

MARTIN LUTHER'S SEPTEMBER TESTAMENT THE UNTOLD STORY

Were the Internet, that notorious cesspool of everything that couldn't even make it into the *National Enquirer*, given a crack at the book we are celebrating today, we would most likely hear several half-truths and untruths. For example, Luther's New Testament was the first printed translation of Scripture into German—wrong (the Strasbourg Mentelin Bible of 1466 was)! Luther's translation shaped the German language for years to come—half right (but give Goethe and Schiller some credit, too). Luther “looked the people in the puss” and produced a translation that spoke German not Greek—half right but wrong on two counts: The word “Maul,” which I have purposefully mistranslated “puss,” was simply the common word for “mouth” in the sixteenth century (so Luther looked folks in the mouth); and the facts are that at many important points Luther made the translation more difficult by preserving Hebraisms and Hellenisms that earlier translations had often omitted.

All this by way of introducing to you the title of my talk: “Martin Luther's September Testament: The Untold Story.” And here I must begin with a tribute to the man of the hour, Eric Gritsch, whose memory we also celebrate this day. I still remember the first time I read his remarkable biography of Luther, *Martin—God's Court Jester*, and how Eric's historical and theological rigor revealed a Martin Luther that I had scarcely before encountered. Of the gems in that book, perhaps my favorite comes in the midst of his discussing Luther's concept of the church and its relation to Scripture. From the Christmas Postil of 1522, Luther's interpretation of the appointed Sunday lessons from Advent through the Epiphany, Professor Gritsch cited a line from the exposition of the gospel for the Feast of St. John (December 28th). “Die Kirche ist kein Federhaus sondern ein Maulhaus” [The Church is not a quill house but a mouth house].¹ I cannot begin to tell you the number of times that I have cited that text, because it not only properly defines Luther's ecclesiology but also his hermeneutics, that is, his approach to Scripture itself and, as we will see today, to its translation.

For all the misappropriations of the famous, but mistaken slogan of the Reformation, *sola Scriptura*, this line from Luther is the perfect anti-

dote. When Luther talks about the “Word of God,” he rarely means simply words in a book to be cited to—nay, rather, thrown at—an unsuspecting congregation. The words must get up off the page and sing. When St. Paul said in Romans, “How shall they hear without a preacher?” this meant for Luther that church is more event than institution and that the Bible itself must be translated with an ear not simply to the receivers’ language but also to its own orality. As he wrote in *Freedom of a Christian* in 1520, describing proper preaching, “Preaching, however, ought to serve this goal: that faith in Christ is promoted. Then he is not simply ‘Christ’ but ‘Christ for you and me,’ and what we say about him and call him affect us. This faith is born and preserved by preaching why Christ came, what he brought and gave, and what are the needs and the fruit that his reception entail.”²

Thus, the central contribution of Luther’s September Testament comes from its surprisingly oral nature. Not only does Luther shape the translation into a language common to his beloved sixteenth-century Germans, but he does this work in order that it may be read aloud in the Christian assembly. Thus, even his best-selling translation—and it truly was that—was not meant to sit idly on a shelf or to decorate a coffee table in the sitting room but to sing out from the midst of the congregation.

One place the oral, singable nature of the text reveals itself comes four years later in early 1526 when Luther’s *Deutsche Messe* (German Mass) appears.³ Imitating the Latin Mass of the time, Luther insisted upon singing both the lesson from the New Testament epistles and the appointed gospel lesson. Moreover, the tones for the chants were markedly different so that the gospel tone matched the chant used for the Words of Institution at the Lord’s Supper. The rules for the gospel chant set aside three different tones for the three voices that appear in the gospel, with the evangelist’s voice in the middle, Jesus’ voice one third lower on the scale and the apostles, crowd or religious leaders one third higher. Moreover, the individual flexes for commas, periods and question marks now matched the cadence of the German language, not Latin. Indeed, Luther even criticized earlier attempts at writing German liturgy for trying to force German into the rhythms of the original Latin chants. In summary, almost from the beginning of its existence, Luther’s New Testament sang, just as he had intended.

