

Anglican-Lutheran Society Conference
16th-20th September 2011
“THE WORD PREACHED – THE WORD READ”
Salisbury, Wiltshire, UK

MARTIN LUTHER’S TRANSLATION OF THE BIBLE
Professor Dr Dorothea Wendebourg (Humbolt University, Berlin)

Martin Luther’s translation of the Bible has neither been the first nor the last German translation of this fundamental book. But none of the earlier or later translations has, to this very day, reached the same spread and importance. This is true for church life and theology as well as for the German language and culture. Let me just to say a few words about this second dimension, before I come to the first one which will be the focus of my paper. This short survey will touch upon four points, namely language, literacy, music, and literature.

It is sometimes stated that Luther, by his translation of the Bible, created the modern German language. Literally speaking, this is not true. He used a version of the German language which had been there before him, the version current at the court and in the administration of Saxony, his native Electorate. The Saxon German was a kind of middle version between the Northern, Lower German and the Southern, Upper German, which could be understood by the people all over the Holy Roman Empire. Through the wide spread of Luther’s translation this version of German became the normative language of all protestant territories of the Empire and finally of all of Germany and other German speaking groups and lands. Thus he was not the creator of the German language, but of a unified German language – without it there would have been a linguistic diversification as in the relationship of Dutch and German. Thus one could say Luther’s translation of the Bible became the starting point of the Reformation as a movement of linguistic unification.

The purpose of Luther’s translation was that the Bible should be accessible to as many people as possible. Therefore as many people as possible should be able to read it – in order to read it to fellow Christians or to read it for themselves. Thus this translation in Germany became the starting point of the Reformation as a movement of founding schools for everybody, which finally led to compulsory school-attendance in Lutheran territories of the Holy Roman Empire before this was taken up in other regions.

According to Luther, the Biblical message was meant to be received and spread not only through reading and preaching, but also through singing. Therefore shortly after publishing the translation of the New Testament and of several Psalms, he began to create biblical hymns which were supposed to be integral parts of the mass as well as to be sung at home. These hymns, starting with so-called Psalm-hymns which Luther invented as a new poetic genre, were quickly followed by similar creations of other authors, and other branches of the Reformation like the Genevan one took up the same idea. The precondition in all these cases was the Biblical text in the vernacular in which the new hymns were deeply soaked. For the Lutheran church this meant they were steeped in the language of Luther`s translation. The same is true of the rich stream of Biblical music that was to characterize the Lutheran tradition in the centuries to come, to name only Heinrich Schütz, Johann Sebastian Bach, Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy or Johannes Brahms. Thus Luthers`s translation of the Bible became the starting point for the Reformation as a movement of singing.

By his translation of the Bible Luther brought his language to a new level in terms of vocabulary, syntax, and poetic quality – so much so, that all later translation, including those of his counter Reformation adversaries, were heavily indebted to it. In fact, he became the most influential writer in the German language to this very day. And the language of his translation became the language of German literature in the centuries to come. Goethe, Schiller, Friedrich Nietzsche, Thomas Mann, and Bert Brecht, to mention just a few examples, were all strongly impregnated by it. So it was no wonder, when the German protestant churches a few decades ago produced a rather clumsy modernisation of Luther`s translations, there was an outcry not only among the faithful, but also from poets and experts on literature and poetry – their accusation being nothing less than “murdering Luther”. In fact, they had their way, the churches revised their revision. Thus Luthers`s translation of the Bible became the starting point for the Reformation as a literary movement.

*

But now let us turn to Luther`s translation of the Bible as a spiritual and theological endeavour. I want to do this in three parts: First I shall delineate the story of Luther`s translation of the Bible, then I shall portray the manner and hermeneutical principles of this translation, and finally I shall say something about its theology.

