

BOOK REVIEWS

Martin Luther: Creative Translator, by Heinz Bluhm, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1965. pp. xv, 236. \$8.00.

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(See Michael Trinklein's article on p. 80.)

Of the three Bibles that have become pre-eminent in the West—the Vulgate, Luther's and the Authorized Version—Luther's is the most remarkable, according to Heinz Bluhm, Leavenworth Professor of the German Language and Literature at Yale. In this volume of essays, written over a period of years, he deals with different aspects of Luther's work as a translator.

The first essay discusses the use of Biblical quotations in Luther's writings. There are alternate renderings of texts, indicating that each quotation was an impromptu, fresh translation. Thereby Luther was unconsciously preparing himself for the translation of the Bible, says Bluhm, by rendering "in various superb ways a veritable deluge of Biblical verses . . . 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" (p. 36).

The next two essays deal with the question of text. Bluhm agrees with earlier scholars that Luther was largely uninfluenced by the pre-Lutheran German Bibles. But he differs with them on the question of his use of the Greek original or the Vulgate. He says rather guardedly, "The Vulgate is the preponderant and preferred source in those relatively few verses in which it differs substantially from the Greek original" (p. 15). Bluhm found that even when Erasmus' Greek edition of 1516 appeared, "there is relatively more evidence for Luther's having used the Vulgate" (p. 48). The author gives his estimate of the Vulgate as being, "on the whole, a better and more reliable version than is sometimes assumed" (p. 106).

In the fourth essay Bluhm focuses on the 23rd Psalm, giving his opinion that the Psalms are "probably even the most excellently rendered parts of Luther's Bible" (p. 104). He finds that the Psalms occupied more of Luther's attention, time and interest than any other part of the Bible. Development is to be noted in Luther's freedom in translation. The first edition of the New Testament was published in 1522, the Psalms later. Bluhm's comparison of Luther's Psalms with the New Testament is interesting. "Not until much later was he to render the New Testament with anything like the freedom shown in this Psalter (of 1531). Only in the last years of his life, from around 1544 on, did he undertake a radical revision of the major Pauline Epistles" (p. 118).

In his fifth and sixth essays, the author deals with Luther's response to attacks that were made on his translation. These two chapters are perhaps

the most important for the modern translator, for in them Bluhm presents Luther's method. In the author's words, "Luther the translator cannot be divorced from Luther the exegete and interpreter. He had achieved eminence as an exegete years before he undertook, or was persuaded to undertake, the translation of the Bible into German" (p. 128). A strong point is made that when Luther came to the Wartburg to translate the New Testament, he came with an intimate acquaintance with the text of the New Testament itself. Luther translated freely, but within well-defined limits. At the outset he determined the meaning of the text. Then he looked for a form of expression that was truly German. Luther was careful to point out this order. Says Bluhm, "He is convinced that his translation does not take undue liberties with the text. The text is king, the translation only a humble but faithful handmaiden bent upon serving her master . . . If the original text contains a word or phrase which would lose its essential meaning should too familiar a German expression be used, the flavor of the original Greek should be retained even if the resulting German does not measure up to the requirements of the German idiom" (p. 130).

Bluhm points out that Melancthon assisted in putting the finishing touches on the manuscript of the New Testament (p. 152). But the author fails to add that for the revision of the entire Bible Luther used a group of advisers who met frequently.

It is observed that Luther worked on the New Testament with incredible speed. Arriving at the Wartburg before the end of December 1521, he completed the actual translation and left there before the end of March 1522 (p. 152). Nothing even approaching this is possible, of course, for those who are translating into languages other than their own. But it may very well be that in stretching out a translation over ten or more years one loses the inspiration and fire that come from sustained and concentrated effort.

The final cluster of three essays traces in a few selected passages the influence of Luther's Bible on the English Bible. Students of the history of the Bible in English will be interested in Bluhm's findings on the Coverdale Bible, one of the Bibles which preceded the Authorized Version. Bluhm establishes Luther "as the primary source of one Old and one New Testament passage which I subjected to detailed analysis" (p. xiv). Turning to the Psalter in the Book of Common Prayer, the author reminds the reader that it is not the Psalter of the King James Bible but of the Coverdale Bible. "This means that a number of the most beautiful English phrases in this great Psalter are ultimately Luther's" (p. xiv).

There is no bibliography, but there is a brief subject index and an index of Scripture references. The volume is handsomely produced and bound. While it contributes to a deeper appreciation of Luther's achievement as a translator, it is not actually a tool for the translator such as would justify its expense. However, those who have ready access to it will find it rewarding reading.

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