Now, the kind of German that Luther used for his translation had two sides, not one. On the one hand, as most scholars agree, Luther's language really did echo the language of his people. The famous story of him having a butcher cut apart a lamb and naming the parts for him is simply one extreme example of Luther's quest for accuracy in German. Luther and his team of translators also needed to know about gems for Revelation and about money for the gospels. Moreover, he often employed language and syntax more suited for the German text than the Greek or, later, Hebrew original.⁵

But, on the other hand, Luther understood that it takes two to translate, that is, he realized that the original text also made an enormous claim on the translator. Sometimes, to use his words for it, he had to let the literal text go in order to remain faithful to the original. At other times he translates in ways that preserve the foreign nature of the New Testament and its own Hellenisms and Hebraisms, which Luther's own humanist training prepared him to recognize and appreciate. Where many go wrong, however, is in imagining that Luther's, at times, hyper-literalism reflected a narrow view of Scripture and its authority. When Luther seems more faithful to the text than to his own readers and hearers, he does so because the very startling nature of word usage or grammar alerts the reader to the complexities of the original text's meaning.

The most famous example of this translational two-step comes with the well known greeting of the angel to Mary at the Annunciation, "Hail, Mary, full of grace."⁶ In Luther's German—even more so than in English—the phrase "full of grace," which would represent a literal translation of the Greek followed by the Latin Vulgate, suggests a very concrete, literal filling of an object—as we still in English talk about a glassful or bellyful of something. To figure out what Gabriel was up to here, as Birgit Stolt has pointed out in her many studies of Luther's German, Luther recalls Gabriel's earlier greetings to the prophet Daniel in the Old Testament.⁷ He decides on that basis that this introduction reflects Gabriel's way of greeting people.

But this is only half the story. Had Luther simply been interested in capturing the Early Modern New High German tongue that his people spoke, he might have rendered it (as do some rather questionable English translations), "Hi, Mary!" Instead, Luther tries to penetrate not simply to

the intellectual—literal but to the emotive—literal sense of the greeting, and, in his defense of his translations, he even admits that he would have simply written, “*Liebe Maria*” (dear Mary). But Luther did not do this. Instead, his translation of 1522 and beyond used a different, nearly untranslatable German phrase, “*Du holdselige Maria*.” Mary is no longer having grace poured into her like beer into a barrel, but she is also not being greeted as if this were simply a colloquial chat between two buddies. Instead, by using that remarkable term “holdselig” (which we could perhaps render “dearly beloved”) Luther split the difference, so to speak, and came up with a term of endearment that still provides a sense of the special place Mary has in the story of Jesus’ birth. Moreover, a cursory look at Luther’s other uses of “holdselig” (there are just over ninety in his works) reveals that he often surrounded it with the synonyms “*freundlich*” (friendly) and “*gnadenreich*” (rich in grace), which also provide boundaries for the meaning of the word.⁷ Another synonym is “*huldreich*,” which also carries the sense of gracious affection.⁸

This balancing act, according to Stolt, has much to do with Luther’s sensitivity to the emotive side of the text and the importance of leaving certain markers, present in the Greek or Hebrew, that demonstrate not simply the literal, explicit meaning but the implicit feelings and beauty of a text. Especially Luther’s translation of the Psalms, printed in ensuing years, demonstrates this aspect of good translation—something almost completely neglected in several recent English translations but recently recovered by modern linguists as part and parcel of the broader scope of communication. All of these things point to the oral nature of Luther’s work and the ways in which he preserves something lost on many of us who have learned to read the Bible not so much in the assembly as in the private recesses of our own studies—a gift (or curse) of Pietism that we have not yet come to terms with.

It is only in this context that we may appreciate Luther’s other remarkable contributions in the September Testament. These contributions were in fact silent in the assembly but only accessible to the reader: the prefaces to books of the Bible, the marginal glosses explaining individual passages and the woodcuts.⁹ And these contributions only make sense within the context of late-medieval and Renaissance experiences with Scripture. Here I need to introduce another of my make-believe

Internet myths. Many imagine that Luther favored reading the Bible alone without any help from others. When, in a postscript to his *Weihnachtspostil* (itself a Scripture commentary that he wanted people to read) he wrote, “Hyneyn, hyneyn, lieben Christen” (Get into, get into [the Scripture] dear Christians), it might seem that he imagined reading Scripture without commentary.¹⁰ And yet within twelve months of the publication of that work, he wrote two introductions for the New Testament commentaries of Philip Melancthon on Romans and 1 & 2 Corinthians and on John. There and in the aforementioned postscript he carefully distinguished good and bad commentaries, where the former provided a scaffold or index for the text while the latter dabbled in mere human opinions.¹¹

