

Conclusion of the Revision of the Luther New Testament

Ernst Gess

The concurrence of the Union of German Evangelical Bible Societies having already been voted earlier, the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany, at its meeting held June 28-29, 1956, approved the final draft of the revision of the Luther text of the New Testament and asked its member churches to use this as the official text in church services and in religious instruction. With this development an important epoch in the history of the Luther Bible has been reached. May the blessed work of Luther bring blessing to many in its new form.

It is impossible here to give an account either of the history of a century of Bible revision or of the twenty-five years of work on this last revision of the New Testament now completed. Neither is it possible to discuss in detail the basic questions of revision work; but a few observations which may serve as an introduction to the new text should be useful.

1. The work on the Luther text had to take into consideration very conflicting points of view. On the one hand was the desire, in grateful respect for Luther's genius, to change as little as possible; on the other hand, it was important to do everything possible to facilitate the access of our people, and especially of our youth, to the Word of God. Some wished to retain for church services a euphonious form of language, as far as possible both dignified and traditional, while others, on the contrary, emphasized the evangelistic point of view.

It was not always easy to strike the happy medium between these aims. One must therefore accept the fact that in reaching a compromise solution full justice has not been done to either viewpoint. The Commission hopes, however, that the work, however incomplete or piecemeal, will nevertheless prove to be usable in practice.

2. The typography and format of the New Testament is now quite new. The division of chapter and verses remains, in spite of the need to change them (these could only be modified by ecumenical action), but there are no longer any indications of contents at the beginning of the chapters. Rather, as is the case in most newer translations, attention has been drawn to the meaning of the immediately following passages, which are identified by relevant section headings. These will prove very helpful for church instruction and for individual Bible reading.

The parallel references, which have been examined by a special commission, are no longer given below each verse, but appear in the margin or at the foot of the page. This makes it necessary for the reader to adjust himself to new habits in looking up references, but in this way the continuity of the text—no longer divided up into separate verses—is also preserved visually.

A help towards the right understanding of the text is the choice of more correct punctuation. One may look, for instance, at the use of the

colon which now appears in Matthew 28:19, 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations: baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teach them to observe all that I have commanded you. And lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age'.

3. One feature which is easily apparent to the reader is that the present revision has attempted to indicate paragraphs within a passage and particularly to divide up the long sentences in the Epistles into shorter sentences, a feature which has greatly simplified the reading of the text. The application of this principle may be seen by comparing Ephesians 1:4-14 in the 1912 edition with the same passage in the 1956 edition. The one sentence of the old reading has been broken up into five shorter sentences, arranged in four paragraphs:

- a. verses 4- 6 one sentence
- b. verses 7-10 two sentences
- c. verses 11-12 one sentence
- d. verses 13-14 one sentence

This is about the same division as that adopted in the RSV, which has divided the first sentence still further into two: (a) verses 3-4 and (b) verses 5-6, but has divided the section into two paragraphs only: 3-10 and 11-14.¹

4. For long sections the reader will find hardly any change in the text to which he is accustomed. It was worked on with great restraint, for it was not the intention that a new translation should result, but that Luther's language should be retained in so far as possible. Thus the work on the Gospels has turned out very conservative; in other books much greater changes were possible and necessary, perhaps the most drastic being in the Epistle to the Hebrews.

The great care prescribed in the guiding principles in dealing with the familiar passages was widely observed. Thus after long reflection the alteration of Luke 2:14, already agreed upon many times, was nevertheless finally rejected and a different translation offered only as a footnote: *Ehre sei Gott in der Höhe und Friede auf Erden bei den Menschen seines Wohlgefallens* 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased!'

Naturally some changes had to be made here and there even in the familiar passages. The following few examples show that the Commission did not make its decisions lightly. The first two examples are of importance for the baptismal liturgy.

Mark 10:14 no longer speaks of *Kindlein* 'little children' but of *Kinder* 'children'. The affectionate sound of Luther's *Kindlein* is easily misunderstood in the sense of a certain unsuitable patronage.

The baptismal command in Matthew 28:18-20 now reads: *Und Jesus trat zu ihnen, redete mit ihnen und sprach: Mir ist gegeben alle Gewalt im Himmel und auf Erden. Darum gehet hin und machet zu*

¹ For this and the subsequent quotations, parallel changes can be noted as from the King James Version to the Revised Standard Version.

Jüngern alle Völker: taufet sie auf den Namen des Vaters und des Sohnes und des heiligen Geistes und lehret sie halten alles, was ich euch befohlen habe. Und siehe, ich bin bei euch alle Tage bis an der Welt Ende 'And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations: baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teach them to observe all that I have commanded you. And lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age".'

This rendering corresponds closely to the footnote on this passage in the 1912 version.

It is important for the right understanding of the song of praise in 1 Timothy 3:16 that, following the clear text of the Greek, it should no longer read *geglaubt von der Welt* 'believed on *by* the world', but *geglaubt in der Welt* 'believed on *in* the world'.

