

# Heritage, Promise and Obligation: A Plea for the Enduring Significance of the Luther Bible for the Communication of the Gospel<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** This paper describes the main characteristics of Luther's translation of the Bible. Two dimensions are considered: First, its historic significance for the Germanic languages, second, its theological basis and power which laid ground for the first one. These dimensions are brought forward as heritage, promise and obligation for further translation and use of the Bible, esp. Luther's translation.

**Keywords:** Luther, Luther as translating and/or interpreting the Bible, typology of Bible translations.

## 1 Fire!

Weimar, September 2, 2004: a staff member calls the director of the Herzogin Anna Amalia Library: Fire! The library is on fire! Full of horror, Knoche, the director, mounts his bicycle, passes Goethe's house garden, crosses Beethovenplatz, and as he turns the last corner, he sees thick clouds of smoke rising from the library's roof. Minutes later, the first glow of fire can be seen. At 9:10 p.m., flames burst explosively 20 meters high through the roof. Carried along by the force of the firestorm, countless pages of books shoot into the air, flying hundreds of meters over the city area, where they are later picked up, often badly scorched, by local residents and handed over to librarians and restorers. Staff and citizens form chains and salvage another 28,000 books. Everyone grabs them on the spur of the moment. Knoche, too, repeatedly rushes into the burning building to save what can be saved. Suddenly he remembers the famous Luther Bible by Wittenberg printer Hanns Lufft from 1534, with Cranach's colorful illustrations. Initially, he is denied access to the second floor: too dangerous! But the fire department lets him through a last time, with the chief fire worker going along. While hot extinguishing water rains down on the two, they make their way through the darkness. In the light of a flashlight, Knoche discovers the editions of the September and December Testaments from 1522. Then the two men stumble their way back through a tangle of water hoses and overturned furnishings.<sup>2</sup>

What drove the East German librarian to stake his life on this specimen? At the same time, other equally valuable items were lost, including a huge collection of music manuscripts.<sup>3</sup> He felt that the last original copies of the Luther Bible had to be preserved at all costs. He risked his health to do so. He was perhaps not clear about the spiritual-theological value of the Luther Bible in detail. But what

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<sup>1</sup> Revised version of a lecture on 2.10.2017 in Rehe/Westerwald. I have retained the engaging style of the lecture in some places.

<sup>2</sup> Sources: [bit.ly/2j7wclh](http://bit.ly/2j7wclh), [bit.ly/2AP5b0B](http://bit.ly/2AP5b0B), [bit.ly/2i9Yef2](http://bit.ly/2i9Yef2) (05.10.2017). I thank Dr. Peter Kunze (Lörrach).

<sup>3</sup> Around 5000 books from the 16th century went up in smoke during the fire. For each of the following centuries, five-digit loss figures are available (<http://www.uni-muenster.de/Forum-Bestandserhaltung/forum/hageboeck.html>), totaling about 50,000 volumes, of which 12,500 are considered irreplaceable (<http://www.anna-amalia-bibliothek.de/de/buchverlust.html>). The remaining 648-edition Bible collection, centered on the first Luther Bibles, was damaged. In the meantime, all Bibles have been restored and are available for use again (cf. <https://blog.klassik-stiftung.de/lutherschriften-in-der-herzogin-anna-amalia-bibliothek/> [all accessed 25.09.2017]).

if Luther's intellectual or spiritual descendants themselves are no longer aware that they have a treasure that should be defended with all their might? Why then should this librarian do so? My contribution offers an approach and a plea.

Let us start with the judgment of a literary scholar. Max Wehrli (d. 1998), a famous Zurich Germanist and author of a comprehensive history of Germanic literature, writes about Luther's work:

Even if one limits oneself to the literary-historical aspect of Martin Luther's ... work, the subject remains boundless. This is not only because the Reformation changed the cultural, political, and intellectual-historical context of almost the entire literary life, and not only because Luther, with his writings and above all his translation of the Bible, is essentially involved in the formation of the New High German written language, both in the form of language and in the vocabulary and imagery. *The innermost reason for Luther's literary importance lies in the fact that the Reformation saw itself as an event of the divine word as well as of the human: the word became and remained its most important medium, most important where it concerned the study of the concrete biblical word. As a great Christian theologian and preacher, Luther spoke from the conviction of participating in the Word in a new and original way, of speaking a language that can only be possible and true by virtue of a divine Word.*<sup>4</sup>

And a few pages later:

The Biblical word was given an exclusive and urgent meaning as the only authority. ... Making the Bible accessible to the common man was an urgent task; Bible translation became Luther's most lasting literary achievement and purest reformatory action.<sup>5</sup>

Other literary histories, such as those by O. F. Best and H.-J. Schmitt, focus on the social significance of the Luther Bible:

The translation of the Bible by Martin Luther and his circle ... is undoubtedly the most important event in the German-speaking cultural area of the 16th century, both linguistically and in terms of intellectual history. [...] The reformer wanted to reach all of Germany with his translation. Therefore, his path to the 'common German language' led through certain standardizations: he borrowed from the usage of the Saxon chancery, which itself represents a balanced mixed language ... [...] More important was the social thrust that this transmission implied and exercised. The deliberate adaptation to the vernacular sprang from the missionary zeal of spreading the divine word as widely as possible. This [...] valorization of the vernacular was paralleled by the re-evaluation of the *common man as the active bearer of the divine mission* (lay priesthood). This translation was no longer a skilful adaptation for a courtly audience or one unfamiliar with classical languages; the mother tongue acquired full intrinsic value in and through the Bible. – The history of the translation's impact shows that Luther's German Bible probably marked the most significant break (caesura) in the history of German language and literature. With it, the German language constituted itself, confronted with the Latin scholarly language, as a continuing cultural language of its own value.<sup>6</sup>

*Both the literary or intellectual-historical pole of these assessments and the theological pole, as described by Max Wehrli (among others), should be noted here.* According to Wehrli, Luther's translation characterizes the Reformation in concentrated form as an event of word and language. Looking at the Luther Bible, one might say, following Acts (2:11), "in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." Only by taking this dimension into account will we be able to

<sup>4</sup> Wehrli: *Geschichte der Deutschen Literatur*, 997 (emphasis S.F.). If not otherwise indicated, translations from German literature are given in my own translation.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* 1004 (emphasis S.F.).

