1

Erasmus as the Initiator of East-Central German Vernacular Bible Translations of the Sixteenth Century

Christine Ganslmayer

Introduction

A controversial question, during the late Middle Ages, was whether vernacular Bible translations accessible to the laity were to be deemed expedient or dangerous. A decision on the matter was not reached until the Council of Trent, in 1546, with discussion of issues relating to the maturity of the laity, the proper authority for interpretation of Holy Scripture, the danger of heresy and so forth. A differentiated approach must in any case be applied to the early vernacular Bible translations that arose in Europe: whereas the authorities in Catholic Spain or in England had been opposed to such translations since the condemnation of John Wyclif, and had banned them, a pre-Reformation tradition of vernacular Bible translation into Czech, French, Italian or German was nevertheless able to develop.[1]

1. See also Thomas Kaufmann, 'Vorreformatorische Laienbibel und reformatorisches Evangelium', *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche,* 101, no. 2 (2004), pp. 140-45; Thomas Kaufmann, *Der Anfang der Reformation:*

In Germany, in particular, both partial and complete Bible translations were widespread, albeit only within certain circles, as a rich manuscript tradition from the fourteenth century bears witness.[2] Of prime importance, however, was the subsequent development of an early print tradition, beginning as early as 1466 with the first ever Bible printed in a vernacular language: the Mentelin Bible, printed in Strasbourg by Johannes Mentelin. In total, fourteen printed Bibles in High German and four in Low German make up this tradition between 1466 and 1522, predating the Luther Bible.[3] The textual basis of Mentelin's Bible is approximately one hundred years older, using an original in Upper German from the middle of the fourteenth century and from Bavaria, presumably Nuremberg. Based on the Vulgate, it uses word-for-word translation and predominantly also transfers the structures of the source language, Latin, to the target language, German.[4] Vernacular translations in this tradition uphold

Studien zur Kontextualität der Theologie, Publizistik und Inszenierung Luthers und der reformatorischen Bewegung (Tübingen, 2018), pp. 69-78; Klaus Unterburger, 'Volkssprachliche Übersetzungen der Bibel im 15. und 16. Jahrhundert: Die Entstehung von Interpretationsvarianten der Heiligen Schrift und die Frage des Auslegungsmonopols der Kirche', in Jan Martin Lies (ed.), *Wahrheit – Geschwindigkeit – Pluralität: Chancen und Herausforderungen durch den Buchdruck im Zeitalter der Reformation* (Göttingen, 2021), pp. 164-70.

2. For instance, manuscripts attributed to the so-called Austrian Bible Translator, whose works have been researched and edited since 2016; see the homepage for the twelve-year German *Academienunion* project: https://bibeluebersetzer.badw.de/ [accessed 20 March 2023]; Thomas O. Höllmann (ed.), *Der Österreichische Bibelübersetzer: Ein neues Akademievorhaben zwischen Tradition und Innovation*, *Akademie aktuell* 62, no. 3 (2017, special issue). https://badw.de/fileadmin/pub/akademieAktuell/2017/62/AA_0317_Buch_V06.pdf [accessed 20 March 2023].
3. For the relevant fundamental handbook article, see Stefan Sonderegger, 'Geschichte deutschsprachiger Bibelübersetzungen in Grundzügen', in W. Besch *et al.* (eds), *Sprachgeschichte: Ein Handbuch zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und ihrer Erforschung*, 4 vols (Berlin and New York, 1998), vol. 1, pp. 257-58.
4. Sonderegger, 'Geschichte deutschsprachiger Bibelübersetzungen', p. 258; see also Carola Redzich, 'Luthers langer Schatten: Teleologie und Typologie in der Forschungsgeschichte zur Bibelübersetzung', in R. Faber and U. Puschner (eds), *Luther: zeitgenössisch, historisch, kontrovers* (Frankfurt am Main, 2017), p. 470.

