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Question 85 - What are the facts regarding Luther's Bible?

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101 MOST ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT THE BIBLE

85. What are the facts regarding Luther's Bible?

In 1521 Luther was summoned to the Diet of Worms, a council of the Holy Roman Empire. When granted the opportunity to disavow his writings, he refused, answering with the famous words: "I do not accept the authority of popes and councils . . . my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything . . . Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise." Made an outlaw by the imposition of the ban of the empire, Luther was whisked away by his prince, Frederick of Saxony, to the safety of the ancient castle of the Wartburg.

There in solitude he set about translating the Scriptures, moved by his passionate belief that the Word of God should be available to "the priesthood of all believers" in their own language.

"God in Every Syllable" Luther began with the New Testament, using Erasmus' emended Greek text as his standard. He painstakingly labored over every detail in recognition that "God is in every syllable. No iota is in vain." He tried to determine the authenticity and grammatical accuracy of the texts and to capture every nuance of meaning. For example, to verify the references in Rev. 21 to certain precious stones, he asked a friend to "get permission from court to let us have the loan of some to see what they are like."

Unlike other biblical scholars, Luther showed little interest in apparent inconsistencies in the Scriptures. What did it matter that the versions of Jesus' birth in Matthew and Luke differ, "if we have the right understanding of Scripture"? However, he did attempt to establish the relative values of various canonical books. His criterion for books of both the Old and New Testament was based on whether, in his opinion, the texts proclaimed Christ. Thus he judged as inferior books the Epistle to the Hebrews, those of James and Jude, and the Book of Revelation.

In January 1522, less than a month into his work on the translation, Luther feared that "the task far exceeds my powers. Only now am I discovering what translating really means and why no one has thus far dared associate his name with an undertaking of this kind." Nevertheless, he completed a first draft in two and a half months. Luther took the translation to Wittenberg on March 6, 1522, and put it through revisions with the help of the eminent Greek scholar Phillip Melancthon. The initial printing of 3,000 copies was carried out in secrecy beginning in May, and *Das Neue Testament Deutsch* appeared the following September. Priced at about a carpenter's weekly wage, it sold out within three months. During Luther's lifetime, more than 100,000 copies of his German New Testament were sold.

Even as the New Testament was being printed, Luther turned to the far more arduous

task of translating the Old Testament.

Luther translated the Old Testament from a variety of Hebrew texts. Not a strong Hebraist himself, he relied on the advice of the scholar Matthäus Aurogallus, and a council of experts made further revisions. The translation took 12 years to complete and was published in several parts. In 1534 the entire Bible appeared in a six-part edition, the first of 11 complete editions before Luther's death in 1546.

Luther reworked his translation ceaselessly. For example, he made hundreds of emendations for the second printing of the New Testament, and he revised the Psalter in 1531 with the help of a team of scholars. He said, "Translating . . . requires a right pious faithful, diligent, God-fearing, experienced and practised heart."

A magnificent edition of Luther's translation was released in 1541 in Wittenberg. A contemporary of Luther's said that his New Testament was "multiplied by the printers in a most wonderful degree, so that even shoemakers and women and every lay person . . . read it greedily."

(The Bible Through the Ages. Reader's Digest. Pleasantville, N.Y. 1996. pp. 305-307)