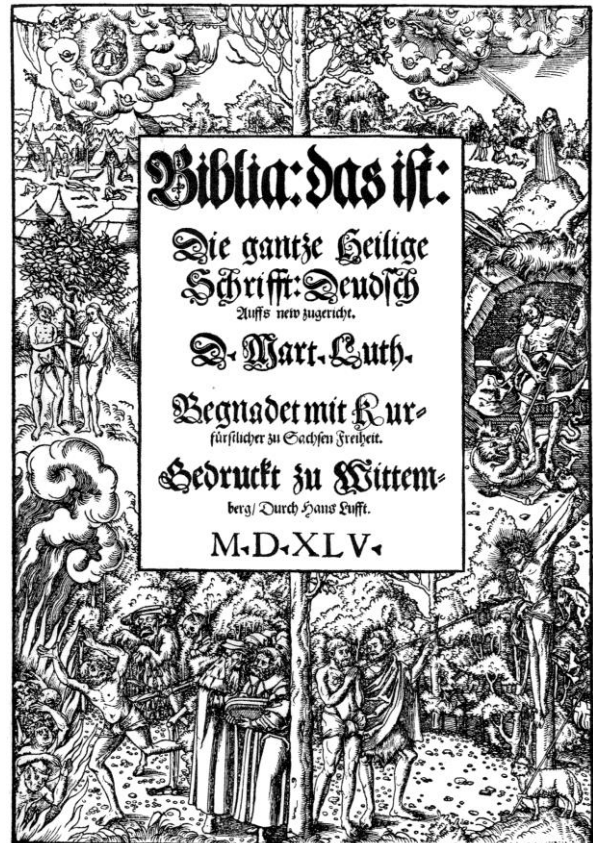


Letting Go of the Letters The Impact of Luther's Bible Translation

The German Reformation would have not been possible without Luther's translation of the Bible. The impact both the actual translation and the literature surrounding it had, went beyond the religious movement. It has influenced literature, culture and politics – and later translations across European languages. This talk will examine the claim Luther made in his Open Letter on Translation that true translation can only be achieved when letting go of the letters.

The Open Letter on Translation is taken from the open access edition with the commentary by Howard Jones: <https://editions.mml.ox.ac.uk/editions/sendbrief/>

More on this and on the 'Open Letter on Translation' by Martin Luther as part of the "Remembering the Reformation" project in Oxford cf. <https://editions.mml.ox.ac.uk/topics/reformation.shtml>