mediaeval hermeneutical traditions of interpretation and do not claim to be orientated to the target language but, instead, open up the Vulgate text for a readership that knew no Latin, such as that found in women's convents.[5] In the later sixteenth century, Luther's first biographer Johannes Mathesius described such a Bible as he had first encountered it in his youth: an 'un-German German Bible … no doubt put into German from Latin, which was dark and gloomy'.[6]

While Martin Luther's epoch-making work brought this first tradition of German Bible translation to an abrupt end, it still constitutes the reception-aesthetic backdrop for an adequate understanding of the effect that Luther's translation had on his contemporaries. In this contribution I will focus on the circumstances that surrounded the writing of the September Testament. Since the when, where and how of Luther's translation are well-known historical facts, I will touch on them only briefly, in the final section. A reorientation of German Bible translation in Luther's time was based on new philological foundations. These were laid by European humanists and the crucial name, in this context, is Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam whose guiding principles, textual editions and translations paved the way, as I will show below.

A less well-known fact is that several other printed German partial translations of the Bible survive for which Erasmus' resources were used, exactly as for Luther's, and I will turn to these first. Slightly ahead of Luther's time, and in Luther's immediate vicinity, Johannes Lang and Nikolaus Krumpach produced partial German Bible translations and it is probably the case that, without them, Luther's September Testament might never have been written. Even in German, these translation efforts remain neglected by scholars and relevant research literature, with which I engage below, remains scarce. In the modern era, the translations by Lang and Krumpach first received detailed appreciation, including through some sample texts, as part of an

5. Redzich, 'Luthers langer Schatten', pp. 473-80; see also Carola Redzich, 'Mittelalterliche Bibelübersetzung und der Übersetzungsbegriff', in B. Bußmann *et al.* (eds), *Übertragungen: Formen und Konzepte von Reproduktion in Mittelalter und Früher Neuzeit* (Berlin and New York, 2005), pp. 259-78. On the place of translation and the value of hermeneutics in mediaeval sacred translations, see Rita Copeland, *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation in the Middle Ages: Academic Traditions and Vernacular Texts* (Cambridge, 1991), 50-62.

6. Johannes Mathesius, *Von des Ehrwirdigen in Gott Seligen thewren Manns Gottes / Doctoris Martini Luthers / anfang / lehr / leben und sterben* […] (Nuremberg, 1568), 150v; my translation.

exhibition catalogue of the Herzog August Bibliothek in Wolfenbüttel,[7] with some mention also in Sonderegger's handbook article.[8] However, they are missing from a recent overview of German Bible translation before Martin Luther[9] and also receive only passing and patchy treatment in the Cambridge *History of the Bible*.[10]

It is especially important to take a closer look at these translations, as I do here, because of how they help to establish Erasmus of Rotterdam as the crucial forerunner, in the sixteenth century, of humanist-influenced translations in the East-Central German language area as a whole. In addition, by profiling the superior quality of Luther's translation over those of Lang and Krumpach, my comparison makes clear why the Luther Bible was able to prevail in the long term over their translations, which Luther's translation quickly marginalised in any event: in the long shadow cast by his epochal New Testament, from its first appearance in print in September 1522, they were quickly forgotten by the wider public.

Reception of Erasmus in early German Bible translations: places and people

By way of brief orientation to the places and people, in 1521-22, of interest for my contribution, the map of present-day Germany (Figure 1.1) locates all places of historical relevance – all in East-Central Germany. Viewed from a cultural-historical perspective, the significance of this is not only geographical but, above all, linguistic.

Unlike today, in Luther's time written German had no uniform or standardised form, with the written language still displaying regional influences. Therefore, for sixteenth-century German it is important to distinguish between individual linguistic regions. If we correlate spatial regions with distribution of German dialects, as spatial language varieties, our focus becomes the language region 'East-Central German' – a

7. Heimo Reinitzer, *Biblia deutsch: Luthers Bibelübersetzung und ihre Tradition* (Wolfenbüttel, 1983), pp. 90-97.
8. Sonderegger, 'Geschichte deutschsprachiger Bibelübersetzungen', p. 259.
9. Jens Haustein and Martin Schubert, 'Die deutsche Bibelübersetzung vor Luther', *Akademie Aktuell: Zeitschrift der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* 64, no. 3 (2017), pp. 20-27.
10. On Lang's translation of Matthew's Gospel see briefly Euan Cameron, 'The Luther Bible', in Euan Cameron (ed.), *The New Cambridge History of the Bible*, 4 vols (Oxford, 2016), vol. 3, p. 219.

