Lecture Sixteen
Translating the Bible into Modern Languages

Scope: The Reformation shattered the religious and cultural unity of medieval Europe and, at the same time, helped fragment political unity; Christendom broke into separate states defined, in part, by their allegiance either to the Catholic or Protestant version of Christianity and, in part, by distinct national identity. The translation of the Bible into the separate European languages was part of this process. Just as Jerome's Vulgate transformed Latin even as it translated the Bible, so did Luther's translation of the Bible into German (1522) become a formative influence on the shaping of German language and culture. This presentation also notes the other early efforts to make the Bible accessible to populations in their own languages and includes a review of the contents of the Bible for the distinct communities of faith.

Outline

I. European history in the aftermath of the Reformation (and Catholic Counter-Reformation) lost any trace of social and religious unity.

- **A.** The Constantinian premise of the unity of state and Church continued, increasingly in the direction of Erastianism—the supremacy of state over Church.
  - **1.** The dictum *cuius regio eius religio* ("the religion of the prince is the religion of the realm") held sway.
  - **2.** Europe became a checkerboard of Protestant and Catholic countries, with Catholicism in France, Italy, and Spain (the Holy Roman Empire) and one form of Protestantism or another in Germany, Scandinavia, England, and part of the Low Countries.
- **B.** The militaristic spirit of the Crusades expressed itself in a long series of religious wars between Protestant and Catholic nations.
- **C.** This competition between branches of Christianity also extended itself into world exploration.
- **D.** The sense of national identity was sharpened further by the development of modern European languages and literatures.

E. The Bible appears to be a unifying element because all sides appealed to it, but its intrinsic internal diversity enabled any position to be supported.

II. After the Reformation, it is possible to speak of four distinct collections going by the name of "the Bible."

A. The Jewish Bible consists of 39 compositions in Hebrew (if each is counted individually): the 5 books of Moses (Torah), the 21 books of the Prophets (Neviim), and the 13 books of the Writings (Ketuvim).

B. The Protestant Bible has 66 books, retaining the traditional 27 Greek writings of the New Testament (despite Luther's complaints) but adopting the Hebrew canon for the Old Testament:

1. The books, however, are organized differently: the Pentateuch (5 books), the 12 historical books (Joshua through Esther), the 5 wisdom books, and 17 books of the prophets.

2. The books that came from the LXX are referred to as Apocrypha and, if included, usually appear in a separate section.

C. The Council of Trent in 1546 affirmed the traditional canon used in Catholicism and asserted the authority of the Vulgate text for faith and morals.

1. The Catholic canon includes the 27 writings of the New Testament and the Old Testament canon found in the LXX (47), for a total of 74 writings.

2. The writings that Protestants call *apocryphal* are termed *deuterocanonical* but are included in the separate categories of historical books (see 1 and 2 Maccabees), wisdom books (see Wisdom of Solomon and Sirach), and the prophets (see Baruch).

D. The largest canonical collection is maintained by the Eastern Orthodox tradition (77 writings); it has the 27 writings of the New Testament, plus the 39 writings of the Hebrew Bible, plus 11 (rather than 8) writings from the LXX (1 Esdras, 3 and 4 Maccabees).

III. The Bible became "the people's book" as it was quickly translated into the developing modern European languages.

A. The most significant initiative was taken by Luther himself, who translated the Bible into German, the New Testament in 1522 (in three months!) and the Old Testament in 1534. There had been efforts before him, despite episcopal resistance, but his was the most successful.

1. For the New Testament, Luther used Erasmus's edition of the Greek, and for the Old Testament, he used a Hebrew text prepared by associates.

2. Luther rendered the Bible in a fresh and simple High German that would shape Lutheran piety and the German language for centuries.

3. Luther was not afraid to emphasize points of Reformation theology in his translation (see Romans 3:28), and his introductions to the books of the Bible remained influential.

B. Translations of the Bible quickly appeared in other major European languages.

1. Spanish translations appeared already in the medieval period (1280), notably, the Bible of the Duke of Alba (1430) and the Old Testament by Rabbi Solomon (1420). The first complete Bible from the original languages was the Biblia del Oso by Casiodoro de Reina in 1569.

2. The first printed translation of the Bible into French was by Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples and appeared in 1530. The Port-Royal version by Antoine and Louis Isaac Lemaistre in 1695 won wide acceptance by both Catholics and French Huguenots.

3. In the Netherlands, the first translation into Dutch from the Hebrew and Greek was ordered by the Synod of Dordrecht (1618) and appeared in 1637.

4. Gustav I Vasa (1496–1560) converted Sweden to Protestantism and ordered the Bible to be translated into Swedish.

C. Among both Protestants and Catholics, translations into other European languages cemented national identity and helped shape national literatures. The Bible was translated from the Vulgate into Czech in 1488, then from the original languages between 1579 and 1593; the New Testament was translated into Finnish in 1548, and the whole Bible appeared in 1642; in Hungarian, the New

Testament was printed in 1541, and the entire Bible in 1590; and a Polish translation of the Bible came out between 1541 and 1597.

IV. The faith of Europe was decisively changed in a matter, not of centuries, but of decades, and the Bible was part of this change.

A. From a positive standpoint, it can be said that the Bible was no longer remote from ordinary people.

B. But there were other aspects of this rapid proliferation of the Bible within a divided Christianity that perhaps had less happy results.

Essential Reading:

J. L. Flood, "Martin Luther's Bible Translation in Its German and European Context," in *The Bible in the Renaissance: Essays on Biblical Commentary and Translation in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries*, R. Griffiths, ed., pp. 45–70.

Supplementary Reading:

M. H. Black, "The Printed Bible," in *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, Vol. 3: *The West from the Reformation to the Present Day*, S. L. Greenslade, ed., pp. 408–475.

Questions to Consider:

1. In what way is the statement that the Bible's story is the story of many Bibles especially true following the Reformation?

2. What might the proliferation of translations into European languages suggest about a popular thirst for scriptural knowledge (and, perhaps, about publishing opportunities for ambitious printers)?