1) The story of Luther`s translation of the Bible

As I have already mentioned, there were German translations of the Bible before Luther, just like translations into other vernacular languages in other countries. The late Middle Ages had seen several Bible movements which championed vernacular Bibles like the Valdensians, the Lollards, or the Hussites. They had all been declared heretical, and their Bibles shared this verdict. But there were also translations produced within the acknowledged church, particularly in France and in the Holy Roman Empire – in fact, in Germany 18 complete Bibles and a whole range of parts of the Bible in the vernacular were printed before the Reformation, the highest number of any Christian country at the time, which was boosted not least by Erasmus of Rotterdam and his humanistic followers. Obviously there was a desire to get to know the Bible – and this desire may well be one of the reasons for the success of the Reformation. For it met with little approval of the hierarchy. The laity was considered unfit to understand the holy book, particularly the female laity, unfit intellectually because they were not trained to understand it, but also unfit morally because reading the Bible by oneself without the guidance of the hierarchy would lead to disobedience and sedition. You know these arguments from English church history. They were the same on the other side of the channel.

The discouragement of lay Bible reading by the official church, the poor quality of the existing translations, and last but not least the high price of Bible prints, all led to the result that even in a country with a relatively high output of vernacular Bibles most people did not know this book. In fact, Luther himself reported that he was a 20 years old student when he saw a whole Bible for the first time in his life. Before that he had been convinced, like most of his contemporaries, that the Bible consisted only of those texts which were regularly read in church service. At the time he saw nothing wrong in this situation. Fifteen years later he found it scandalous. Now he blamed the hierarchy of putting the Bible “under the bank” and withholding from Christians their most basic right. For the right to hear and read the Word of God without restriction was nothing less than the implication of its central message, justification through Christ alone by grace alone in faith alone. It was the basic right embodied in the priesthood of all believers. The consequence was clear: The Word of God had to be made hearable and readable in those languages people understood. For most Christians that was not Latin, but the vernacular.

As regards his profession, Luther was not destined to do the translation work himself. It might well have turned out as it did in the case of Erasmus who advocated lay Bible reading and vernacular Bibles, but himself only wrote in Latin. After all, the field of Luther`s professional life was an environment where Latin was the current language, the convent of the Augustinian Hermits and the university of Wittenberg, where he, as a Bible professor, had to give lectures on

Biblical books. Thus Luther's first editions of Biblical texts were emended editions of parts of the Latin Bible which he produced on the basis of the Greek or Hebrew text. Equally the first works from his own pen all appeared in Latin, since they were part of an academic discussion.

But for two reasons his life opened up to the wider, German speaking public. First, soon after becoming professor in the Saxon capital, Luther was nominated regular preacher at St. Mary's, the central city church. He also had to hear confession in the church's confessional. Thus he got into intensive contact with ordinary people. Out of this contact came a growing concern with these people's religious life and spiritual problems. Therefore a couple of years later Luther started, besides his academic lectures and publication, to write spiritual treatises for average Christians, treatises on preparation for death, on penance, baptism, Holy communion – and naturally he did so in German. Second, Luther had the astonishing experience that some of his academic writings did not remain academic, but were immediately translated into the vernacular and sold out in an instant all over the country. That was the case, for example, with his famous 95 theses on indulgence, which were to become the trigger of the Reformation. Obviously he touched upon the religious nerve of the public, and obviously he possessed not only the spiritual and theological, but also the linguistic talent to do so. Thus his work as a translator more or less naturally grew out of this pastoral work. People needed the Bible. They did not have it or only in bad and often contradictory translations. Luther sat down to bring forth a better one.

The first part of Luther's translation of the Bible, that of the New Testament, was produced under peculiar circumstances. It happened while the monk sat, disguised as a knight, in the Wartburg Castle, sheltered by his prince from the persecution by Pope and Emperor. During those ten months of hiding he wrote a lot, but he was also in clandestine contact with his colleague and friend in Wittenberg, Philipp Melanchthon. Thus he was kept informed about the rather wild course the Reformation was taking in his city and university. He even went there secretly to have a look for himself. On that occasion Melanchthon told him that a decisive reason for the tumultuous course of the Reformation was that there was no clear knowledge of Holy Scriptures. The Pauline letters, most of all, were an object of continuous misinterpretation and controversy. The knight-monk had to help. Luther demanded a copy of Erasmus' edition of the Greek New Testament as well as Greek and Hebrew grammar books, and returned to the castle to do the work. It took him eleven weeks, starting in December 1521 and finishing by the end of February 1522. The German New Testament appeared on the book market in September, which is why it is called the Septembertestament. The print did not carry the name of the translator, but everybody knew it had to be Luther. The book was rejected or outright forbidden by several princes who were opposed to the Reformation. At the same time even they could not but admit its quality and