Thus, when we picture Luther himself writing commentaries or preparing sermons on biblical texts or translating, we must never imagine an empty writing desk save for the Bible. The wealth of studies on Luther’s biblical interpretation shows instead his vast knowledge of patristic and medieval interpreters, to say nothing of the more recent work of humanists like Faber Stapulensis or Erasmus of Rotterdam.¹² To apply Peter Fraenkel’s apt term for Melancthon’s view of biblical authority, Luther also read the Bible not as the sole authority (a la *sola Scriptura*) but rather as the *primum et verum*, the first and true authority, against which others could be measured and then used.¹³

This respect for the exegetical conversation swirling around the biblical text affected the September Testament in three easy-to-see ways: through preface s, glosses and illustrations. And these were primarily produced not for the casual reader so much as for the other interpreters of the Bible: the parish pastor or preacher and, to a lesser extent, the educated, well-to-do layperson. No one who has leafed through the September Testament can fail to notice and marvel at the amazing Cranach woodcut s woven throughout the book of Revelation. That no other book of the New Testament contained illustrations, however, often puzzles modern readers, unless Luther’s work is set into the context of earlier publications. Then it is clear that Luther’s Bible provides illustrations strictly at the points where the Cologne Bible of 1478–1480, among others, had them, with the exception of illustrations for each prophet, which seem to reflect a program very carefully laid-out by Luther himself. The

September Testament is no exception, in that like the Cologne Bible, the only book illustrated in the New Testament was Revelation. But here, of course, Renaissance art also played a role, in that Cranach's pictures are clearly modeled after the series for Revelation produced two decades earlier by Albrecht Dürer, themselves based upon the Cologne Bible.¹⁴

This dependence on medieval and Renaissance sources, however, does not gainsay the fact that the September Testament made one famous change to the iconography. Whereas both the Cologne Bible and Dürer were not averse to putting the image of a single pope among those trampled by the four horsemen of the Apocalypse in Revelation 6, Cranach, doubtless at Luther's instigation, eliminated such depictions and instead placed the papal tiara on the head of the beast in Revelation 10 and the whore of Babylon in chapter 17—much to the displeasure of Elector Frederick the Wise, who insisted on its removal from the December Testament printed at the end of 1522. Indeed, this blend of respect for tradition and defiance of the anti-Christ marks many of Luther's works from this time.

The other two contributions, glosses and prefaces, deserve more attention because of the profound way they shaped Luther's Bible. Again the forerunners and models for Luther's New Testament provide the perfect backdrop for examining both Wittenberg's dependence upon traditional sources and Luther's own creative approach to translating. Any good, card-carrying member of a Methodist church knows how John Wesley's heart was strangely warmed at a worship service in Aldersgate. Fewer remember that what Wesley heard that day was not the Bible but instead Luther's preface to the book of Romans, which already first graced the September Testament of 1522.¹⁵

Indeed, of all the prefaces to that publication this one is by far the best known. Shortly after its appearance it was published separately in a Latin version prepared by Justus Jonas and later attached to Melancthon's annotations on the same book.¹⁶ But there were also important prefaces to the entire New Testament and to other individual books, including Revelation and James. His strictures against James were so famous as to have echoed in comments by seventeenth-century Puritan exegetes, even though by the 1530s Luther had removed them.¹⁷ In the case of Revelation, however, it would seem that Cranach's woodcuts

anticipated Luther's revised preface of 1530 in that first there and not in 1522 did he attempt to explain individual images in Revelation and relate them to his own times.¹⁸ In our September Testament Luther finds Revelation wanting: It does not present the gospel clearly; it is more like 4 Esdras than any biblical text; it was rejected by many church fathers; and it is not apostolic in the sense of Acts 1:8 because it fails to witness to Christ. "Thus," Luther concludes, "I stay with the books that offer Christ to me in a clear and pure manner."¹⁹ Still, he lets people think what they will about this book—a good thing, too, since he so radically changes his tune in 1530, shortly after the siege of Vienna by the Turkish army led to a heightened apocalyptic awareness among Lutherans.