1. Item da der Engel Mariam grüset vnd spricht: Gegrüset seistu / Maria vol gnadē / der Herr mit dir? Wolan / so ists biß [\[Page b1v\]](#)her / schlecht den lateinischen buchstaben nach verdeutschet / sage mir aber ob solchs auch gut deutsch sey? Wo redet der deutsch man also / du bist vol gnaden? Vnd welcher Deutscher verstehet / was gsagt sey / vol gnaden? Er mus dencken an ein vas vol bier / oder beutel vol geldes / darumb hab ichs vordescht. Du holdselige / da mit doch ein Deutscher / dester meher hin zu kan dencken / was der engel meinet mit seinem grus. Aber hie wöllen die Papisten toll werden vber mich / das ich den Engelsen grus verderbet habe. Wie wol ich dennoch da mit nicht das beste deutsch habe troffen. Vnd hette ich das beste deutsch hie sollen nemen / vnd den grus also verdeutschen / Gott grusse dich du liebe Maria (denn so vil wil der Engel sagen / vnd so wurde er geredt haben / wan er hette wollen sie deutsch grussen) ich halt sie solten sich wol selbs erhenckt haben fur grosser andacht / zu der lieben Maria / das ich den grus so zu nichte gemacht hette.
2. Aber was frage ich darnach? sie toben oder rasen / jch wil nicht wehren / das sie verdeutschen was sie wöllen / ich wil aber auch verdeutschē / nicht wie sie wöllen / sonder wie ich wil / wer es nicht haben wil / der las mirs stehen / vñ halt seine meisterschafft bey sich / denn ich wil ir weder sehen noch hören / sie dorffen fur mein dolmetzschen nicht antwort geben / noch rechenschafft thun / Das hörestu wol / ich wil sagen / du holdselige Maria / du liebe Maria. vnd las sie sagen / du volgnaden Maria. Wer Deutsch kan / der weis wol / welch ein hertzlich fein wort das ist / die liebe Maria / der lieb Gott / der liebe Keiser / der liebe fürst / der lieb man / das liebe kind. Vnd ich weis nicht / ob man das wort liebe / auch so hertzlich vnd gnugsam in Lateinischer oder andern sprachen reden müg / das also dringe vnd klinge ynns hertz / durch alle sinne wie es thut in vnser sprache.
3. Denn ich halt S. Lucas als ein meister in Hebreischer vnd Greckischer sprache / hab das Hebreisch wort / so der Engel gebraucht / wöllen mit dem Greckischen kecharitomeni / treffen vnd deutlich geben. Vnd denck mir der Engel Gabriel habe mit Maria geredt / wie er mit Daniel redet / vnd nennet jnn / Ha- [\[Page b2r\]](#) mudoth vñ Isch Hamudoth / vir desideriorum / das ist / du lieber Daniel. Denn das ist Gabriels weise zu reden / wie wir jhm Daniel sehen. Wenn ich nu den buchstaben nach / aus der esel kunst / solt des Engels wort verdeutschen / muste ich also sagen / Daniel du man der begirungen oder / Daniel du man der lüste / O das were schon deutsch / Ein deutscher horet wol / das Man / Lüste / oder begyrunge / deutsche wort sind / wie wol es nicht eytel reine deutsche wort sind / sondern lust vnd begyr / weren wol besser. Aber wenn sie so zusammen gefasset werden / du man der begyrungen / so weiß kein deutscher was gesagt ist / denckt / das Daniel villeicht vol böser lust stecke / Das hiesse denn fein gedolmetzscht. Darumb mus ich hie die buchstaben faren lassen / vnnd forschen / wie der Deutsche man solchs redet / welchs der Ebreische mā isch Hamudoth redet / So finde ich / das der deutsche mā also spricht / Du lieber Daniel / du liebe Maria / oder du holdselige mad / du medliche junckfraw / du zartes weib / vnd der gleichen. Deñ wer dolmetzschen wil / mus grosse vorrath von worten haben / das er die wol könne haben / wo eins an allen orten nicht lauten will.

Title page of the last authorized edition of the full Bible in Luther's translation.
 Title woodcut by Lucas Cranach d.J.
 Left hand side = Old Testament / Law
 Right hand side = New Testament / Grace
 Title: *Bible: that is: The complete Sacred Scripture: German; newly edited. Dr Martin Luther. Provided with the privilege of the Elector of Saxony. Printed in Wittenberg by John Luft. 1545*

What do you think is the appropriate way to translate the Bible?

