

‘These four letters s o l a are not there’: Language and Theology in Luther’s Translation of  
the New Testament

Charlotte Methuen

*University of Glasgow\**

*Luther’s 1522 translation of the New Testament is one of the most significant translations in Christian history. In it, he offers a translation of Romans 3: 28 which introduces the word allein: ‘So halten wir es nun, daß der Mensch gerecht werde ohne des Gesetzes Werke, allein durch den Glauben.’ As Luther himself recognized in his Open Letter on Translating (1530), the word ‘alone’ does not appear in either the Greek text of Romans or in the Vulgate, nor do other contemporary vernacular translations include it. Luther asserted that the introduction of the word allein arose from his attention to the German language. This claim has often been regarded as specious, since the introduction of allein serves to underline a key aspect of Luther’s theology, namely his doctrine of justification by faith. This essay examines Luther’s translation practice, and particularly his comments on Romans 3: 28 in his lectures on Romans, his preface to Paul’s epistle to the Romans and other writings, concluding that Luther was indeed concerned to produce a fluent and coherent German translation of the biblical text, but that he wished also to produce one that was theologically unambiguous. Not only linguistic considerations, but also Luther’s theological priorities, and his definition of theological unambiguity, determined his definition of a good translation.*

---

In 1530, Luther published his *Open Letter on Translation*. In it he responded to critics of his German Bible translation, focusing in particular on two passages. The first was Romans 3: 28, which in his German New Testament, published in 1522 (the so-called *Septembertestament*), Luther had translated: ‘*So halten wir es nun, daß der Mensch gerecht werde ohne des*

---

\* TRS, University of Glasgow, No. 4 The Square, Glasgow, G41 2NW. E-mail:  
charlotte.methuen@glasgow.ac.uk.

*Gesetzes Werke, allein durch den Glauben* – ‘We hold, therefore, that a man is justified without the work of the law, through faith alone’.<sup>1</sup> The second was his rendering of Luke 1: 28, the angel’s greeting to Mary: ‘*Gegrusset seystu holdselige, der herr ist mit dyr, du gebenedeyte vnter den weyben*’ – ‘Greetings to you, sweet Mary, the Lord is with you, you who are blessed amongst women’. In his *Open Letter*, Luther vigorously defended his choice of the adjective *holdselig*, ‘sweet’ or ‘lovely’, to describe Mary in preference to the Vulgate’s *voll Gnaden*, ‘full of grace’. He also laid out his reasons for introducing the word *allein*, ‘only’, into his translation of Romans 3: 28, insisting: ‘I knew very well that the word *solum* is not in the Greek or Latin text; the papists did not have to teach me that. It is a fact that these four letters *s o l a* are not there.’<sup>2</sup> However, he assured his readers, the inclusion of *allein* reflected his desire to produce a fluent German translation, for German functioned differently from Latin. It was, Luther claimed, a matter of language rather than theology.

Is Luther’s assertion to be believed? There can be no question but that his use of *allein* – *allein durch Glauben* (‘through faith alone’) – in translating Romans 3:28 also makes a theological point, emphasizing the doctrine of justification by faith that is fundamental to Luther’s theology. Is Luther’s claim in his *Open Letter on Translation* specious? This essay considers this question firstly by placing Luther’s translation of Romans 3: 28 in the context of contemporary translations of other New Testament passages and secondly by comparing it to his rendering of Romans 3: 28 elsewhere. In doing so, it highlights the challenge posed by Luther’s task of translating Scripture at a time when the meaning of Scripture was itself contested, and translation was not only a question of textual accuracy but defining orthodoxy and heresy. There can be no doubt that Luther was indeed concerned to produce a fluent and

---

<sup>1</sup> There is some complexity involved in writing about Luther’s German Bible translation in English: German, and where appropriate Latin and Greek, will be given in the text along with English translations.

<sup>2</sup> Luther, *Sendbrief zu Dolmetschen*, WA 30/2, 636 (LW 35, 188).

accessible German translation of the biblical text, but how did his theological priorities shape his definition of a good translation?

The questions raised by Luther in his *Open Letter on Translation* remain pertinent to translators today.<sup>3</sup> All translators are faced with a challenge, as Birgit Stolt points out: ‘How true to the original must one remain; how freely may one formulate things? The free, adaptive method, oriented toward the language of translation, stands over against the ‘alienating’ method, oriented toward the original language, with its emphasis on remaining true to the words.’<sup>4</sup> James Arne Nestingen observes: ‘Translation takes place in two dimensions. The first is a linguistic exchange, roughly equivalent language being substituted for the original. The second is cultural, the new language inevitably giving that which is being translated another hue, colored with its own specific assumptions.’<sup>5</sup> For Stolt, the ‘truly remarkable’ aspect of Luther’s method of translating lies in his ability to attend both to the original text and to the language into which he was translating.<sup>6</sup> It is widely recognized that it was this ability to render the words of the Bible into a language which seemed familiar to those who spoke it that distinguished Luther’s translations from earlier German translations of the Bible, which had generally sought to stay closer to the language of the original text, and thus had

---

<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Robert Barnes believes that ‘much modern debate about translation in general has arisen from debate about the principles of biblical translation’: ‘Translating the Sacred’, in Kirsten Malmkjær and Kevin Windle, eds, *The Oxford Handbook of Translation Studies* (Oxford, 2011), 37–54; at 38.

<sup>4</sup> Birgit Stolt, ‘Luther’s Translation of the Bible’, *Lutheran Quarterly* 28 (2014), 373–400, at 376; originally published in German as “‘... und fühl’s im Herzen ...’”. Luthers Bibelübersetzung aus der Sicht neuerer Sprach- und Übersetzungswissenschaft’, *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 98 (2001), 186–208.

<sup>5</sup> James Arne Nestingen, ‘Luther’s Cultural Translation of the Catechism’, *Lutheran Quarterly* 15 (2001), 440–52, at 440.

