliest trace of its use we find in his lectures on the book of Romans in 1516. During that year the renowned teacher, Erasmus, had come out with the first printed edition of the Greek New Testament. This edition, based on some late copies of the ordinary Byzantine text, was a landmark in the history of Bible transmission. If previously Luther had lectured solely from the Latin Vulgate, he now began frequent independent explanations of Greek words. After Melanchthon arrived in Wittenberg, he became Luther's counsellor in the Greek language. The Doctor attended Master Melanchthon's lectures on Homer "in order to become a Greek."

But we overestimate Luther's knowledge of Greek, if we imagine that he made the initial translation of the New Testament in such a short time without the aid of other translations. The second edition of Erasmus' Greek New Testament, which Luther had with him at the Wartburg, also contained Erasmus' notations for the improvement of the Latin text. Comparisons today indicate that Luther both used and rejected many of the annotations of Erasmus. The same holds true concerning the Vulgate, which he had lying close at hand for constant reference.

In Luther's eyes, however, a person who knows the languages has taken only the first step in translating. The real task lay in conveying the thought of a passage. This cannot always be done merely by translating words from one language to another. If one follows this procedure, the result can often prove disastrous. The translation becomes wooden and unintelligible.

Take Psalm 63 for example. In his initial effort Luther had translated word for word: "Let my soul be filled with joyful lips." The sense was lost by such a literal transfer. So Luther reworked the phrase. "By 'lard and fat' the Hebrews mean fat, so that my mouth may make praise with joyful lips." The Hebrew image of a soul filled with lard and fat must have conjured up a most humorous picture, especially to the generally rotund German folk. The sense was lost by such a literal transfer. So Luther reworked the phrase. "By 'lard and fat' the Hebrews mean fat, so that my mouth may make praise with joyful lips." The Hebrew image of a soul filled with lard and fat must have conjured up a most humorous picture, especially to the generally rotund German folk. "just as a healthy and fat animal is happy, and conversely, a happy animal grows fat, a sad animal grows thin, and a thin animal is sad. . .(Thus) we have relinquished the Hebrew words and rendered the passage in clear German like this, 'It would be my heart's joy and gladness, if I were to praise thee with joyful lips.'[31] By re-wording he had successfully removed the stumbling-block for those who read God's Word in the vernacular.

From this perspective we can begin to understand why Luther frequently took a crack at those who artificially bound themselves

to grammar. Such word-bound translations he has called "rabbinical." In opposition to the woodenness of the grammarians, Luther followed the rule "that wherever the words could have given or tolerated an improved meaning, there we did not allow ourselves to be forced by the artificial Hebrew (gemachte Grammatica) of the rabbis into accepting a different inferior meaning."[32]

Luther knew he was running "quite a risk (by) relinquishing the words and rendering the sense." "For this many know-it-alls will criticize us, to be sure," he anticipated, "and even some pious souls may take offense." Despite the objections, Luther called for a responsible freedom in translating the text. "What is the point of needlessly adhering so scrupulously and stubbornly to words which one cannot understand anyway?" he asked. And then he answered his own question by explaining the methodology he followed. "Whoever would speak German must not use Hebrew style...Once he has German words to serve the purpose, let him drop the Hebrew words and express the meaning freely in the best German he knows."[33]

Another instance underscores the point. In Psalm 92 Luther avoided a literal translation because it did not carry the meaning to the reader. Word for word the text would read, "When their hair is grey they will still bloom and be fat and green." "But what does that mean?" he asks. "The psalm has been comparing the righteous to trees, to palm trees and cedars, which have no 'grey hair,' neither are they 'fat' (by which a German means an oily or greasy substance, 'schmalz,' and thinks of a hefty paunch). But the prophet here intends to say that the righteous are such trees, which bloom and are fruitful and flourishing even when they grow old."[34]

Luther gleans this thought not merely from the text but from other portions of the Scriptures. The Word of God teaches that the righteous abide forever. Psalm 1:3 says of the righteous that "his leaf shall not wither." And Christ Himself declares that "every plant which my heavenly Father has not planted, must be rooted up," Matthew 15:13. Therefore in a free rendition Luther transfers "When their hair is grey they will still bloom and be fat and green" into the more intelligible "Even when they grow old, they will nevertheless bloom, and be fruitful and flourishing." In doing so, he was well aware that this sort of treatment "may perhaps irritate Master Know-it-all, who does not bother about how a German is to understand the text but simply sticks to the words scrupulously and precisely, with the result that no one understands the text." But he does not care, because the burden lies with the critic. "We have taken nothing from the meaning and we have rendered the words clearly."[35]

