

CAPTIVE TO THE WORD

*Martin Luther: Doctor of
Sacred Scripture*

by

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*"I am bound by the Scriptures . . .
and my conscience is captive
to the Word of God".*

Martin Luther



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CHAPTER IX

LUTHER AS A TRANSLATOR

“THE TRANSLATION OF THE BIBLE INTO GERMAN IS Martin Luther’s greatest single work. It is both a literary and a religious achievement of the first order.”¹ So writes Heinz Bluhm, and it is no more than the truth. Nothing that Luther ever did had more significant repercussions than when he put the Scriptures into the tongue of the common people in his land. The German Bible is his most enduring monument, and it is fitting that what he should be remembered by best of all has to do with the Word. Here in this singular achievement we see the apotheosis of the man.

Only of late, however, have we begun to measure the magnitude of what Luther accomplished in this respect. In Germany itself, his work has been so familiar to all as to be taken for granted. Outside Germany and German-speaking communities, it has not been fully realized what it means to give a nation the Word of God in the language of man. Luther and his Bible are part of Germany’s soul. We are accustomed to being told that the English Bible helped enormously to make England what she is, first in the translations of Tyndale and others and supremely in the Authorized Version. For Germany, Luther was Tyndale and the King James’ translators rolled into one. The sheer incredibility of his prodigious feat ought to astonish us, but all too often it passes unacknowledged. However, scholars like Otto Reichert, Wilhelm Walther, Emanuel Hirsch, and Michael Reu have done something in our century to renew our appreciation.²

They have enabled us to see the place of Luther’s Bible translation, not only in the unfolding of German literature and history, but also in the context of the Reformation itself. The rendering of the Scriptures into the speech of the ordinary man in the street was the greatest single factor in spreading the message of reform. For at heart it was none other than the message of the Word, and to distribute the Scriptures was to further the Reformation. As Luther again and again insisted, it was not what *he* did which effected the transformation of European Christianity: the Word did it all. It was only necessary for it to be let loose, and it would do its

¹ Heinz Bluhm, *Martin Luther: Creative Translator* (1965), p. vii.

² Otto Reichert, *D. Martin Luthers Deutsche Bibel* (1910); Wilhelm Walther, *Luthers Deutsche Bibel* (1917); Emanuel Hirsch, *Luthers Deutsche Bibel* (1928); and Reu, *Luther’s German Bible*, already cited.

own work. Hence K. R. Hagenbach, in his massive history, could describe Luther's German Bible as "the keystone of the Reformation."¹ More recently, G. R. Elton has expatiated on the same theme. "If there is a single thread running through the whole story of the Reformation, it is the explosive and renovating and often disintegrating effect of the Bible, put into the hands of the commonalty and interpreted no longer by the well-conditioned learned, but by the faith and delusion, the common sense and uncommon nonsense, of all sorts of men. One country after another was to receive its vernacular Bible in this century, and with it a new standard of its language; in 1521-2 Luther, who had for so many people already done so much to bring the gospel to life after its long sleep in the scholastic night-cap, began the work for his Germans."²

In order to grasp the timeliness of Luther's work as a translator, we need to appreciate that in the Middle Ages the reading and study of the Scriptures was regarded as the prerogative of the clergy. They alone were qualified to interpret the Word. The layman had to be satisfied to receive it at second hand and on trust. Apart from the few who were versed in Latin, there was no chance of them looking at it for themselves. The likelihood of the Bible ever being made available in the tongue of the people was remote indeed. Even some of the most enlightened men of the age, who saw the need for reform in other directions, suffered from a blind spot here. Johann Geiler from Kaisersburg, who has been nicknamed the German Savonarola, was one of those who advocated the renovation of the Church, yet he believed that to put the Scriptures into the vernacular would be a risky move. "It is a bad thing to print the Bible in German. It must be understood far differently from the way in which the text sounds. It is dangerous to put a knife into the hands of children and let them slice their own bread. They can only wound themselves with it. So also the Holy Scriptures, which comprise the bread of God, must be read and interpreted by people who have requisite knowledge and experience and who are able to determine the true sense."³

It was not the case that the Church had explicitly proscribed a translation of the Bible, but it had certainly discouraged the notion. A statement by Pope Innocent III around the turn of the thirteenth century strongly underlined the drawbacks involved in the lay reading of the Bible, if this were allowed without supervision.⁴ In January 1486 Archbishop Berthold of Mainz had issued an edict forbidding any unapproved German version in his diocese. He defended his action on the ground that in his office he

¹ Karl R. Hagenbach, *History of the Reformation in Germany and Switzerland Chiefly*, Vol. I (E.T. 1878), p. 143.