Where did this idea of prefaces come from? We know that already Jerome had provided such introductions to some books of his Latin translation. Only much later did scholars come to discover that some of these prefaces were written not by Jerome at all but by Pelagius—especially the one to Romans! In the Middle Ages, many commentators would comment not only on the biblical texts but also on these short prefaces. The Gutenberg Bible includes these same short prefaces. But we also know that with the Renaissance, new prefaces to Scripture were being written, especially by Erasmus of Rotterdam. In 1516, his Greek text of the New Testament includes prefaces in Greek by Greek sources alongside prefaces from the Vulgate. In the second edition of 1519, however, the Greek material is followed by Erasmus's own, sometimes lengthy prefaces.²⁰ Thus, when Luther writes prefaces for his German translation, he is following in the footsteps of the famous Dutch humanist. Again, however, when one compares the content of the two sets of prefaces, we find that Luther often rejects Erasmus's positions (based often upon St. Jerome) for interpretations more consonant with St. Augustine, to be sure, but also indicative of Wittenberg's own developing theology.

Indeed, the aforementioned preface to Romans owes far more to Wittenberg's own Greek whiz, Philip Melancthon, whose lectures on Romans with Luther's preface appeared in November 1522, only a few months after the September Testament. Here Wittenberg's theology comes to full expression: "This epistle is really the chief part of the New Testament, and is truly the purest gospel," Luther writes. After defining the epistle's chief terms (law, sin, grace, faith, righteousness, flesh and

spirit), Luther then offers an outline of the book strikingly similar to Melanchthon's own. The short preface of the Vulgate has been exchanged for a Renaissance argumentum, as they called it, a careful outline of the author's basic points. Thus, in talking of faith, Luther remarks famously, "Faith, however is a divine work in us which changes us and makes us to be born anew of God... kills the old Adam and makes us altogether different people... and brings with it the Holy Spirit. O it is a living, busy, active, mighty thing, this faith. It is impossible for it not to be doing good works incessantly."²¹

These prefaces alone give us leave to celebrate this translation not simply for its contributions to the German language and literature but for its singular statement of Wittenberg's theological program. In his autobiographical reminiscences of 1545 that grace the first volume of his Latin works, Luther talks of his insight into the meaning of "the righteousness of God" in Romans 1:16–17 as no longer the active righteousness by which God judges sinners but rather the passive righteousness by which God declares sinners saints, he adds, "There upon an entirely new face of Scripture showed itself to me," so that phrases like wisdom of God, power of God and the like meant that by which God makes human creatures wise, powerful, etc.²² It is this "entirely new face of Scripture" that is reflected in these prefaces, so that God's grace and mercy not human works and merit take center stage.

But there is one more aspect to Luther's translation that we dare not overlook. It also relates to Luther dependence upon and, at the same time, freedom from past exegesis, and that is the gloss. Once again, the notion of printing a biblical text with marginal notations was hardly new. In fact, the commentaries of Nicholas of Lyra, the fourteenth-century interpreter of the entire Bible used extensively by Luther, were published in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries with a small biblical text in the middle of the page completely surrounded by the early-medieval text of the so-called Ordinary Gloss and the comments of Nicholas of Lyra among others.

Here Luther was assisted greatly by developments in printing technology, which by the 1520s had developed smaller typeface for marginal glosses so that they no longer swallowed the text. Thus, as one can see, the text of the New Testament dominates, and the marginalia assist the

reading. Sometimes, the marginal note points to the source of a biblical reference; at other times, Luther explains the meaning of a word. But, most notably in Romans, Luther's September Testament also provides a handy guide to Wittenberg's own reading of the Bible, and we find even more glosses in the completed Bible of 1534 and beyond. From Romans 3, let me share a single gloss on verse 23: "For there is no exception; all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God and are justified without merit, by his grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus." Luther states, "Note this, that he says they are all sinners, etc. This is the chief part and central place of this Epistle and of the entire Scripture. Namely, that everything is sin that has not been redeemed through the blood of Christ and justified in faith. Therefore, grasp well this text, for it buries all works, merit and boasting, as he himself says, and there remains only God's pure grace and honor."²³

In 1527, Duke Georg of ducal Saxony, Luther's sworn enemy, could take the influence of Luther's translation no longer. In 1523 the duke had already tried to ferret out copies and burn them, but with limited success—especially when Luther suggested that residents of ducal Saxony allow the prince's henchmen to search for copies but not to lift a finger to help in finding where they were hidden. Now in 1527 the poor duke begged his court theologian, Jerome Emser, to publish his own translation. The result shows us just how influential Luther's translation really was. As Luther himself noticed, the translation was basically the same as his own, with the exception that the word "alone" (as in "we are justified by faith alone") was left out. What higher compliment could Luther receive from his enemies! Of course, Emser changed the prefaces and glosses to reflect the theology of Luther's opponents, and the woodcuts for Revelation saw no trace of the papal tiara on any of the book's beasties. But the fact that Emser felt constrained to include his own prefaces, glosses and pictures shows just how successful Luther's remarkable translation was.