<sup>6</sup> Schmidt: *Luthers deutsche Bibel* (1983), 261+263, quoted acc. to Schrader: *Sprachgestalt*, 146 (Points of omission in square brackets by Schrader, without them by me; likewise the emphasis).

develop an understanding of “communication of the gospel“ in which the gospel can appear not only as an object (or even a “product“ of an “enterprise“ “church“), but at the same time as a subject from which a language appropriate to God can be expected.

## 2 On the literary and philological characteristics of the Luther Bible

### A Lesson from Recent History

The 1975 so-called “Luther NT“ is a fine lesson in the wise divine guidance of history – even through error and controversy. During the heated discussions that followed the publication of the revision of that time, it became apparent that the Luther Bible could not be approximated to, let alone transferred into, the paradigm of the new dynamic-equivalent translations such as Good News Bible.<sup>7</sup> At the time, Eduard Lohse, New Testament scholar, chairman of the Stuttgart Bibelwerk and leading bishop of the United Lutheran Church(es) of Germany (VELKD), counted on sitting out the criticism, saying, “Some time will have to pass before congregations and Bible readers have gained so much experience through regular handling of the revised text that it has become familiar to them.“<sup>8</sup> But the protests did not die down, nor were they motivated by skepticism against the 1968 movement, as Siegfried Meurer<sup>9</sup> implied. Well-known Germanists such as Johannes Anderegg (\*1938), Walther Killy (1917–1995) or the Tübingen rhetorician Walter Jens (1923–2013) maintained their criticism, while theologians such as Gerhard Krause (1912–1982), the editor of the *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, and Gerhard Ebeling (1912–2001), Luther researcher and systematist, or Eberhard Jüngel (1934–2021) opposed this revision in thorough expert reports. A new commission was appointed to reverse the changes. Finally, since 1984, and with slight revisions from 2017, we have had the text that had become the standard for many of us, read preferably, read aloud, and learned by heart.

So, what is distinctive about Luther’s interpretation, and what line has been crossed in 1975?

### “Looking the People at the Mouth“? Luther’s conception of translating or interpreting

Albrecht Beutel<sup>10</sup> and others have long pointed out that Luther did not look the people at the mouth with his translation in the sense that some advertising brochures insinuate: Speak the language of the people, and the people will follow you, and the like. This is nonsense, which is all too often not seen through, with the consequence of even further losses (watering down) in revisions and translations. To put it more precisely: Luther looked the people at the mouth, but he also shaped and filled their mouths. This understanding is well founded. Luther was not concerned with simplistic adaptation to “the“ contemporary language (which did not even exist in the singular), but with speaking as competently as possible:

“What Luther demands here is far from plebeianization of the mother tongue. He is not concerned with speaking as roughly as possible, but as competently as possible!“<sup>11</sup>

<sup>7</sup> More on this in my book “*Kommunikative Bibelübersetzung*“, 369–380.

<sup>8</sup> Quote by Schrader: *Sprachgestalt*, 151.

<sup>9</sup> 1931–2001, general secretary of the German Bible Society from 1981 to 1997.

<sup>10</sup> In addition, Markus Öhler, Birgit Stolt, Christopher Spehr, Kristlieb Adloff and Christina Hoegen-Rohls (see bibliography). *Regarding the thus rejected view under the denominator “general comprehensibility”*, see especially the works of Fritz Tschirch and Eduard Lohse.

<sup>11</sup> Beutel: “*Scriptura ita loquitur, cur non nos?*“, 116.

If one looks at Luther's sentence in the context of the "Sendbrief vom Dolmetschen" ("Letter of Interpretation")<sup>12</sup> written at the Veste Koburg (today: Coburg) in 1530, the first thing that strikes one is that the words "people" and "looking" (out of the famous quote "dem Volk auf's Maul schauen") do not occur at all! "Look" was originally "see", which can be classified as a minor shift. More serious is the shift attached to "people": Luther does not address an abstract quantity summarily. It would be worth a separate investigation to find out since when "the people" got into the alleged quotation.<sup>13</sup> With the insertion of "people" one indirectly imputes some kind of populism to Luther. But Luther is *not thinking of the people as an abstract sum with the lowest common denominator, but of concrete people*. He names individual groups in specific life situations, for which they are each specifically competent. Let us hear the quotation in question in its context!

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.

For example, Christ says: *Ex abundantia cordis os loquitur* [Matt 12:34, Luke 6:45]. If I am to follow these asses, they will lay the original before me literally and translate thus: "Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks." Tell me, is that speaking German? What German could understand something like that? What is "the abundance of the heart"? No German can say that; unless, perhaps, he was trying to say that someone was altogether too magnanimous or too courageous, though even that would not yet be correct. For "abundance of the heart" is not German, any more than "abundance of the house," "abundance of the stove," or "abundance of the bench" is German. But the mother in the home and the common man say this, "What fills the heart overflows the mouth." That is speaking good German, the kind that I have tried for – and unfortunately not always reached or hit upon. For the literal Latin is a great hindrance to speaking good German.<sup>14</sup>

... On the other hand 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. For example, in John 6[:27] Christ says, "Him has God the Father sealed [*versiegelt*]." It would have been better German to say, "Him has God the Father signified [*gezeichnet*]," or, "He it is whom God the Father means [*meinet*]." But I preferred to do violence to the German language rather than to depart from the word. Ah, translating is not every man's skill as the mad saints imagine. It 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.<sup>15</sup>

Luther was concerned with using idiomatic German, not alienated from the Latin, and not (at best as a by-product!) with simplistic adaptation to the current language of the day. It is true that he has

<sup>12</sup> I note in passing that Luther's translation principles are apparent not only in this letter, but already in 1522. Sources: Mühlhaupt: *Testament*, 17ff., pointing also to G. Bruchmann's "Luther als Bibelverdeutschender in seinen Wartburgpostillen" (Luther as translator in his Wartburgpostillen).

