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## VOLUME 9, ARTICLE 13

**ANDREW C. GOW,**  
**THE CONTESTED HISTORY OF A BOOK: THE  
GERMAN BIBLE OF THE LATER MIDDLE AGES  
AND REFORMATION IN LEGEND, IDEOLOGY, AND  
SCHOLARSHIP**

## THE CONTESTED HISTORY OF A BOOK: THE GERMAN BIBLE OF THE LATER MIDDLE AGES AND REFORMATION IN LEGEND, IDEOLOGY, AND SCHOLARSHIP<sup>1</sup>

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### 1. NO GERMAN BIBLE BEFORE LUTHER?

One of the most persistent inaccuracies regarding the European Middle Ages—both among the general public and even among scholars—is the notion that the Roman church forbade or banned the reading of the Bible in the vernacular.<sup>2</sup> A corollary of this popular conception is the idea that there were no vernacular Bible translations before Luther’s 1522 ‘September Testament’. Great-site.com, which sells individual leaves from a 1523 Luther Penta-

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<sup>1</sup> I should like to acknowledge the advice and comments of Thomas A. Brady, Jr., Christopher Ocker, Robert Bast, Berndt Hamm, Petra Seegets, Falk Eisermann and Volker Leppin, who have provided encouragement and read drafts of this piece; to thank the Universities of Alberta, Arizona, Augsburg, Erlangen, Heidelberg, Tennessee (Knoxville), the San Francisco Theological Seminary and the Graduate Theological Union (Berkeley), where I have given papers on aspects of this topic and which have supported my research in various ways, and to thank both the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the Alexander von Humboldt-Stiftung, which contributed materially to the travel and other research expenses associated with my research on this topic.

<sup>2</sup> See Rudolf Bentzinger’s dismissal of this old myth in his very useful paper “Zur spätmittelalterlichen deutschen Bibelübersetzung. Versuch eines Überblicks,” Irmtraud Rösler (ed), *“Ik lerde kunst dor lust.” Ältere Sprache und Literatur in Forschung und Lehre. FS Christa Bausfeld* (Rostocker Beiträge zur Sprachwissenschaft 7; Rostock: Universität Rostock, 1999), 29–41; here 30; see also notes 22–25 and 40 below. See also the interesting blog at <http://socrates58.blogspot.com/2006/08/was-catholic-church-avowed-enemy-of.html> (accessed 30 June 2008), which demonstrates both a popular interest and the existence of a certain popular literature pertaining to this topic.

teuch, advertised (at least until recently) “A leaf from the earliest printing of the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament) in the German language. These leaves are over 480 years old. They come with beautiful Certificates of Authenticity. If you are looking for the oldest printed scripture in any language other than Latin or Greek... this is it. It doesn't get any older than this. A great gift for friends of German or Lutheran heritage, or anyone who appreciates Christian history.”<sup>3</sup>

This innocent mistake (“the earliest printing of the Pentateuch [...] in the German language”; “the oldest printed scripture in any language other than Latin or Greek”; “It doesn't get any older than this”) is still widespread among the general public. Until fairly recently, one could find similar inaccuracies in more specialized scholarship.<sup>4</sup> And despite the immense literature on medieval German Bibles<sup>5</sup> in the field of *Germanistik* (German language and literature studies), exemplified by the work of Freimut Löser<sup>6</sup> on such topics as the anonymous ‘fourteenth-century Austrian Bible Translator,’ many (non-specialist) scholars still see Luther's Bible as a radical novelty and break with the ‘medieval’ past. The main issue at stake here is not late medieval Christianity itself, nor the late medieval vernacular Bible, its texts, versions, distribution or popularity, but rather the Reformation, and the main Bible of the Reformation: Luther's. This version of Luther's significance fits seam-

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.greatsite.com/ancient-rare-bible-leaves/luther-1523-leaf.html>; accessed 16 January, 2006. My intention here is not to ridicule the owner of this business but to point out how pervasive this story is, using an easily accessible example from outside academia.