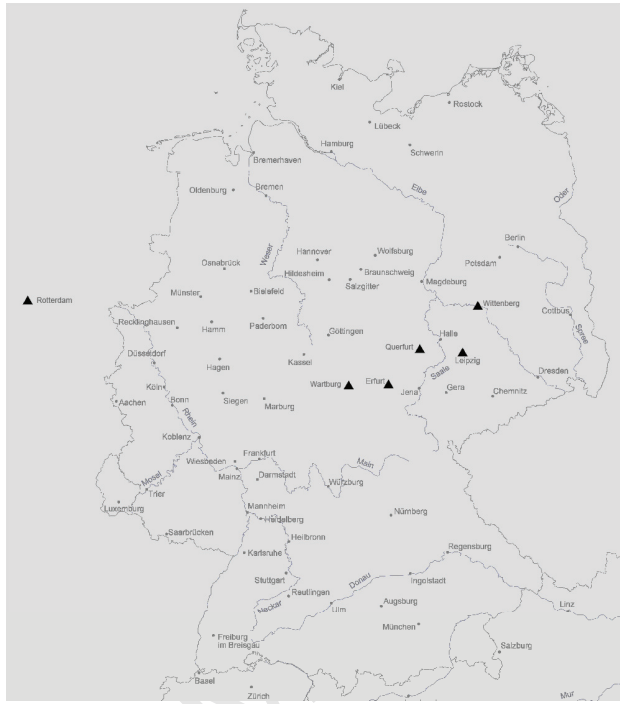

Figure 1.1: Places of relevance (□) for reception of Erasmus in early East-Central German Bible translations.

linguistic term that encompasses several variants of the German language in eastern Central Germany, with Thuringian and Saxonian as the main dialects. That all of the German translations of the Bible discussed here were created in this area is a remarkable fact.

In this context, the contributions of the following people must be considered important. The first, and most fundamental, is Erasmus of Rotterdam (c.1466-1536), the famous humanist and European cosmopolitan.[11] The next, of course, is Luther himself

11. 1466, 1467 and 1469 are all suggested for Erasmus' birth. For monographs on his life and work, see Willehad Paul Eckert, Erasmus *von Rotterdam: Werk und Wirkung,* 2 vols (Cologne, 1967); Erika Rummel (ed.), *The Erasmus Reader* (Toronto, 1990); Wilhelm Ribhegge, *Erasmus von Rotterdam* (Darmstadt, 2010); and Christine Christ-von Wedel, *Erasmus of Rotterdam: A Portrait* (Basel, 2020).

(1483-1546).[12] By December 1521 – temporally the starting point for his translation of the New Testament – Luther was a 38-year-old monk, professor of biblical exegesis at the recently founded University of Wittenberg. Long familiar beyond academic circles as an author of edifying writings, since January 1521 his fame was that of a critic of the Church, excommunicated by the Pope. Using the pseudonym *Junker Jörg* and hiding in protective custody at the Wartburg, Luther remained in close constant contact with his friends, including Wittenberg's professor of Greek Philipp Melanchthon (1497-1560).[13] Two other key figures from this period, less well-known today, are Johannes Lang (*c.*1487-1548),[14] Erfurt humanist, Augustinian friar and acquaintance of Martin Luther, and Nikolaus Krumpach (*c.*1480-*c.*1536),[15] a parish priest from