<sup>13</sup> It is characteristic for the matter-of-factness with which the quotation is collocated that not even all those who deal with the Sendschreiben have noticed this. Example: Fricke's "Dem Volk aufs Maul schauen" (Looking the people at the mouth).

<sup>14</sup> Luther's Works vol. 35, 189.

<sup>15</sup> Luther's Works vol. 35, 194. For the German original, see Luther: *Sendbrief vom Dolmetschen* (1530), 89. Cf. also Adloff: *Was heißt: "Dem Volk aufs Maul geschaut"?*, 49 (what does it mean: 'Looking the people at the mouth?'), sowie Spehr: "Dem Volk aufs Maul schauen" (prove of my contention: there 87f.).

Germanized names of animals, plants and coins.<sup>16</sup> But would simple countrymen be able to “consume“ his Epistle to the Romans on the fly? Luther was probably the last person to have any illusions about this.<sup>17</sup> He is not concerned with simplistic or low, but good German usage. “The utensils and processes of a household no one can describe better than the mother. The games in the alleys are best known to the children. And the everyday challenges of public life hardly anyone can formulate better than the man in the market. Luther wants to acquire competent speech when he speaks of looking people at the mouth’ (sic)“.<sup>18</sup>

That is why he also justifies the famous insertion of “alone“ in Rom 3:28 (“by faith alone“) with good German usage, according to which a “not ... but“ phrase can also be constructed as an “alone ... no“ phrase. Let us read Luther’s examples in the Sendbrief:

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.

In all these phrases, this is the German usage, even though it is not the Latin or Greek usage. It is the nature of the German language to add the word *allein* in order that the word *nicht* or *kein* may be clearer and more complete. To be sure, I can also say, “The farmer brings grain and *kein* money,” but the words “*kein* money” do not sound as full and clear as if I were to say, “The farmer brings *allein* grain and *kein* money.” Here the word *allein* helps the word *kein* so much that it becomes a complete, clear German expression.

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.<sup>19</sup>

Luther argues on several levels: from language pragmatics and language competence as well as from a theological view of language. For him, the literary-philological side and the theological side of the translation process (and of language in general) lay within each other, which necessarily followed from his theology of the word (Christ the literal, not allegorical sense). The importance of what Luther said can hardly be overestimated. What looks to the uninitiated like “merely textual“ or philological banter is inseparable from justification by faith and grace alone. The Sendbrief also says, “If it be not a work, it must be by faith alone.“

The matter itself in its very core, then, demands that we say, “Faith alone justifies.” And the nature of our German language also teaches us to express it that way. I have in addition the precedent of the holy fathers. And the danger of the people also compels it, so that they may not continue to hang upon works and wander away from faith and lose Christ, especially in these days, for they have been accustomed to works so long they have to be torn away from them by force. For these reasons it is not only right but also highly necessary to speak it out as plainly and fully as possible, “Faith alone saves, without works.” I am only sorry that I did not also add the words *alle* and *aller*, and say, “without any works of any laws,” so that it would have been expressed with perfect

<sup>16</sup> List according to Spehr *ibid.* 92.

<sup>17</sup> He recommended the Epistle to the Romans to every Christian for daily reading anyway, since a deeper understanding only comes with repeated reading.

<sup>18</sup> Spehr: „Dem Volk aufs Maul schauen“, 88. Despite correct interpretation, Spehr also fails to notice that “Volk” (people) does not occur.

<sup>19</sup> Luther’s Works vol. 35, 189.

clarity. Therefore it will stay in my New Testament, and though all the papal asses go stark raving mad they shall not take it from me.<sup>20</sup>

The matter itself demands it and so does the manner and nature of the language. Thus, for Luther, the translation decision was clear and certain. By “the matter (thing) itself“ (*the res ipsa*), Luther understands the article of justification, or Christ himself.<sup>21</sup> Therefore: Whoever does not know the matter (“Rottengeister“, sectarian minds, see above) is also not suitable for translating. It remains an open question to what extent Luther, with his insistence on good German, opened a flank or introduced a criterion that could take on a life of its own. In my lecture for the J.T. Beck Prize 2014, I drew attention to this.<sup>22</sup> The solution is probably that the false independence or the takeover of the rule by this criterion begins at the moment when the weight, clarity and certainty of the theological side decreases. Precisely this seems to be the case with authoritative representatives of Dynamic Equivalence who are oriented towards scientific linguistics: Because of their focus, the theological dimensions and specificities of biblical texts and their translation is lost from view, with all the weight falling on intellectual-informational comprehensibility.

Either way, the categorical difference between the Luther Bible and the translations that have been established in the wake of allegedly scholarly translation theories<sup>23</sup> since the 1960s remains immediately obvious to anyone who is concerned with textual comparisons and does not allow himself to be deceived with alleged or poorly interpreted quotations.

Luther’s translation work thus does not live from the same standards as the dynamic-equivalent practice. The latter has a different, functionally reduced understanding of language and communication, and aims in “consumer language“ (E. A. Nida) at the modern, religiously indifferent consumer, not at the Christian who wants to know what to believe and what is false teaching.

