Martin Luther as translator of the Bible

Of those who have translated Scripture into the vernacular Martin Luther (1483-1546) ranks among the best. Whereas Luther himself gave a very modest assessment of his German translation of the Bible, history has shown that the “Luther-Bible” was one of the greatest services which the reformer rendered to the church of Christ. Not only did the German Bible promote the reformation of the church in Germany, but also it became the standard for subsequent translations of Scripture throughout continental Europe and England, thereby furthering the Reformation beyond Luther’s native country. The most influential translator of Scripture into English, William Tyndale, revealed an open debt to Luther’s version. And the Authorized Version, which remains the touchstone for modern English editions, shows several influences of Luther’s German Bible. And yet relatively little attention has been devoted to the principles which guided Martin Luther in his translation of Scripture. Perhaps it will be of interest to Reformed believers concerned about English versions of the Bible used in the home and during the public worship services to know the principles that governed this powerful translation. The purpose of this article is to sketch the theory and practice of Martin Luther’s translation of the Bible into German.

Luther did not publish a systematic exposition on the theory and practice of Bible translation; it was long thought that the reformer had not defined these clearly in his own mind. While Luther did have the opportunity to discuss the translation of certain specific passages in his commentaries, letters and in the “table talks”, it was concluded that he “operated not according to set rules from without but according to precepts guiding him from within.” In recent years, however, scholars have given greater attention to Luther’s German rendering of the Hebrew and Greek Testaments, and have begun to discern Luther’s systematic approach. Thus while the examination of the principles which guided Martin Luther has yet to be completed, several important studies have provided the main lines of investigation. It is clear that Luther did apply carefully considered principles to his translation of Scripture. These principles may be crudely arranged under two headings: theological and linguistic. To make such a division appears somewhat artificial but is not without basis in Luther’s own thinking, as the reformer himself defended his translation of Romans 3:28 with theological and linguistic arguments. In what follows I shall describe briefly some of the theological premises which guided Luther in producing what became the most influential translation of the Reformation. Space prevents treatment of Luther’s thoughts on textual criticism, exegesis and hermeneutics, except insofar as they impinge upon Luther’s translation, as it is translation which appears to be of concern today.

1. Theological considerations

One important theological consideration in translating Scripture into the vernacular is the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. Together with the other reformers, Luther professed that the Bible is the revelation of God to all human beings. In His Word, Luther believed, God speaks directly to everyone who reads it. What is more, God’s revelation is clear and readily understood by all. As priests of God, all believers have the duty to read and apply God’s Word in their lives. The Roman Catholic church, however, had assumed a position between God and man, claiming to be the sole interpreter of God’s Word. And as the majority of Luther’s contemporaries were unable to read for themselves the church-sanctioned Latin Vulgate Bible (let alone the original Hebrew and Greek texts), they trusted the interpretation given by the church. But as Luther and the other reformers well-knew, the Church purposely concealed the clarity of Scripture and obscured the Gospel for its own interests. In fact, it was a restricted group of official expositors which claimed the duty that belonged to every believer. A few men, learned in the original languages of the Bible, had
appropriated a responsibility which was not theirs. By providing a German translation Luther aimed to restore the priesthood of all believers. It is this doctrine which underlies Luther’s statement about the language into which he translated Scripture: “we must inquire about this (i.e. the vernacular) 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.”

Another theological consideration which affected Luther’s translation is the conviction that Scripture is the Gospel. Again in common with the other reformers, Luther believed that the central message of the Bible is the good news of salvation by faith in the death of Jesus Christ. This tenet, which the Roman Catholic church had obscured also, Luther read on every page of the Bible. Accordingly, Luther thought, the message of the Gospel must be revealed whenever the text permits it. Indeed for Luther the foremost meaning of a text was the meaning which most illustrated the “evangel,” or good news, in Scripture. From the opening paragraph of his preface to the Bible onward, Luther insisted, contrary to the Roman Catholic introductions to the Latin Vulgate, that one distinguish between the “laws and commandments” and the “gospel and promises of God.” Luther desired to uncover what the Roman Catholic Church had hidden for generations: the message of God’s grace. Luther realized that the purpose of the Old Testament law is to direct the believer to Christ, Who alone fulfilled the law, and Whose death alone justifies. This central message of Scripture appears not only in Luther’s introductions to the individual books of the Bible and in the marginal notes which accompany the German text, but also in the translation.

