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The King James Version and Luther's Bible Translation

Graham Tomlin here examines perhaps two of the most influential Reformation texts: Martin Luther's translation of the Bible (1534) and the King James Version (1611). He shows how their different emphases reflect different strands in tension within the Reformation as well as their different historical contexts. For Luther, translation should be idiomatic and so accessible, theological and the work of a faith-ful translator who has been humbled by God's grace. His is a translation of immanence and incarnation into his culture. In contrast, the KJV is not concerned to propound a particular theological standpoint but seeks simplicity and the integrity of precise translation of the original languages. It thus preserves the Scripture's strangeness and trusts the reader with the text's uncertainties.

Perhaps the two most influential documents that emerged from the Reformation period were Martin Luther's translation of the Bible into German which finally appeared in full in 1534, and the King James Version, whose four hundredth anniversary we have been celebrating in 2011. Both had an extensive and profound effect on the languages into which they were translated. Luther combined the various forms of contemporary German into one common vernacular usage which became the basis for a standardised spoken and written language for centuries to come. The King James Version shaped the English language both in England itself and also, in time, throughout the world in the various British colonies, as British traders and missionaries took the King James Bible with them on their overseas ventures in subsequent centuries.

There is of course, a vital link between the two: William Tyndale. Tyndale learnt German specifically to read and to use Luther's translation. If one account of Tyndale's life is to be believed, after his appeal to Bishop Tunstall for patronage of the idea for a new translation had been turned down, he made a visit to Wittenberg in 1525 to familiarise himself with what was happening there, and presumably to meet Luther himself, before relocating to the low countries. Despite the fact that he took a different approach to translation from Luther, Tyndale's subsequent translation was thus significantly influenced by Luther's. In some estimates, 76% of the Old Testament and 84% of the New Testament language in the KJV derives from Tyndale, duly passed through the filter of the various versions of Coverdale, Geneva, the Bishops' Bible etc. Therefore, some of Luther's translation found its way indirectly into the King James Bible from Tyndale. Heinz Bluhm's work in the 1960s indicated a number of instances of how phraseology and language in Luther's translation, turned into parallel English prose, found its way via Coverdale to the King James Bible. ¹ This is not to say however that the translations are the same, or take the same approach. As we will see, despite the fact that they both emerge out of the European Reformation, they take a very distinct and different approach to the task of translation, rooted in turn in very different theological and contextual starting points.

Martin Luther's Approach to Bible Translation

After his appearance before the Emperor at the Diet of Worms in 1521, Luther was spirited away for his own safety to the Wartburg Castle, not far from one of his childhood homes in Eisenach. There, he began the task of translating the Bible into German, with the New Testament appearing in 1522 (working from Erasmus' new edition of the Greek NT), and the full Bible finally in 1534.

Luther wrote about the task of, and his approach to, Bible translation in two main documents. One was his *Sendbrief von Dolmetschen*, or 'An Open Letter on Translating' written while he waited at Coburg Castle for the outcome of the Diet of Augsburg in 1530. In September of that year, his New Testament had come in for severe criticism, especially for his translation of Romans 3:28, when he inserted a word not found in the Greek – the word 'allein'. So, a verse which in the NRSV reads: "For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law" was rendered in Luther's version: "*So halten wir es nu, das der Mensch gerecht werde, on des Gesetzes werck, alleine durch den Glauben*" ("without works of the law, through faith **alone**"). The '*Sendbrief*' was in part a defence of this decision and in part an explanation of his broader convictions about the task of Bible translation.

The other key document is his 'Defence of the Translation of the Psalms', written in 1531, and finally published in December 1532. He also touched on the task in several instances of 'Table Talk', which give valuable brief insights into his approach to translation. From these documents, three central themes appear, referring to the requirements of a good translation, and a good translator, of the Bible.