<sup>6</sup> Stolt, ‘Luther’s Translation’, 377.

resulted in less idiomatic German.<sup>7</sup> Luther's linguistic aim, as Antoine Berman has pointed out, was to compose a text which was 'not Latin, not a pure dialect, but a generalized popular speech'.<sup>8</sup>

What, however, was the text being translated? The wider context of early modern biblical translation, and of Luther's *Open Letter* itself, throws into stark relief the complexity of establishing what it means to '[remain] true to the original'. This is in part because the Bible presented (and continues to present) particular difficulties when it comes to establishing what is meant by 'the original'.<sup>9</sup> The first challenge for Luther was that of defining the source text.<sup>10</sup> Luther's German Bible was a new departure, not only in his efforts to produce an idiomatic German text, but also in his commitment to offering a translation (at least in

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 377–81. Stolt notes, however, that Luther was also 'sensitive to the historically developed, stylistic genre of the biblical way of narration, a biblical narrative tone': *ibid.* 397.

<sup>8</sup> Antoine Berman, *The Experience of the Foreign: Culture and Translation in Romantic Germany* (Albany, NY, 1992), 25. Historians of the German language are agreed that Luther's Bible translation made a very significant contribution to the standardization of early modern high German: see, for instance, Michael Trinklein, 'Luther's Insights into the Translator's Task', *Bible Translator* 21 (1970), 80–8.

<sup>9</sup> There is not space in this essay to engage properly with the philosophy of translation. Suffice it to remark that structuralism tells us, with some justification, that meaning is fluid for all texts, but translators nonetheless have to proceed on the assumption that they can find a meaning in the original text that can be mediated, however imperfectly, into another language.

<sup>10</sup> This remains an ongoing challenge for biblical translators, as Anthony Pym observes: 'in the case of the Bible, the establishment of any "original" ... depends on a multi-lingual collection of writings and rewritings collated over a period of centuries, some of them quite fragmentary, many of them contradictory, and more requiring interpretation in terms of non-sacred texts from the same periods': Anthony Pym, 'On the Historical Epistemologies of Bible Translating', in Philip A. Noss, ed., *A History of Bible Translation* (Rome, 2007), 195–215, at 196–7.

theory<sup>11</sup>) from Greek and Hebrew rather than from the Latin of the Vulgate.<sup>12</sup> This decision was not value-neutral, but had far-reaching theological consequences. By the time Luther began his theological career, the humanist insistence on the importance of studying works in their original language had already generated an awareness that some aspects of medieval theology and church practice drew their rationale from passages in the Vulgate which humanists had come to see as inaccurate translations of the Greek text. Lorenzo Valla, Erasmus and Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples, amongst others, questioned the accuracy of the Vulgate's Latin translation and suggested revisions to it. Indeed, the format of Erasmus's 1516 *Novum instrumentum* – which presented the Greek text and his own Latin translation on facing pages, followed by his annotations discussing the relationship between the two – was,

---

<sup>11</sup> The extent of Luther's knowledge of New Testament Greek and of Hebrew has long been the subject of debate. This essay will work on the assumption that his Greek was good enough for him to be able to use Erasmus's *Novum instrumentum* and to recognize the validity of the translation issues identified by the humanists.

<sup>12</sup> For discussions of Luther's Bible and its relationship to other early modern German Bible translations, see Heinz Bluhm, *Martin Luther: Creative Translator* (St Louis, MO, 1965); idem, 'Luther's German Bible', in Peter Newman Brooks, ed., *Seven-Headed Luther: Essays in Commemoration of a Quincentenary 1483–1983* (Oxford, 1983), 177–94; Andrew C. Gow, 'The Contested History of a Book: The German Bible of the Later Middle Ages and Reformation in Legend, Ideology, and Scholarship', *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 9 (2009), article 13 [online journal], at: <<http://www.jhsonline.org>>, last accessed 15 August 2016; Thomas Kaufmann, 'Vorreformatorische Laienbibel und reformatorisches Evangelium', *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 101 (2004), 138–74; Willem Jan Kooiman, *Luther and the Bible* (Philadelphia, PA, 1961); Volker Leppin, "'Biblia, das ist die ganze Heilige Schrift deutsch". Luthers Bibelübersetzung zwischen Sakralität und Profanität', in Jan Rohls and Gunther Wenz, eds, *Protestantismus und deutsche Literatur*, Münchener Theologische Forschungen 2 (Göttingen, 2004), 13–26; Charlotte Methuen, "'novam sprach, celeste deutsch". Eine Untersuchung der theologischen Sprache von Luthers Bibelübersetzung', *Zeitschrift für Neues Testament* 13 (2010), 40–51; Heimo Reinitzer, *Biblia deutsch. Luthers Bibelübersetzung und ihre Tradition* (Wolfenbüttel and Hamburg, 1983).

as Paul Botley observes, ‘largely inspired by Erasmus’ decision to publish his own Latin translation of the New Testament’, and his realization that this ‘required an edition of the Greek text on which it was based’.<sup>13</sup> Luther’s decision to base his own translation of the New Testament on the Greek text, which he regarded as conveying the ‘true meaning’ of Scripture, therefore made a theological as well as a linguistic statement. For Luther, theological authority was rooted in the principle of *sola scriptura*; and the *scriptura* which he wished to make known in German was that found in the original languages, from which, he believed, readers would learn true theology and a better understanding of what the Church should be.

For Luther, then, a translation ‘[remained] true to the original’ when it presented the theology which he believed to be proclaimed in the Greek New Testament and Hebrew Bible. However, from 1520 that theology had been defined to be heretical. Consequently, his translation embodied and articulated precisely the theological assumptions that his opponents were seeking to suppress, and thus raised issues not just of language but of power. Lynne Long observes that ‘sacred text translation’ is particularly prone to ‘promot[ing] contention