12. For select monographs on Luther's life and biography, see Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther,* 3 vols (Stuttgart, 1983/1986/1987); Thomas Kaufmann, *Martin Luther* (Munich, 2010); Heinz Schilling, *Martin Luther: Rebell in einer Zeit des Umbruchs: Eine Biographie* (Munich, 2016); Volker Leppin, *Martin Luther* (Darmstadt, 2017); Albrecht Beutel (ed.), *Luther Handbuch* (Tübingen, 2017).
13. On Philipp Melanchthon, see in particular the standard work by Heinz Scheible, *Melanchthon: Vermittler der Reformation* (Munich, 2016).
14. On Johannes Lang, see Adolf Brecher, 'Lange, Johannes', in *Allgemeine Deutsche Biographie*, 17 (1883), pp. 635-37; Martin Burgdorf, *Johann Lange: der Reformator Erfurts*, Ph.D. thesis, University of Rostock, 1911 (Kassel, 1911); Paul Bertram, 'Johannes Lang: Erfurts Kirchenreformator', in Alfred Kurz (ed.), *Erfurter Lutherbuch 1917: Eine Festgabe zur vierten Jahrhundertfeier der Reformation* (Erfurt, 1917), pp. 125-76; J. Klaus Kipf, 'Lang, Johann', in Wilhelm Kühlmann (ed.), *Killys Literaturlexikon: Autoren und Werke des deutschsprachigen Kulturraumes*, 13 vols (Berlin, 2008-12), vol. 7, pp. 201-2; Michael Welte, 'Lang, Johann', in F.W. Bautz *et al.* (eds), *Biographisch-Bibliographisches Kirchenlexikon* (*BBKL*),44 vols (Nordhausen, 1975-2022), vol. 4, column 1078; Robert Stupperich, 'Lang(e), Johannes', *Neue Deutsche Biographie* 13 (1982), pp. 540-41; Heinz Scheible, 'Lang, Johann', in Hans Dieter Betz *et al.* (eds), *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 9 vols (Tübingen, 1998-2007), vol. 5, column 68; Andreas Lindner, 'Der unbekannte Reformator Erfurts: Johannes Lang', in Steffen Raßloff *et al.* (eds), *Orte der Reformation: Erfurt* (Leipzig, 2012), pp. 44-46.
15. On Nikolaus Krumpach, see Otto Clemen, 'Der Bibelübersetzer Nikolaus Krumpach', *Zentralblatt für Bibliothekswesen*, 36 (1919), pp. 216-21; Heinrich Gisbert Voigt, 'Nicolaus Krumpach: Der sogenannte letzte

Querfurt near Leipzig, where his works and early translations were printed in the workshop of Wolfgang Stöckel.[16] No portrait of either translator survives, but in 2014 Lang's gravestone was rediscovered in Leipzig's St Michael's churchyard.[17]

Erasmus of Rotterdam as initiator of vernacular Bible translations throughout Europe

In 1516, Erasmus of Rotterdam's *Novum Instrumentum omne*[18] was printed for the first time by Johann Froben in Basel. Despite numerous shortcomings and printing errors, this folio volume of around 675

---

katholische Pfarrer von Querfurt', *Zeitschrift des Vereins für Kirchengeschichte der Provinz Sachsen (und des Freistaates Anhalt)* 23 (1927), pp. 55-85; Hans Jürgen Rieckenberg, 'Krumpach, Nikolaus', *eue Deutsche Biographie* 13 (1982), p. 125; Carola Redzich, 'Krumpach, Nikolaus', in Wilhelm Kühlmann *et al.*, (eds), *Verfasserlexikon: Frühe Neuzeit in Deutschland 1520-1620*, 7 vols (Berlin, 2011-19), vol. 4, columns 4-12.