An Idiomatic Translation

Luther's Bible was very significant for the German language, but it was by no means the first German translation. The first vernacular Bible in Europe had been produced in Strasbourg in 1466 in German. By 1507, thirteen further German editions had been produced as well as five different versions of the Psalms. Between 1477 and 1522, four Lower German editions of the Bible had also appeared. Luther therefore did not decide to translate because no German translation existed. Like the translators of the KJV, he wanted to improve on what was available. However, unlike them, he started directly from the Hebrew and Greek texts rather than using previous editions of the Bible as a starting point. Most significant was his desire to make a truly localised, colloquial German translation. His criticisms of these previous German versions centred on their inaccessibility to ordinary people. As he put it in his 'Prefaces to the Old Testament':

Nor have I read, up to this time, a book or letter which contained the right kind of German. Besides no one pays any attention to speaking real German. This is especially true of the people in the chancelleries, as well as those patchwork preachers and wretched writers. (LW 35: 250) 2

For Luther, the primary requirement for a translator of the Bible is not, strangely enough, expert knowledge of Greek and Hebrew, but an excellent knowledge of idiomatic German. For him, close familiarity with the receptor language is as important, if not more important, than knowledge of the donor languages. The aim is to find the most idiomatic way of

expressing the sense of the biblical text, in a way that people who speak that colloquial language can understand and follow. In this way, Luther established what John Flood called 'the emancipation of the vernacular' from the hold that the classical languages had on German culture up until that point. ³ In the '*Sendbrief*', he writes:

I wanted to speak German, not Latin or Greek, since it was German I had undertaken to speak in the translation... 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. (LW 35: 189)

The translator learns to translate not by reading Hebrew but listening to people: 'Therefore I must let the literal word go, and try to learn how the German says that which the Hebrew expresses' (LW 35:193). In his 'Defence of the Translation of the Psalms', he writes, '...once he has the German words to serve purpose, let him drop the Hebrew words and express himself freely in the best German he knows' (LW 35: 214). His defence of the insertion of the word '*alleine*' in Romans 3:28 is at least in part a linguistic argument, claiming that colloquial German requires the '*allein – kein*' construction in comparing and contrasting two things (LW 35: 188).

Luther often argues against the value of a direct word-for-word translation. For example in his Preface to the book of Job, written in 1545, he writes:

The language of this book is more vigorous and splendid than that of any other book in all the Scriptures. Yet if it were translated everywhere word for word – as the Jews and foolish translators would have it done – and not for the most part according to the sense, no one would understand it. (LW 35: 252)

Literal, word-for-word translations often obscure rather than reveal. And because Scripture is meant to reveal God, understanding is vital, so the translator must feel free to stay closer to a comprehensible form in the receptor language rather than leave obscurities unresolved in the donor language.

Luther therefore takes very seriously the context in which a translation takes place. For him, this includes both the linguistic context and the historical one. The second reason he gives for his inclusion of '*allein*' in Romans 3:28 is the need for theological clarification in the polemical circumstances of the sixteenth century. This addition is needed, he says, '...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' (LW 35: 198).

Behind all this, there lies a significant principle: that in translation the vital thing is not a direct rendering of the original language, but the conveying of the idea behind the original language in ordinary speech. This of course assumes that it is possible to identify the ideas behind the words, which leads to Luther's second key principle in Bible translation.

A Theological Translation

For Luther, a translation needs to express the heart of the message of Scripture, which for him is the message of justification by faith alone. He describes the task of translation as like the hard work of clearing a field of stones and boulders: 'We had to sweat and toil there before we got those boulders and clods out of the way, so that one could go along so nicely. The ploughing goes well when the field is cleared. But rooting out the woods and stumps, and getting the field ready – this is a job nobody wants' (LW 35: 188). The image conveys the idea of finding a rough field, full of obstacles that need to be cleared away. Similarly, the Bible presents a number of linguistic and theological problems that need to be ironed out, cleared up, made smooth. And in order to do this work, the translator needs to be a good theologian, one who understands the gospel.