---

<sup>13</sup> Paul Botley, *Latin Translation in the Renaissance: The Theory and Practice of Leonardo Bruni, Giannozzo Manetti and Desiderius Erasmus* (Cambridge, 2004), 115; cf. Henk Jan de Jonge, ‘*Novum Testamentum a nobis versum*: The Essence of Erasmus’ Edition of the New Testament’, *JThS* 35 (1984), 394–413. However, the Basle printer, Froben, did encourage Erasmus to produce an edition of the Greek text: see De Jonge, ‘Essence of Erasmus’ Edition’, 401; J. K. Elliott, “‘*Novum Testamentum editum est*’: The Five-Hundredth Anniversary of Erasmus’s New Testament’, *Bible Translator* 67 (2016), 9–28, at 11; Bruce Metzger and Bart Ehrman, *The Text of the New Testament*, 3rd edn (New York, 2005), 142. Metzger and Ehrman assert (ibid. 145) – erroneously – that the *Novum instrumentum* initially included not Erasmus’s translation but the Vulgate translation. For the shape of the *Novum instrumentum*, its rationale and genesis, see Erasmus von Rotterdam, *Novum instrumentum* (Basel, 1516), facsimile edn, ed. Heinz Holeczek (Stuttgart and Bad Cannstatt, 1986), especially Holeczek’s introduction, v–xxxv.

between the users of the texts involved',<sup>14</sup> since, as Lefevere asserts, 'it is not only the authority of the text that requires validation, it is also the authority of those whose power resides in the text'.<sup>15</sup> In the Reformation context, the challenge to authority posed by vernacular Bible translations was explosive, as Richard Duerdon highlights in relation to early modern English translations of the New Testament: 'all about and through these texts swirl the perils and promises of conviction – both kinds – and of ideology, authority, and power',<sup>16</sup> for 'if Tyndale is a heretic, no amount of philological ability will make the text acceptable; ideology and language form a single inter-text'.<sup>17</sup> David R. Glowacki argues that for the authors of early modern English Bible prefaces 'the economic forces, the political forces, and the effort of the translators are ultimately sanctioned by God'.<sup>18</sup> This was not a new phenomenon – Hermann Schüssler has shown that the scriptural authority and ecclesiology were already intimately entwined in late medieval definitions of doctrine<sup>19</sup> – but there can be

---

<sup>14</sup> Lynne Long, 'The Translation of Sacred Texts', in Carmen Millán and Francesca Bartrina, eds, *The Routledge Handbook of Translation Studies* (London, 2013), 464–74, at 467.

<sup>15</sup> André Lefevere, *Translation, History, Culture: A Sourcebook* (London, 1992), 3; cited by Lynne Long, *Translating the Bible: From the 7th to the 17th century* (Aldershot, 2002), 205.

<sup>16</sup> Richard Duerdon, 'Equivalence or Power? Authority and Reformation Bible Translation', in: Orlaith O'Sullivan, ed., *The Bible as Book: The Reformation* (London, 2000), 9–23, at 9. For issues of power in translation in general, see Román Álvarez and M. Carmen África Vidal, eds, *Translation, Power, Subversion* (Clevedon, 1996).

<sup>17</sup> Duerdon, 'Equivalence or Power?', 13. For Thomas More's view of Tyndale's translation as heretical, see Morna D. Hooker, 'Tyndale's "Heretical" Translation', *Reformation 2* (1997), 127–42.

<sup>18</sup> David R. Glowacki, 'To the Reader: The Structure of Power in Biblical Translation, from Tyndale to the NRSV', *Literature and Theology 22* (2008), 195–209, at 197. Glowacki's claim is less convincing in the case of the preface to Tyndale's New Testament than it is for the Geneva Bible or the Authorized version.

<sup>19</sup> Hermann Schüssler, *Der Primat der Heiligen Schrift als theologisches und kanonisches Problem im Spätmittelalter* (Wiesbaden, 1977), especially 294–305.

no doubt that Luther's German New Testament, and later Bible, formed a nexus for complex processes which aimed to control both the biblical text and its interpretation.<sup>20</sup> Luther himself, however, makes no explicit claims to divine (or, indeed, secular) authority regarding his own translation; his stated intention was to mediate an understanding of the 'real nature of the gospel': "'gospel' [*evangelion*] is a Greek word and means in German good message, good tidings, good news, a good report, of which one sings and tells and about which one is glad."<sup>21</sup> For Luther the content of this message was everything: people were to understand that 'faith in Christ overcomes sin, death, and hell, and gives life, righteousness, and salvation.'<sup>22</sup> But how was that faith acquired?

The theological questions raised for translators and interpreters by the return to Greek and Hebrew texts are exemplified in two texts identified by the humanists as key: Matthew 4: 17, which Luther did not discuss in his *Open Letter on Translation*, and Luke 1: 28, which he did. In the NRSV, Matthew 4: 17 is rendered into English: 'From that time Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."' The key phrase is Jesus's exhortation, which in Greek reads: μετανοείτε, ἤγγικεν γὰρ ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν. The Vulgate translation is *paenitentiam agite adpropinquavit enim regnum caelorum*, and the terminology *paenitentiam agite* ('do penance') helped to justify the practice of sacramental confession. Lorenzo Valla had recognized this as a problematic translation of the Greek term

---

<sup>20</sup> Thus Duke George of Saxony sought to suppress the *Septembertestament* by having all copies confiscated and burned: see Christoph Volkmar, 'Turning Luther's Weapons against him: The Birth of Catholic Propaganda in Saxony in the 1520s', in Malcolm Walsby and Graeme Kemp, eds, *The Book Triumphant: Print in Transition in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Leiden, 2011), 115–31, at 127–8.

<sup>21</sup> Luther, 'Preface to the New Testament' (1522), *WA.DB* 6, 2 (*LW* 35, 358, translation amended by author).

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, *WA.DB* 6, 10 (*LW* 35, 362).



μετανοεῖτε, and Erasmus and Luther agreed.<sup>23</sup> In English, from the time of Wyclif, μετανοεῖτε has been translated ‘repent’;<sup>24</sup> however, neither German nor Latin has an equivalent to the English verb ‘repent’, and both Erasmus and Luther struggled to find a translation which did not carry the overtones of Jerome’s *paenitentiam agite*. In the 1516 *Novum instrumentum*, Erasmus opted for *poeniteat vos*; in 1519, the edition used by Luther for his 1522 *Septembertestament*, Erasmus tried *resipiscite*; in the 1522 edition he reverted to an amended version of the Vulgate: *paenitentiam agite vitae prioris*. Similarly, in 1522 Luther translated μετανοεῖτε with ‘*Besser’ euch*’ – ‘improve yourselves’ – but by 1534 he had opted for ‘*Tut Buße*’ – ‘do penance’, returning to the reading he had offered in 1517 in the first of the Ninety-Five Theses: ‘*Dominus et magister noster Iesus Christus dicendo “Penitentiam agite &c.” omnem vitam fidelium penitentiam esse voluit*’ (‘When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, “Do penance”, he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance’).

