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MARTIN LUTHER'S PRINCIPLES OF BIBLE TRANSLATION[1]

THE BIBLE TRANSLATION

For the translation of the Bible, Luther availed himself of the enforced leisure at the Wartburg to produce in three months a rendering of the complete New Testament. The Old Testament came later. The German Bible is Luther's noblest achievement, unfortunately untranslatable because every nation has its own direct version. For the Germans, Luther's rendering was incomparable. He leaped beyond the tradition of a thousand years. There had been translations before him of the Scripture into German, reaching back to the earliest transcription of the Gothic tongue by Ulfilas. There were even portions of the Bible translated not from the Latin Vulgate, but from the Hebrew and the Greek. But none had the majesty of diction, the sweep of vocabulary, the native earthiness, and the religious profundity of Luther. "I endeavored," said he, "to make Moses so German that no one would suspect he was a Jew."

The variety of German chosen as a basis was the court tongue of electoral Saxony, enriched from a number of dialects with which Luther had gained some familiarity in his travels. He went to incredible pains to find words. The initial translation did not satisfy him. His New Testament was first published in September, 1522, but he was revising it to the day of his death in 1546. The last printed page on which he ever looked was the proof of the latest revision. The Old Testament was commenced after his return from the Wartburg. The complete translation of the entire Bible did not appear until 1534. This, again, was subject to constant reworking in collaboration with a committee of colleagues.

Luther on occasion achieved the most felicitous rendering at the first throw. At other times he had to labor. In that case he would first make a literal translation in the word order of the original. Then he would take each word separately and gush forth a freshet of

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synonyms. From these he would select those which not only best suited the sense but also contributed to balance and rhythm. All of this would then be set aside in favor of a free rendering to catch the spirit. Finally the meticulous and the free would be brought together. Sometimes he was at a loss for terms and would set out in quest of words. In order to name the precious stones in the twenty-first chapter of Revelation he examined the court jewels of the elector of Saxony. For the coins of the Bible he consulted the numismatic collections in Wittenberg. When he came to describe the sacrifices of Leviticus and needed terms for the inward parts of goats and bullocks, he made repeated trips to the slaughterhouse and inquired of the butcher. The birds and beasts of the Old Testament proved a hard knot. To Spalatin he wrote:

> I am all right on the birds of the night owl, raven, horned owl, tawny owl, screech owl–and on the birds of prey–vulture, kite, hawk, and sparrow hawk. I can handle the stag, roebuck, and chamois, but what in the Devil am I to do with the taragelaphus, pygargus, oryx, and camelopard [names for animals in the Vulgate]?

Another problem was the translation of idioms. Here Luther insisted that the idiom of one language must be translated into the equivalent idiom of the other. He was scornful of the Vulgate translation, "Hail, Mary, full of grace." "What German would understand that if translated literally? He knows the meaning of a purse full of gold or a keg full of beer, but what is he to make of a girl full of grace? I would prefer to say simply, *'Liebe Maria.'* What word is more rich than that word, *'liebe'?"*

There is no doubt that it is a rich word, but its connotations are not precisely the same as "endowed with grace," and Luther did not use the word in his official version. Here is the problem of the translator. Should he use always an indigenous word which may have a particular local connotation? If the French call a centurion a gendarme, and the Germans make a procurator into a burgomaster, Palestine has moved west. And this is what did happen to a degree in Luther's rendering. Judea was transplanted to Saxony, and the road

from Jericho to Jerusalem ran through the Thuringian forest. By nuances and turns of expression Luther enhanced the graphic in terms of the local. When he read, "There is a river, the streams whereof shall make glad the city of God," he envisaged a medieval town begirt with walls and towers, surrounded by a moat through which course a living stream laving with laughter the massive piers.

