



Reformation's
500-Year Anniversary—2017



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The Bible—Christian Faith's Highest Authority and Guide

New Testament, which was completed in just 11 weeks. After returning to Wittenberg, Luther received the assistance of his colleagues in revising, editing, and polishing his translation. In September of 1522, nine months after Luther had begun his work in Wartburg, his New Testament reached the book market! An estimated 5,000 copies were sold in the first two months at a price equivalent to a half month's salary of Professor Bugenhagen, one of Luther's colleagues (CH; HCC; TSGB).

Next Luther turned to the Old Testament. It was completed in 1534. Though Luther was well-versed in Greek and Hebrew, he saw the necessity of forming a "translation committee," which he referred to as his "Sanhedrin" including such coworkers as Philipp Melancthon, Justus Jonas, John Bugenhagen, and Caspar Cruciger. Luther said, "Translators must never work by themselves. When one is alone, the best and most suitable words do not always occur to him" (CH).

Luther's translation philosophy fell somewhere between literal and free. He wanted the German Bible to be in the spoken rather than in a more formal written German so the commoner could understand the text. He wanted his translation to speak like "the mother in the home, the children on the street, the common man in the marketplace" (OLT).

Luther's translation of the Bible into German was not a first, but differed from earlier German translations, none of which "had the majesty of diction, the sweep of vocabulary, the native earthiness, and the religious profundity of Luther" (HIS).

How it sounded was important to Luther and the translation had to pass the ear test. Luther's approach was one of rendering the spirit of the foreign language into the new language. About translation, Luther said, "In rendering Moses, I make him so German that no one would suspect he was a Jew" (CH).

Luther's German Bible "sounded natural when spoken as well as read, its cadence and readability have made it a popular Bible in Germany to this day" (CH). It is said to even be superior in literary quality to the King James Bible that came later. Yet, regarding crucial passages of doctrinal significance, Luther said, "I have kept to the original quite literally and have not lightly departed from it" (OLT).

Luther also acknowledged that some portions were particularly challenging, "In translating Job, Master Philip, Aurogallus, and I labored so, that sometimes we scarcely handled three lines in four days" (OLT).

Luther was also meticulous in finding the correct terms for the translation. He was not afraid to solicit the help of language scholars and also other experts when searching for specific terms such as names for birds and animals. To properly name the precious stones in Revelation, chapter 21, Lu-

GOD'S WORD has been "written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ."

The roots of the Catholic Church of Luther's day are found in the Christian Church of the early New Testament period. Luther, a monk in the Church, began to see how it had strayed away from the teachings of God's Word from salvation through Christ to the works of man. Nonetheless, living and saving faith had been preserved in the shelter of the Church. Luther himself, in deep distress and despair of conscience, was encouraged and consoled by a fellow monk to put his faith and trust in Christ's redemption work.

The freeing gospel gave new life to Luther but he would also face fierce opposition. Eventually Luther was summoned to the Holy Roman Empire Diet of Worms in 1521 to answer for his writings and teaching and to recant. There God gave him strength to say, "Unless I am refuted and convicted by testimonies of the Scriptures or by clear arguments...I am conquered by the Holy Scriptures quoted by me, and my conscience is bound in the word of God: I can not and will not recant any thing, since it is unsafe and dangerous to do any thing against the conscience" (HCC).

The Holy Scriptures were his defense at the Diet of Worms, but most importantly God's Word was dear because it revealed salvation through Christ to him. Yet for hundreds of years the Catholic Church kept the Scriptures hidden, only available in Latin for the privileged. Luther understood the need for a translation for the commoner and he undertook the task as a service to Christians and for the honor of God through whom he himself was blessed (OLT).

How Did Luther Translate?

Following the Diet of Worms in 1521, Luther was declared a heretic. Territorial ruler, Frederick the Wise protected Luther by arranging to have him "abducted" and sent to Wartburg Castle. There Luther took on the monumental task of translating the



Luther wanted his translation to speak like and be read by "the mother in the home, the children on the street, the common man in the marketplace." (Detail from the cover page of the 1534 edition.)



CH - Life of Martin Luther by Gustav König

Luther and his "Sanhedrin," as he called his Old Testament translation committee.

ther examined the court jewels of the Elector of Saxony. In order to specifically describe inward parts of Old Testament sacrificial animals, Luther inquired of a butcher at a slaughterhouse (HIS).

Luther colorfully described the challenges of making the prophets of the Old Testament speak German, "O God, what a hard and difficult task it is to force these writers, quite against their wills, to speak German. They have no desire to give up their native Hebrew in order to imitate our barbaric German. It is as though one were to force a nightingale to imitate a cuckoo, to give up his own glorious melody for a monotonous song he must certainly hate" (CH).

Luther's Bibles also contained many illustrations, woodcuts by artist Lucas Cranach and others. They also included Luther's prefaces to various books of the Bible and marginal notes, which help the reader better understand the text. Luther's Preface of the Letter to the Romans is one of Luther's most noteworthy writings (TSGB).

Doctrinal portions were of utmost importance. While addressing the papists' criticisms, in his Open Letter on Translating, Luther defends the doctrine of justification with his inclusion of 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" (OLT).

Bible in the Vernacular and the Reformation

With the invention of the printing press in 1440 and its further development in the decades to follow, Luther's translations of the Bible became bestsellers. The novelty of having an affordable book in one's home for the first time made Luther's German Bible a must read even by those who may not have been concerned about matters of the soul.

"Everyone read Luther's new Bible or listened to it being read. Its phrasing became the people's phrasing, its speech patterns their speech patterns...It formed a linguistic rallying point for the formation of the modern German language." This had far-reaching impact on the nation. No other work equals it in uniting several regional dialects into one language (CH).

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The English Bible in Our Vernacular

Martin Luther's emphasis on the Bible being in the language of the people speaks to the purpose of LLC's current study of English Bible translations by a group consisting of the following individuals: Jon Bloomquist, Jim Frantti, and Jouko Haapsaari, John Lehtola, and Keith Waaraniemi. This Bible Translation Evaluation Committee was formed to evaluate English Bible translations seeking to identify one or two translations to recommend as reference and study tools to help us better understand the King James Bible's 17th century English and to assist in foreign mission fields. May God lead and guide in this sensitive and important work.

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