The translation of Matthew 4: 17 demonstrates the complex interplay between theological meaning and language, but it also shows the way in which the constraints of the target language – in this case German – determine possible translations and meanings. A second problematic Vulgate translation, which Luther discussed at some length in his *Sendbrief*, was the angel’s greeting to Mary at the annunciation (Luke 1: 28), which in the NRSV reads: ‘And he came to her and said, “Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.”’ Here too, it was the spoken words which presented the translation challenge. In Greek, the angel’s words read: Χαῖρε, κεχαριτωμένη, ὁ κύριος μετὰ σοῦ; this was translated by the

---

<sup>23</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition, 4: Reformation of Church and Dogma (1300–1700)* (Chicago, IL, 1984), 308.

<sup>24</sup> Wycliffe has ‘Do ye[e] penaunce’; see: *The Earlier Version of the Wycliffite Bible, 7: The Gospels, edited from MS Christ Church 145*, ed. Conrad Lindberg (Stockholm, 1994), 31; *King Henry’s Bible, MS Bodley 277: The Revised Version of the Wyclif Bible, 4: The New Testament*, ed. Conrad Lindberg (Stockholm, 2004), 38. For the relationship between the earlier and later versions of the Wyclif translation, see Mary Dove, *The First English Bible: The Text and Context of the Wycliffite Versions* (Cambridge 2007), especially 137–88.

Vulgate: *Ave gratia plena Dominus tecum*. Some form of this phrase was well known to many late medieval and early modern Christians as the opening of the *Ave Maria*, one of the texts they were expected to know by heart in Latin or the vernacular, or both.<sup>25</sup> The problem, as humanist scholars identified it,<sup>26</sup> was that the Latin *gratia plena* – ‘full of grace’—implied that grace was a measurable commodity, rather than describing the quality of the relationship between God and Mary, as the Greek *κεχαριτωμένη* seemed to do. Both Erasmus and Luther found solutions which they went on to use consistently. Erasmus in his *Novum instrumentum* translated the angel’s greeting: *Ave gratiosa, dominus tecum!* Luther chose to use the term *holdselig* – ‘lovely’, ‘sweet’, ‘gracious’: *Gegrusset seystu holdselige, der herr ist mit dyr.*<sup>27</sup>

Luther’s explanation for his decision centres on his view that *κεχαριτωμένη* expressed Mary’s relationship to God:

When does a German speak like that, ‘You are full of grace’? What German understands what that is, to be ‘full of grace’? He would have to think of a keg ‘full of’ beer or a purse ‘full of’ money. Therefore I have translated it, ‘You lovely one,’ so that a German can at least think his way through to what the angel meant by this greeting. Here, however, the papists are going wild about me, because I have corrupted the angelic salutation; though I have still not hit upon the best German

---

<sup>25</sup> By the late Middle Ages, lay people were expected to know and be able to recite the *Ave Maria*, the Lord’s Prayer, the Ten Commandments and the Apostles’ Creed in their own language. All these texts were often chanted in the context of the liturgy and were also used in private devotions and in combination with the rosary: see Arnold Angenendt, *Geschichte der Religiosität im Mittelalter*, 2nd edn (Darmstadt, 2000), 471, 479, 545–6.

<sup>26</sup> Both Valla and Erasmus observed in their *Annotations* that the Greek participle meant ‘accepted into grace’. See Pelikan, *Christian Tradition*, 4: 308; compare also Erika Rummel, *Erasmus’ Annotations on the New Testament: From Philologist to Theologian* (Toronto, ON, 1986), 167–71.

<sup>27</sup> In this case, Tyndale’s translation (Antwerp, 1534) renders the Vulgate text into English: ‘Hayle ful of grace, y<sup>e</sup> Lorde is with y<sup>e</sup>’.

rendering for it. Suppose I had taken the best German, and translated the salutation thus: ‘God greets you, dear Mary’ – for that is what the angel wanted to say, and what he would have said, if he had wanted to greet her in German. Suppose I had done that! I believe that they would have hanged themselves out of tremendous fanaticism for the Virgin Mary, because I had thus destroyed the salutation.<sup>28</sup>

Beneath the polemic, an indication of the conflicts in which Luther and his New Testament translation had by 1530 become deeply embroiled, Luther’s linguistic point was that a literal translation of the Vulgate encouraged German-speakers to misunderstand the nature of grace. However, he also held that the Vulgate had misunderstood the Greek term, which he believed to be the translation of a Hebrew phrase.<sup>29</sup> Luther looked for a model in

---

<sup>28</sup> Luther, *Sendbrief zu Dolmetschen*, WA 30/2, 638 (LW 35, 191–2, translation amended by author: the LW rendering, ‘Thou gracious one’, seems to owe as much to Erasmus’s Latin *gratiosa* as to Luther’s *holdselige*, and ‘Hello there Mary’ misses the tone of Luther’s rendering of the divine greeting to ‘dear Mary’).

<sup>29</sup> Luther assumed that the spoken language of the New Testament was Hebrew, and therefore frequently considered which Hebrew term might be being translated by the Greek: Stephan Veit Frech, *Magnificat und Benedictus Deutsch: Martin Luthers bibelhumanistische Übersetzung in der Rezeption des Erasmus von Rotterdam* (Bern, 1995), 261. In this, intriguingly, Luther was following Giannozzo Manetti, whose unpublished translation of the Bible into Latin he cannot have known. Erasmus, in contrast, emphasized ‘the diversity of languages which had been spoken in Roman Judaea’, and argued that Christ would certainly not have spoken Latin but ‘Syriac, perhaps sometimes in Chaldaic, and maybe occasionally in Greek’, or Hebrew corrupted by Syriac and Chaldean: see Erasmus’s annotations to Acts 10, in *Erasmus’ Annotations on the New Testament: Acts – Romans – I and II Corinthians*, ed. Anne Reeve and M. A. Screech (Leiden, 1990), 299–300; cf. Botley, *Latin translation in the Renaissance*, 98, 116–17. For Manetti’s translation, see also Annet den Haan, ‘Giannozzo Manetti’s New Testament: New Evidence on Sources, Translation Process and the Use of Valla’s *Annotationes*’, *Renaissance Studies* 28 (2013), 731–47.