<sup>4</sup> E.g., For example, Steven Ozment, *The Age of Reform, 1250–1550: An Intellectual and Religious History of Late Medieval and Reformation Europe* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1980), 202: “[T]he medieval church, fearing the social consequences of religious egalitarianism, had always forbidden the circulation of vernacular Bibles among the laity [emphasis added] and vigorously suppressed the gospel translations of groups like the Waldensians and the Wyclif Bible of the Lollards.”

<sup>5</sup> Kurt Gärtner, “Die erste deutsche Bibel? Zum Bibelwerk des österreichischen Bibelübersetzers aus der ersten Hälfte des 14. Jahrhunderts. Mit zwei neuen Handschriftenfunden zum Klosterneuburger Evangelienwerk und zum Psalmenkommentar,” Horst Brunner and Norbert Richard Wolf (eds), *Wissensliteratur im Mittelalter und in der frühen Neuzeit. Bedingungen, Typen, Publikum, Sprache*, (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 1993), 273–295.

<sup>6</sup> E.g., “Deutsche Bibelübersetzungen im 14. Jahrhundert. Zwölf Fragen,” *Jahrbuch der Oswald von Wolkenstein Gesellschaft* 12 (2000), 311–323, and F.L. with Christine Stöllinger-Löser, “Verteidigung der Laienbibel. Zwei programmatische Vorreden des österreichischen Bibelübersetzers der ersten Hälfte des 14. Jahrhunderts,” Konrad Kunze *et al.* (eds), *Überlieferungsgeschichtliche Studien zur deutschen Literatur des Mittelalters*. (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1989), 245–313.

lessly into what Heiko Oberman called “the founding myth of international Protestantism: the notion that Luther’s call for liberation from the Babylonian captivity [of the Church] led to a wondrous escape from Roman papal tyranny and a passage out of the dark Middle Ages.”<sup>7</sup>

If the vernacular Bible was not truly inferior and inaccessible, Protestantism’s (and Luther’s) Middle Ages begin to fall apart, and the Reformation looks like something very different from the revolutionary movement for (religious) freedom and freedom of conscience that many Protestants and some scholars still want it to have been. Thomas Kaufmann, who holds the chair for Modern Church History in the Faculty of Theology at the University of Göttingen, has recently catalogued the German Bibles of the later Middle Ages, which are as well known to specialists as they are unknown to broader educated and lay publics, but he insists on Luther’s singular accomplishment nonetheless—as a theological and cultural, if not quite political breakthrough.<sup>8</sup>

Scholars who acknowledge the wide circulation of vernacular Bibles often argue that they were linguistically inferior, claiming that Luther relied exclusively on the ‘original Greek’ text of the New Testament in his translation (which places more weight on Erasmus’ faulty 1516 edition of the New Testament in Greek and on Luther’s use of it than either can bear, ignores Luther’s reliance on both earlier German translations and the Vulgate,<sup>9</sup> and gives

<sup>7</sup> Heiko A. Oberman, *The Two Reformations. The Journey from the Last Days to the New World*, edited by Donald Weinstein (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), xvi.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Kaufmann, “Vorreformatorische Laienbibel und reformatorisches Evangelium,” *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 101 (2004), 138–174. See my fuller discussion of this article below. Sönke Hahn did something similar in his 1972 dissertation, published unrevised and in typescript as *Luthers Übersetzungsweise im Septembertestament von 1522. Untersuchungen zu Luthers Übersetzung des Römerbriefs im Vergleich mit Übersetzungen vor ihm* (Hamburg: Helmut Buske Verlag, 1973), arguing that Luther produced an originally *evangelical* translation that emphasized particular theological ‘breakthroughs’ (e.g., salvation by faith alone); esp. 238–244. One might instead refer to particular theological *interpretations* rather than ‘breakthroughs’—and suggest not that Luther was finding *the true meaning* and thus revolutionizing Bible translation—as generations of Lutherans have held—but rather that his translation implied a particular ‘take’ on Scripture, or at least on select theologically sensitive passages.