While, as we have seen, Luther wants good idiomatic German, even that is subservient to the overall theological goal: 'I preferred to do violence to the German language rather than to depart from the word' (LW 35: 194). If his first two reasons for the insertion of '*allein*' into Romans 3:28 were linguistic and historical, the third is theological:

For in that very passage he is dealing with the main point of Christian doctrine, namely, that we are justified by faith in Christ without any works of the law. And Paul cuts away all works so completely, as even to say that the works of the law – though it is God's law and word – do not help us for justification... But when all works are so completely cut away – and that must mean that faith alone justifies – whoever would speak plainly and clearly about this cutting away of works will have to say, 'Faith alone justifies us, and not works.' The matter itself, as well as the nature of the language, demands it. (LW 35: 195)

A text that displays the dynamic at work here is James 2:24 – 'You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone' (NIV) - a verse that could be fatal to Luther's interpretation of the gospel. At first glance, he translates it fairly 'straight': '*So sehet ihr nun, daß der Mensch durch die Werke gerecht wird, nicht durch den Glauben allein.*' The key phrase 'not through faith alone' is translated directly. However there is a twist in the tail. In his translation of the verb 'justify', he makes a subtle shift from a clearly present tense (in the Greek) to a tense which, if not exactly future, still implies an ongoing process which is not yet finished (in the German – *gerecht wird*). The 'justification' referred to thus becomes eschatological. Luther's understanding of justification was that God's righteousness is given to us in Christ now, as an anticipation of the final declaration of righteousness to be pronounced one day upon us. ⁴ The subtle shift of the tense to indicate an ongoing process allows him to shift the focus of the verse. It moves from the declaration of justification in the present (in which no works are involved) to the final state of being justified in the future, the final delivery from all sin, which will involve a certain level of discipline and, in one sense, 'works'. It is a small shift, but a significant one, guided by his prior theological understanding.

When there are disputed readings, a crucial guiding hand in Luther's translation is his understanding of the heart of the gospel. Where the meaning of the text is unclear, Luther often seeks to translate it in ways that fit his theological framework. There are a number of examples of this.

First, in Romans 1:17, another seminal verse for Luther, as it had sparked his own 'Reformation breakthrough', the Greek simply has the phrase δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ. This could of course mean 'the righteousness which God possesses', 'the righteousness God requires', or even 'the justice of God'. Luther translates it with the phrase '*die Gerechtigkeit, die vor Gott gilt*', (the righteousness that counts before God), making it very clear in what sense he wants the phrase to be read, one that ties in with his notion of 'passive righteousness', given to us by God.

Secondly, there is the famous Lutheran distinction between Law and Gospel that dictates the resulting translation. One saying recorded in the 'Table Talk' reports:

...if some passage is obscure I consider whether it treats of grace or of law, whether wrath or the forgiveness of sin [is contained in it], and with which of these it agrees better. By this procedure I have often understood the most obscure passages. Either the law or the gospel has made them meaningful, for God divides his teaching into law and gospel. (LW 54: 42)

Thirdly, in a different fragment from the Table Talk, yet another of Luther's devices for interpretation, the three 'orders', is decisive:

...the Bible speaks and teaches about the works of God. About this there is no doubt. These works are divided in three hierarchies: the household, the government, the church. If a verse does not fit the church, we should let it stay in the government or the household, whichever it is best suited to. (LW 54: 446)

Fourthly, Luther is convinced that the heart of the Bible's message is Christ. In his Preface to the Old Testament of 1545, he writes:

The Hebrew language, sad to say, has gone down so far that even the Jews know little enough about it, and their glosses and interpretations (which I have tested) are not to be relied upon. I think that if the Bible is to come up again, we Christians are the ones who must do the work, for we have the understanding of Christ without which even the knowledge of the language is nothing. Because they were without it, the translators of old, even Jerome, made mistakes in many passages. Though I cannot boast of having achieved perfection, nevertheless, I venture to say that this German Bible is clearer and more accurate at many points than the Latin. So it is true that if the printers do not, as usual, spoil it with their carelessness, the German language certainly has here a better Bible than the Latin language – and the readers will bear me out in this. (LW 35: 249)

This bold claim that his German Bible is clearer than Jerome's is not a claim to be a better translator but a better theologian. Luther believes that his rediscovery of the centrality of Christ and his righteousness, received by faith, as the heart of the message of Scripture makes his Bible clearer in the sense that the light of the gospel shines out more clearly from it than it does from Jerome's Latin translation. 5

Luther therefore strives for a Christological translation that conveys this central idea. When translating difficult Old Testament texts, "Whenever equivocal words or constructions occur, that one would have to be taken which (without, however, doing injustice to the grammar)

agrees with the New Testament" (LW 54: 446). Luther rejects Jewish exegesis of the Old Testament, because it fails to recognise Christ as the centre of Scripture.

For we followed the rule that wherever the words could have given or tolerated an improved meaning, there we did not allow ourselves to be forced by the artificial Hebrew of the rabbis into accepting a different inferior meaning... words are to serve and follow the meaning, and not meaning the words. (LW 35: 213)

That final sentence goes to the heart of Luther's approach to Bible translation. For Luther, a good translation always elucidates the heart of the gospel. Again, the focus is not on the individual words of Scripture, but on a translation that conveys the heart of the message of the Bible.

A Faith-ful Translator

Besides a knowledge of colloquial German and a grasp of the essentials of the gospel, Luther has one other chief quality that he expects of a translator: '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' (LW 35: 194). Translation does not just require a good theological knowledge. It also needs a certain experience of grace.

Luther's theology of the cross, developed in his early years, yet continuing to influence his theology throughout his career, emphasises the place of experience in theology. As he put it in his *Operationes super Psalterium* of 1519-21, 'Let no-one think himself a theologian if he has read, understood and taught these things... It is living, or rather dying and being damned that makes a theologian, not understanding, reading and speculating'. 6

For Luther, the experience of being radically humbled, brought to the end of one's own resources, leads to faith, in that it teaches the futility of relying on one's own works, achievements, abilities, and instead leads a person to cry out to God for mercy, lifting up hands not full of works, but the empty hands of faith. This is why true theology begins at the cross for Luther, and by 'cross' he often means the experience of suffering. 'Therefore we should know that God hides Himself under the form of the worst devil. This teaches us that the goodness, mercy, and power of God cannot be grasped by speculation but must be understood on the basis of experience' (LW 7: 175).

Experience, notably the experience of despair, temptation and doubt teach the Christian not to rely on his or her own resources, but to simply trust the promise of God that he saves and rescues sinners. In this way, experience is the true teacher of theology. No-one can understand true Christian theology unless they have undergone this radical humbling, this personal experience of what he would often call '*Anfechtung*', leading to abandonment of self-reliance and instead faith in Christ alone. Translation requires good theology and good theology requires not just academic expertise or learning, but personal faith. This is why, as mentioned above, translation 'requires a right, devout, honest, sincere, God-fearing, Christian, trained, informed, and experienced heart' (LW 35: 194). Experience is vital for the making of a good theologian and therefore a good translator, partly at least because a good translation, which properly understands the distinction between law and gospel, aims to reproduce that same

experience in the hearts of its readers. The goal of a translation of Scripture is not just understanding, but faith.

Luther and the Task of Translation – Conclusion

Translation therefore requires a good knowledge of the idiomatic receptor language, a theologically astute mind that has understood the essence of the gospel and experience of grace. These are the distinguishing marks of Luther's approach to Bible translation.