None of Luther's textual renditions has stirred up more criticism than his addition of the word 'alone' to the text of Romans 3:28: "Therefore we conclude that a man is justified alone by faith without the deeds of the law." The defense of that addition to the German text forms the core of his open letter "On Translating." At stake in this passage was not only the principle of idiomatic translation, but also the heart of Luther's Biblical theology. We all recognize "justification by faith alone" as the watchword for the Lutheran Reformation. But the argument in favor of the retention of the word "alone" in the Bible text has receded into the background for non-German speaking Lutherans. The simple truth is that the word "alone" does not occur in the original Greek text. And Luther felt free to quote the passage without the addition, as he did in the Smalcald Articles.

In considering the meaning of the passage, however, he flatly asserted that the "alone" conveys the sense of the text. "It be-

longs there if the translation is to be clear and vigorous." The explanation is simple: "It is the nature of our German language that in speaking of two things, one of which is affirmed and the other denied, we use the word 'alone' along with the word 'not.'"[36] Luther illustrates this trait by various German examples, as, for instance, the farmer who comes to town and brings along (allein) grain and no (kein) money. In transferring Paul's words into German idiom, therefore, Luther contends the German instinctively feels the force of an "only." "Actually the text itself and the meaning of St. Paul urgently require and demand it," he points out, since the passage deals with a main point of Christian doctrine. In it "Paul cuts away all works so completely...(that) whoever would speak plainly and clearly about this...will have to say, 'Faith alone justifies us, and not works.' The matter itself, as well as the nature of the language, demands it."[37]

In view of the foregoing, it may come as a surprise to learn that Dr. Luther was actually a champion of the literal understanding of Scripture. For him responsible freedom in translation applied only to the selection of words in one idiom that best conveyed the meaning of a corresponding set of words in another. But one was not free to pervert the meaning of a text by the choice of words. Finding the right word was one matter; finding the right meaning was another.

What then does "literal" mean when it refers to the sense or meaning of a text? For Luther it stands in contrast to the generally accepted manner of interpretation in his day. At the university he had learned to look at a Bible passage in four different ways. The meaning could be taken literally, in a historical sense; allegorically, as a picture of the church; tropologically, with reference to the moral state; or anagogically, as rising above the literal sense to a future blessedness. Thus Mount Zion could refer historically to the home of the Jews; allegorically, to the temple or its representatives; tropologically, to righteousness; and anagogically, to the blessedness of eternal life.

But after Luther's breakthrough to an understanding of Scripture in terms of God's revelation of Himself in Law and Gospel, he discarded the "old formulas." "We must not commit sacrilege against the Word of God and without warrant of any express passage of Scripture give a word a meaning that differs from its natural sense," he asserted.[38] Since his Roman opponent, Jerome Emser, defended the manifold sense of Scripture in his translation work, Luther countered by saying, "Even though the things described in Scripture mean something further, Scripture should not therefore have a twofold meaning. Instead, it should retain the one meaning to which the words refer." In this connection Luther made the well-known statement, "The Holy Spirit is the simplest writer and adviser in heaven and on earth. That is why his words could have no more than the one simplest meaning, which we call the written one, or the literal meaning of the tongue."[39]

How does one then establish the simple, literal sense of a passage? Here, according to Luther, Scripture itself comes to our rescue. "Each passage has both a historical and a theological context. "Scripture,"[40] he affirmed, "is its own interpreter" for those who would hear." In a marginal notation Luther explains for us his understanding of the larger context of Scripture. It has to do with Moses and Christ, with the Law and the Gospel, with the purpose of the Old Covenant and the New. "If the Old Testament could be explained by natural reason without the aid of the New, I will say that the New Testament has been given in vain, just as the apostle argues that Christ has died in vain if the law is sufficient

• . Others beat around the bush and avoid Christ, as if it were their intention to do so. But if I find a nut in the text with a shell too hard for me to crack, I throw it on the Rock (Christ) and I get the sweetest kernel."41

Luther kept these concerns for a literal translation, so understood, constantly before him. We find them reflected in a table conversation in the year 1532, at the height of his translation efforts. There Luther enunciated two rules which he followed in translating the Holy Scripture:

First, if some passage is obscure I consider whether it treats of grace or of law, whether wrath or the forgiveness of sin (is contained in it), and with which of these it agrees better. By this procedure I have often understood the most obscure passages. Either the law or the gospel has made them meaningful, for God divides his teaching into law and gospel. The law, moreover, has to do either with civil government or with economic life or with the church. . So every prophet either threatens or teaches, terrifies and judges things, or makes a promise. Everything ends with this, and it means that God is your gracious Lord. This is my first rule in translation.