Because of the spiritual-theological power of his Bible-saturated language, Luther could afford to introduce numerous innovations into German that would then shape it for centuries. This becomes strikingly clear in the neologisms, proverbs, and style that have conquered the German language via the Luther Bible.<sup>24</sup> A few examples:

Georg Büchmann’s “Geflügelte Worte und Zitatenschatz“ (Winged Words and Treasure of Quotations) comprised 50 pages from the Luther Bible alone – more than from Goethe and Schiller put together. Among them are (later on quite common):

1. German **phrases** like: ein Dorn im Auge, sein Herz ausschütten, herrlich und in Freuden leben, Axt an die Wurzel legen, Perlen vor die Säue werfen, ein Stein des Anstoßes sein, herrlich und in Freuden leben, seine Zunge im Zaum halten, sein Licht unter den Scheffel stellen, Balken/Splitter im Auge haben, mit Blindheit geschlagen sein, der Mensch lebt nicht vom Brot allein, niemand kann zwei Herren dienen, wes das Herz voll ist, des gehet der Mund über, auf Treu und Glauben, etc.<sup>25</sup> From Low and East Middle German, among others, *heucheln* (to pretend), *worfeldn* (to winnow) and *Schlacke* (dross, slag) found their way into today’s German.

<sup>20</sup> Luther’s Works vol. 35, 197f.

<sup>21</sup> Re the relationship between *verbum* and *res* (word and matter) in Luther’s exegesis see my study “‘Hoc est in Christo ad literam factum’...“ – Still helpful is Krause: Studien, 223–241.

<sup>22</sup> Felber: Habakuks „Meisterspruch“.

<sup>23</sup> For more, see Felber: Kommunikative Bibelübersetzung.

<sup>24</sup> By the 1530s, the Luther Bible had become so familiar in the German-speaking world (in Upper Germany as early as 1525) that there was no longer any need for the (initially added) language aids (glossaries).

<sup>25</sup> English: a thorn in the flesh, to pour out one’s heart, to live gloriously and joyfully, to put an axe to the root, to cast pearls before swine, to be a stumbling block, to live gloriously and joyfully, to hold one’s tongue, to hide one’s light under a bushel, to have beams/chips in one’s eye, to be struck with blindness, man does not live by bread alone, no one can serve two masters, have a full heart, his mouth will speak, in good faith.

2. German language before Luther did not have adequate means of expression for many **abstract terms**. What could not be borrowed from preaching language or mysticism had to be invented. Examples of both:

*Einfluß, Gelassenheit, geistreich, wohlgefällig, schüchtern, heucheln, lagern, fromm, vgl. Lippe, Pfote.*<sup>26</sup>

3. **Composites:**

*Feuereifer, friedfertig, gastfrei, gottesgelehrt, Gotteslästerer, haarbreit, Herzenslust, Höllenbrand, Kleingläubige, Langmut, Lästermaul, Lückenbüßer, Machtwort, Morgenland, Menschenfischer, Ottergezücht, Schädelstätte, Scharfrichter, Teufelswerk, Übeltat, Winkelprediger, wetterwendisch, Wortgezänk, Zinsgroschen.*<sup>27</sup>

4. **newly filled or created:** Beruf, Buße, Gnade, Götze, Sünde.<sup>28</sup> Designations for office bearers were redefined, establishing a new terminology: Apostel, Pfaffe, Monarch, Tyrann, Prophet; Evangelium, evangelisch, fromm, Psalm, regieren, Testament, Rechtfertigung.<sup>29</sup>

5. **Style and gesture:** One should not underestimate the formation of a Biblical-German “sacral style”.<sup>30</sup> Luther created a type of text called “Bible” that is essentially characterized by sacral (or: reverent) style, which suggests to listeners an “appropriate, precisely ‘sacral’ attitude of reception for the biblical text. Luther succeeds in this by “linguistically imitating biblical narrative modes and speech gestures with precision,” by “expressively dynamizing” turns of phrase, and by “oratorically vitalizing”.<sup>31</sup> “So the human word must be cultivated and used in such a way as to bring out this highest dignity of his, to bring out God himself.”<sup>32</sup>

Luther proceeded in this most consciously and reflectively<sup>33</sup> and was thus able to establish an “exclusive language standard model,” a model text for good German in general, until the 18th century.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, Luther wanted to teach his dear Germans good German! He confessed that the goal of his work was “to preach and write German to the unlearned.” Thus Jacob Grimm wrote in 1822: “Luther’s language, in its noble, almost miraculous purity, must be considered the core and foundation of New High German language translation”.<sup>35</sup>

With Birgit Stolt (et al.), “it must be stressed emphatically that Luther from the beginning consciously translated in sacred language” and thus “further developed German in vocabulary, syntax, sound, and rhythm on an epochal scale.”<sup>36</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Influence, composure, witty, well-pleasing, shy, hypocritical, camp, pious, cf. lip, paw.

<sup>27</sup> Fiery, peaceable, hospitable, godly, blasphemer, hair-breadth, heart’s desire, hellfire, small believer, long-suffering, blasphemous, gap-filler, power word, morning-land, fisher of men, viper-bred, skull place, executioner, devil’s work, evil deed, angle preacher, ranting, word bickering, interest groat ...

<sup>28</sup> Profession, repentance, grace, idol, sin.

<sup>29</sup> Apostle, priest (negatively occupied by Luther), monarch, tyrant, prophet, furthermore: gospel, evangelical, pious, psalm, rule, testament, justification.

<sup>30</sup> For more, see in the bibliography: the works of Schrader, Anderegg, Stolt and Hoegen-Rohls.

<sup>31</sup> Excellent here: Stolt: *Biblische Erzählweise* (Biblical manner of narration); cf. also Hoegen-Rohls: *Biblia deutsch*, here summarized from pages 76–80.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* 80f.

<sup>33</sup> Irrefutable proof (in my view) in Stolt: *Biblische Erzählweise*, 187–189; further evidence from Luther can be found in Haubrichs: *Sprache Luthers* (Luther’s language), 53ff.