1. And what about when the angel greets Mary and says, 'Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you'? [led.1](#) Well, in the past [\[Page b1v\]](#) this has just been rendered word for word into German from the Latin, but tell me – seriously – is this good German? Show me any German who says, 'You are full of grace'. For that matter, what German will understand the meaning of 'full of grace'? They're going to think of a barrel full of beer or a bag full of money. That's why I rendered it into German as 'gracious one', to make it easier for a German to actually work out what the angel means by his greeting. But here the papists choose to throw a fit on the grounds that I have corrupted the angelic greeting – although even with this wording I still didn't get the German exactly right. If I had got the German exactly right here and rendered the greeting as, 'God be with you, dear Mary' (which is, after all, what the angel means, and how he would have spoken if he'd wanted to greet her in German), I'm convinced they would have positively hanged themselves in their fanatical devotion to dear Mary on the grounds that I had destroyed the greeting.
2. But what do I care? They can rant and rave, and I'm not going to stop them from rendering into German whatever they want, but I'm going to use German too, and not as they want, but as I do. If people don't like it, they should leave it alone and keep their genius to themselves – I will neither look at nor listen to any of it. Nor do they need to answer for my translation or take responsibility for it. Now listen – I will go on saying, 'gracious Mary' and, 'dear Mary', and they can go on saying, 'full-of-grace Mary'. People who can speak German know what a fine, heartfelt word 'dear' is, as in 'dear Mary', 'dear God', 'dear emperor', 'dear prince', 'dear man', 'dear child'. I'm not sure whether Latin or any other language can express 'dear' in such a heartfelt and satisfying way, resonating through all the senses and going straight to the heart, as the word 'dear' does in our language.
3. I believe that St Luke, who was a master of Hebrew and Greek, wanted to capture and clearly convey with 'kecharitomene' [led.1](#) the sense of the Hebrew word used by the angel. And I think that the angel Gabriel spoke to Mary as he speaks to Daniel when he calls him 'Chamudot' [\[Page b2r\]](#) and 'Ish Chamudot' (vir desideriorum), [led.1](#) that is, 'dear Daniel'. That's how the angel Gabriel speaks, as we can see in the book of Daniel [led.1](#). Now, if I were going to put the angel's words into German word for word, using the donkeys' technique, I'd have to say, 'Daniel, you man of desires' or, 'Daniel, you man of lusts'. Oh, that would be charming German! Of course, a German recognizes 'man', 'lusts', and 'desires' as German words when he hears them (although these are not the most natural German words to use: 'desire' and 'lust' would really be better). But when the words are combined as 'you man of desires', no German will know what's being said, and will think that Daniel is perhaps full of sinful desire. What fine translating that would be! That's why I have to depart from the exact wording here and try to find out what a German says when a Hebrew says, 'Ish Chamudot'. And I discover that a German says, 'dear Daniel', 'dear Mary', or 'gracious maiden', 'lovely young lady', 'sweet woman', and so on. A translator needs a large supply of words to hand in case one of them doesn't sound right everywhere.

The annunciation to Mary (Luke 1:28-30) in different versions

For a verse-by-verse comparison of Bible versions: http://textus-receptus.com/wiki/Luke_1:28

Greek (1st cent.)

28 και εισελθών ὁ ἄγγελος πρὸς αὐτὴν εἶπεν Χαῖρε κεχαριτωμένη ὁ κύριος μετὰ σοῦ εὐλογημένη σὺ ἐν γυναιξίν

29 ἡ δὲ ἰδοῦσα διεταράχθη ἐπὶ τῷ λόγῳ αὐτοῦ, καὶ διελογίζετο ποταπὸς εἶη ὁ ἄσπασμὸς οὗτος

30 καὶ εἶπεν ὁ ἄγγελος αὐτῇ Μὴ φοβοῦ Μαριάμ εὖρες γὰρ χάριν παρὰ τῷ θεῷ

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<https://biblehub.com/interlinear/luke/1-28.htm>

Jerome's Vulgate (4th cent., from Greek)

28 Et ingressus angelus ad eam dixit: Ave gratia plena: Dominus tecum: benedicta tu in mulieribus.

And ingoing the angel to her said: Hail grace full: the Lord with you: blessed you among women.

29 Quae cum audisset, turbata est in sermone ejus, et cogitabat qualis esset ista salutatio.

That when she heard, perturbed is in sermon his, and contemplated what might be this greeting.

30 Et ait angelus ei: Ne timeas, Maria: invenisti enim gratiam apud Deum.

And says the angel to her: Do not fear, Mary: you have fun indeed grace by God.