What the word could not do at this point, the pictures supplied. The Luther Bibles were copiously illustrated, particularly for the earlier portion of the Old Testament and for the book of Revelation in the New Testament. The restriction of illustrations to these portions of the Bible had become a convention in Germany. The Gospels and the epistles were adorned only with initial letters. Why this should have been the case is difficult to see. Certainly there was no objection to illustrating the Gospels; witness Dürer's "Life of Mary," or the woodcuts of the Passion, or Schongauer's, nativities. Within the conventional limits Luther's Bible was richly illustrated. In the various editions to appear during his lifetime there were some five hundred woodcuts. They were not the choicest expressions of the art, but they did Germanize the Bible. Moses and David might almost be mistaken for Frederick the Wise and John Frederick.

An interesting development is to be observed in the illustrations from one artist to another in the successive editions of the Luther Bible, notably from Cranach to Lemberger. One senses something of the transition from the Renaissance to baroque. Compare their renderings of the wrestling of Jacob with the angel. Cranach has a balance of spaces, with decorative background. Lemberger displays strains in tension, with even the trees participating in the struggle.

Unfortunately the illustrations for the book of Revelation were made all too contemporary. The temptation was too strong to identify the pope with Antichrist. In the first edition of the New Testament in September, 1522, the scarlet woman sitting on the seven hills wears the papal tiara. So also does the great dragon. The beast out of the abyss has a monk's cowl. Fallen Babylon is plainly Rome. There is no mistaking the Belvedere, the Pantheon, and the Castelo de St. Angelo. Duke George was so enraged by these pictures that he sent a warm protest to Frederick the Wise. In consequence, in the issue of December,

1522, the tiaras in the woodcuts were chiseled down to innocuous crowns of a single layer, but other details were left unchanged and attracted so little notice that Emser, Luther's Catholic opponent, actually borrowed the blocks from Cranach to illustrate his own Bible. In the New Testament of 1530 Luther introduced an annotation explaining that the frogs issuing from the mouth of the dragon were his opponents, Faber, Eck, and Emser. In the completed edition of the whole Bible in 1534, after Frederick the Wise was dead, the woodcuts were done over and the papal tiaras restored.

DOCTRINAL PROBLEMS IN TRANSLATION

The most difficult task in translating consisted not in making vivid the scenes but in capturing the moods and ideas. "Translating is not an art that everyone can practice. It requires a right pious, faithful, diligent, God-fearing, experienced, practical heart." Luther did not think to add that it requires an instructed head, but he had his ideas about the Bible which in some measure affected alike what he did and what he left undone. He did not attempt any minor harmonization of discrepancies, because trivial errors gave him no concern. If on occasion he could speak of every iota of Holy Writ as sacred, at other times he displayed blithe indifference to minor blemishes, such as an error in quotation from the Old Testament in the New Testament. The Bible for him was not strictly identical with the Word of God. God's Word is the work of redemption in Christ which became concrete in Scripture as God in Christ became incarnate in the flesh; and as Christ by the incarnation was not denuded of human characteristics, so the Scripture as the medium of the Word was not divested of human limitations. Hence Luther was not subject to the slightest temptation to accommodate a gospel citation from the prophets to the text of the Old Testament. No more was he concerned to harmonize the predictions of Peter's denial with the accounts of the denial itself.

But when doctrinal matters were involved, the case was different. Luther read the New Testament in the light of the Pauline message that the just shall live by faith and not by works of the law. That this doctrine is not enunciated with equal emphasis throughout the

New Testament and appears to be denied in the book of James did not escape Luther, and in his preface to the New Testament of 1522 James was stigmatized as "an epistle of straw." Once Luther remarked that he would give his doctor's beret to anyone who could reconcile James and Paul. Yet he did not venture to reject James from the canon of Scripture, and on occasion earned his own beret by effecting a reconciliation. "Faith," he wrote, "is a living, restless thing. It cannot be inoperative. We are not saved by works; but if there be no works, there must be something amiss with faith." This was simply to put a Pauline construction upon James. The conclusion was a hierarchy of values within the New Testament. First Luther would place the Gospel of John, then the Pauline epistles and First Peter, after them the three other Gospels, and in a subordinate place Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation. He mistrusted Revelation because of its obscurity. "A revelation," said he, "should be revealing.'