In all these cases, attention is drawn away from the very words of Scripture, the *ipsissima verba*, to the meaning behind it, to the theological and Christological heart of Scripture and to the experience of humbling that leads to faith. The emphasis lies for Luther not on the original words themselves, but the gospel they express: 'words are to serve and follow the meaning, and not meaning the words' (LW 35: 213). In his mind the two main poles of the work of Bible translation are the internal message of the Scriptures and the person who hears them, understood in all the particularities of their social and linguistic context. The actual words of Scripture seem to recede into the background, in the shadow of his desire to communicate an idea to an audience.

The Approach to Bible Translation in the King James Version

In stark contrast to Luther's defiant and independent tone, the Preface to the King James Version, written by Miles Smith, Resident Canon of Hereford Cathedral, and soon to be Bishop of Gloucester, feels very different. Its deferential opening, flattering King James, the 'most dread Sovereign' with mention of the blessings God has poured out on the nation through him, indicates that, if it is an exaggeration to say that the KJV was written for an audience of one, that particular reader loomed large in the thoughts of the translators. Again here we will draw out some key themes in the approach to translation in this text.

There are many similarities in the two translations. Like Luther, the KJV disdains the use of too many marginal comments. The translators allow themselves to indulge only where there are variant readings touching on non-essential doctrines. The Geneva Bible was of course marked by its many theological stage directions, indicating how the text was to be read in duly Calvinist manner. In the Preface to the Geneva Bible, the translators indicate that their approach was to have 'faithfully rendered the text and in all hard places most sincerely expounded the same... as we have chiefly observed the sense, and laboured to keep the propriety of the words.' ⁷ At the same time, they took care to add what they euphemistically called "brief annotations" to help the reader understand. The Geneva Bible, like Luther, has a particular theological framework, a set of convictions as to the core message of Scripture. Contrary to Luther, it relies heavily on the marginal notes rather than the translation itself to convey the convictions of the translators, who felt duty bound to translate the text in a fairly literal or exact way. Luther, on the other hand, relies more on the translation itself to carry the theological weight of conveying the true message of Scripture without extensive marginal notes. He feels more free to depart from a literal translation for the purposes of idiomatic German expression of the message and to convey the meaning behind the actual words.

The KJV translators take a different approach. Richard Bancroft's terse sixth Rule for the Translators had made the policy plain: 'No marginal notes at all to be affixed, but only for the explanation of the Hebrew or Greek words, which cannot without some circumlocution so briefly and fitly be expressed in the text.' The emphasis here is on 'at all'. There are to be no Calvinist marginal notes, nor, for that matter, notes advocating royal supremacy either. The translation is to observe a strict neutrality. However, they omit marginal notes for different reasons from Luther. It is not because they hope to convey a distinct theological context within the text of the translation, but because suggesting a distinct theological standpoint is not a primary consideration for them.

The 'Epistle Dedicatory' to the Preface to the KJV positions the translation deliberately between the poles of early seventeenth century English religion:

...if on the one side, we shall be traduced by Popish Persons at home or abroad, who therefore will malign us, because we are poor instruments to make God's holy Truth to be yet more and more known unto the people, whom they desire still to keep in ignorance and darkness; or if, on the other side, we shall be maligned by self-conceited Brethren, who run their own ways, and give liking unto nothing, but what is framed by themselves, and hammered on their anvil; we may rest secure, supported within by truth and innocence of a good conscience, having walked the ways of simplicity and integrity, as before the Lord; and sustained without by the powerful protection of Your Majesty's grace and favour, which will ever give countenance to honest and Christian endeavours against bitter censures and uncharitable imputations. §

The path set out is not a theological, but a moral and spiritual one: 'the ways of simplicity and integrity', duly guarded by royal protection. The aim is not a theological translation in the sense that Luther's is, but rather one that aims at 'simplicity and integrity'. In other words, the aim is a simple and understandable translation (simplicity) which is as accurate and faithful a translation as possible of the original texts (integrity). The point is developed in Smith's Preface where he explains the decision not to render each Hebrew or Greek word with exactly the same English word in each instance:

We have not tied ourselves to an uniformity of phrasing, or to an identity of words, as some peradventure would wish that we had done... Thus to mince the matter, we thought to savour more of curiosity than wisdom, and that rather it would breed scorn in the Atheist, than bring profit to the godly Reader. For is the kingdom of God to become words or syllables? Why should we be in bondage to them if we may be free, use one precisely when we may use another no less fit, as commodiously? ¶

Here is a striving for an exact phrasing which does justice to the original, but which avoids a stilted awkwardness that would come from sticking to the exact correspondence of each Hebrew or Greek word with the same English one on every occasion. The concern here is for two things: a 'commodious' translation and a precise one. There is a delicate striving for a careful balance. On the one hand, if a word means the same, they feel they should translate it with the same word. However, they do not feel themselves tied to that as a rigid rule, because it then becomes 'mincing the matter' – something 'curious', odd, obscure.

Absent from both Bancroft's Rules and Smith's Preface is any sense of a distinct theological vision driving the translators. Naturally, Smith's slightly fawning address to King James shows that there will be little quarter given to Calvinist subversion of royal rule, and

Bancroft's third Rule for the Translators – 'Old ecclesiastical words to be kept, namely, as the word *church* not to be translated *congregation* etc' - directed them to avoid Tyndale's separatist leanings. Apart from that, however, neither show any interest in a driving prior understanding of the gospel, as lies behind both Luther's version and the Geneva Bible.

Also absent is any sense of a desire to express the Bible in colloquial English. Contrary to Luther, the selection of members of the companies of translators of the KJV focussed on ability to handle the donor languages, rather than the receptor one. As Smith put it: 'Therefore such were thought upon, as could say modestly with Saint Jerome, "Both we have learned the Hebrew tongue in part, and in the Latin we have been exercised almost from our very cradle."' ¹⁰ Jerome himself is praised as 'the best linguist, without controversy, of his age, or of any that went before him'. ¹¹ It is these qualities, rather than familiarity with idiomatic English, or even personal experience of grace that primarily qualifies a person to be a translator. In addition, the requirement to work from the Bishops' Bible, except where it was misleading, led to the KJV retaining archaic forms of English which were in fact going out of use in the early seventeenth century, such as the personal forms of address: *thou*, *thee* and *thy*, instead of *you*, *your*, and *yours*. ¹² Luther would never have allowed anything like this!

David Norton's analysis of the KJV concluded that 'textual accuracy, theological neutrality and political acceptability were the qualities desired, and the aim a single generally acceptable text'. ¹³ And again, 'the translators were not concerned with qualities in their English other than fidelity to the original'. ¹⁴ The KJV shows no great interest in either a colloquial translation or a theological one.

A couple of examples will bear this out: Luther himself cites the angelic greeting to Mary in Luke 1:28 as a case in point where the Latin misses the mark. It may be worth laying out each version in turn to make the point:

GREEK: καὶ εἰσελθὼν πρὸς αὐτὴν εἶπεν, Χαῖρε, κεχαριτωμένη, ὁ κύριος μετὰ σοῦ.

VULGATE: et ingressus angelus ad eam dixit: ave gratia plena, Dominus tecum benedicta tu in mulieribus

LUTHER: Und der Engel kam zu jr hin ein und sprach: Gegrüsset seistu holdselige, der Herr ist mit dir du Gebenedeitete unter den Weibern.

KJV: And the angel came in unto her, and said, Hail, *thou that art* highly favoured, the Lord *is* with thee: blessed *art* thou among women.

Luther complains that the clumsy Latin '*gratia plena*' would make a German 'think of a keg "full of" beer or a purse "full of" money' (LW 35: 191). His theology of grace wanted to avoid any sense that grace was a substance that could be dished out by the papacy in the form of indulgences, merits etc. Instead grace is simply God's favour towards us. So he feels free to depart from the Greek significantly, with his more colloquial '*Gegrüsset seistu holdselige*' (literally, 'you are greeted, gracious one').