angelic greetings in the Old Testament, and found one in the angel's greeting to Daniel as 'greatly beloved' (Daniel 10: 11, 19 NRSV):

I think that the angel Gabriel spoke with Mary as he speaks with Daniel, calling him *chamudoth* and *ish chamudoth*, *vir desideriorum*, that is, 'You dear Daniel'; for that is Gabriel's way of speaking as we see in the book of Daniel. Now if I were to translate the angel's words literally, with the skill of these asses, I should have to say this, 'Daniel, you man of desires' [*Daniel, du man der begirungen oder: Daniel, du man der lüste*]. That would be pretty German! A German would hear, of course, that *Man*, *Lüeste*, and *begyrunge* are German words . . . . But when the words are thus put together: 'you man of desires,' no German would know what is said. He would think, perhaps, that Daniel is full of evil desires. Well, that would be fine translating! Therefore I must let the literal words go and try to learn how the German says that which the Hebrew expresses with *ish chamudoth*. I find then that the German says this, 'You dear Daniel,' 'You dear Mary,' or 'You gracious maid,' 'You lovely maiden,' 'You gentle girl,' and the like.<sup>30</sup>

Grace, as Luther had come to believe by 1519, is not a commodity to be bought or sold, but is manifested in 'the righteousness of Christ my God which becomes ours through faith and by the grace and mercy of God'.<sup>31</sup> Here too, therefore, Luther's point was not only linguistic but deeply theological.

Reflecting on the hostile reception of Erasmus's translation of the opening of John's gospel in the 1519 edition of his *Novum Testamentum* (as it was now titled), which he

---

<sup>30</sup> Luther, *Sendbrief zu Dolmetschen*, WA 30/2, 639 (LW 35, 192–3).

<sup>31</sup> Luther, *Two Types of Righteousness*, WA 2, 146 (LW 31, 299); cf. also Luther's use of a marriage metaphor for the relationship between the sinner and Christ: *The Freedom of a Christian*, WA 7, 54–5 (LW 31, 351).

rendered *In principio erat sermo*, rather than *verbum*, Long comments that ‘the overlay of tradition and exegesis’ had ‘crystallise[d] the text into an original to which any alteration was regarded with aggression and suspicion’.<sup>32</sup> Luther’s rejection of *voll gnaden*, the German equivalent of the Vulgate’s *plena gratia*, in favour of *holdselige* received a similarly negative response. And yet, when in 1523 Hieronymus Emser published a version of the German New Testament which attempted to render Luther’s translation doctrinally acceptable to Catholics, he retained Luther’s use of *holdselige*, even though, as he commented in a marginal note, he affirmed that Mary ‘is called by the angel full of grace’.<sup>33</sup>

Indeed, Emser explicitly rejected Luther’s interpretation:

Certainly the angel here was not speaking about human affection [*huld*] but about the grace of God. And Mary did not possess the honor and worthiness that she would become the mother of God from human affection but from God’s grace. For this reason, we should not at this place read and pray ‘You beloved one’ but ‘You full of grace.’ For the grace that Eve forfeited, Mary regained for us, and the curse of Eve has been transformed into the blessing of Mary.<sup>34</sup>

Stolt argues that in the view of Emser and of others who objected to Luther’s translation, ‘the church had established once and for all how this passage was to be interpreted, namely, in harmony with dogma and typology, and any questioning of this

---

<sup>32</sup> Long, ‘Translation of Sacred Texts’, 470.

<sup>33</sup> Hieronymus Emser, *Das new Testament nach lawt der Christlichen kirchen bewerten Text* (Dresden, 1523), fol. 39<sup>r</sup>. For the politics behind Emser’s translation, see Volkmar, ‘Turning Luther’s Weapons against him’.

<sup>34</sup> Hieronymus Emser, *Auß was gründ und ursach Luthers dolmatschung / über das nawe testament / dem gemeinen man billich vorbotten worden sey ...* (Leipzig, 1523), cited in Stolt, ‘Luther’s Translation’, 382.

reading came close to blasphemy'.<sup>35</sup> Emser wished to maintain this traditional theology, but his German translation nonetheless retained Luther's use of *holdselige*. A new or revised translation did not always give rise to a new theology.<sup>36</sup>

The Vulgate's translation of Matthew 4: 17 and of Luke 1: 28 had already been identified as problematic by humanist scholars. No such questions had been raised about Roman 3: 28, which in the Greek in Erasmus's 1516 *Novum instrumentum* reads: λογιζόμεθα οὖν πίστει δικαιοῦσθαι ἄνθρωπον χωρὶς ἔργων νόμου.<sup>37</sup> This was translated in the Vulgate as *arbitramur enim iustificari hominem per fidem sine operibus legis*. Erasmus introduced minor changes which reflected the word-order of the Byzantine codex on which his edition was based, emphasizing the place of faith: *arbitramur igitur fide iustificari hominem absque operibus legis*.<sup>38</sup> Luther's 1522 translation, which remained unchanged in all subsequent editions, placed even stronger emphasis on the role of faith by introducing the word *allein* – 'only': *So halten wir es nun, daß der Mensch gerecht werde ohne des Gesetzes Werke, allein*

---

<sup>35</sup> Stolt, 'Luther's Translation', 382.

<sup>36</sup> Similarly, there are many discrepancies between Erasmus's Latin translation of the Greek text and the text used in his accompanying notes in the *Annotationes*.

<sup>37</sup> Erasmus based his rendering of the Greek text on Byzantine codices, whilst the Vulgate used an Alexandrian text, which reads: λογιζόμεθα γὰρ δικαιοῦσθαι πίστει ἄνθρωπον χωρὶς ἔργων νόμου. The latter is now regarded as closer to the original. For the manuscripts used by Erasmus in the *Novum instrumentum*, see Patrick Andrist, 'Structure and History of the Biblical Manuscripts used by Erasmus for his 1516 Edition', and Andrew J. Brown, 'The Manuscript Sources and Textual Character of Erasmus' Greek New Testament', in Martin Wallraff, Silvana Seidel Menchi and Kaspar von Greyerz, eds, *Basel 1516: Erasmus' Edition of the New Testament* (Tübingen, 2016), 81–124, 125–44 respectively.