<sup>9</sup> In 1995, a 1519 Lyons print of the Vulgate was found in the Württembergische Landesbibliothek Stuttgart; it was claimed to bear personal annotations by Luther, which would have proved that he used the Vulgate in his Bible translation. Although subsequent research has shown that the annotator was not Luther himself, this episode reminded scholars and the educated public of Luther’s reliance on the Vulgate among other sources for his supposedly all-new translation of the ‘Greek original’: see Martin Brecht and Eberhard Zwink (eds), *Eine glossierte Vul-*

him more credit as a philologist than he deserves). Even stronger is the old Protestant-nationalist German claim, couched as linguistic scholarship, that Luther's German Bible formed or even invented the standard form of early modern German; and a few other lesser ones. In the Microsoft *Encarta*, one of the main sources from which many students draw their information on such topics, we read "Condemned by the emperor [in 1521], Luther was spirited away by his prince, the elector Frederick the Wise of Saxony, and kept in hiding at Wartburg Castle. There he began his translation of the New Testament from the original Greek into German, a seminal contribution to the development of a standard German language."<sup>10</sup> Yet in 1969, W.B. Lockwood noted that

It has been a common error of criticism to regard the Mentel Bible [1466] as typical of the pre-Luther stage of biblical translation. Recent researches however have shown that the elements of Luther's style are already present in a large measure in the manuscript literature of the fourteenth and especially the fifteenth centuries.<sup>11</sup>

In the catalogue of just about any European rare-book collection, medieval vernacular Bibles, manuscript and printed, can almost always be found, often in great profusion, as (for example) in the *Stadtbibliothek* of Nuremberg and its tributary library, that of the former Dominican convent of St. Catherine in Nuremberg, numerous other religious houses, or the Burgundian ducal library.<sup>12</sup> The Nuremberg City Library acquired its first complete Bible in

*gata aus dem Umkreis Martin Luthers. Untersuchungen zu dem 1519 in Lyon gedruckten Exemplar in der Bibelsammlung der Württembergischen Landesbibliothek Stuttgart.* (Vestigia Bibliae: Jahrbuch des Deutschen Bibelarchivs Hamburg, vol. 21; Bern: Peter Lang, 1999).

<sup>10</sup>[http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia\\_761570003/Martin\\_Luther.html#461526848](http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761570003/Martin_Luther.html#461526848), accessed 16 February, 2006. The latter opinion is repeated in another Encarta article, the one on German literature: "...Martin Luther, whose translation of the Bible established New High German as the literary language of Germany." See the article available at [http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia\\_761555778/German\\_Literature.html#p8](http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761555778/German_Literature.html#p8), accessed 16 February, 2006.

<sup>11</sup> "Vernacular Scriptures in Germany and the Low Countries before 1500," G.H.W. Lampe (ed), *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), vol. 2, 415–435; 434. See also below, note 86, for Wilhelm Krafft's 1883 comparison of various passages from the 1483 Koberger Bible with Luther's *September-Testament* and his 1541 version of the Hebrew Bible.

<sup>12</sup> See Karin Schneider, *Die Handschriften der Stadtbibliothek Nürnberg, Band I: Die deutschen mittelalterlichen Handschriften* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1965), 1–430; see also the Latin and French Bibles, historiated Bibles and Gospels listed in the (published) 1420 inventory of the library of Philip the Good: George Doutrepoint, *Inventaire de la <<Librairie>> de Philippe le Bon (1420)* (Brussels: Weissenbruch, 1906).