² Geoffrey R. Elton, *Reformation Europe 1517-1559* (1963). *The Fontana History of Europe*, p. 52.

³ Georg Buchwald, *400 Jahre deutsche Lutherbibel* (1934), p. 4; Kooiman, op. cit., p. 86 for this reference and that in n. 1 on p. 97.

⁴ DTC. 7. 1961-81. PL. 214. 695-9, cf. 793-5.

was required to guard the purity of the divine Word. Those who were trying their hand at turning the Bible into German were for the most part incapable of doing justice to their task, he thought. In any case, he added, it is most dangerous to place the Holy Scriptures in the homes of ordinary people, where even women might read, if they could, or at least hear, since they are unable to come to a right judgment about them.¹ Berthold was giving expression to the general mind of the Church, as Kooiman remarks, even though he put it more bluntly than others might have done.²

The result of these inhibitions was that scholars and churchmen rarely concerned themselves with the matter of Bible translation. They took it for granted that there was no market for this kind of enterprise. What little work was done was left to one or two innovators of indifferent calibre, whose acquaintance with Latin was insufficient to enable them to penetrate the considerable depths of the Vulgate. All they attempted was a rather feeble word-for-word rendering into hobbling German. It was the contribution of the humanists which paved the way for something better. Both Reuchlin and Erasmus reached back to the original languages, and thus laid bare the text for an authentic translation. In the preface to his Greek New Testament, Erasmus had looked forward to the day when the Scriptures would be opened up to the people. "I totally disagree with those who are unwilling that the Sacred Scriptures, translated into the vulgar tongue, should be read by private individuals. . . . I wish that they were translated into all languages of all people, that they might be read and known not merely by the Scots and Irish, but even by the Turks and Saracens. . . . I wish that the ploughman might sing parts of them at his plough and the weaver at his shuttle, and that the traveller might beguile with their narration the weariness of the way."³

The humanists, however, were not equipped for the task. They were too remote from life as it was and the people as they were. Their idea of the Bible, moreover, was inclined to be legalistic. They lacked the passion of an overmastering sense of mission. This Luther possessed. He knew he was raised up by God for this very purpose. He was driven on by an irresistible compulsion to bring the Word of life to his own people in their native tongue. He could not rest content until the project was complete. Coming as he did from the peasant stock, Luther was essentially a man of the plebs. He knew his own German speech down to the grass roots. He had a unique gift of expression. In him the hour and the task met as he went into enforced retreat in the castle at the Wartburg, after

¹ Karl Mirbt, *Quellen zur Geschichte des Papsttums und des römischen Katholizismus* (4th edn. 1924), No. 332; For Luther's own complaint that the laity had not been allowed to read the Scriptures, *vide* LW. 30. 105.

² Kooiman, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

³ Erasmus, *Novum Testamentum* (2nd edn. 1519), p. 8; cf. Sir Frederic Kenyon, *Our Bible and the Ancient Manuscripts* (1941), p. 212 n. 1.

the Diet of Worms. He retired as a fugitive from persecution for the sake of the truth. He emerged with a weapon which would continue to fight the battles of the Lord long after he had been laid to rest. The Word would still do it all.