<sup>34</sup> Hoegen-Rohls *ibid.* 83f., there a quote from the grammarian Johannes Clajus: “As God spoke Hebrew through Moses and the prophets and Greek through the apostles, so he spoke bene Germanice [good German] through Martin Luther as his chosen instrument.” Cf. Lemmer: *Bewertung* (evaluation).– Haubrichs speaks of the “language standard book of the future in all landscapes in which the Reformation prevailed, and beyond,” untouched even “by some printers in distant language landscapes” (*Sprache Luthers*, 66; my translations).

<sup>35</sup> Quote taken from <https://www.luther2017.de/de/reformation/und-gesellschaft/deutsche-sprache/wem-hat-luther-auf-maul-geschaut-luthers-einfluss-auf-die-sprache/> (2023-01-26).

<sup>36</sup> Hoegen-Rohls: *Biblia deutsch*, 85.

With his innovations Luther demanded from his readers to learn more. It becomes clear that he did not want to trivialize, but to write precisely and theologically exact.<sup>37</sup> For this reason, “Gospel“ did not become “Good News“. Luther did avoid foreign words (as quadrant Mt 5:26; substance Heb 1:3, etc.), but in many cases he deliberately left them in. This includes above all “gospel“. Mülhaupt rightly recognizes the theological motif here: “... it is an expression of the divine strangeness of the gospel and, as it were, of the strangeness of Christ’s justice (aliena justitia!),“ and agrees with Emanuel Hirsch’s description:

The best and deepest thing for the understanding of the Gospel is not done by him who paraphrases it in washed-out, all-meaning, nothing-meaning words that come easily to men because they notice no difficulty in them. The best and deepest way to understand the Gospel is rather to proclaim it in peculiar, distinctive words, which, with all their connection to the ordinary, press a sting into the listener’s spirit, which make it clear to him that here there is something yet unknown to be understood, that here a new rich world wants to open up to him ... Thus one can learn from Luther’s interpretation: Comprehensibility of Christian speech is always a hovering between the connection to the ordinary use of language and the distinctiveness of the terms demanded by the peculiarity of the matter. We must not lose the connection, otherwise we lose the ear to which we are addressing ourselves. But we must also not abandon the distinctiveness to the shallowness of worldly speech, otherwise we shorten the thing for whose sake alone it is worthwhile that we speak.<sup>38</sup>

At the point that Saul went into the cave, Luther first noted in his manuscript: “Saul went in to shit“ (“Saul ging hinein, um zu scheißen“). But then in print it literally reads, “to cover his feet“ (1 Sam 24:4). Luther is asking the reader to read the literal translation and refrains from translating only a linguistically determined “scopos.“ A similar lesson was to be learned from the discussion about the “Volxbibel“ (lit. “Bible of the people“; since 2005): There is a difference of language levels, which must be retained for reasons of salvation and pedagogy. Whoever mixes them spoils good manners.<sup>39</sup>

To get a receiving organ for it, theological commentaries are often little eloquent. The already mentioned Germanists Anderegg, Stolt and Schrader, on the other hand, have (among others) worked out how Luther, in order to create a sacred linguistic aura, took over structures, phrases and a characteristic narrative type from the original languages and, precisely contrary to the Horatian recommendation for linguistic naturalness, followed Jerome’s rhetorical recipes, which demanded a strict(er) imitation of the verbal-inspired wording. That the Bible, though clear, contained in its clarity an uncomfortable message against which the whore of natural reason rebelled, Luther always emphasized. How then can today’s advertising, financed by the churches (!), insinuate that this imposition could be foisted on people, as it were, in passing, without letting them notice the detachment?

If the core terms (“Kernbegriffe“) of Scripture, according to Schrader, “are abandoned in zeitgeist-adapted new versions, the whole of the message is admittedly lost, not only a mildew of words and graphics that have become unusual is stripped off“; but the Bible made imposition-free (zumutungsfrei) fits in when imposition-rich concepts such as legalism and reason of heart, imposition-rich contrasts such as flesh vs. Spirit, sin vs. law, devil and angel, “repentance, kingdom of God, rebirth

<sup>37</sup> The Orthodox Jew and lyricist Manfred Winkler praised Luther’s ingenuity for Hebrew expression in German, precisely because of certain inaccuracies (!). Luther built a bridge here that never again succeeded to the same extent (Schrader: Sprachgestalt, 172). After that, no translation was made without having Luther on the desk; even at the beginnings of the Buber-Rosenzweig translation, it was thought only to revise the Luther Bible. Rosenzweig aptly saw Luther’s translation in a world-historical-global framework: “*The Reformation is the first German event that has reached out into the world and has not disappeared from it again. Since then, the German fate has been interwoven with the world fate. Luther’s act of translation marks this point*“ (quoted from Kantzenbach: Luthers Sprache, 9, emphasis S.F.).

<sup>38</sup> Quoted by Mülhaupt: Testament, 75.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. 1.Kor 15,33 KJV: “Be not deceived: evil *communications* (*homiliai kakai*) corrupt good manners.“



and sanctification hardly appear even in today's sermons, which are embarrassed of them and prefer to deal with ecological catastrophe and interreligious community ...<sup>40</sup>

### 3 The Theological Peculiarity of the Luther Bible, or: On the right of a special theological and ecclesiastical language

Many theologians like to avoid the question of a theological peculiarity of the Luther Bible. Is this not a matter of things that are so subjective as to be non-negotiable? But let us recall Max Wehrli:

As only ever a great Christian theologian and preacher, Luther also speaks out of the conviction to participate in the Word in a new and original way, to speak a language that can only be possible and true by virtue of a divine Word.<sup>41</sup>

My thesis is: Luther taught the Germans the language of Canaan. He not only looked people on the mouth, but also gave them what and how the mouth should speak and sing. He not only Germanized the Bible, but also, in my words, "biblised" the German. He thus gave German a wellspring of rejuvenation that bubbled for centuries.<sup>42</sup>

Let us be reminded by the Germanists! Max Wehrli's "*Speaking a language that is possible and true only by virtue of the divine Word*" is also our longing, and we do well to orient ourselves to the Luther Bible, through which God has given such powerful language for generations. There was no official church revision from Luther's passing until 1892. Theologically interpreted: until the 20th century, it pleased God to guide the Protestant churches of the German-speaking world through the Luther Bible, even into Switzerland (including Basel, where the Luther Bible dominated over the Zurich Bible until after 1945).