When, like my collaborator and colleague, Eric Gritsch, we try to understand this phenomenon called the Reformation and the way in which Lutherans above all others fiercely held to the notion of justification by faith alone without the works of the law, then we need turn no further than to this September Testament and remember that all Lutheran

LUTHER'S SEPTEMBER TESTAMENT

pastors and teachers after its publication had not only its remarkable text but also its remarkable pictures, introductions and glosses rattling around in their heads and hearts as they went to interpret the same texts for their people. True, later printings slowly replaced Luther's glosses with others and Luther's woodcuts with far tamer ones, so that by the eighteenth century only Luther's translation remained. Nevertheless, what we celebrate today truly can be called Luther's greatest contribution to the German speaking people and to the church, that is, to the evangelical "Mouth House," that bears his name.

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NOTES

1. See Eric W. Gritsch, *Martin—God’s Court Jester: Luther in Retrospect* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 98.
2. Translation the author’s, based upon *Luther’s Works* [Amer. ed.], ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Helmut Lehmann and Christopher Brown, 55+ vols. (St. Louis: Concordia & Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955–), 31: 357 [henceforth: LW 31: 357].
3. LW 53: 61–90.
4. See Birgit Stolt, “Laßt uns fröhlich springen!” Gefühlswelt und Gefühlsnavigierung in *Luthers Reformationsarbeit* (Berlin: Weidler, 2012), 262–264.
5. See Stolt, “Laßt uns,” 258–61. Luther’s defense of his translation is found in LW 35: 175–202, especially 190–195.
6. Stolt, “Laßt uns“, passim.
7. See particularly *Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* [Schriften], 65 vols. (Weimar: H. Bohlau, 1883–1993), 9: 149, 12 [Henceforth: WA 9: 149, 12].
8. WA 10/1/1: 420, 13–17.
9. The glosses are in *Luthers Werke: Deutsche Bibel* 12 vols. (Weimar: Bohlau, 1906–1961), vol. 6–7 [Henceforth: WAB 6–7]; the prefaces for the New Testament are translated in LW 35: 357–411 ; the woodcuts have been reproduced in WAB 7:483–523.
10. LW 52: 286.
11. LW 59: 18–22 & 43–47.
12. Most recently, see Timothy J. Wengert, *Reading the Bible with Martin Luther* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013).
13. Peter Fraenkel, *Testimonia Patrum* (Geneva : Droz, 1961).
14. For this see Heimo Reinitzer, *Biblia deutsch: Luthers Bibelübersetzung und ihre Tradition* (Wolfenbüttel: Herzog August Bibliothek, 1983), 128–41.
15. LW 35: 365–80.
16. See WA DB 7: XXXIII: *Praefatio Methodica totius Scripturae in Epistolam Pauli ad Romanos* (Wittenberg: [Grunenberg], 1523). It was reprinted in Strasbourg in 1523 and 1524 by Johannes Knoblauch. It was also printed in 1524 in Mainz, in 1525 in Strasbourg by Johannes Herwagen, who appended it to Melancthon’s annotations, in 1550 in Geneva and in 1579 in Berlin. An English translation appeared in London in 1632.
17. See Derek Cooper, *Thomas Manton: A Guided Tour of the Life and Thought of a Puritan Pastor* (Philipsburg, New Jersey: P & R, 2011), 101–120. Luther’s comments on James are in LW 35: 362 & 395–398.
18. For both prefaces, see LW 35: 398–411.
19. WA DB 7:404, 29–30.
20. For a comparison of various prefaces to Romans, See the report on the working group at the 1997 International Luther Congress in *Luther-Jahrbuch 66* (1999): 298–301.
21. LW 35: 370.
22. LW 34: 337.
23. WAB 7: 38. For the Emser New Testament, see Reinitzer, *Biblia*, 196–202.