<sup>38</sup> Tyndale's English translation gives a good indication of Erasmus's meaning: 'We suppose therefore that a man is iustified by fayth with out the dedes of the lawe.' I am grateful to Gergely Juhász for drawing my attention to the relationship between Erasmus's translation and the manuscript tradition.

*durch den Glauben* ('a person is justified without the works of the law, through faith alone').<sup>39</sup>

In his *Sendbrief*, Luther protested at the criticism being levelled at him by 'these blockheads': 'I knew very well that the word *solum* is not in the Greek or Latin text; the papists did not have to teach me that. It is a fact that these four letters *s o l a* are not there.'<sup>40</sup> Here too, he justified his use of *allein* on the basis of German usage:

it is the nature of our German language that in speaking of two things, one of which is affirmed and the other denied, we use the word *solum* (*allein* – *only*) along with the word *nicht* [not] or *kein* [no]. For example, we say, 'The farmer brings *only* grain and *no* money'; 'No, really I now have *no* money, but *only* grain'; 'I have *only* eaten and *not* yet drunk'; 'Did you *only* write it, and *not* read it over?'<sup>41</sup>

The use of *allein*, he claimed, followed from his commitment to producing a German translation which was recognizably German and not Latin or Greek: 'I wanted to speak German, not Latin or Greek, since it was German I had undertaken to speak in the translation. ... For the literal Latin is a great hindrance to speaking good German.'<sup>42</sup> Consequently, he emphasized:

We do not have to inquire of the literal Latin, how we are to speak German, as these asses do. Rather we must inquire about this of the mother in the home, the children on

---

<sup>39</sup> Heinz Bluhm has explored the relationship between Erasmus's 1519 Greek text of Romans 3: 19–31, Erasmus's 1519 translation, the Vulgate and Luther's *Septembertestament*: Heinz Bluhm, 'Bedeutung und Eigenart von Luthers Septembertestament: Eine Analyse von Römer iii. 19–31', *Luther Jahrbuch* 39 (1972), 55–79.

<sup>40</sup> Luther, *Sendbrief zu Dolmetschen*, WA 30/2, 636 (LW 35, 188).

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, WA 30/2, 637 (LW 35, 189).

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

the street, the common man in the marketplace. We must be guided by their language, the way they speak, and do our translating accordingly.<sup>43</sup>

What ‘these blockheads’ had failed to understand, he complained, was that his use of *allein* ‘conveys the sense of the text; it belongs there if the translation is to be clear and vigorous’.<sup>44</sup>

The problem, as Waldtraut-Ingeborg Sauer-Geppert notes, is that this ‘apparently simple linguistic aid’ achieves ‘an exclusivity which the original text can have, but which it does not have to have’.<sup>45</sup> Key here, therefore, is Luther’s understanding of ‘the sense of the text’. By 1522, he had come to emphasize that justification was by faith alone – *sola fide*. Bluhm claims that Luther uses *sola* or *allein* in ‘a series’ of quotations of Romans 3: 28 before the publication of the *Septembertestament*, but that none predates the 1515 lectures; however, the first direct evidence he cites is from 1518, in Luther’s ‘Sermon on the proper preparation for receiving the sacrament’: *Apostolus ... clamat omnes esse peccatores et sola iustificandos fide* – ‘The apostle ... proclaims that all are sinners and are justified only by faith’.<sup>46</sup> The conviction that justification is received solely by grace through faith was beginning to emerge in Luther’s *Lectures on Romans*. He commented on Romans 1: 17: ‘Only in the Gospel is the righteousness of God revealed [*in solo evangelio revelatur Iustitia Dei*] ... by faith alone [*per solam fidem*], by which the Word of God is believed.’<sup>47</sup> However, the *Lectures on Romans* did not yet include *sola* in the discussion of Romans 3: 28. Luther’s gloss explained: ‘*that a man is justified*, reckoned righteous before God, whether Greek or

---

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., WA 30/2, 637 (LW 35, 188).

<sup>45</sup> Waldtraut-Ingeborg Sauer-Geppert, ‘Bibelübersetzungen III/1’, in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* (Berlin, 1976–2004), 6: 228–46, at 239.

<sup>46</sup> Luther, *Sermo de digna praeparatione cordis pro suscipiendo sacramento eucharistiae*, WA 1, 332; Bluhm, ‘Bedeutung und Eigenart’, 76.

<sup>47</sup> Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, WA 56, 171 (LW 25, 151); but cf. the minimal treatment in WA 57, 133, which does not mention faith at all.



Jew, *by faith, apart from works of the Law*, without the help and necessity of the works of the Law'.<sup>48</sup> In the *Schola*, he distinguished between 'works of the law' and 'works of grace':

Thus when the apostle says that a man is justified *apart from works of the Law* (v. 28), he is not speaking about the works which are performed in order that we may seek justification. Because these are no longer the works of the Law but of grace and faith, since he who performs them does not trust in them for his justification, but he wants to be justified and he does not think that through these works he has fulfilled the Law, but he seeks its fulfillment.<sup>49</sup>

Luther did not refer explicitly to Romans 3 either in the 1516 disputation on human power and will without grace, or in his 1518 sermon on indulgences and grace.<sup>50</sup> Although Luther's *Lectures on Romans* show that Luther was wrestling with the relationship between justification and grace, Romans 3: 28 had not yet emerged as a foundational text for his theology.

Luther's first explicit statement of the doctrine of justification by faith alone arguably occurred in the Heidelberg Disputation, in thesis 25: 'He is not righteous who does much, but he who, without work, believes much in Christ [*non ille iustus est, qui multum operator, sed qui sine opere multum credit in Christum*].' Luther explained: 'I wish to have the words "without work" understood in the following manner: Not that the righteous person does

---

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., WA 56, 39 (LW 25, 33).

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., WA 56, 264 (LW 25, 252).