"Power of the divine word", faithfully and accurately translating: this engagement with Scripture will ever give us a new language, in which our human language is led to the bath, is ennobled (Friso Melzer, Siegfried Kettling), and in which the congregation should, may and will praise, confess and pray to God.

The "language of Canaan" has become a pejorative term today. Yet Isaiah (19:18) mentions with hope that five cities of the Egyptians would speak the language of Canaan; Yahweh would be known to the Egyptians, he would strike them and heal them, and they would turn to the Lord, unlike in the book of Exodus. Yahweh would make himself known (*noda*) to the Egyptians; they would know God (*w<sup>e</sup>jad<sup>e</sup>u*) and serve him (v. 21). He will give them a savior (*moschia*), etc. Five cities: this may be few compared to the thousands of Egyptian villages and cities, but it is already half of the full number Ten, perhaps a down payment on the incoming full number of Gentiles to whom God will give pure lips. If what Isaiah sees as hopeful for the Gentiles is seen negatively among the Gentiles or Gentile Christians, what about their hope?

We should gain hope in the affirmation, not in the denial, of Bible-influenced speech, of the normative place of biblical concepts over against theological concepts leaning on philosophy, sociology and

<sup>40</sup> Schrader: Sprachgestalt, 166.

<sup>41</sup> Wehrli: Geschichte der deutschen Literatur, 997.

<sup>42</sup> Adolf Deissmann's often mentioned discovery of a kind of common language level of the New Testament does not argue against this in any way. For a justification see Marlowe: Was the Bible Written in 'Street Language'?

psychology. Scriptura ita loquitur, cur non nos?<sup>43</sup> Zephaniah prophesies that the Lord will give a pure language to the nations. Zeph 3:9:

Translated from Luther 1984: But then *I will give the nations pure lips*, and they shall all call on the name of the LORD and serve him with one accord.

ESV: For at that time *I will change the speech* of the peoples to a pure speech, that all of them may call upon the name of the LORD and serve him with one accord.

Pietists once enjoyed the “language of Canaan“, as Schrader has examined in volume 4 of the History of Pietism.<sup>44</sup> But now? We have fire under the roof.

## 4. The Enduring Significance of the Luther Bible

### Heinrich Heine

It would be easy to fill an entire lecture with only the testimonies of important authors who paid tribute to the Luther Bible, and to whom nothing was further than to turn its hymn of praise into a swan song. It should be remembered only briefly and by way of overview that literary scholars, philosophers and theologians of five centuries form a choir that sings a common praise of the Luther Bible. For generations, this book has provided the pattern of good speech for elementary school students learning German, has been a sample text in grammars<sup>45</sup>, the basis for poetry and music. It often provided the pattern for our literary language. This was not done by a German textbook like the one by Wolf Schneider, who, as an agnostic, demands the renunciation of Canaanite language, but by a translation that made it possible for German to turn back to the biblical languages.<sup>46</sup> No other German book has had such an “impact on the history of the church, piety and literature“ as this one (A. Beutel), since it has a “theological coherence second to none“ and “linguistic mastery“ (Thomas Kaufmann). Believing and unbelieving poets from Klopstock to Lessing, Hamann, Herder, Goethe, Schiller, Novalis, Schlegel and Eichendorff to Nietzsche, Thomas Mann, Ricarda Huch and Bertolt Brecht confirmed this assessment.<sup>47</sup> Following Schrader, the Luther hymn of the mocker Heinrich Heine (1797–1856) may be cited here, who in 1834 wrote the essay “On the History of Religion and Philosophy in Germany“ for a French audience:

“Luther ... was at once a dreaming mystic and a practical man of action. His thoughts had not only wings but also hands; he spoke and acted. He was not only the tongue but also the sword of his time. ... The same man who could rant like a fishwife, he could also be soft, like a tender maiden.

<sup>43</sup> “Thus speaketh the Scriptures, why not we?” asks Luther in a sermon on Heb 9 in March 1539 (WA 47, 699, 15). For an in-depth study see Beutel: Scriptura ita loquitur. Schwarzwäller addresses the same question to the language of theology as a whole (Schwarzwäller: Sprache der Bibel, 191. 200ff.), as does the Catholic New Testament scholar Marius Reiser critically of the Einheitsübersetzung: “Should we not also let the biblical authors say theirs in their own way, if possible?” (Language and Literary Forms, 45, my translation).

<sup>44</sup> Schrader: Sprache Canaan.

<sup>45</sup> 1531, with the first German grammarian Fabian Frangk; then Laurentius Albertus and Albert Oelinger 1573, Johannes Clajus 1578 (Kantzenbach: Luthers Sprache, 11; Haubrichs: Luthers Sprache, 67).

<sup>46</sup> Tellingly, he thinks it is harmful to study German studies (<http://www.spiegel.de/lebenundlernen/uni/sprachpapst-wolf-schneider-germanistik-zu-studieren-halte-ich-fuer-toericht-a-690834.html>, 2023-01-26): “I think it is particularly foolish to study German studies. Thomas Mann can be read at home in the evening, as well as what others have written about him. It's completely crazy to waste years of one's life at university for that. German studies, along with sociology, psychology and communication studies, are among the subjects I strongly advise against – those who want to become journalists.”