These presuppositions affected the translation but slightly. Yet occasionally an overly Pauline turn is discernible. There is the famous example where Luther rendered "justification by faith" as "justification by faith alone." When taken to task for this liberty, he replied that he was not translating words but ideas, and that the extra word was necessary in German in order to bring out the force of the original. Through all the revisions of his lifetime he would never relinquish that word "alone." In another instance he was more flexible. In 1522 he had translated the Greek words meaning "by the works of the law" with German words meaning "by the merit of works." In 1527 he substituted a literal rendering. That must have hurt. He was an honest workman, and successive revisions of the New Testament were marked by a closer approximation to the original. And yet there were places where Luther's peculiar views, without any inaccuracy, lent a nuance to the rendering. In the benediction, "The peace of God, which passeth all understanding," Luther translated, The peace which transcends all reason." One cannot exactly quarrel with that. He might better have said, "which surpasses all comprehension," but he was so convinced of the inadequacy of human reason to scale the heavenly heights that he could not but see here a confirmation of his supreme aversion.

If the New Testament was for Luther a Pauline book, the Old Testament was a

Christian book. Only the ceremonial law of the Jews was abrogated. The moral law was still valid because it was in accord with the law of nature. But more significant than the ethic was the theology. The Old Testament foreshadowed the drama of redemption. Adam exemplified the depravity of man. Noah tasted the wrath of God, Abraham was saved by faith, and David exhibited contrition. The preexistent Christ was working throughout the Old Testament, speaking through the mouths of the prophets and the psalmist. A striking witness to the Christological interpretation of the Old Testament current in Luther's day is to be found in the illustrations of his Bible. Among the hundreds of woodcuts the only portrayal of the nativity of Jesus is located not in the Gospels, where one would expect to find it, but on the title page to Ezekiel. Reading the Old Testament in this fashion Luther could not well escape Christianizing shades of meaning. The "loving-kindness of the Lord" became "grace"; the "Deliverer of Israel" became "the Saviour"; and "life" was rendered "eternal life." That was why Bach could treat the Sixteenth Psalm as an Easter hymn.

Luther's liberties were greatest with the Psalms because here he was so completely at home. They were the record of the spiritual struggles through which he was constantly passing. The favorite words of his *Anfechtungen* could not be excluded. Where the English version of Ps. 90 speaks of "secret sins" Luther has "unrecognized sins." He was thinking of his fruitless efforts in the cloister to recall every wrongdoing, that it might be confessed and pardoned. Where the English translates, "So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom," Luther is blunt: "Teach us so to reflect on death that we may be wise."

Luther so lived his way into the Psalms that he improved them. In the original the transitions are sometimes abrupt and the meaning not always plain. Luther simplified and clarified. When he came to a passage which voiced his wrestlings in the night watches, he was free to paraphrase. Take his conclusion to the Seventy-third Psalm.

> My heart is stricken and my bones fail, that I must be a fool and know nothing, that I must be as a beast before thee. Nevertheless I will ever cleave to thee. Thou holdest me by thy right hand and leadest me by thy counsel. Thou will

> crown me at last with honor. If only I have that, I will not ask for earth or heaven. When body and soul fail me, thou art ever God, my heart's comfort and my portion.

Ile Bible, just as it stood in Luther's rendering, was a great educational tool; but more was needed, obviously for children but also for adults, who were almost equally ignorant. The children should be taught at church, at school, and at home; and to that end pastors, teachers, and parents should receive prior training. Hence Luther's plea that Catholic schools be replaced by municipal schools with a system of compulsory education including religion. " The Scripture cannot be understood without the languages," argued Luther, "and the languages can be learned only in school. If parents cannot spare their children for a full day, let them send them for a part. I would wager that in half of Germany there are not over four thousand pupils in school. I would like to know where we are going to get pastors and teachers three years from now.

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