appeal. One of Luther's fiercest enemies among the princes wished that he would soon finish to translate the whole Bible and then go to hell! However, the greatest, though unwilling compliment, was that his opponents, feeling the need to counterbalance his translation by one of their own, could not but heavily lean upon Luther's work. On the side of the Reformers, Ulrich Zwingli in Zurich, who soon afterwards published a translation for his region, also used the Septembertestament, but he adapted the language to his native Swiss German.

The Septembertestament is the first translation of the New Testament into any vernacular language done on the basis of Erasmus' Greek edition. Thus Luther used the ultimate edition on an academic, historical-critical level at the time. Yet he did not rely only on this text, he also took advantage of Erasmus' Latin translation and philological annotations. Also he obviously presupposed the Latin Vulgate text simply because he knew it to a large extent by heart. For the translation of the Old Testament which was begun immediately afterwards, the starting point was also the text in its original language, in this case Hebrew – although we do not know which edition was used – together with the Vulgata. Yet this work could not be done so quickly – it was not finished before 1532, together with the Apocrypha in 1534. And this work could not be done by Luther alone. In fact, the translation of the Old Testament was real teamwork. Luther used to prepare a first draft which was then looked through by several linguistically trained colleagues, especially by Melancthon, and an expert on Hebrew. Often the group debated endlessly, until everybody was satisfied in terms of content, expression, and style. As he wrote to a friend, at times they had to consult specialists on certain topics that were dealt with in the Bible. For example, they went to a butcher in order to find the right terminology for the different bodily parts of animals in the sacrificial laws of the Pentateuch. Once Luther visited a jeweller to look at his gems in order to find the right words for their shades and sparkles, when they had to translate the description of the garments of the High priest. As the result showed, such a procedure was worth the effort, but it took time: "It happened several times, that for a fortnight, even for three or four weeks we searched for a single word and still did not find it," Luther wrote in retrospect. And he continued: "Now, since the translation is finished and the text reads so smoothly without any stumbles, nobody realizes any more which rocks and blocks were lying on our way. Where every reader now is able to walk like on a planed board, we had to sweat and worry before we cleared away those rocks and blocks." The work, which after all was done besides a lot of other duties, took so long that Ulrich Zwingli, who had started later, overtook the Wittenbergians and had his translation of the Old Testament printed years before them.

Even after the work was finally done and published Luther and his group returned to the text and revised several times, looking again and again for the most appropriate words. From 1531 the

revision work was institutionalized in a regular Collegium Biblicum, a circle of theological and linguistic specialists under Luther's leadership that was responsible for the revisions. Several of their sessions have been taken down on record, so we know the amount of work the Wittenbergians invested in this endeavour. Luther was convinced that this work was the most important part of his theological duties, therefore he kept examining and improving parts of the translation up to his final years. At the end of his life 91 prints of the Bible or parts of it in his translation had appeared in Wittenberg alone, hundreds in other cities and regions, adding up to a total of 430 editions.