<sup>50</sup> Luther, *Quaestio de viribus et voluntate hominis sine gratia disputa 1516*, WA 1, 145–51; Luther, *Sermon vom Ablass und Gnade*, WA 1, 243–6. The marginal citations in Luther's writings up to 1518 (WA 1), suggests that he cited Romans 1[: 17] and Romans 8 quite frequently, but Romans 3 rarely, citing 3: 20 more often than 3: 28. However, some care is needed here, since in most cases the marginal references given in the WA represent the editors' assumptions about which passage Luther had in mind when he wrote 'St Paul says' or 'Paul in Romans chapter 3 wrote'.

nothing, but that his works do not make him righteous, rather that his righteousness creates works. For grace and faith are infused without our works. After they have been imparted the works follow.’<sup>51</sup> Here he cites Romans 3: 28 to substantiate this point, reproducing the Vulgate text (i.e. not that found in Erasmus’s *Novum instrumentum*, which he had probably not yet read): *arbitramur enim iustificari hominem per fidem sine operibus legis* – ‘for we hold that man is justified by faith apart from works of law’.<sup>52</sup> By the time he came to dispute with Cajetan in Augsburg in autumn 1518 Luther was relating the language of *sola fide* more explicitly to justification: ‘Through no attitude on your part will you become worthy, through no works will you be prepared for the sacrament, but through faith alone, for only faith in the word of Christ justifies, makes a person alive, worthy, and well prepared [*sola fides verbi Christi iustificat, vivificat, dignificat, praeparet*].’<sup>53</sup> Two years later, in *The Freedom of a Christian*, he similarly asserted: ‘it is clear that, as the soul needs only the Word of God for its life and righteousness, so it is justified by faith alone and not any works [*ita sola fide et nullis operibus iustificantur*].’<sup>54</sup> However, Romans 3: 28 is not explicitly cited in either case, although his words in *The Freedom of a Christian* could imply that he had it in mind.

The first instance of the use of *allein* explicitly associated with Romans 3: 28 occurs in a sermon preached at Epiphany 1521, in which Luther affirmed ‘that we do not become godly [*fromm*] through our own works, but only through faith in Christ, as Paul says to the Romans in the third and to the Galatians in the second chapter’.<sup>55</sup> The *Kirchen- or Weihnachtspostille*, completed while Luther was at the Wartburg in 1521 and published in 1522, cites Paul, presumably implying Romans 3: 28, in the same terms that Luther would use

---

<sup>51</sup> Luther, *Heidelberg Disputation*, WA 1, 364 (LW 31, 56).

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, WA 1, 364 (LW 31, 56).

<sup>53</sup> Luther, *Proceedings at Augsburg*, WA 2, 14; (LW 31, 271).

<sup>54</sup> Luther, *Freedom of a Christian*, WA 7, 51 (LW 31, 346). In the German version Luther wrote ‘das der glaub allein mag frum machen’: WA 7, 23.

<sup>55</sup> Luther, *Sermon preached on the Day of the Holy Three Kings*, WA 7, 241; cf. Bluhm, ‘Bedeutung und Eigenart’, 76.

in the *Septembertestament*: ‘so you see here how St Paul teaches in all places that justification does not come through works, but only from faith without any works [*das die rechtfertigung nit durch werck, sondernn alleyn auß dem glawben ohn alle werck kome*]’.<sup>56</sup>

It is apparent, then, that, as Bluhm points out, ‘Luther the interpreter preceded Luther the translator’.<sup>57</sup> By 1522 Luther had come to believe that the true meaning of Romans 3: 28 was that justification occurred not by works, but by faith alone. His inclusion of the word *allein* was intended to make this meaning – which for Luther was the true meaning – clear to the German reader. It was probably also intended to counterbalance the only use of the phrase ‘faith alone’ – in this case *fide tantum* – in the Vulgate, which occurs in James 2: 24 and inconveniently contradicts Luther’s theology: ‘*ex operibus justificatur homo et non ex fide tantum*’ (‘a person is justified by works and not by faith alone’), or, in Luther’s translation, ‘*das der mensch durch die werck gerecht wird / nicht durch den glauben alleine*’.<sup>58</sup> In his preface to the epistle, Luther complained that James contradicted the theology presented in Romans, which, he asserted, clearly taught ‘that Abraham was justified without works, through his faith alone’.<sup>59</sup> Romans, he insisted, was ‘the chief part of the New Testament, ... truly the purest gospel’,<sup>60</sup> and within that epistle, Romans 3: 19–28 – or possibly 3: 23–4 – was

the chief part and the centre of this Epistle and the whole of Scripture, namely that all is sin which is not redeemed by the blood of Christ and made righteous in faith.

---

<sup>56</sup> Luther, *Kirchenpostille*, WA 10/1.1, 343–4; cf. Bluhm, ‘Bedeutung und Eigenart’, 76.

<sup>57</sup> Bluhm, ‘Luther’s German Bible’, 186.

<sup>58</sup> James 2: 24, WA.DB 7, 392.

<sup>59</sup> Luther, ‘Preface to the Letters of James and Jude’ (1522), WA.DB 7, 384 (LW 35, 396).

<sup>60</sup> Luther, ‘Preface to the Epistle of St Paul to the Romans’ (1522), WA.DB 7, 2 (LW 35, 365).

Therefore, mark this text well, for here all works, services and fame is laid low, as he himself says here. Only all of God's grace and honour remain.<sup>61</sup>

Luther's translation of Romans 3: 28 supported – or even emphasized – this reading, seeking to employ the German language so as to ensure that the passage would be read with the meaning he believed it should have.

By the time Luther began lecturing on Genesis in 1535, he was deeply aware that his theological position had come to be characterized by the phrase *sola fide*. Affirming, quite explicitly, that 'God wants to teach us that we are saved by grace alone or by faith alone',<sup>62</sup> he offered a spirited defence against those who 'call us "solafideists," because we attribute righteousness to faith alone' [*nos vocant solarios, propterea quod soli fidei tribuimus iustitiam*].<sup>63</sup> They were, he thought, wrong, and the German Bible should tell them so. As Beutel has observed, Luther's Bible translation was intended 'to renew, not the letter of Scripture, but its spirit'.<sup>64</sup> Consequently, the language of the translation was intended to claim scriptural authority for his own interpretation of Scripture. Moreover, whilst the meaning of a text expounded in a sermon was explicated by the preacher,<sup>65</sup> the Bible translation had to speak for itself.