The second rule is that if the meaning is ambiguous I ask those who have a better knowledge of the language than I have whether the Hebrew words can bear this or that sense which seems to me to be especially fitting. And that is most fitting which is closest to the argument of the book. The Jews go astray so often in the Scriptures because they do not know the (true) contents of the books. If one knows the contents, that sense ought to be chosen which is nearest to them.42

While these rules of translation helped Luther unfold the sense of the Bible text, they do not always solve the ever-present problem of finding the right words to express the meaning. There were times, especially with regard to doctrine, when Luther could not find German expressions to cover the meaning of the text. At such times he discarded his hopes of speaking the people's language. He simply translated the words from the original with little regard for the German ear.

A good example is Psalm 68:18. The verse reads: "Thou hast ascended on high; thou hast led captivity captive." Luther could have translated in a more readable fashion, "Thou hast set the captives free." But he felt that was too weak. It simply did not convey the fine, rich meaning of the Hebrew, which says literally: "Thou hast led captivity captive." In explanation, Luther points out how much depends on these words. The passage "does not merely imply that Christ freed the captives," he said, "but also that he captured and led away the captivity itself, so that it never could or would take us captive again. . Death can no longer hold us, sin no longer incriminate us, the law can no longer accuse our conscience." "Therefore out of respect for such doctrine, and for the comforting of our conscience," Luther concludes, "we should keep such words, accustom ourselves to them, and so give place to the Hebrew language where it does a better job than our German."43

The same holds true for the Greek New Testament. Citing the passage in John 6 where Christ says, "Him has God the Father sealed," Luther admits it would have been better German to say, "He it is whom God the Father means." But God's placing a seal on the Christ was too important a Biblical teaching to have been

watered down by an inferior translation. So Luther preferred in this instance to violate the German language rather than depart from the word "sealed." "I have been very careful to see that where everything turns on a single passage," he recited, as a rule of thumb, "I have kept the original quite literally."44

We cannot help but admire a man who set out to bring a faithful translation of God's Word to his people and followed through without turning aside. After reviewing basic problems and difficulties that Luther experienced in transferring the Word from language to language, we are able to listen with great sympathy to his own description of the translator's craft: "Ah," translating is not every.man's skill as the mad saints imagine, "he said. "It requires a right, devout, honest, sincere, God-fearing Christian, trained, informed, and experienced heart."45 At the same time, we miss in Luther's soliloquy one trait that helped to set Luther apart as translator. That is, a poetic soul.

Those who read the German Bible testify to its beauty and warmth, to its rhythm and flow. From the very beginning of his work on the text, Luther aimed to produce more than a faithful translation. He wanted a text that was crisp and pleasant to hear. By his own admission he read Holy Writ "as though it had been written yesterday." And he wished his translation to be read in the same way. He adapts his language to any mood, to the tenderness of the Christmas story as well as to the terrors of the Apocalypse. He employs all the skills of the poet's craft: an added syllable for the sake of rhythm, the use of alliteration, assonance, and rhyme. All is so naturally conceived that it does not appear artificially contrived.

Gifted with a natural talent for language, Luther does not work according to rules but from inner necessity. In the midst of the Psalms' translation, he wrote to his friend Eobanus Hessus, "I must acknowledge that I am one who is more deeply moved, more carried away, more strongly inspired by poetry, than through any prose style. Since that is true in general of me you can understand how much more this is true in relation to the Psalms."46

But in seeking a readable text, he especially had the people in mind. He could rightfully boast how smoothly the story of Job reads in the German, even though he sometimes looked three weeks for one word. "One now runs his eyes over three or four pages and does not stumble once -- without realizing what boulders and clods had once lain there where he now goes along as over a smoothly planed board."47