Heinrich Bornkamm shows how Luther had been prepared for this crowning achievement. "All his previous work impelled him with inner logic to the translation of the Bible. Through the Bible alone he had become what he was. Through it he had learned to rout scholastic theology, and in it he had rediscovered the core of the gospel. The Bible was his only friend in his lonely hours, the sole weapon in his conflict against a thousand-year old system. If he had a right to believe that up to this time he had won all his oral and literary skirmishes, he had to tell himself that he was indebted to the Bible for these victories. Though the plea of his Wittenberg friends gave the final impulse, yet he carried out his very own work, his *opus proprium*. With this work he not only revealed to his people the source of his life, but in it he also found the fullest justification for his previous actions. Henceforth everybody could and should judge for himself and thereby exercise the first duty and the foremost privilege of the universal priesthood; for this was precisely what Luther had discovered in the Scriptures was the basic essence of the Church."¹

Luther did not suddenly emerge full-grown as a translator when he started on his great work in the Wartburg. Already he had been practising the art. Bluhm has examined his sermons on Matthew's Gospel from 1517 onwards, and the way in which Luther made his own translation of the Greek text.² Quite obviously he was still deeply attached to the Vulgate, and there is no need to depreciate the merits of Jerome's version in order to buttress the case for a vernacular rendering. The two issues are quite separate. As he compared the Latin with the Greek, Luther must have learned a lot about how to convert the idiom of one language into that of another. However, Jerome was limited by the self-imposed restrictions of a literal word-by-word method of translation. Luther was able to emancipate himself from this, largely under the influence of Augustine who pioneered what Schwarz calls the inspirational principle of translation.³

Bluhm finds no discernible influence on Luther at this period of the already existing German versions.⁴ As many as fourteen in High German and four in Low are cited by Oskar Thulin.⁵ These range from that printed in Strasburg in 1466 by Johann Mentelin (which ran into fourteen editions in fifty years), through that of Günther Zainer at Augsburg in

¹ Bornkamm, *Luther's World of Thought*, p. 274.

² Bluhm, *op. cit.*, pp. 4-36.

³ Werner Schwarz, *Principles and Problems of Biblical Translation: Some Reformation Controversies and their Background* (1955), p. 167.

⁴ Bluhm, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

⁵ Oskar Thulin, "Die Gestalt der Lutherbibel in Druck und Bild", *Luther, Vierteljahrsschrift der Luthergesellschaft*, Bd. XVI (1934), pp. 60-61; Schwiebert, *op. cit.*, p. 643.

1475 (the best-known of all) to Silvanus Otmar's production, also at Augsburg, in 1518. Luther was more in debt to the *Plenarium*, the collection of selected Bible passages which he had bought as a schoolboy. This, as we have seen, was obtainable in German as well as in Latin. Bluhm's conclusion about Luther's renderings of Scripture in the sermons on Matthew's Gospel is as follows: "They reveal an expert and an artist in the handling of highly idiomatic German. Their variety and more than occasional excellence provide an important clue to what was to be offered to the world in the *Septembertestament*. When Luther was persuaded to undertake this formidable task, he was in a position to draw, unconsciously of course, on a large and ready storehouse of previously, and sometimes frequently, rendered passages. Boundless as this vast supply of variants would seem to be, in some verses Luther appears to have exhausted the very possibilities of expressing the idea in the vernacular. The scholar patient enough to peruse these early quotations is impressed by the apparent ease with which one of the greatest masters of the German language can render in various superb ways a veritable deluge of biblical verses."¹

In the summer of 1519 Luther ventured on the first translation of a complete pericope. During the Leipzig Disputation he was invited by Duke Barnim of Pomerania to deliver a sermon for the feast of Peter and Paul on the 29th June. He selected as his text the Gospel for the day – Matthew 16:13–19. The vernacular version of this passage prefixed to the actual sermon represents Luther's earliest attempt to render a pericope in full. A careful examination of the evidence by Bluhm suggests that Luther was still using the Vulgate as a basis, although, of course, by now he was thoroughly familiar with the Greek text of Erasmus.² Luther continued this practice from now on. In a letter to Nicholas Gerbel of Pforzheim, who helped Erasmus to correct the proofs of his Greek Testament, Luther spoke about his exposition of the Gospel passage dealing with the ten lepers (Luke 17:11–19). "All this is in German," he added. "I am born for my Germans, whom I want to serve."³

The next stage was the translation of an entire sequence into German. This was the series of lessons in the Advent Postil. The publication not only contained a German rendering of the pericopes for the Advent Sundays, but also a translation of the homilies attached to them. A similar Christmas Postil was treated in the same fashion. Eventually Luther intended to link up all the pericopes in a complete Church Postil in four major parts covering each quarter of the Christian year. His treatment of the Gospel reading about the ten lepers, already mentioned, fell into place in the section which included the season of Trinity. In all this work – done during Luther's confinement in the Wartburg – we can see how

¹ Bluhm, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

² *Ibid.*, p. 47.

