

Luther's New Testament

In September 1522 *Das Neue Testament Deutsch* was published in Wittenberg, Germany. The exact date may have been September 21, the day of St. Matthew the Apostle. This was a huge event in the life of Martin Luther (1483-1546) and in the history of the Reformation.

What led to this huge event?

Here's a summary of Luther's career up to the publishing of his New Testament:

- ◆ He first came into contact with a full edition of the Bible when he was about 20 years old. It was a text of the Vulgate, the Latin translation of the Bible. The Vulgate was translated by Jerome around 400 A.D. The Gutenberg Bible was a printing of the Vulgate in 1455. Luther became a diligent student of the Vulgate during his time as a monk.
- ◆ He became a university teacher in 1512. In the following years he taught the Psalms, Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews.
- ◆ Beginning in 1515 he began intensive study in learning the biblical languages of Hebrew and Greek. He also became familiar with the Greek New Testament which was released by Erasmus in 1516.
- ◆ Luther nailed the 95 Theses to the church door in Wittenberg on October 31, 1517. As a reformer, Luther appealed to the Scriptures as the sole authority in the church. When he was brought before the Diet at Worms to answer for his writings, he said his conscience was captive to the Word of God and he would not recant unless he could be convinced otherwise with clear evidence from the Scriptures.
- ◆ Emperor Charles V declared Luther an outlaw who could be legally killed after the Diet at Worms. To save Luther's life, his governor, Elector Frederick, had him captured and taken secretly to the Wartburg Castle near Eisenach. Luther stayed at the Wartburg (his "Patmos") from May 1521 to March 1522.
- ◆ In early December 1521 Luther made an undercover visit to Wittenberg for a few days. Philip Melancthon and other friends convinced him to undertake a translation of the New Testament from Greek into German. Luther returned to the Wartburg and began the work.
- ◆ He translated the New Testament in 11 weeks! He based it on the Greek New Testament and used the Vulgate as well as translation helps written by Erasmus to finish his translating.
- ◆ He returned to Wittenberg in March 1522. He and Melancthon went through the manuscript and prepared it to be published.

Before Luther's New Testament translation there were German Bibles and German Bible story books, but the Bibles were based on the Vulgate, not the original languages. Also, Bible books were big, clumsy, and expensive (three times the cost of an ox!). Luther wanted a Bible based on the original languages that was readable by the people and accessible to them as well.

Luther's New Testament is sometimes called the *September Testament of 1522*.

The publishers were Christian Döring and Lucas Cranach. Melchior Lotter printed 3,000 copies.

It was the first of many printings of his New Testament. Luther continued to rework and refine his translation over the next 24 years until his death. From 1522 to 1546 there were 32 authorized publications of his New Testament: 21 published as just the New Testament and another 11 published as part of the whole Bible. Luther's first full Bible translation appeared in 1534.

Luther's *September Testament* has some special features:

- ◆ Luther wrote a preface to the New Testament. Here is the beginning of it:
It would be good, right, and fair that this book go out without any preface or other name, and would just take its own name and speech. But because the mind of Christians is misled by many wild explanations and prefaces—so that a man knows almost nothing anymore about what gospel and law, New or Old Testament even mean—the need calls for an explanation and preface. In this way the simple man is brought out of his old delusion onto the right path. He is taught what he should expect in this book, so that he does not search for commandment and law when he should search for gospel and the promise of God.
- ◆ He also added to his introduction a personal comment on which books of the New Testament are best for a Christian to read the most. Here is an excerpt:
John's Gospel and Saint Paul's letters, especially the one to the Romans, and Saint Peter's first letter are the true core and marrow among all books and should rightly be first. Each Christian would be advised to read these books first and most of all, and through daily reading make them more familiar to himself than daily bread...In them you find a master presentation of how faith in Christ overcomes sin, death, and hell and gives life, righteousness, and salvation, which is the true nature of the gospel.
- ◆ He wrote a preface for each of the letters in the New Testament. Most of the prefaces are brief, but the preface to the book of Romans is extensive (explaining in detail many terms such as *law, sin, grace, faith*, among others).
- ◆ He added notes in the margins of the New Testament text.
The inner margin has cross references to other Bible passages. For example, when the prophecy about Jesus' birth in Bethlehem is quoted in Matthew 2, Luther notes the reference to Micah 5.
The outer margin has brief explanatory notes. For example, when the crowd shouts to Jesus on Palm Sunday in Matthew 21, Luther notes, "*Hosianna in German means, 'Ah, help!' or 'Ah, give bliss and salvation!'"*
- ◆ The 1522 Bible has decorative elements in it. Each New Testament book begins with a picture that includes the first letter of the book. For example, John's Gospel begins with a picture of John holding his gospel book with an eagle standing beside him, with a capital letter I forming the right side of the picture. His gospel begins, *Im anfang wardz wort* ("In the beginning was the Word").
- ◆ The book of Revelation has 21 full-page woodcut illustrations that accompany the text and give a visual presentation of many scenes in Revelation. Lucas Cranach did the illustrations. They are very detailed. Some of them are edgy. For example, the drunken whore of Babylon in chapter 17 is wearing the pope's crown.

Discussion questions:

Why do you think Luther began with translating the New Testament?

What is the value of putting a readable Bible into people's hands?

What do you find interesting about the story of Luther's *September Testament*?*

* Sources for this Bible study include:

Das Neue Testament in der deutschen Übersetzung von Martin Luther. Studienausgabe Band 2. Reclam 1989.

Luthers Werke, Weimarer Ausgabe, *Deutsche Bible Band 6, Band 7.* 1929. 2001 reprint by Verlag Hermann Böhlaus Nachfolger Weimar.

Martin Luther, *Das Neue Testament Deutsch, Septembertestament,* Wittenberg 1522. Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft 2021.