<sup>47</sup> More strong witnesses can be found at Kantzenbach: Luthers Sprache; also at Ihlenfeld: Großer verkannter Mann (Great unrecognized man).

He was sometimes wild like the storm that uproots the oak, and then again he was gentle like the zephyr that tastes with violets. He was full of the most shuddering fear of God, full of devotion to the honor of the Holy Spirit, he could completely immerse himself in the pure spirit; and yet he knew very well the glories of this earth ..., he had something original, incomprehensible, miraculous, as we find it in all providential men ..., something invincibly demonic ...

Glory to Luther! Eternal glory to the dear man, ... from whose deeds we still live today! ... The dwarf, who stands on the shoulders of the giant, can certainly see further than the giant himself, especially if he wears glasses; but for the elevated view the high feeling, the giant's heart is missing, which we cannot acquire ...

Martin Luther gave the spirit ... a body. He also gave the word to the thought. He created the German language.

This happened by translating the Bible.

Indeed, the divine author of this book seems to have known ... that it is not at all indifferent by whom one is translated, and he himself chose his translator, and gave him the miraculous power to translate from a dead language, which was as it were already buried, into another language, which was not yet alive. ...

But how Luther arrived at the language in which he translated his Bible is incomprehensible to me up to this hour. ... If Luther used the language spoken in today's Saxony for his Bible translation, Adelung would have been right to claim that the Saxon, especially the Meissen dialect is our actual High German, i.e. our written language. ... I confess ... frankly, I do not know how the language we find in the Luther Bible came into being. But I do know that through this Bible, of which the young press, the black art, hurled thousands of copies into the people, the Lutheran language was spread over the whole of Germany in a few years and elevated to the general written language. This written language still prevails in Germany and gives this politically and religiously fragmented country a literary unity. ... The language in the Luther Bible ... is an eternal source of rejuvenation for our language. All the expressions and turns of phrase in the Luther Bible are German, the writer may still use them; and since this book is in the hands of the poorest people, they need no special learned instruction to be able to express themselves literarily.<sup>48</sup>

Heine aptly expresses the poles already mentioned. On the one hand, there is the linguistic-literary meaning of the Luther Bible. This is accessible to every poet, to every reader, believer or not.<sup>49</sup> Luther gave the spirit a body, he says, but does not specify whether it is about the holy or human spirit. First, he gave the thought the word and created the German language. Then, secondly, there is the dimension of the divine author, which was closed to Heine as an unbeliever, but which he could nevertheless name well: He does not know, he says modestly, from where the language of Luther or the language of the Bible brought into German had taken its power. How can it be that a dead language breathes life into another language that is not yet alive? He does not understand that. Nevertheless, he speaks of a divine author who has chosen a congenial translator and given him miraculous power. Heine speaks of a miracle! Rightly so! It is about the miracle that is not repeated when today's representatives of a functional translation theory keep repeating Luther's misunderstood quote about "looking the people at the mouth". For it is precisely with what Heine recognizes here as a miracle that they have their difficulties.

<sup>48</sup> Heine, Heinrich: *Zur Geschichte der Religion und Philosophie in Deutschland* (History of Religion and Philosophy in Germany), in: Heine, Heinrich: *Historisch-kritische Gesamtausgabe der Werke* Bd. VIII/1, Hamburg 1997, 33–40 (zit. nach Schrader, *Aura und Umgangsdeutsch*, 168f.; my translation).

<sup>49</sup> Cf. the high esteem in which the Luther Bible is held by the multi-award-winning Turkish-German writer Feridun Zaimoglu (*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* 20.1.2010).

## Suggestions for the Future of the Luther Bible

Nowadays we are surrounded by an ocean of weak speech. The culture of speech has been in decline from Obama to Trump, from Helmut Schmidt to Angela Merkel, and we suffer under the prosaic, shallow babble of church announcements.

How do we refind a language that is appropriate to the dignity, sacredness and peculiarity of divine speech? What language is appropriate to God? Some theologians ask what is appropriate to contemporary man, justifying it with some more or less substantial buzzwords (God's "condescendence", "incarnation", perhaps "kenotic participation", etc.), but often overlook the fact that it pleased God to reach people's heart even through texts that were and remained quite foreign to contemporaries. But in any case, his word does not return empty. In the word God himself acts, indeed in the word God himself resides<sup>50</sup>, so it has the power of God even where we can explain only fractions rationally. The view of churches, according to 1 Cor 1, displays not many high, not many wise, but many simple people. To be a serious Christians, longing for clarity and truth, means: longing for authenticity, i.e. conformity with the original. This authenticity is also felt by people who are far from the church. It was an atheist who called the Luther Bible the best German book (Nietzsche<sup>51</sup>), and it was Christians who, unaware of their central treasure, kept publishing new translations instead of good reading aids, thus giving away their treasure.

Five cities of Egypt shall speak the language of Canaan, all nations shall get pure lips (see above). German was once allowed to absorb a great deal of the Hebrew and Greek ("Canaanite") language in the Luther Bible. Shall we strip that away again? Should we continue the secularization of our language that began in the 18th century?<sup>52</sup> How are the peoples to get pure lips when even Bibles are written in consumer language?

Here is my plea for the Luther Bible: for the preservation of this heritage, for the obligation and the promise that are given to us with it!