³ LW. 48. 320.

he was being prepared for his overall objective in the translation of the whole Bible into German. In his preface to the Wartburg Postil, entitled *A Brief Instruction on what to look for and expect in the Gospels*, Luther concluded with an impassioned paragraph which lets us see why he was so keen to release the Bible to the people in their own tongue. "Since we abandoned the Scriptures, it is not surprising that He (i.e. God) has abandoned us to the teaching of the pope and to the lies of men. Instead of Holy Scripture we have had to learn the *Decretales* of a deceitful fool and an evil rogue. O would to God that among Christians the pure gospel were known and that most speedily there would be neither use nor need for this work of mine. Then there would surely be hope that the Holy Scriptures too would come forth again in their worthiness."¹

Similarly, in the Postil itself Luther wound up his coverage of the Christmas lections with this outburst: "O that God would let my interpretation and that of all other teachers vanish altogether, so that every Christian might consider nothing but the simple Scripture itself and the pure Word of God. . . . Therefore, go to the Scriptures, dear Christians! Go there alone, and let my exposition and that of all other teachers mean no more to you than the scaffolding on a building, so that we might understand the simple, pure Word of God, accept it as our own, and hold it fast."²

It is not easy to discover just when it was that Luther conceived the plan of translating the Scriptures in their entirety. It probably began to evolve in the autumn of 1520. The intensified work on the Postil no doubt reflected Luther's growing conviction that soon he would have to tackle the complete project. At the end of 1521 he paid a secret visit to Wittenberg, in all likelihood to discuss with his advisers the possibility of such an undertaking. It seems that Luther's friends encouraged him to pursue the task. He thought of starting with the Old Testament, but he needed more help and toyed with the idea of escaping from his voluntary imprisonment to live under cover in Wittenberg, where he could consult his colleagues. He wrote to Nicholas von Amsdorf on the 13th January 1522 to make a suggestion on these lines, but it was thought to be too hazardous.³ In the same letter he indicated what he had in mind with regard to the Bible project. He wanted it to be "a worthy translation for all Christians to read".⁴ He expressed the hope that it would be an improvement on the past, and that it would do even more for the Germans than the Vulgate had done for those who knew Latin.⁵ He recognized, however, that he had shouldered a burden beyond his powers. "Now I

¹ LW. 35. 123-4.

² WA. 10. i. 728. On the Advent and Christmas Postils, *vide* LW. 48. 237-43.

³ LW. 48. 363.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

realize what it means to translate, and why no one has previously undertaken it who would disclose his name."¹

So in what Bornkamm calls "the great breathing spell" afforded by his stay in the Wartburg, Luther set about his task of translation, starting willy-nilly on the New Testament.² He told Johann Lang: "I shall be hiding here until Easter. In the meantime I shall finish the *Postil*, and translate the New Testament into German, an undertaking our friends request. I hear that you are also working on this. Continue as you have begun. I wish every town would have its interpreter, and that this book alone, in all languages, would live in the hands, eyes, ears, and hearts of all people."³ Luther used the Greek text of Erasmus which had been given to him by Gerbel when he was at Worms. He whimsically referred to it as "the bride" to whom he was now married.⁴ "She has borne to me the children I mentioned above," he reported in a letter. "You will judge whether the offspring are similar to the mother. She is still fertile and highly pregnant. Christ willing, she will give birth to a son who will destroy the papists, sophists, monks, and Herodians with a rod of iron."⁵ Those words proved to be prophetic.