The KJV also departs from the Greek (and the Latin for that matter) but for different reasons. It has the phrase 'Hail, *thou that art* highly favoured'. It uses six words to convey what the Greek does in two, the Latin in three and Luther also in three. The KJV is striving for as

faithful a rendering as possible, even indicating to the reader that the words 'thou that art' are not strictly speaking there in the Greek by the use of Roman type, rather than black letter type (in later versions in italics) so that the reader can keep as close to the original as possible. They are content to expand the text, while avoiding the unfortunate spatial and substantial connotations of the Latin, and the chatty colloquialism of Luther. The resulting phrase 'Hail, thou that art highly favoured' sounds less idiomatic, yet still has a smooth rhythm, with syllabic variety and a certain literary beauty to it. The departure from exact rendering of the Greek is not for the sake of idiomatic English, but a certain precise dignity. It is a phrase which captures what Adam Nicolson calls the 'passionate exactness' of the KJV. 15

A different, but equally illuminating, example is Psalm 58:9. In the KJV we find 'before your pots can feel the thorns, he shall take them away as in a whirlwind, both living and in his wrath'. It is a sentence which has balance and rhythm, is a fairly literal translation, yet it makes little sense. We can sense the perplexity of the translators, as the Hebrew at this point is difficult to translate, as most modern versions acknowledge in marginal notes. Luther instead has '*Ehe ewre Dornen reiff werden am Dornstrauche, wird sie dein zorn so Frisch wegweisen*', or roughly translated, 'Before your thorns have ripened on the thornbush, your wrath will tear them out while they are still green'. Here, Luther feels free to depart from the Hebrew to give a comprehensible sentence while the KJV translators would prefer to offer something barely meaningful, yet closer to the original. Luther's version is idiomatic, conveys a clear idea of divine judgment – a depiction of the law, not the gospel. The KJV line is rhythmically balanced and flows delicately, yet has no theological idea driving it, and is happier to offer the reader what is on the page of the Hebrew, rather than forcing it into a colloquial phrase.

Conclusion: The Bible – Familiar or Strange?

What then can we conclude about the difference of approaches in these two translations, arguably the two most influential texts that emerged from the era of the Reformation? Paul Ricoeur's essay 'On Translation' argues that the perfect translation is a false ideal, born out of an Enlightenment confidence in the exact reference of language to meaning. The supposed dilemma between faithfulness to and betrayal of a text is a false one: every translation is in some sense a betrayal. We are to 'give up the ideal of the perfect translation'. In one sense, translation is impossible but we still do it. 16

Luther probably would have agreed. For him, no translation is neutral. His version of the Bible is an unashamedly Lutheran one, conveying a particular understanding of the gospel, with justification by faith, Law and Gospel, the two kingdoms, all the classic Lutheran ideas running throughout. He also wants to make the biblical writers sound like Germans, to embed the text in the culture and language of his people and his time. It is a translation that makes the biblical text close, intimate, contemporary, blended with the language of the market and the home. In 1528, Luther wrote to Wenceslas Linck:

We are sweating over the work of putting the Prophets into German. God, how much of it there is, and how hard it is to make these Hebrew writers talk German! They resist us, and do not want to leave their Hebrew and imitate our German barbarisms. It is like making a nightingale leave her own sweet song and imitate the monotonous voice of a cuckoo, which she detests. (LW 35: 229)

Just like contemporary artists who painted biblical scenes with characters in sixteenth century clothes. Luther wants to overcome the sense of distance and unfamiliarity of the text, to help people find themselves and their language in the stories of the Bible, to make God speak German. It is a translation of immanence rather than transcendence, of incarnation into German culture that fits the Christological core of his gospel.