Further, John 6:69, again according to the Greek, now reads *wir haben geglaubt und erkannt, dass du bist der Heilige Gottes* 'we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God', while the previous text, *dass du bist Christus, der Sohn des lebendigen Gottes* 'that thou art Christ, the Son of the living God', was relegated to a footnote. Here the matter was intentionally handled differently than in Luke 2:14.

5. From the examples given under 4, which could easily be added to, it is clear how significant has been our considerably better knowledge of the Greek text than that which existed in the time of the Reformation. The examination and comparison of the manuscripts of the New Testament has become a highly specialized area of scholarly work and an invaluable help for establishing the best Greek text from which now the German translation is to be sought.

The following is an interesting instance: the last phrase of Romans 12:11 now reads *dienet dem Herrn* 'serving the Lord', while Luther's translation, *schicket euch in die Zeit* 'adapt yourselves to the world', is relegated to a footnote. The basis for this alteration is that we have to accept as very probable the fact that the Greek text which Luther had before him contained in this place an error in writing. The Greek words for 'time' and 'Lord' are very similar, so that a mistake in hearing or in writing could easily occur.

6. Very thorough deliberation was required in the places where it was a question of a better understanding of the meaning. In this connection, also, we give a few examples:

John 2:4, the passage, which for us is too hard sounding and so difficult for church instruction, *Weib, was habe ich mit dir zu schaffen* 'Woman, what have I to do with thee?' is better rendered, also from the point of view of meaning, by *Weib, was geht's dich an, was ich tue* 'Woman, what does it matter to you what I do?'

Or John 5:39-40 is rendered in the 1912 version by *Suchet in der Schrift, denn ihr meint, ihr habet das ewige Leben darin; und sie ist's, die von mir zeuget; und ihr wollt nicht zu mir kommen, dass ihr das Leben haben möchtet* 'Search the Scriptures, for in them ye think ye

have eternal life; and they are they which testify of me. And ye will not come to me that ye might have life.' The new rendering reads: *Ihr suchet in der Schrift; denn ihr meint, ihr habt das ewige Leben darin; und sie ist es, die von mir zeuget; aber doch wollt ihr nicht zu mir kommen, dass ihr das Leben hättet* 'You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness to me; yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life'.

Yet another example, from John 14:2, which previously read: *In meines Vaters Hause sind viele Wohnungen. Wenn's nicht so wäre, so wollte ich zu euch sagen: Ich gehe hin euch die Stätte zu bereiten* 'In my Father's house are many dwellings; if it were not so, I would have told you: I go to prepare a place for you'. This verse now reads: *In meines Vaters Hause sind viele Wohnungen. Wenn's nicht so wäre, würde ich dann zu euch gesagt haben: Ich gehe hin, euch die Stätte zu bereiten?* 'In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?'

Many other places could be quoted where, with a gentle hand, by means of corrections which are often not noticeable, the German rendering, while maintaining the sound of the Luther version, has nevertheless become more readable and more understandable.

7. A whole series of decisions were also taken regarding individual words, whether because a word has become completely obsolete and not understandable, or whether it has changed its meaning, or whether because the existing translation was not a good one.

a. As an example of a word no longer either used or understood we would quote *fürbass* 'forward' (changed by confirmation candidates to *barfuss* 'barefoot' by association of sounds!); the word *fürbass* no longer appears in the text. On the other hand, where a word no longer used is still understandable, it has been kept, e.g. *widerbellen* 'to be refractory', Titus 2:9.

b. A word which has undergone a change of meaning since the days of Luther is *Geiz*. In using *Geiz* Luther means *Habsucht* 'covetousness, the desire to possess.' With us *Geiz* is used in a much more limited sense for a special narrow kind of 'avarice', that is, 'desire for money'. Thus in most cases instead of *Geiz* the word *Habsucht* or *Habgier* 'greed' is used. In particular, 1 Timothy 6:10 now stands: *Denn Habsucht ist eine Wurzel alles Uebels* 'for greed is a root of all evil'. On the other hand, in 2 Corinthians 9:5 *Geiz* remains.

It is the same in the use of *Eitelkeit* 'vanity' and *eitel* 'vain'. In Romans 8:20 *Eitelkeit* has been replaced with *Vergänglichkeit* 'transitoriness', but in Ephesians 4:17 it is *Nichtigkeit* 'futility'. The adjective *eitel* 'vain' remains in four places, and especially in 1 Peter 1:18, a key passage. In the other places, for example, 1 Corinthians 15:17, it has been replaced by *nichtig* 'futile' or a similar word. But James 2:20 no longer has *du eitler Mensch* 'O vain man', but *du törichter Mensch* 'you foolish man'.

c. That Luther's translation *Tiere* 'beasts' in Revelation 4:6 and

again in the following verse does not entirely satisfy is well known. It corresponds neither to the Greek nor to the meaning of the passage (the third *Tier* had the face of a man). But the expression used many times today, *Wesen* 'being, creature' instead of *Tiere* 'beasts,' also did not seem good, for Luther uses the word *Wesen* in a special sense. See for example Revelation 4:11, *durch deinen Willen haben sie das Wesen und sind geschaffen* 'by thy will they existed and were created'. Thus the translation *Gestalten* 'forms, figures' was arrived at instead of *Tiere*, with the addition of *himmlische* 'heavenly' alongside in the first instance.