Luther finished off the assignment in the astonishingly short space of eleven weeks. When we consider that this was a time of the year when the days were dark, that the lighting in the castle was minimal, that Luther's health was none too good, and that all the while he was in hiding from his enemies, we can only concur with Kooiman that this was "an almost unbelievable feat".⁶ "Rarely, if ever," he added, "has a book that exerted such an influence been written so rapidly."⁷ Luther did not only consult the original Greek. He used the Vulgate, and also Erasmus' Latin version contained in the second edition of his New Testament published in 1519.⁸ A dictionary was also at his side. There is no evidence that he took account of any of the existing German translation to any marked degree. Bornkamm dismisses the collected lists of alleged loans or adaptation from Zainer's Bible, for example, as displaying "nothing but insignificant trifles".⁹ As we have seen, Luther may have drawn to a certain extent on the *Plenarium*, with which he was so familiar, and perhaps also on an oral tradition which is hard to pin down. But this is to be understood only as a work of genius, in which the primary factor was an inspiration which Luther acknowledged had been given from above. Nothing else could account for such an end-product in so brief a period of time. Luther's New Testament was shaped in the white heat of a remarkable spiritual experience.

¹ Ibid.

² Heinrich Bornkamm, "Probleme der Lutherbiographie", *Lutherforschung Heute*, Ed. Vilmos Vajta (1958), p. 19; LW. 48. xvii n. 3.

³ LW. 48. 356.

⁴ Ibid., 321.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Kooiman, op. cit., p. 92.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ LW. 48. 352. For Luther's use of the Greek text, *vide* WADB. 7. 545.

⁹ Bornkamm, *Luther's World of Thought*, p. 278.

In two months, no less than five thousand copies were sold. In twelve years, nearly a quarter of a million New Testaments were distributed amongst the German people. But before the first issue was off the press in September 1522, Luther had got down to his job on the Old Testament. He had now left the Wartburg and resumed his duties at Wittenberg. Here he had the assistance he required for the more exacting demands of Old Testament translation. He could turn to the newly-appointed Professor of Hebrew, Matthäus Aurogallus, for guidance on knotty points. Although he remained modest about his mastery of Hebrew, Melancthon was also a reliable counsellor. But Luther realized that this was a very different proposition from the New Testament. It was to take twelve years – with considerable interruptions – before he was through. “This tough-minded persistence in an over-busy career,” Kooiman thinks is “even more deserving of respect than the speed with which he worked during his period of concealment.”¹ And if we ascribe the phenomenal swiftness with which the New Testament was poured out to the enablement of the Spirit, can it not be said that an equal endowment is needed for a hard slog of a dozen years?

In his preface to the first part of the Old Testament – the Pentateuch – which appeared in 1523, Luther frankly confessed the problems involved. “For I freely admit that I have undertaken too much, especially in trying to put the Old Testament into German. 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. . . . 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.”² Luther’s copy of the Hebrew Scriptures, over which he sat for so many long hours, was published at Brescia in 1494, and has been treasured amongst the relics of the reformer to this day. It is thought that the Septuagint he possessed was printed by Aldus in Venice in 1518.³ He did not, however, rely greatly on the Greek version of the Old Testament, any more than on the Vulgate.

Luther’s Old Testament came out piecemeal over the years from 1522 to 1534. It cost him sweat and toil, if not blood and tears. But when the completed Bible was published, in a magnificent edition from the typographical angle, Luther’s “crowning accomplishment”, as Thulin calls it, was sealed.⁴ We cannot begin to estimate its influence, not only in the

¹ Kooiman, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

² LW. 35. 249; cf. WA. 10. ii. 60. WAB. 2. 423.

³ Kooiman, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

⁴ Thulin, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

spread of the Reformation message, but in the whole life of the emergent German nation. If ever a people and a book were bound together, since the days when Israel dwelt in their land of old, it was Germany and Luther's Bible. Tributes to his achievement are legion. We can only quote one or two. "Luther's Bible was a literary event of the first magnitude," declares Bernhard Dammerman in the *Cambridge History of the Bible*, "for it is the first work of art in German prose. Luther showed himself to be a poet of genius, and with a true feeling for the properties of other languages."¹ Kenneth S. Latourette refers to it as "one of Luther's major achievements. . . . None other either before or later equalled it in dignity and felicity of expression."² He adds that it had an even more profound effect on the German language than the King James Version on English. A front-page article in the *Times Literary Supplement*, commemorating the four hundredth anniversary of Luther's death, passed this judgement: "No other single influence on the German language is comparable to that of his Bible, perhaps the most astonishing, impressive, and highly personal translation ever compassed."³ In hailing it as "the most important and useful work of his whole life," Philip Schaff went on to explain that "it was a republication of the gospel. He made the Bible the people's book in church, school, and house. If he had done nothing else, he would have been one of the greatest benefactors of the German-speaking race."⁴