Luther’s teaching is frequently summarized as “the theology of the cross;” it would not be far from the mark to say that this teaching permeates also his translation. Some scholars have gone so far as to say that Luther permitted this doctrine to affect the rendering of even those passages which do not point to the cross. To put it differently, Luther’s translation has been described as “Pauline,” as though the reformer read Scripture through the eyes of the apostle Paul, whose letter to the Romans champions the teaching of justification by faith. M.U. Edwards is so bold as to state that “Luther chose to translate crucial passages in a way that tended to reinforce the points he wanted the reader to take away from the text.” But such an appraisal does not account sufficiently for Luther’s belief that the Bible is God’s Word, and the charge that Luther was Pauline assumes that the Bible contains competing theologies. Luther had found illustrious precedents for reading all of Scripture in light of the cross in the church fathers. Augustine, for example, had criticised the Jewish exegete Philo because the latter did not interpret passages of the Old Testament “so that Christ would be understood in them.” According to Luther, since all Scripture points to Jesus Christ, the correct interpretation (and translation) is the one which reveals Him most fully: “I decided to know nothing among you except Christ and Him crucified.” The Lutheran scholar Kirster Stendahl expresses the effect of Luther’s Christocentric translation as follows: “this powerful clarity about the central message of Scripture led to new energy not only in biblical study, but also in the life of the church and in the lives of millions.”

Other theological considerations which affected Luther’s translation of Scripture could be discussed here, but one must suffice. Luther professed the unity of Scripture, and so believed that the Old and New Testaments should be interpreted as one whole. The central meaning of the entire Word of God should govern the translation of each component of that Word. For this reason Luther took issue with the 1534 edition of the Basel Hebrew scholar, Sebastian Munster, who employed rabbinic philology and exegesis of the Old Testament, ignoring the role of the New Testament as “interpreter” of the Old. The New Testament gains deeper meaning when read against the background of the Old, and the Old Testament gains its full meaning only when read together with the New. In short, Luther applied the principle that Scripture interprets Scripture to his translation.

2. Linguistic considerations

Whereas a distinction is drawn between the letter and the spirit of the text in modern discussions of translation, Luther considers these aspects inseparable. The believer reads “spiritually,” since it is the Holy Spirit Who permits the believer to understand the Bible. The natural man is blind to the true content of the Bible, but the regenerate man has a living relationship with the revelation of
God, and thus for him the letter becomes spirit, and the Word becomes a living witness to the work of God in Christ for mankind. Translating by the illumination of the Spirit does not mean moving beyond the text to a “hidden” meaning. Luther repeatedly states that one need never translate in opposition to the grammar of the text; at the same time, Luther believes that the reader must go beyond the form to the content. “Words serve and follow the meaning, not meaning the words.”

Luther also uses the following image to illustrate his understanding of the relationship between the letter and the spirit of the text: the words of Scripture are the sheath in which the Word of the Spirit is placed. The translator must know the literal meaning of the original words in order to understand what they contain.

Luther’s principle of grammatical-spiritual translation was unlike the principles of exegesis and translation espoused by his contemporaries. The medieval tradition of interpreting Scripture allegorically was still very common in Luther’s day – indeed, on occasion Luther himself employed it. The allegorists sought to go beyond the text to a different, mystical meaning; Luther’s “spiritual” approach was to understand the letter of the text in order to reach the Spirit of God who had inspired that text. Thus, for example, Luther interpreted and translated the Psalms according to the Spirit, who had endowed the psalmist with a prophetic power to compose a text which points to Jesus Christ. For Luther this Christocentric reading of the Psalms was not allegorical but literal; that is to say, the true meaning of the text can only be grasped in full when the reader understands why and with what the Spirit inspired the psalmist.

Since the literal meaning of the text gives access to the spiritual meaning, the translator must be an expert in the original languages of Scripture. Textual criticism, philology, exegesis and proper historical criticism are paramount to understanding the Bible. Luther was one of the “Biblical humanists” who promoted such scholarship. It is difficult, perhaps, for the modern reader to appreciate how important knowledge of Hebrew, Greek and Latin was to the reformers. Ten years’ experience as professor of the Bible helped Luther to translate accurately. He made use of Erasmus’ 1519 edition of the New Testament with its accompanying Latin translation and annotations. He had studied the medieval writings on exegesis and interpretation; he knew the rabbinic expositions of the Old Testament, and he readily consulted fellow scholars on matters of language and exposition. Luther stressed the importance of knowing Hebrew and Greek because the literal meaning of the biblical text leads to its spiritual meaning.

When the translator has fully grasped the literal meaning of the original text, he must, however, relinquish the form of that text and concentrate on translating its substance. For Luther the letter is but a form in which substance resides. He frequently stated that one should not be a prisoner of the text. To quote Luther:

“(the translator) 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.”