8. Everyone who has to give religious or confirmation instruction knows how difficult it is for young people today to read Luther's German. There are various reasons for this, and not least because of the structure of the sentences. On the other hand, it is just there that the very originality of Luther's language comes most to the fore. Therefore great caution had to be observed.

Thus the Commission could only very rarely accede to the wish expressed with great insistence, namely, that in relative clauses the verb should be put at the end of the sentence, as is the current practice. Such a practice would in many cases not only complicate the reading, but above all the "music of the Luther language" would be spoiled. One has only to take the end of Romans 8 and read aloud: *noch keine andere Kreatur uns von der Liebe Gottes, die in Christus Jesus ist, unserm Herrn, scheiden kann* instead of *noch keine andere Kreatur mag uns scheiden von der Liebe Gottes, die in Christus Jesus ist, unserm Herrn*. No one would want the first of these two renderings. The same holds good for a large number of other passages.

On the other hand, much has been done, beyond what has been mentioned above, to make the text easier for the reading of young people. One example: Luther's use of the word *so* 'thus' confuses us today, especially when *so* is used in one sentence with various meanings. Thus in John 8, the verses 31 and 36 no longer begin with *so*, but with *wenn* 'if', while the second *so* 'then' is kept. John 8:51, which is a key passage, has, however, not been changed.

9. One simplification for many people is the dropping of the declensional endings of certain proper names, including that of Jesus Christ. Now, the simple forms of *Jesus* and *Christ* are always used, apart from the genitive, which had to be kept, and in a few cases the vocative, e.g. Matthew 26:68 and Luke 18:38.

10. One can easily criticize the lack of consistency in the whole work; the Commission is very conscious of this. But the Commission is convinced that any principle of rigorous consistency would have led to a wholesale mutilation of the living language. Furthermore, in admitting certain types of inconsistency in the text the Commission was only following Luther, who proceeded with a "sublime carelessness." Thus, for instance, he did not think of always rendering the Greek word *parrêsis* with the same expression in German. For the most part he translated it *Freidigkeit* (which today would be better rendered *Freimut*

'frankness') rather than *Freudigkeit* 'joyousness'. But twice in Hebrews he says *Vertrauen* 'trust', and further, he translates the word again with *frei* 'bold'—*frei offenbar* 'straightforward', *frei heraus* 'plainly', *frei öffentlich* 'outspoken, openly'. And in Ephesians 6:19 there is *mit freudigem Auftun meines Mundes* 'the joyous opening of my mouth'. Who would want to blame Luther for such variations? All one can do is to try to emulate his exhaustive use of the riches of our language.

Revision work is always incomplete or piecemeal, not only because it is done by man, but because, with the living flow of the language, after a few decades a new examination of a text will be necessary. However, if the newly established text helps some people to find their way to the Word of God, the work will not have been in vain.

And now one can only say, "Take and read!"

Notes on the Chinese Version of the Bible

Tun-Jou Ku

As a result of studies based upon recent discoveries of ancient manuscripts of the Bible, numerous mistakes have been detected in its Chinese version. The present analysis will, however, not touch these textual inaccuracies, but will rather be limited to mistakes or weaknesses in the form of language used in the translation.

I was never so shocked as when, about twenty years ago, I came across one sentence in the Kuoyü Bible, a version which is still considered to be the best in Chinese, and one for which deep gratitude still is owed. A close translation of the Chinese sentence would be, 'What you *have done*, do quickly' (John 13:27). Of course, the correct translation should be: 'What you *are going to do*, do quickly'. Then I was led by curiosity to jump to another page, where my eye caught another ambiguous line, '... worship the first beast which was dead, wounded and healed' (Rev. 13:12). How could "deadly wound was healed" be translated as 'dead, wounded and healed'? I closed the Bible with a sigh of distress.

Now, as I am working on an important project for a new Chinese Bible concordance and have thus an opportunity to read the Bible carefully, I find many more such mistakes, so many that I feel I must do something about it. Here is an analysis of these mistakes and weaknesses in the Chinese Bible from the viewpoint of the form of language and obvious inaccuracy in rendering.

Such mistakes as we have found may be divided into three groups: (1) mistakes in translation, (2) weaknesses in style, and (3) errors in the choice of words.

Mistakes in Translation

Conspicuous among the first group of mistakes are those consisting of omissions or improper choice of words or characters. For example,