2) The manner and hermeneutical principles of Luther's translation of the Bible

In 1530, long after the publication of the Septembertestament, but years before the translation of the Old Testament was finished, Luther gave an account of his translation work and his guiding principles in a short treatise called *Open Letter on Translating (Sendbrief vom Dolmetschen, WA 30/2, 532-646)*. This short treatise was again written in the solitude of a castle, this time the Veste Coburg where the banned heretic had to stay during the Diet of Augsburg 1530. Labouring at the translation of certain psalms he was once again engaged in the difficult task of rendering a text in another language. But the reason he felt challenged to give an account of his translation work was not so much his present occupation with the Old Testament but rather the criticism his translation of the New Testament had met in counter Reformation circles. He was accused of falsifying the text in the interest of his own theology – particularly his translation “justification by faith alone” in Rom. 3,28, where the Greek text only speaks of “justification by faith” met with fierce opposition. Luther's defense was not so much a theological refutation. It was a lecture on what it means to translate, a lecture that reveals the high degree of hermeneutical awareness which underlies Luther's German Bible. He was obviously not just a gifted writer, but an extremely conscientious worker who knew what he was doing. Modern philologists admit that his reflections are not out-of-date even today.

Of the two possibilities between which a translator has to choose, namely to be oriented towards the language of origin or the language of the addressee, Luther decidedly opted for the latter.

Whereas the translations of the Bible which were on the market before his used a language that was Hebrew or Greek in German syllables, his claim was: “I did want to speak German, not Greek or Latin”. In other words, “one does not have to ask the letter of the foreign language how to speak in the vernacular, as did those donkeys who have translated the Bible before and whose products no ordinary German understands.” Rather, “one has to ask the mother in the house, the children on the street, the simple man in the market and to look at their mouths how they speak,

and translate accordingly. Then they shall understand and realize it is German that is spoken to them.”

Such an approach quite often implies that it is necessary to leave behind the wording of the original. In fact, the translator has to grasp the sense of the Greek or Hebrew original and then search for the words in his own language to express it appropriately. “For the words have to serve the meaning, not the meaning the words. Therefore we have in our translation often to let go the words in order to express the sense...Truely, the translator of the old Testament has to make sure he understands the Hebrew man, in order to understand the meaning of the text, and then he has to think: Dear me, how does the German man speak in such a case? If the translator really has the vernacular words, let go the Hebrew words and freely express the meaning in German as well as possible. ” (38,11). Rom. 3,28 is such an example, where another language, in this case Greek, expresses a certain meaning differently than a German does and where it is necessary precisely in order to preserve the original meaning to use more words than the original language; in fact, modern exegetes, independently from their denomination, have long since proven Luther`s translation of that Pauline verse right. Admittedly, such a procedure presupposes not only an excellent knowledge of the foreign language, but also a masterly skill in one`s own. Not least the translator needs a rich vocabulary: “who wants to translate, needs to have a big stock of words, so that he has a choice when one and the same word does not fit in all contexts.”

Yet translating is not only a matter of choosing the right words, it also implies choosing the right style. Luther was well aware that there are different stylistic levels in the Bible. Most books are written in a medium style prose. But there are also passages of poetic language or of outright poetry. Some people say that in these parts of his translation Luther delivered his master pieces. The Christmas narrative, for example, charms believers and agnostic hearers alike. And the translation of the Psalms, Luther`s favourite Biblical book, is itself a book of wonderful poetry. The best test of the quality of his translation are the compositions where German biblical texts are put into music – just listen to the evangelist in Bach`s Passions and Christmas Oratorio or to the Requiem by Brahms, there is not clearer evidence.

One last remark in this part of my paper: There are exceptions to the principal of addressee-orientation in Luther`s translation. At certain points he consciously kept the original wording and transposed it onto German literally although it sounded strange. This intentional alienation was chosen for different reasons: One reason was that in some passages the biblical text could be understood in different ways and Luther did not want to force a fixed interpretation upon the reader by giving a certain German translation. The second reason was that at times the original,

especially the Hebrew original, seemed to him richer and more expressive than all possible vernacular equivalents, therefore he consciously created Hebraisms in German in order to keep this richness. Thirdly, where a story or a message required not everyday language, but a sacral style Luther created such a style by imitating the respective wording of the Greek or Hebrew original. And fourthly, he stuck to the original by way of literal translation in order to signal that a certain Biblical word or phrase expresses something specific which does not have an equivalent in German language and life. This applies, for example, to Christological passages (e.g. Romans 3,21: ἰλαστήριον or John 6,27: εσφραγισεν). Here the vernacular mind and language had to be adapted to the Biblical mode of thinking and speaking, not vice versa. All in all these are rare cases and they only work because they are rare. But they are significant.