16. On Wolfgang Stöckel, see Christoph Reske, *Die Buchdrucker des 16. und 17. Jahrhunderts im deutschen Sprachgebiet. Auf Grundlage des gleichnamigen Werkes von Josef Benzing* (Wiesbaden, 2007), pp. 516-17.
17. Tim Erthel, 'Der "Reformator Erfurts" nimmt Gestalt an. Zur Wiederauffindung des Grabsteins von Johannes Lang in der Michaeliskirche', *Mitteilungen des Vereins für die Geschichte und Altertumskunde von Erfurt* 76 (2015), pp. 6-21.
18. Johann Froben (ed.), *Novum Instrumentum omne: Diligenter ab Erasmo Roterodamo recognitum & emendatum* […] (Basel, 1516), https://www.e-rara.ch/bau_1/doi/10.3931/e-rara-2849 [accessed 10 June 2023]. On Erasmus' Bible project, see among others Gerhard B. Winkler, 'Einleitung', in *Erasmus von Rotterdam: Ausgewählte Schriften*, ed. Werner Welzig, 8 vols (Darmstadt, 1967), vol. 3, pp. XVII-XL; Kaufmann, 'Vorreformatorische Laienbibel', pp. 149-53; Marijke de Lang (ed.), '"Fidelius, apertius, significantius": The New Testament Translated and Edited by Erasmus of Rotterdam, 1516', *The Bible Translator* 67, no. 1 (2016, special issue); Martin Wallraff *et al.* (eds), *Basel 1516: Erasmus' Edition of the New Testament* (Tübingen, 2016); Robert D. Sider, esp. 'General Introduction: The New Testament Scholarship of Erasmus: An Introduction', in *Collected Works of Erasmus. The New Testament Scholarship of Erasmus: An Introduction with Erasmus' Prefaces and Ancillary Writings*, ed. Robert D. Sider (Toronto, 2019); Riemer Faber, 'Erasmus' *Novum Instrumentum* (1516): Reforming the Bible into the

pages was a work of momentous significance and proved very successful. In March 1519, a second improved and enlarged edition appeared, under the modified title *Novum Testamentum omne*[19] (Figure 1.2), and this became the basis for the early East-Central German Bible translations.

Figure 1.2: *Novum Testamentum Omne* […], ed. Erasmus of Rotterdam (Basel, 1519), title-page.

Erasmus – who had already emerged as a translator of Greek works into Latin[20] – was famed most among his contemporaries for this work, as proved by its print-runs, brisk sales and distribution.[21] It contains the text of the New Testament, set in two columns, and for the first time ever in a printed edition features the Greek text as a continuous and critical text, compiled from several manuscripts, as well as a Latin translation. Along with various other paratexts, including a dedicatory letter and several fundamental prefaces, Erasmus' *Annotationes*, or scholarly commentary on the edition, comprise roughly two-thirds of the work and have their own separate preface. Given humanism's rediscovery of long-forgotten manuscripts, and its famous maxim *ad fontes* (back to the sources), it was only a matter of time before the need to revise the Latin Vulgate was recognised and, at the end of his third preface, the

Bible of the Reformation', in J. J. Marius Lange van Ravenswaay and Herman J. Selderhuis (eds), *Renaissance und Bibelhumanismus* (Göttingen, 2020), pp. 295-312.

19. *Novum Testamentum omne: multo quam antehac diligentius ab Erasmo Roterdamo recognitum, emendatum ac translatum* […] (Basel, 1519), https://www.e-rara.ch/bau_1/content/titleinfo/13069330 [accessed 10 June 2023].
20. Henk Jan de Jonge, 'Erasmus's Translation of the New Testament: Aim and Method', *The Bible Translator* 67, no. 1 (2016), p. 30; Henk Jan de Jonge, 'Erasmus' Übersetzung des Neuen Testaments: Ziel und Methode', *Theologische Zeitschrift*, 73 (2017), pp. 207-8.
21. Gerhard B. Winkler, 'Einleitung', vol. 3, p. XVII; Heinz Holeczek, *Erasmus Deutsch*, 2 vols (Stuttgart, 1983), vol. 1, p. 48; Valentina Sebastiani, 'The Impact of Erasmus' New Testament on the European Market (1516–1527): Considerations Regarding the Production and Distribution of a Publishing Success', in Wallraff *et al.* (eds), *Basel 1516*, pp. 225-37.