For a side-by-side version of the Vulgate and the Douay-Rheims translation vulsearch.org

Luther (16th cent. [1519], translation from revised Greek text with consultation of Vulgate)

28 vnd der Engel kam zu yhr hyneyn, vnd sprach, Gegrusset seystu holdselige, der herr ist mit dyr,

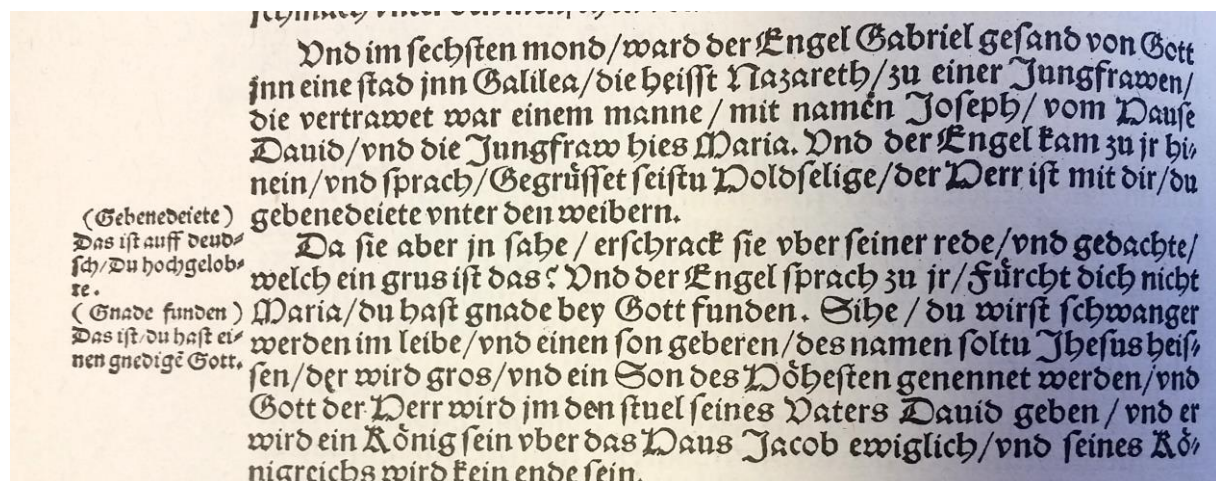
du gebenedeyte* vnter den weyben. * Das ist auff deudsch / Du hochgelobte.

In German this means: you highly praised

29 Da sie aber yhn sahe, erschrack sie vber seyner rede, vnd gedacht, wilch eyn grus ist das.

30 Vnd der Engel sprach zu yhr, furcht dich nit Maria, du hast gnade funden* bey Gott.

* Das ist / du hast einen gnedigen Gott. *This means: you have a merciful God*



Coverdale (16th cent. [1535], text of Tyndale with consultation of Vulgate and Luther)

28 And the angell came in vnto her, and sayde: Hayle thou full of grace, the LORDE is with the:
blessed art thou amonge wemen.

29 Wha she sawe him, she was abasshed at his sayenge, and thought: What maner of salutacion is this?

30 And the angell sayde vnto her: Feare not Mary, for thou hast foude grace with God.

King James Bible (17th cent. [1604], from Greek, based on earlier Protestant translations)

28 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.

29 And when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and cast in her mind what manner of
salutation this should be.

30 And the angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favour with God.

Bibel in gerechter Sprache (2006, from Greek, by a collective with focus on gender justice & Jewish)

28 Als er zu ihr hineinkam, sagte er: »Freue dich, du bist mit Gnade beschenkt,
denn die Lebendige ist mit dir!«

*When he came in to her, he said: "Be joyful, you have been gifted with grace,
for she-that-is-alive is with you!"*

29 Sie aber erschrak bei diesem Wort, und sie fragte sich, was es mit diesem Gruß auf sich habe.

But she was shocked by this word, and she asked herself, what was meant by this greeting.

30 Der Engel sprach zu ihr Folgendes: »Fürchte dich nicht, Maria, du hast Gnade gefunden bei Gott.

The angel said the following to her: "Be not afraid, Mary, you have found grace with God."

Fill in your translation from a different language

28 _____

29 _____

30 _____

Fill in a translation from a different type of translation (children's version, Good news bible etc.)

28 _____

29 _____

30 _____

**Any feedback or thought on Reformation translation or Bible translation in general?
Interested in learning more about the Taylor Editions Series: Reformation Pamphlets?**

Email me: henrike.laehnemann@mod-langs.ox.ac.uk

Free copies of the "Treasures of the Taylorian" including the *Sendbrief vom Dolmetschen* available.