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Luther on Translating the Bible

MARY JANE HAEMIG

And why should I talk so much about translating? If I were to point out the reasons and considerations back of all my words, I should need a year to write on it. I have learned by experience what an art and what a task translating is. Therefore I will tolerate no papal ass or mule to be my judge or critic, for they have never tried it....

This I can testify with a good conscience—I gave it my utmost in care and effort 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.... And I am more plentifully repaid, if even a single Christian acknowledges me as an honest workman.¹

So wrote Martin Luther in 1530. The church reformer, theologian, exegete, pastor, teacher, and counselor, was also a skilled—and combative—translator of the Bible. Luther completed his translation of the New Testament while at the Wartburg and saw it published in 1522. He then proceeded, with the help of his colleagues in Wittenberg, to translate the books of the Old Testament, publishing

¹Martin Luther, *On Translating: An Open Letter* (1530), in *Luther's Works*, vol. 35, ed. E. Theodore Bachmann (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1960) 193. Subsequent references to this letter and Luther's *Defense of the Translation of the Psalms* (note 3) will be referenced in the text of this essay (as *LW* 35) rather than in notes.

Martin Luther—reformer, theologian, exegete, pastor, teacher, and counselor—was also a skilled translator. His defense of his translation of Rom 3:28 (“by faith alone”) and of several psalms provides insight into the principles that guided his translation and continue to inform the difficult and necessary work of translation.

them as they were completed. The complete Bible, including the Apocrypha, was available by 1534.² His translation had lasting influence, and it is worth paying attention to what Luther said about translating. Not only do we learn something about Luther's translations of the Bible and their historical and theological importance, we also are led to reflect generally on the translating, use, and understanding of biblical texts today.

LUTHER'S GUIDELINES FOR TRANSLATING

Martin Luther discussed and defended his translation of the Bible. *On Translating: An Open Letter* (LW 35:181–202) was a defense of his translation of Rom 3:28. Critics had attacked Luther for adding the word *sola* (alone) to the verse. While defending his translation of this verse, Luther made a number of general comments about the translating task. Luther also made some sarcastic comments directed at his critics, informing them tartly that if they didn't want to read it, they didn't have to. He sharply criticized his papist opponents, noting that he could do what they could not, namely, expound Scripture, translate, read, and pray. In his *Defense of the Translation of the Psalms*³ Luther dealt with a number of individual issues in the translation of the psalms. Repeatedly, Luther explained why he and his colleagues chose to translate a certain way rather than follow rabbinic precedent or another previous interpreter. Both pieces set forth the overall principles that guided Luther's translation of the Bible. These are enumerated below.

Make the text speak the language of the people

This is the principle most people remember when considering Luther's translation of the Bible. Luther wanted the Bible to speak the language of the people—in his case, German—and thus to convey the Bible's message to all.

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. (LW 35:189)

Luther's translation was more successful than previous translations of the Bible into German because it spoke German, that is, it did not sound like Latin or Hebrew translated into German but rather sounded like German.

Luther's concern for making the text speak German went far beyond merely using German words that were widely and commonly known. Luther also recognized that languages had peculiarities that had to be respected in translation. In *On Translating*, he defended his decision to add the word "alone" to his translation of

²See, for example, the description in Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: The Preservation of the Church 1532–1546*, trans. James L. Schaaf (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993). See chapter IV, "Completing the Translation of the Bible," 95–113.

³Martin Luther, *Defense of the Translation of the Psalms* (1531) in LW 35:209–223.

Rom 3:28: “We hold that a man is justified without the works of the law, by faith alone.” Luther acknowledged that the word “alone” (*sola*) is not in the Greek or Latin text—“the papists did not have to teach me that.” Luther argued that adding the word conveyed the sense of the text, that “it belongs there if the translation is to be clear and vigorous” (*LW* 35:188). He continued:

I wanted to speak German, not Latin or Greek, since it was German I had undertaken to speak in the translation. But 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 *solum* (*allein*) along with the word *nicht* [not] or *kein* [no]. For example, we say, “The farmer brings *allein* grain and *kein* money”; “No, really I have now *nicht* money, but *allein* grain”; “I have *allein* eaten and *nicht* yet drunk”; “Did you *allein* write it, and *nicht* read it over?” There are innumerable cases of this kind in daily use. (*LW* 35:189)

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Luther expressed similar thoughts in 1531 when defending his translation of Ps 68.