3. The theology of Luther`s translation of the Bible

Translation always implies interpretation. Unavoidably there is a measure of decision in choosing one`s words, style and syntactic combinations. To do this in a way that itself is guided by the translated text makes the difference between responsible and arbitrary translation. *The Letter on Translating* shows that Luther was aware of this problem and that he took it on consciously. His aim was that the Bible was understood in a certain way, the right way as he was convinced. For that reason he translated it the way he did. But he did more than that. Instead of simply having the translation printed by itself, he added hundreds of marginal notes to the text. And he added a preface to every Biblical book. Here he offered to the reader access to each part of the Bible, and he described the historical contexts, explained difficult thoughts and images – for instance in the prophets or in the apocalyptic books and passages - laid out the main arguments and warned against wrong interpretations. These prefaces are quite different among themselves, as are the Biblical books they prelude. Yet they are held together by a common focus which in Luther`s eyes makes the Bible one book after all. This common focus, the “center of Scriptures” (Mitte der Schrift) is Christ as the Redeemer who saves humankind out of mere grace through faith. Reading the Bible appropriately means reading it in this light. Negatively speaking this means that whatever contradicts this focus has a questionable right to be part of Holy Scriptures. Luther`s translation of the Bible is a revolutionary book not only because of the quality of the translation proper, but also because of its clear focus and its critical force, including some candid judgements on the traditional Biblical canon.

The most important of the prefaces inserted in the translation are the preface to the New Testament as a whole and the preface to Paul`s letter to the Romans. What is significant about the first one is, above all, its function. It is at the same time the preface to the entire New Testament and to the gospels, all of them together. For it is Luther`s theological thesis that there is just one

gospel, one εὐαγγέλιον, not four, and that this one gospel occurs all over the Bible. In other words, εὐαγγέλιον does not primarily mean a literary genre, it does not even mean a written text, but it means “good message, good news, good tidings, good yelling, about which one sings, tells, and is happy.” This good news appears in many shapes throughout the Bible, from God’s word to the serpent in Genesis 3 and to Abraham in Genesis 22, through the prophets right into the so-called New Testament. Its centre is the “message of Christ, God’s and David’s son, true God and true man, who through his death and resurrection has conquered sin, death, and hell for all who believe in him.” In one biblical book this message is encapsulated in a short, sometimes indirect promise like in the Old Testament verses mentioned; in another one it is set out in theological explanations like in Paul; and in other cases again it is put before us in long narratives, namely in the four gospels. Yet it is decisive to understand that the centre of the Biblical message is not a written set of stories or doctrines as such, but a communication of God’s love aimed at being received in faith – the Gospel, the euangelion. It is this programmatic usage, by the way, which made the word “evangelium” a key word in Western languages and the adjective “evangelical” the principal term by which the adherents of the Reformation were to characterize themselves.

According to Luther it is the Apostle Paul who brings out this soteriological, faith-oriented thrust of the gospel most clearly, particularly in his letter to the Romans. In his preface to this letter he calls it “the true capital piece of the New Testament and the purest gospel, worth not only to be known by heart word by word, but also to be used every day as a Christian’s daily bread of the soul.” Thus the letter to the Romans serves as a “light” in which the whole of Scripture is to be understood. As a consequence, Luther’s preface to the letter to the Romans is not only one of the longest, but also the theologically deepest in his translation of the Bible. The reader is provided here with a short summary of Christian theology, a kind of basic dogmatics: Law, sin, grace, faith, justice, flesh, spirit – all these basic biblical categories are unfolded before his eyes in order to enable him to understand Paul’s letter and through it the whole of the Bible.