If we might have gained the impression that Luther translated the way he did merely for effect, we have mistaken his motives. We need only observe the master at work to dispel that notion. While Luther was translating the Bible, he constantly read his sentences aloud, testing the accents and cadences, the vowels and consonants for their melodic flow. He did this because German was really a language (Sprache), not written; heard, not read; for a word has sound and tone. By Luther's own description, "the soul of the word lies in the voice."48

Thus Luther constructed his translation with a view to the public reading of the book. By means of sentence structure and meaningful punctuation, he makes the Bible a book to be heard. He transmits its sounds in such a way that the silent reader can hear it as living, spoken words. He even suggests that a person who reads the Bible himself would do well to read it aloud, in order

that the Bible might literally "speak to him." This was an ancient tradition and Luther himself observed it.

In the final analysis, the twin goals of producing a faithful and readable translation always remained before Luther throughout his life. He never claimed his work to be perfect and constantly revised his translation as new insights came to him. His personal desk Bible was filled with such jottings. At the same time, he stood in awe of the task for which he felt he had been called as a Professor of the Holy Scriptures, namely, "to bring God's Word to his people for their comfort and joy." "I think that if the Bible is to come up again," he said, "we Christians are the ones who must do the work, for we have the understanding of Christ, without which the knowledge of the language is nothing."[49]

To this we say, "Amen."

Conclusion: Luther's German Bible

We cannot leave off observing the preparation of a new Bible translation in Luther's day without taking the finished product into our hands for a moment. Even a casual paging of the text will reveal many features which underscore Luther's intent to bring the Scriptures to the people. A number of wood-cut illustrations decorate the pages. Especially striking are the twenty-one full-page pictures of the visions of St. John in Revelation. We may also be struck by the fact that the text is not divided into verses. Versification started at that time in the middle of the century. Only the chapter divisions are marked.

Luther does provide an index to the Bible. And in running our eyes down the familiar listing, we realize, if we have not done so before, that Luther's printed Bible reflects the ancient church's attitude toward the Biblical canon. He includes books of the Old Testament Apocrypha because "they are good and useful to read," though they are not to be placed on the level of the Holy Scripture. The order of the books in the New Testament also reminds us that some epistles were spoken against in the early church. Contrary to the order in the Vulgate, Luther regularly numbered the New Testament books from 1-23, ending with III John. He then added Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation without number at the end.

In the text itself, later editions of the Luther Bible marked the beginning and the end of the regular Gospel and Epistle lessons for each Sunday. This was done for the benefit of both pastor and parishioner. But aside from the text, perhaps the most useful additions were Luther's introductions to the various Biblical books and the notations on the Bible's margin. For those of us who do not use Luther's German Bible, the English translation of the "Prefaces" give us the flavor of Luther's writing. They are classics and deserve to be read.

Luther also added comments on the margin for the guidance of the common folk. A sample of these "glosses," as they were called, will help us understand their character. Our reference is Exodus 33. In this passage Moses asks to see God face to face. God denies the request and tells Moses to be satisfied in knowing God by His name. And then Luther adds, "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious." To this scene Luther comments in a sidenote:

All this refers to Christ; how he should live, preach, die, and rise in the midst of Moses' people, who will not see his countenance, but only see him from behind. That

means, they will see Christ by faith in his humanity, but not yet (see) his divinity. And this is the Rock on which all believers stand in this life. Yet this is entirely a gift of God without our merit. Therefore he says, I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious.[50]

Luther's insight leads each reader directly into the heart of the Scripture's Gospel message.

That very Gospel also moved Luther to work countless hours in preparing his translation. "I gave my utmost care and effort," he related, "and I never had any ulterior motives. I have neither taken nor sought a single penny for it, nor made one by it. Neither have I sought my own honor by it; God, my Lord, knows this. Rather I have done it as a service to the dear Christians and to the honor of One who sitteth above, who blesses me so much every hour of my life that if I had translated a thousand times as much or as diligently, I should not for a single hour have deserved to live or to have a "sound eye." All that I am and have is of his grace and mercy."[51]

We cannot, however, leave the workshop of the translator without hearing his closing wish. We may have learned the problems and difficulties that a translator faces. We may have recognized the joys of accomplishment. We may use the insights from Luther's preparation of the German Bible as a springboard for a discussion of translation today. But we have overlooked something very basic, if we do not feel the force of Luther's admonition to his people, "Now you have the translated Bible. Only use it well also after my death."[52]