But what is the point of needlessly adhering so scrupulously and stubbornly to words which one cannot understand anyway? Whoever would speak German must not use Hebrew style. Rather he must see to it—once he understands the Hebrew author—that he concentrates on the sense of the text, asking himself, “Pray tell, what do the Germans say in such a situation?” Once he has the German words to serve the purpose, let him drop the Hebrew words and express the meaning freely in the best German he knows. (*LW* 35:213–214)

Martin Luther, son of a miner, preacher to the people of Wittenberg, and teacher of many students from humble circumstances, wanted the Bible to speak to ordinary people, not just to the learned or religious.

Be faithful to the text and strive for accuracy

On the other hand, Luther recognized that sometimes it was important to follow the exact wording of the text. He maintained, “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” (*LW* 35:194). Citing his translation of John 6:27 as an example, Luther continued, “But I preferred to do violence to the German language rather than to depart from the word” (*LW* 35:194).

In his *Defense of the Translation of the Psalms*, Luther acknowledged the necessity sometimes to translate quite literally in order to capture the force of certain ideas. He said that sometimes “we...translated quite literally—even though we

could have rendered the meaning more clearly another way—because everything turns on these very words” (LW 35:216). He cited the example of Ps 68:18, “Thou hast ascended on high; thou hast led captivity captive,” commenting that

it would have been good German to say, “Thou hast set the captives free.” But this is too weak, and does not convey the fine, rich meaning of the Hebrew, which says literally, “Thou hast led captivity captive.” This does not imply merely that Christ freed the captives, but also that he captured and led away the captivity itself, so that it never again could or would take us captive again. (LW 35:216)

In defending his translation of Ps 91:5–6, “You will not fear the terror of the night, nor the arrow that flies by day, nor the pestilence that stalks in darkness, nor the destruction that wastes at noonday,” Luther admits that he “stuck to the Hebrew” for good reason:

Since they are expressed in obscure and veiled words, one man might well interpret differently from another these four torments or misfortunes which a righteous person must endure for God’s sake. Therefore we tried to leave room for each person to understand them according to the gifts and measure of his spirit. Otherwise we would have rendered them in such a way as to give fuller expression to our own understanding of the meaning. (LW 35:216–217)

Meaning has priority over words

Luther made clear that his primary guideline in translating was a theological viewpoint. Words flow from meaning, not vice versa. Linguistic and literary considerations were secondary to theological considerations. Luther knew the central message of the Bible and translated individual texts from that standpoint. In explaining his translation of Rom 3:28, he wrote:

Now I was not relying on and following the nature of the languages alone, however, when, in Romans 3[:28] I inserted the word *solum* (alone). Actually the text itself and the meaning of St. Paul urgently require and demand it. For in that very passage he is dealing with the main point of Christian doctrine, namely, that we are justified by faith in Christ without any works of the law. (LW 35:195)

While defending his translation of the Psalms, Luther also pointed out that meaning trumped other considerations. For example, in defending his translation of Ps 65:8, he explained:

[W]e formerly translated, “Thou makest joyful those who go out both early and late.” We have clarified this to read, “Thou makest joyful all that go about their business, both morning and evening.” That is to say, it is thy gift that all living creatures, both men and animals, arise in the morning at perfect peace, and each goes joyfully forth to his tasks and to his work...and at evening, likewise all come home again with singing and lowing. In short, this psalm praises God for peace and prosperity. (LW 35:212)

Luther then commented:

No one should be surprised if here and in similar passages we occasionally differ from the rabbis and grammarians. For we 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 of the rabbis into accepting a different inferior meaning. For this is what all schoolmasters teach, that words are to serve and follow the meaning, and not the meaning the words. (LW 35:213)

Luther makes the same point concerning other Psalms, for example, “Again in Psalm 68 we ran quite a risk, relinquishing the words and rendering the sense” (LW 35:213).