---

<sup>61</sup> *WA.DB* 7, 38. The note is positioned alongside Romans 3: 23–4, but Bluhm implies, probably correctly, that it should be taken to apply to the longer passage in the middle of which it occurs, i.e. Romans 3: 19–28 or 19–31: Bluhm, 'Bedeutung und Eigenart', 73, 79.

<sup>62</sup> Luther, *Lectures on Genesis* (Gen. 21: 17), *WA* 43, 178 (*LW* 4, 60).

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.* (Gen. 22: 17–18), *WA* 43, 253 (*LW* 4, 163).

<sup>64</sup> Albrecht Beutel, *In dem Anfang war das Wort. Studien zu Luthers Sprachverständnis* (Tübingen, 1991), 28.

<sup>65</sup> As Stolt, 'Luther's Translation', 377, observes: 'The preacher could perceive directly from the reaction of his listeners whether or not they followed what he was saying'. Cf. also Bluhm, *Martin Luther*, 77, on the difference between the *Weihnachtspostille* [WP] and the *Septembertestament* [ST]:

Long suggests of sixteenth-century Bible translation that ‘a vernacular version made the text available to the literate Christian without the intervention of the priest. The intervention of the translator was not considered to be intrusive.’<sup>66</sup> She is certainly right that Luther’s intention was to provide direct access to Scripture. He wanted, as he put it in *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, to give to all people ‘the power to test and judge what is right or wrong in matters of faith, ... to become bold and free on the authority of all these texts, and many others, ... and test all that [the Romanists] do, or leave undone, by our believing understanding of the Scriptures’.<sup>67</sup> However, the translator was not neutral in this process. Luther’s Bible translation was intended, as Volker Leppin concludes, to offer ‘not so much a popularisation, but an authoritative meaning of the Bible’.<sup>68</sup> Consequently, Alec Ryrie argues, for the reader of Luther’s Bible translation, ‘[s]ola fide is logically and chronologically prior to *sola scriptura*’.<sup>69</sup> It was the recognition that justification came about *sola fide*, which had so profoundly informed, and fundamentally changed, his own experience of God, that he intended his translation to communicate to its readers.<sup>70</sup>

Luther’s theology was, therefore, key to determining the shape of his translation of the Bible, since it defined the ‘true’ meaning of the text which he wished to articulate in German. Stolt argues that his theology determines his translation technique, and ‘dictate[s] his

---

‘In WP what matters is the sermon; the translation is but a prelude. In ST what matters is the translation itself’.

<sup>66</sup> Long, ‘Translation of Sacred Texts’, 468.

<sup>67</sup> Luther, *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, WA 6, 412 (LW 44, 135).

<sup>68</sup> Leppin, “‘Biblia, das ist die ganze Heilige Schrift deutsch’”, 17.

<sup>69</sup> Alec Ryrie, “‘Protestantism’ as a Historical Category”, *TRHS* 6th ser. 26 (2016), 59–77, at 72.

<sup>70</sup> Cf. *ibid.*; and see also Hendrix’s recognition that for Luther the authority of Scripture was not some kind of propositional truth: ‘rather ... Luther approached Scripture as we would approach a great work of art’: Scott Hendrix, ‘The Authority of Scripture at Work’, in *idem*, *Tradition and Authority in the Reformation* (Aldershot, 1996), art. II, 144–59, at 147; first publ. in E. W. Gritsch, ed., *Encounters with Luther* (Gettysburg, PA, 1982).

decision when to remain true to the text and when to translate more freely'.<sup>71</sup> Luther did not believe that complete mastery of the interpretation of a text was possible, but he did think that 'the right text' would lead to a better understanding,<sup>72</sup> and also asserted that 'no false Christian or trouble-maker can faithfully translate [the Scriptures]'.<sup>73</sup> His achievement, as Berman has put it, was 'to create a work accessible to the German people, capable of providing a solid base for the religious sensibility of the Reformation'.<sup>74</sup> That 'religious sensibility' was significantly different to that of the late medieval Church, and Luther's translation of the New Testament both reflected and helped to define that difference. Lawrence Venuti observes that any translation 'creates values in social formations at specific historical moments'; consequently, 'retranslations reflect changes in the values and institutions of the translating culture, but they can also produce such changes by inspiring new ways of reading and appreciating the source texts'.<sup>75</sup> This was precisely Luther's intention. His translation was intended to purvey a particular understanding of the central message of the gospel, with the expectation that those who read it would amend their faith, and with it their religious and ethical behaviour. To this extent, then, Long is wrong to suggest that 'the translator was not considered to be intrusive'.<sup>76</sup> The controversies that arose around Luther's translation – and indeed other translations of this period<sup>77</sup> – indicate that Luther's

---

<sup>71</sup> Stolt, 'Luther's Translation', 381.

<sup>72</sup> Hendrix, 'Authority of Scripture', 158, drawing on Luther's preface to the revised edition of his commentary on the penitential psalms: WA 18, 479 (LW 14, 140).

<sup>73</sup> Luther, *Sendbrief zu Dolmetschen*, WA 30/2, 640 (LW 35, 194, amended); cf. Pym, 'Historical Epistemologies', 203.

<sup>74</sup> Berman, *Experience of the Foreign*, 24.

<sup>75</sup> Lawrence Venuti, *Translation Changes Everything: Theory and Practice* (London, 2013), 107.

<sup>76</sup> The Bible translation prepared by Luther and his team at Wittenberg and published in 1534 has come to be known as the *Lutherbibel*. However, I have not been able to establish when this terminology became common.

<sup>77</sup> For Tyndale's translation decisions, see Hooker, 'Tyndale's "Heretical" Translation'.

contemporaries were very aware that the translator was creating a text which was intended to guide its readers to a particular theological position. Luther's translation of the New Testament illustrates vividly the ways in which the translator was – and is – not neutral, and it shows that, and illustrates how, theology and language are intimately entwined.