Latin, minus the Apocalypse (!), in the 1420s,<sup>13</sup> numerous German Bibles in the fifteenth century, and provided the materials for an exhibition in 1777, mounted by the great bibliographer Georg Wolfgang Panzer, of the pre-Lutheran German Bibles extant in that library (*v. infra*). The massive library of St. Catherine's, also at Nuremberg, was stuffed with vernacular Scripture and devotional works. A lengthy historical debate on this topic reaches back to the early eighteenth century. Its high point came in the hundred years from the middle of the nineteenth to the middle of the twentieth century. As the Catholic polemicist and Bishop of Bruges Jean Baptiste Malou argued in 1846,<sup>14</sup> the Lutheran Professors of Theology Wilhelm Krafft (1821–1897) at Bonn in 1883<sup>15</sup> and Friedrich Kropatschek (1875–1917) at Breslau in 1904,<sup>16</sup> the Catholic polemicist Franz Falk (1840–1909) in 1905,<sup>17</sup> and Erich Zimmermann (1938) and Hans Rost (1939) demonstrated before the middle of the twentieth century, vernacular Bibles circulated and were read widely, especially in the Empire and with the exception of fifteenth-century England, all through the later Middle Ages.<sup>18</sup> The controversialist debate in which these Catholic and Protestant scholars found themselves on the same side, and its almost total eclipse in post-WWII scholarship, form the basis of my first ana-

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<sup>13</sup> See Andrew Colin Gow, “Challenging the Protestant Paradigm. Bible Reading in Lay and Urban Contexts of the Later Middle Ages,” Thomas Heffernan and Thomas E. Burman (eds), *Scripture and Pluralism. Reading the Bible in the Religiously Plural Worlds of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, (Studies in the History of Christian Thought, CXXIII; Leiden: Brill, 2006), 161–191.

<sup>14</sup> Malou lived 1809–1864 and came from a ‘clerical’ family. Jean Baptiste Malou, *La lecture de la Sainte Bible en langue vulgaire, jugée d’après l’écriture, la tradition et la sainte raison* (Louvain: Fonteyne, Librairie; Paris: Jacques Le Coffre; Bonn: A. Marcus, 1846). This Catholic attack on the propaganda of the Protestant Bible Societies was widely circulated and even translated into German in 1846.

<sup>15</sup> Wilhelm Ludwig Krafft, *Die deutsche Bibel vor Luther: sein Verhältnis zu derselben und seine Verdienste um die deutsche Bibelübersetzung* (Bonn: Carl Georgi, 1883), 25 pp.

<sup>16</sup> Friedrich Kropatschek, *Das Schriftprinzip in der lutherischen Kirche. Bd. I: Die Vorgeschichte: Das Erbe des Mittelalters* (Leipzig: A. Deichert, 1904), esp. chapter 4, “Von der Verbreitung und dem Gebrauch der Bibel am Ausgang des Mittelalters”, 136–165. Kropatschek wanted to demonstrate how the principle *sola scriptura* was already common in scholasticism, e.g. in the work of William of Ockham.

<sup>17</sup> Franz Falk, *Die Bibel am Ausgange des Mittelalters, ihre Kenntnis und ihre Verbreitung* (Cologne: J.P. Bachem, 1905).

<sup>18</sup> Especially Erich Zimmermann, *Die deutsche Bibel im religiösen Leben des Spätmittelalters* (Neue Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Bibel im Mittelalter, VIII; Potsdam: Akademische Verlagsgesellschaft Athenaion, 1938), *passim*; Hans Rost, *Die Bibel im Mittelalter. Beiträge zur Geschichte und Bibliographie der Bibel* (Augsburg: M. Seitz, 1939), 37–66.

lytic attempt; I will also address the historiographical question of how and why the story of a *ban* on the vernacular Bible has persisted for so long despite ample evidence to the contrary.