Translating is difficult and can be controversial

Luther was aware of previous interpretations of texts and aware that his translations could and often did set him at odds with these. He knew that his translations, which centered on meaning, might arouse controversy. He made this clear, for example, in the first paragraph of his *Defense of the Translation of the Psalms*:

But because a number of good, devout persons who know the languages but are not versed in translating...might possibly find it offensive or take exception to the fact that at many places we have departed rather freely from the letter of the original and at times even followed an interpretation different from that taught by the Jewish rabbis and grammarians, we shall herewith give our reasons and clarify them with several examples—so they will see that in so translating we have not acted out of a misunderstanding of the languages nor out of ignorance of the rabbinical commentaries, but knowingly and deliberately. (LW 35:209)

At several points in his *Defense*, Luther explicitly criticizes the interpretations of the rabbis, as well as the “grammarians” and even St. Bernard (1090–1153) (LW 35:217). His awareness of these authorities suggests that he did not depart lightly from them but did so when he felt it necessary.

Luther was humble enough to admit that he could have made mistakes—and smart enough to seek help from his colleagues to minimize the possibility of mistakes and improve future editions

Luther knew all too well that translation was a difficult task. He reported that “it has often happened that for two or three or four weeks we have searched and inquired for a single word and sometimes not found it even then. In translating Job, Master Philip [Melanchthon], [Matthew] Aurogallus, and I labored so, that sometimes we scarcely handled three lines in four days. Now that it is translated and finished, everybody can read and criticize it” (LW 35:188).

Luther, obviously wearied by criticism of his work, invited anyone who could do a better job to try translating. He suspected that there “will not be much German or Hebrew left in them” (LW 35:221). He criticized other translators for stealing his words (for example, LW 35:221). He was also humble enough to admit that

he could have made mistakes—and smart enough to seek help from his colleagues in order to minimize the possibility of mistakes and improve future editions. He bluntly rebuked his critics:

Now because we extolled the principle of at times retaining the words quite literally, and at times rendering only the meaning, these critics will undoubtedly try out their skill also at this point. First and foremost they will criticize and contend that we have not applied this principle rightly, or at the right time—although they never knew anything about such a principle before. Yes they are the type who, the moment they hear about something, immediately know it better than anyone else. (*LW* 35:222)

Luther invited his critics to try translating themselves:

Let all the experts and know-it-alls pool their skill, in order at least to see that actually doing the translation is a wholly different art and task from that of simply criticizing and finding fault with someone else's translation. Whoever does not like our translation can just leave it alone. By it we are serving our own, and those who do like it. (*LW* 35:223)

For Luther, translating was not simply an intellectual task or a linguistic and/or literary skill. He commented that it “is not every man's skill as the mad saints imagine.” Accurate translation required a proper understanding of the Bible's message. Luther asserted, “It [translating] requires a right, devout, honest, sincere, God-fearing, Christian, trained, informed, and experienced heart. Therefore I hold that no false Christian or factious spirit can be a decent translator” (*LW* 35:194).

THE IMPACT OF LUTHER'S TRANSLATIONS

Contrary to popular belief, Luther was not the first person to translate the Bible into German. At least fourteen translations of the Bible into German appeared in print prior to the publication of Luther's translation of the New Testament (1522). Luther's translation was memorable and successful because it was far better than previous translations from scholarly, linguistic, and literary standpoints. From a scholarly standpoint, he translated from the Greek and Hebrew, whereas previous translations had translated from the Latin Vulgate. It is well known that Luther first translated the New Testament during his stay at the Wartburg. What is less well known is that Luther used the skills of his Wittenberg colleagues to ensure his biblical translations were linguistically accurate. Philip Melanchthon reviewed his translation of the New Testament and suggested changes. A team of his Wittenberg colleagues—among them Matthew Aurogallus, Justus Jonas, Caspar Cruciger, and Melanchthon—assisted Luther in the translation of the Old Testament (1523–1534).

From a literary standpoint, Luther made the Bible speak German in a way that was understandable to readers and listeners in his time. His creative and memorable use of language also caused his German Bible to shape the German lan-

guage. His Bible translation, standing in the midst of German regional dialects, aided the move toward a common German tongue. It also influenced the words and expressions of the German language. Distinctive expressions that came into common use in Germany can be traced to Luther's Bible.