Schwarz has described Luther's method of translation as inspirational, following Augustine, rather than traditional (on the lines of the Vulgate), or philological (like Reuchlin and Erasmus).⁵ In a letter of the 29th November 1520, Luther chided Spalatin for his rigid imitation of the text in his rendering. "Figures of speech and the liveliness of sentences and arguments can only be conveyed in a free translation," he insisted.⁶ But then he went on, significantly, "not to mention the problems involved in reproducing the spirit of the author."⁷ According to Schwarz, these two complementary passages contain the basis of Luther's method in translation: content and form must be preserved in a free rendering, yet the underlying spirit of the author must somehow be recreated. At its best, such a treatment can reach the heights.⁸ Bluhm considers the translation of the Twenty-Third Psalm, for example, to be a consummate work of art.⁹ It surpasses the bounds even of creative translation and touches the borderland of original composition. The text was so to speak reborn in the process of vernacularization. That was Luther's ideal. Men and women

¹ CHB. 103.

² Kenneth S. Latourette, *A History of Christianity* (1954), p. 719.

³ *Times Literary Supplement*, 23rd February 1946, p. 85.

⁴ Schaff, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 341.

⁵ Schwarz, *op. cit.*, p. 137; cf. pp. 45, 61, 92.

⁶ WAB. 2. 220.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Schwarz, *op. cit.*, p. 205.

⁹ Bluhm, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

must be able to read God's Word," he declared, "as though it had been written yesterday."¹

In order to succeed in this, the translator must himself experience what the biblical writer is dealing with. Luther complained that Erasmus had indeed translated the New Testament (into Latin), but he had not felt it.² "No one can see an iota in the Scriptures," he asserted, "if he does not have the Spirit of God."³ In his open letter *On Translating*, with a foreword by Wenceslaus Link, who succeeded Staupitz as vicar-general of the Augustinians, Luther discussed his methodology. He met the objections of his critics who claimed that his free rendering failed to do justice to the Scriptures. Luther believed that just the opposite was the case.⁴ He consoled himself with the remembrance that Jerome had to endure much ill-informed comment when he produced the Vulgate.⁵

In the same open letter, Luther defended his version of Romans 3:28 which had come under-fire, and still does today.⁶ He had translated it as "by faith *alone*". It was supposed by some that here he had introduced the Reformation principle of *sola fide* unjustifiably in a text where it is not really to be found. But this was no King Charles' head with him, and he was quite ready to give a reason for what he had done. He was perfectly well aware that there is no equivalent for "alone" in the Greek. Those who criticized his rendering stared at it like cows at a new gate, he said.⁷ But if the German was to be clear and vigorous, he had no alternative. Incidentally, so distinguished a contemporary New Testament scholar as Joachim Jeremias of Göttingen has recently affirmed that in adding "alone" Luther was linguistically as well as theologically correct.⁸

In providing the German people with the Bible in their own tongue, Luther not only bestowed on them a unique spiritual and literary treasure, which was to become part of the national inheritance. He also ensured, maybe to a greater degree than he realized himself, that the witness of the Reformation would be maintained. Protestantism is the religion of the Word, and by letting loose the Bible in Germany, Luther laid the most stable foundation possible for the future. Nor was this confined to Germany. A chain reaction was set up, which resulted in similar translations into the vernacular all over Europe and beyond. Luther may have been hemmed in by the stout walls of the Wartburg castellan, when he started on his truly monumental enterprise: but the Word of God was not bound, nor could it be.

¹ WA. 12. 444.

² WA. 20. 728.

³ WA. 18. 609.

⁴ LW. 35. 189-90.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 184.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 185-9.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 188.

⁸ Joachim Jeremias, *The Central Message of the New Testament* (E.T. 1965), p. 55.