In stating that the translator should render the sense and not the letter of the original text, Luther was following a principle established by the church fathers and reaffirmed by Erasmus. Erasmus had reminded his readers that the translator’s task was “to bring out the meaning in the most suitable terms,” and that it was impossible to render every expression in one language in the same form in another. Luther was, like Erasmus, sensitive to the tension caused by the simultaneous desire to reproduce the factual meaning of the original text and to maintain the force and effect of the original words.

In translating the Bible into German, Luther strove to express Scripture in words known to all German speaking people. He chose to employ the dialect used by the German chancellery because it was the language spoken by the majority of Germans in both south and north Germany. As the Luther biographer M. Brecht notes, “at least some eighty or ninety percent of Luther’s linguistic expressions, substantially more than the earlier translation, could be understood in both southern and northern Germany.” Unlike existing Vulgate-based German editions of the Bible which were rife with Latinate expressions and sentence structures most German readers could not
appreciate, Luther’s edition is characterized by very “modern” German diction. Whenever possible Lutheran avoided using foreign words; difficult terms or concepts were explained in marginal notes. As most readers will know, Luther is famous for his direct, simple, and vivid writing style. So too the German edition of the Bible is marked by simple and graphic language. To quote H. Bornkamm, Luther’s translation “...spoke the language of the entire people, from the studies of the learned to the huts of the common folk.”

But even so Luther was not satisfied with his first version. He continued to revise the translation until his death in 1546; and in each revision his goal was to make the Bible sound “more German” for German readers.

Luther’s principle of translating according to the sense and not the form of the original text prompted severe criticism. In 1523 Jerome Emser, the Roman Catholic secretary to Duke George of Saxony who had banned Luther’s translation, published a treatise bearing the lengthy but revealing title, “On what grounds and for what reason Luther’s translation of the New Testament should properly be forbidden to the common man.” Emser’s main argument was that Luther’s translation was too free and not in accord with the letter of the original. As might be expected of an orthodox Roman Catholic who foresaw the effect which Luther’s translation would have upon its readers, Emser claimed that the new edition was too far removed from the original texts and the Latin Vulgate sanctioned by the church and so posed a threat to the church.

Conclusion

Modern scholars are more or less agreed that Luther’s translation was remarkably free for its time. Luther wished to produce a readable version. The liberties Luther took to make the text accessible to the German readers are most evident in the translations of his favourite Old Testament book, the Psalms. It has been observed that on occasion Luther translated the original Hebrew so freely that fidelity to the Hebrew was compromised. On this point it is worthwhile to cite Calvin’s criticism of Luther’s methods: “Luther is not so particular as to propriety of expression or the historical accuracy; he is satisfied when he can draw from it some fruitful doctrine.”

Considerable tension must have filled the heart of Luther, whose desire was to make David “sound purely German,” and who professed that the Scriptures are the words of God and not of men.

In response to such criticism, and as conclusion, let us permit Luther to have the final word. The translator was very conscious of the difficulty that arises when the letter of the original text cannot be translated exactly into the vernacular. On one occasion he writes, 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 ... I preferred to do violence to the German language rather than to depart from the word.” In fact, Luther argued that the doctrinal import in certain Hebrew, Aramaic or Greek expressions is so great that the reader must adopt the foreign expression into his own vernacular. Referring to Christ’s victory over death as prophesied in Psalm 68:18 (“Thou hast ascended on high; thou hast led captivity captive”), Luther notes that a German would rather say “thou hast set the captives free.” But in order to maintain the message of the Gospel in these words, he transliterates the Hebrew, stating that “out of respect for such doctrine, and for the comforting of our conscience, we should keep such words, accustom ourselves to them, and so give place to the Hebrew language where it does a better job than our German.” The translator’s goal is to detract nothing from the meaning of the original text while rendering the words clearly in the native tongue. In sum, Luther’s grammatical-spiritual method of translation aimed at striking a careful balance between adherence to the original text and clarity of expression.

R Faber

© 2012
www.christianstudylibrary.org

1 Thus, e.g., H. Bluhm, “Martin Luther and the English Bible: Tyndale and Coverdale,” in G. Dünnhaupt, ed., The Martin Luther Quincentennial (Detroit, 1985), 112-125.


5 *Idem*, 189.


7 Augustine, *Contra Faustum Manicheum*.


9 This point is well-made by W.J. Kooiman, *Luther and the Bible* (English Translation. Philadelphia, 1961), 33.


12 Thus Kooiman, 68.


17 H. Bornkamm, 50.


20 M. Luther, “Defense of the Translation of the Psalms,” 216. Luther’s adherence to the letter of the original text is most clearly evidenced in Luther’s debates with the Zwinglians concerning the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ in the bread and wine of the Supper. Whereas the latter argued for a mystical, non-real relationship between them, the former emphasized the words “this is my body.”