- a) *The Luther Bible is the consistent fruit of the Reformation's struggle for the truth and the speaking of the Gospel.*<sup>53</sup> This alone elevates it far beyond a museum object. Without it, the continuation of this struggle would also be in danger.
- b) *It obligates to a competent German, which is appropriate to God and his revelation and is not only oriented to the narrow limits of understanding of the recipients.* "Scripture speaks thus, why do we not?": The Luther Bible keeps this question alive, and with it at the same time historically the memory of the beginnings and foundations of the Lutheran church(es) as well as theologically the power of a word foreign to us, but becoming the word to feed and live on.
- c) *It obliges the memorization of a text that unites old and young.* There is a widespread consensus that dynamic-equivalent translations are not good to memorize. However, the fact that with their enforcement on the Bible translation market, memorization has been pushed back even more, contrary to all guidelines from Scripture (Deut 6!; Psalm

<sup>50</sup> In Klepper's song "Singt Gott, lobset seinem Namen", he phrases "Im Worte kommt Gott selbst hernieder" (in the word God himself comes down); cf. Ringleben's book "Gott im Wort" (God in the Word) (see bibliography).

<sup>51</sup> "The masterpiece of German prose ..., the Bible was the best German book so far. Held against Luther's Bible, almost everything else is only 'literature'" (F. Nietzsche, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse* [1886], in: *Werke in 3 Bänden*, Band II, 715 [Nr. 247], my translation).

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Schöne: *Säkularisation*.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Kantzenbach: *Luthers Sprache*, 13; Mühlhaupt: *Testament*, 8f.

1 and 119!) and tradition (Talmud: “Whoever does not want to learn by heart, shall die“!), has so far come far too little into awareness as a problem.<sup>54</sup>

- d) *It obligates to quote exact wordings, also beyond the area of church and theology.*  
If we do not quote accurately the most sacred text of our culture, the Bible, where else shall we demand accuracy?
- e) *It feeds the expectation that the miracle described by Heine will once again become real.*  
Why should it be impossible for the Luther Bible to do today what was possible in a time when people needed much more time to earn a living than they do today?
- f) *It exhorts us to read, learn and sing it with loving patience.*  
Where young people have trouble with it, older people must sit down with the younger ones, if necessary reading slower and fewer verses. Let us not forget: the real obstacle to understanding is usually not the language of the Bible, but the foreign matter that it addresses.<sup>55</sup>
- g) *In comparison with other literal translations (such as Schlachter and Elberfelder), the poetic and theological power of the Luther Bible shows itself to be a weighty advantage, despite certain inaccuracies.*

Let's stick with this Bible, which is not only one of the most accurate, but also the most memorable – and with which it has pleased God to nourish and guide churches on the continent for centuries.<sup>56</sup>

*Dynamic-equivalent translations* (Hope for All, Good News) come and go rapidly. The representatives of this type have an all too justified fear of obsolescence. The Luther Bible can and will survive, but for that it needs new readers!

- h) *The Luther Bible is (or: was?) a pillar of Protestant unity.*<sup>57</sup>  
Its importance for Protestant Christians corresponds to the importance of the ministry in the Roman Catholic Church. The Luther Bible won a monopoly position in the German speaking realm. 18 German translations before it could not prevail.<sup>58</sup>  
Through the many newer translations since a few decades, however, the reverse is now happening: the displacement of the Luther Bible. Thus a pillar of Protestant unity of faith is tottering. We should grant the Luther Bible a monopoly in our congregational practice, specifically in worship, in memorization, and in Christian teaching in general. For private and academic Bible reading, other translations can always be added as a commentary.
- i) *Finally: The Luther Bible meets a human need that cannot be satisfied by a technically cold language reduced to the materially tangible.*  
Reference should be made to the phenomenon of Tolkien and in general to the hunger for mythological experience in the literary scene. While modernized versions are presented in churches, people line up at the theater to hear the King James Version from the mouth of an actor ...<sup>59</sup> It makes a huge difference whether we read Lk 2:19 as “Mary kept all these words and moved them in her heart“ (Luther), or, much more abstractly, “Mary kept all that she had heard in her heart and *thought much about it*“ (Good News 1997, from the German Gute Nachricht Bibel).

<sup>54</sup> As to that, see Schnepper: Goldene Buchstaben (Golden letters); cf. Pola: “Wer nicht auswendig lernt, ist des Todes schuldig“ (“Who does not learn by heart, is guilty of death”).

<sup>55</sup> Beutel: Klassizität, 37.

<sup>56</sup> As a paradigm for classifying the Bible as a book, it might be advisable to think less of a novel to be read through and then put away, and more of a textbook that teachers and students work through together, and that neither of them ever get finished to learn from for the rest of their lives. A child is not usually left alone with a textbook, but opens it together with its teacher. It is the same with the Holy Scripture, notwithstanding the clarity and unity powerfully testified by the Reformers: it unites its readers, lets old and young help each other in discovering and understanding.

<sup>57</sup> Thus, e.g. Mülhaupt, Testament, 92.

<sup>58</sup> For an Overview, see e.g. Hoegen-Rohls: Biblia deutsch, 86.

<sup>59</sup> For more quotes, proves and arguments I refer emphatically to Stolt: Biblische Erzählweise, 182ff.

As far as the work on the revision of the Luther Bible is concerned, the demand for the greatest possible restraint arises from what has been said. It should be “guided by respect for the theological component of Luther’s translation.”<sup>60</sup> I have presented my own articles on the Luther Bible of 2017 and the Zurich Bible of 2007/8 (see bibliography). Just two remarks here: 1) The overall conservative character of the 2017 version is to be welcomed, but it makes one wonder whether this revision was necessary at all. Not even the now incomprehensible “Schloßen“ in Ps 147:17 have been replaced by today’s “hail“. 2) The accompanying explanations of the facts and words have become so distant from the Bible and so critical of it that I can only advise against them. Such modernizations stand in stark contrast to the efforts to produce a text that is as close as possible to the original text and to Luther, and this can probably only be explained by the peculiarities of (post)modernism. If in the future it will no longer be possible to obtain Luther Bibles without such framings, the congregation will nolens volens have to rely on semi-legal reprints like the one of the Geneva Bible Society from 2009.

Let’s get the Luther Bible out of the fire!

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<sup>60</sup> Also Mülhaupt: *Testament*, 92.

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