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E N D N O T E S

LW   = Luther's Works (American Edition)
WA   = Weimar Edition of Luther's Works (German)
WA Br = Weimar Edition Letters
WA DB = Weimar Edition German Bible
WA Tr = Weimar Edition Table Talk
W²   = Walch Edition 2, St. Louis

1. WA 30 II, 573f. (1530)
2. This is the lead-off statement in Heinz Bluhm, Martin Luther, Creative Translator (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1965), p. vii.
3. WA 10 I, 728 (1522); W² 11, 429
4. WA 2, 263 (1519) -- against Eck in the Leipzig Debate.
5. WA Br 3, 249 (1524); W² 21a, 595f. Letter to Spalatin, Feb. 23.
6. Bluhm, Martin Luther, p. xv
7. Part of the Edict of the Archbishop of Mainz; translated in Margaret Deanesly, The Lollard Bible (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1966 reprint), p. 125.
8. Wilhelm Walther, Luthers Deutsche Bibel (Berlin, 1918), p. 32.
9. Margaret Deanesly, The Lollard Bible, p. 390. The quotation comes from "The Apologie of Fredericus Staphylus," counsellor to Emperor Ferdinand.
10. WA 12, 360 (1522-23); W² 9, 1059.
11. WA Br 2, 396-98 (1521); LW 48, 320. Letter to Nicolus Gerbel, Nov. 1.
12. WA TR 1, No. 674 (1530's); LW 54, 121.

13. Preserved Smith, _Luther's Correspondence_ (Philadelphia: The Lutheran Publication Society), Vol. II, p. 445. Letter to Wenceslas Link, June 14, 1528.
14. WA DB 4, xv-xvi.
15. WA DB 8, 32 (1545); LW 35, 250f.
16. Johann Matthesius, _D. Martin Luthers Leben_ (Berlin, 1855 reprint), P. 258f.
17. WA DB 3, xliii-xliv
18. WA DB 3, 1 (1531); translated in M. Reu, _Luther's German Bible_ (Columbus, Ohio: The Lutheran Book Concern, 1934), p. 217.
19. WA Tr 5, No. 5533 (1542-43); LW 54, 445f.
20. WA DB 6, 2 (1522); LW 35, 357
21. WA 30 II, 633f (1530); LW 35, 183; from Luther's "Sendbrief vom Dolmetschen" ("On translating") -- hereafter only the American Edition (LW) will be cited for this work.
22. See W. Walther, _Luthers Deutsche Bibel_, p. 175.
23. WA Tr 2, No. 2785b.
24. WA Tr 2, No. 2771a; translated in Preserved Smith, _The Life and Letters of Martin Luther_ (New York: Barnes & Noble Inc., 1968 reprint), p. 266.
25. LW 35, 189 (1530).
26. LW 35, 189f (1530).
27. WA Tr 1, No. 1040; W² 22, 1543
28. WA Tr 1, No. 1040; W² 22, 1542
29. Ibid.
30. WA DB 10 I, 94
31. WA 38, 9-17 (1531); LW 35, 212; from Luther's "Summarien über die Psalmen, Und ursachen des dolmetschens" ("Defense of the Translation of the Psalms") -- hereafter only the American Edition (LW) of this work will be cited.
32. LW 35, 213f.
33. Ibid.
34. LW 35, 218f (1530)
35. Ibid.
36. LW 35, 189 (1530)
37. LW 35, 195 (1530)
38. WA 11, 434 (1523); LW 36, 279
39. WA 7, 650f (1521); LW 39, 178f.
40. WA 7, 97f, line 23 (1520)
41. WA 3, 12ff (1513-1516); LW 10, 6
42. LW 54, 42f.
43. LW 35, 216 (1531)
44. LW 35, 194 (1530)
45. Ibid.
46. WA Br 8, 107 (1537); translated in William J. Kooiman, _Luther and the Bible_ (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1961), p. 149.
47. LW 35, 188 (1530)
48. WA 5, 379 (1519-21); "Cum vox sit anima verbi." See H. O. Burger, "Luther als Ereignis der Literaturgeschichte," in _Luther Jahrbuch_, 1957, pp. 90-94.
49. WA DB 8, 30; LW 35, 249 (1523)
50. WA DB 8, 306 (1523)
51. LW 35, 193
52. WA 10 I, 728 (1522)