Luther's translation was memorable and successful because it was far better than previous translations from scholarly, linguistic, and literary standpoints

Most importantly, Luther's translation was superior and had an impact because it clearly conveyed a theological viewpoint. Luther knew what the central message of the Bible was. And—because “words follow meaning”—he did not hesitate to shape his translation so that the words indeed followed the message as Luther understood it.

Luther's translation soon created competitors. Roman Catholic authorities, both secular and ecclesiastical, were very concerned about the fact that Roman Catholic clergy and laity were using Luther's translation of the Bible. They acted to provide German Catholics with an appropriate Bible translation. But they flattered Luther—taking Luther's translation, they cut out the prefaces and changed the translation in some key places. German Catholics unwittingly read a version of Luther's Bible.

Luther's translation spurred and led a movement across Europe for New Testaments and then full Bibles in the languages of the peoples. In many cases translators consulted Luther's translation into German for help in translating the Greek and Hebrew into their own languages. William Tyndale (1494–1536), “widely acknowledged as the most formative influence on the text of the King James Bible,” admired Luther's translation work.⁴ Another example: Michael Agricola's (1510–1557) translation of the New Testament into Finnish (printed in 1548) “used the Greek text as his basis but the translation by Luther as a guide.”⁵

Not enough Germans were literate in the first half of the sixteenth century to make translating (and printing) the Bible for private use a viable enterprise. Mark U. Edwards Jr. has noted that those who purchased Bibles were only a small fraction of the German-speaking population. “But most people would have been influenced by Luther's translation only through preached sermons and oral readings from Scripture.”⁶ Luther knew he had to produce a Bible that was accessible to both the literate and the illiterate. So his translation featured short, clear sentences,

⁴Alistair McGrath, *In the Beginning: The Story of the King James Bible and How It Changed a Nation, a Language, and a Culture* (New York: Doubleday, 2001) 67.

⁵Harry Lenhammer, “Agricola, Michael,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation*, ed. Hans J. Hillerbrand, 4 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996) 1:11.

⁶Mark U. Edwards Jr., *Printing, Propaganda, and Martin Luther* (Berkeley: University of California, 1994) 128.

hard-hitting expressions, and readily understandable words. It was meant to be read aloud—and, by implication, communally.

Luther did not simply translate the Bible. He also provided aids to help ordinary people understand the Bible. He wrote prefaces to the Old and New Testaments and to the individual books of the Bible. These focused on the central points of each writing. Read through some of the prefaces translated and available in *Luther's Works* (volume 35). They assist us in studying the Bible even today. Luther also provided marginal glosses to explain key terms. Through these means, Luther sought to encourage engagement with the Bible. It is often forgotten that Luther considered his *Small Catechism* as both introduction to and summary of the Bible. Its “three chief parts”—the Ten Commandments, Apostles’ Creed, and Lord’s Prayer—contained everything the Christian needed to know. That is, the Ten Commandments tell us how God wants us to live, the Apostles’ Creed tell us what God has done for us, and the Lord’s Prayer teaches us how to talk to this God. For Luther, this was the Bible’s basic content, and knowing these gave anyone basic orientation for understanding the whole Bible.

SOME THOUGHTS FOR TODAY

Today we have a plethora of Bible translations. It seems that every few years another group of scholars produces a translation claiming to be the Bible in today’s language and/or a “more accurate” translation of the Bible. Many of these efforts cite Luther as model or precedent. But many forget that, for Luther, linguistic accuracy, though important, was not primary. Yes, Luther wanted to achieve an accurate translation. He sought help from people with careful and thorough knowledge of the languages. But Luther was acutely aware that each translation is ultimately grounded in a theological viewpoint. No translation of the Bible truly meets standards of “objectivity” and “lack of bias” that some have claimed. Luther acknowledged—and even celebrated—his own theological standpoint and its impact on his translation.

For Luther, the purpose of translation is to let God’s word speak clearly. Translation is not primarily or only a scholarly, linguistic, or literary achievement. It is successful when it clearly communicates God’s word. Translation is only a beginning! It is never an end in itself, but intended to facilitate engagement with God’s Word, Jesus Christ. ⊕

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