



The Bible in the Language of the People

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Luther's Lasting Impact

INTERACTIVE FAITH

AN ONLINE BIBLE STUDY SERIES



Introduction

What biblical teachings drove Luther to translate the Bible into German?

Brief History of Bible Translations

The Septuagint—translating the Old Testament into Greek

Early translations of the New Testament

The Vulgate—Jerome's translation of the New Testament into Latin

Translation efforts by other missionaries

Translation efforts by pre-Reformation "heretics"

The Story of Luther's Translation Work

Luther at the Wartburg—May, 1521-March, 1522

September (1522) and Decembers (1522) editions of the New Testament

The lengthy process of translating the Old Testament

First edition of the entire *Luther Bibel* (1534)

Ongoing work

Luther's Approach to Translating the Bible

Read the following quotes from Luther regarding his translating work. What principles do you see him following? What insights can we gain for a proper view of Scripture and how God works through his Word?

"In translating the Holy Scriptures I follow two rules:

"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..."

In theology, there are law and gospel, and it must be one or the other... So every prophet either threatens and 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... But if one knows the contents, that sense ought to be chosen which is nearest to them."

*"Table Talks" (1532)
Luther's Works 54:42-43*

"If it were translated everywhere word for word... and not for the most part according to the sense, no one would understand it. So, for example, when he says something like this, 'The thirsty will pant after his wealth' [Job 5:5], that means 'robbers shall take it from him'... Again, by 'light' he means good fortune, by 'darkness' misfortune [Job 18:8]... We have taken care to use language that is clear and that everybody can understand, without perverting the sense and meaning."

*"Preface to the Book of Job"
Luther's Works 35:252-53*

"In all these phrases, this is the German usage, even though it is not the Latin or Greek usage. It is the nature of the German language to add the word allein in order that the word nicht or kein may be clearer and more complete. To be sure, I can also say, "The farmer brings grain and kein money," but the words "kein money" do not sound as full and clear as if I were to say, "The farmer brings allein grain and kein money." Here the word allein helps the word kein so much that it becomes a complete, clear German expression.

"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 on the street, the common man in the marketplace. We must be guided by their language, the way they speak, and do our translating accordingly. That way they will understand it and recognize that we are speaking German to them."

*"On Translating: An Open Letter"
Luther's Works 35:189*

“I have not just gone ahead anyway and disregarded altogether the exact wording of the original. Rather with my helpers I have been very careful to see that where everything turns on a single passage, I have kept to the original quite literally and have not lightly departed from it. For example, in John 6[:27] Christ says, ‘Him has God the Father sealed [versiegelt].’ It would have been better German to say, ‘Him has God the Father signified [gezeichnet],’ or, ‘He it is whom God the Father means [meinet].’ But I preferred to do violence to the German language rather than to depart from the word.”

*“On Translating: An Open Letter”
Luther’s Works 35:194*

“When the angel greets Mary, he says, ‘Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you!’ [Luke 1:28]. Up to now, that has simply been translated according to, the literal Latin. Tell me whether that is also good German! When does a German speak like that, ‘You are full of grace’? What German understands what that is, to be ‘full of grace’? He would have to think of a keg ‘full of’ beer or a purse ‘full of’ money. Therefore, I have translated it, ‘Thou gracious one,’ so that a German can at least think his way through to what the angel meant by this greeting. Here, however, the papists are going wild about me, because I have corrupted the Angelic Salutation; though I have still not hit upon the best German rendering for it. Suppose I had taken the best German, and translated the salutation thus: ‘Hello there, Mary’—for that is what the angel wanted to say, and what he would have said, if he had wanted to greet her in German.”

*“On Translating: An Open Letter”
Luther’s Works 35:192*

“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.”

*“Preface to the Old Testament”
Luther’s Works 35:250*

“I have constantly striven to produce a pure and clear German in translating; and it often happened that for two or three or four weeks we sought and asked for a single word and at times did not find it even then. Such was our labor while translating Job that Master Philip, Aurogallus, and I could at times scarcely finish three lines in four days.”

What Luther Says 106

The Lasting Impact of Luther's Bible Translation

Some would argue that Luther's translation of the Bible into German had a longer lasting impact than anything else he did. Comment on the following results.

- ◆ It put the Bible into the hands of the people in a language they could understand
- ◆ It standardized the German language
- ◆ It provided an impetus for increased literacy
- ◆ It encouraged translations of the Bible into other languages

The image to the right became the motto for the Lutheran Reformation: *Verbum Domini Manet in Aeternum* ("The Word of the Lord Stands Forever"). It was sewn on the official court clothing of the electors of Saxony and engraved on their shields, armor, and cannons. Why was that a fitting motto? Is that our motto today? If so, how do we show it?



What lasting lessons can we take away from the story of Luther's translation of the Bible into German?