This is the positive side of Luther’s measuring the Bible with the yardstick of the gospel message. But, as I have mentioned, there is also the critical one. It becomes particularly clear in the preface of the letter of James. Luther refuses to reject this epistle outright as had been done in some circles of the Early church. He admits there are good passages in it. But he cannot regard it as a letter by an Apostle, and that for two reasons which are two sides of the same coin. First, the letter does not preach justification by faith. Second, it does not preach the crucified and risen Christ. It is the consensus of all truly apostolic writings of the Bible that they “treat Christ”. “What does not teach Christ, is not apostolic, even if it were taught by Paul or Peter. Again, what preaches Christ, would be Apostolic, even if it were done by Jude, Hannas, Pilate, and Herod.” In

other words, “apostolic” like “euangelion” is not primarily a historical or literary, but a content-oriented term.

In the same perspective Luther comments on the letter to the Hebrews. For text-critical reasons he considers the letter not as Pauline, but rather as a writing from the time of the next generation. Furthermore, he argues that it was probably not written by one author only, but by different hands. Therefore it is not all on the same theological level. Truly apostolic passages are interwoven with sentences that contradict the apostolic gospel, like the rejection of the possibility of penance after baptism. The standard of distinction is, again, the apostolic gospel.

One would expect that, after such critical remarks about these and other parts of the Bible, Luther would remove them from the canon. But he did not do so. Rather, he followed a different line which he described in an appendix to the preface of the New Testament called *Which are the right and best books of the New Testament*. Here he enumerates several books as the central ones which “show Christ to you and teach you all you need to know for your salvation”, and which provide the standard by which to measure every part of the Scriptures. He is convinced that this standard is evident from an impartial reading of Scripture itself, Scripture thus being its own judge and interpreter (*scriptura sui ipsius interpres*). But if that is clear there is no need to quarrel about books that do not quite pass the judgement. The church can keep them and use them for what they are worth.

So all the traditional parts remain in Luther’s translation of the New Testament. But he changes their order: The letters to the Hebrews and to James which in the Vulgate follow Paul’s letter to Philemon are placed behind the three Johannine letters together with the letter of Jude and the Apocalypse of John. And he does not number them as he does with the other books, the last one which has a number is the third letter of John, number 23. Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation are a package by themselves, included in and excluded from the New Testament at the same time. In his translation of the Old Testament Luther proceeded in a similar way: he singled out all the books that are part of the Septuaginta and the Vulgate, but not of the Hebrew canon. However, he did not – as was the procedure of the Reformed Reformers – cut them off. Rather he placed them, under the name of apocrypha, at the end of his translation and did not number them as he did with the Old Testament books proper. For, as he wrote in the preface, they were “good and useful to read, but not to be put on one level with Holy Scriptures.” In other words, like the last four books of the New Testament they, too, were included in and excluded from the canon at the same time. Which means nothing less than dispensing with the idea of a fixed canon altogether. In fact, the Lutheran Church is the only one which does not have a fixed Biblical canon. For Lutherans it is

perfectly clear, what are the essential parts of the Bible. They see no need to delineate exactly where its borders lie.

*

Martin Luther was well aware of the exceptional quality of his translation. “I am able to interpret the Psalms and the prophets, they [sc. my adversaries] are not. I am able to translate, they are not. I am able to read the Scriptures, they are not,” he wrote in mocking analogy with the apostolic self praise in 2.Cor.11. At the same time he was highly conscious of the limits even of this exceptional work – the continuous revision process demonstrates that clearly. In his eyes these limits were not simply a contingent, personal problem; rather they were of principal nature: “Nobody should think he has tasted Holy Scriptures enough who has not, together with the prophets, guided the churches for a hundred years,” he confessed. It is a strange confession, considering his lifelong intimate relationship with the Bible. But it was the summary of his life, his penultimate sentence before death. There was only one more to come: “We are beggars, truly.” Beggars live on what they receive, not on their own possessions and achievements. This beggar had received a lot – and passed it on generously.