The KJV translators on the other hand preserve more of the strangeness of the scriptural text. Here, there is no attempt to make Amos sound like a Hampshire farmer or Luke a London physician. It makes the Bible (and perhaps God) seem less immediate, more alien, aloof, yet also more majestic, awesome, in the older sense of that word. Adam Nicolson's book on the KJV argues that this English Bible refuses to make a choice between the Cavalier richness of ceremony and the Puritan austerity of simplicity. What he does not include is the intimacy of nearness, the sense that the Bible speaks our language, relates directly to our concerns – something which Luther's translation does more effectively.

The KJV trusts the reader more, offering him or her the information they need – as exact a translation as is possible while retaining a sense of style and 'commodiousness'. Unlike papally approved versions, the KJV translators were content to insert marginal notes indicating variant readings of a text, leaving uncertainties as uncertainties and giving the reader the opportunity to make up their own mind. It avoids controversy, refusing to side with a particular interpretation of the Bible, instead giving the reader room for manoeuvre, a classically Anglican thing to do.

The differences are of emphasis rather than total contrast. However, the two versions embody a number of different strands of the Reformation movement. If the Reformation was in part a democratization of religion, making it accessible and familiar, giving people a gracious God that they could love rather than fear, then Luther's translation conveyed all of that and more. At the same time, however, the Reformation also bequeathed a strong sense of freedom of conscience, of the exaltation of the laity, giving them every much of a right to read the Scripture and make up their mind about it as the priests and the scholars. And it is this aspect that is best preserved in the KJV.

The translations also are products of their age. Luther's breathes the atmosphere of the early years of the Reformation, with his initial confidence that the gospel had now been discovered and now needed only to be proclaimed far and wide for it to be welcomed and believed. The KJV breathes the more nervous and cautious air of a century later, a century of sobering division and dispute which made it clear that biblical interpretation and finding unanimity was not as straightforward as it had seemed in those heady days of the 1520s.

Around forty years after the KJV was published, William Chillingworth wrote his famous line: 'The Bible, I say, the Bible only, is the religion of Protestants.' ¹⁷ It sounds like the kind of thing Luther would have said. Chillingworth, however, probably meant it in a different way – that the Bible, rather than any particular interpretation of the Bible is what Protestants cling to. That, Luther would not have agreed with. Therein lies the dilemma of the Reformation, and these two versions together capture both the richness and the vigour, yet also the tensions that lie at the heart of this movement that has shaped the modern world so extensively.



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Endnotes

- 1 Bluhm 1965: Chapter 9
- 2 Luther 1960-90 (henceforth cited in main text as LW)
- 3 Flood 2011: 48
- 4 For example in Luther's Romans commentary he writes of the believer that '...he is at the same time both a sinner and a righteous man; a sinner in fact, but a righteous man by the sure imputation and promise of God that He will continue to deliver him from sin until He has completely cured him. And thus he is entirely healthy in hope...' (LW 25: 260)
- 5 Friedrich Kantzenbach makes this point that it was the centrality of Christ to Scripture that shapes Luther's translation throughout: 'Luther's Bible Translation is consequently the fruit of his struggle over the truth of the Gospel. It took a long journey until Luther

could find *one* theme which Holy Scripture showed forth in all its variety, its different literary types and methods of teaching, namely Christ.' (Kantzenbach 1978: 13)

6 '*Vivendo, immo moriendo et damnando fit theologus, non intelligendo, legendo aut speculando*' (Archiv zur Weimarer Ausgabe 2.296.8-11).

7 Preface to the Geneva Bible, 1560 in Bray 1994: 361

8 Bray 1994: 415f

9 Bray 1994: 434f

10 Bray 1994: 432

11 Bray 1994: 422

12 McGrath 2001: 266-71

13 Norton 1993: 144-5

14 Norton 1993: 157

15 Nicolson 2011: 197

16 Ricoeur 2006: 12

17 Chillingworth 1870: 463