## 2. THE GERMAN BIBLE IN THE LATER MIDDLE AGES

Scholars generally agree that vernacular Bible translations abounded in the later Middle Ages, both in manuscript and in early printings, and were framed by an even more voluminous literature of Biblical piety and devotion, and by countless partial Biblical text editions in the vernacular (Gospels, Psalters, harmonized Gospel renderings [Diatessera] and Bible retellings [historiated Bibles]).<sup>19</sup> Robert Scribner noted these in 1990:

Close to the humanists were printers, artists and woodcarvers, all of whom were to profit from the market opened up by evangelical propaganda. Printers were usually well-educated, well-informed, pragmatic and mobile individuals [...] Their shrewd business sense led them to sniff a new opportunity in the religious and political controversy that swirled around Germany in the 1520s. Many may well have been aware of the possibilities because of the proven popularity of religious literature well before the reformation movements appeared [...].<sup>20</sup>

Alister McGrath, an avowedly Protestant historian of theology, noted in 1987 that “no universal or absolute prohibition of the translation of scriptures into the vernacular was ever issued by a medieval pope or council, nor was any similar prohibition directed against the use of such translations by the clergy or laity,”<sup>21</sup> thus echoing early and perfectly orthodox Lutheran statements of the same point by Kropatschek<sup>22</sup> and Adolf Risch, in 1922,<sup>23</sup> as well as

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<sup>19</sup> For a selection of specialized articles on such items, see the rather generally titled volume edited by Heimo Reinitzer: *Deutsche Bibelübersetzungen des Mittelalters* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1991).

<sup>20</sup> Robert Scribner, “The Reformation movements in Germany,” G.R. Elton (ed), *The New Cambridge Modern History: The Reformation 1520–1559* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 83.

<sup>21</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *The Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation* (New York: Basil Blackwell Publishers, 1987), 124.

<sup>22</sup> Kropatschek, *Das Schriftprinzip*, esp. chapter 3, “Das sogenannte Bibelverbot der Kirche” (101–136) and chapter 4, “Von der Verbreitung und dem Gebrauch der Bibel im Mittelalter” (136–165).

<sup>23</sup> “Den Vorwurf eines allgemeinen Bibelleseverbots oder gar der Feindschaft gegen die Bibel darf allerdings die katholische Kirche für die Vergangenheit als geschichtlich unberechtigt zurückweisen.” Adolf Risch, *Luthers Bibelverdeutschung* (Schriften des Vereins für Reformationsgeschichte, Jahrgang 40, Nr. 135; Leipzig: M. Heinsius Nachfolger, 1922), 10; see also the exhaustive bibliographical summary of the entire history of the question in nineteenth-century scholarship from Malou on, in note 8 on pp. 71–72.

Margaret Deanesly's similar points in 1920.<sup>24</sup> The most these older authors would allow is that the church was simply reluctant to allow unsupervised lay access to vernacular translations, the quality of which was difficult to control. By the end of the twentieth century, scholars were even less guarded about the importance of the medieval vernacular Bible. Parallel to McGrath's comments, the illustrious Jaroslav Pelikan stated in 1996 that the myth that the translation of the Bible into German began with Luther is not true.<sup>25</sup> In 2001, Owen Chadwick noted in a book addressed to a larger readership that there were many printed editions of the Bible before Luther: in Latin, 94; and he mentions 16 in German. In fact there were 14 in early new High German, 4 in early new Low German, and 4 in early modern Netherlandish, for a total of 22 Germanic editions by 1518.<sup>26</sup> And most recently, Thomas Kaufmann published a detailed account of pre-Lutheran vernacular Bibles and their articulation with Luther's Bible translations. He refers to only one of the main historians of the pre-Lutheran German Bible cited above, the notorious Augsburg anti-Semite Hans Rost (the only one of them who published on these topics after WWII).<sup>27</sup> An interesting attempt to survey the field can be found in the volume *Lay Bibles in Europe 1450–1800*, which includes a valuable article on Gerhard Zerbolt of Zutphen and the lay Bible, and an article on fifteenth-century book illustrations (specifically in a Life of Christ), but that is the extent of the pre-Reformation coverage, and the impression created is that lay Bibles were far less important in this period than they actually were.<sup>28</sup> Rudolf Bentzinger's survey of 1999 (see note 2, *supra*) makes a much less partisan attempt to lay out the data, but he cannot help but bow to the "linguistically much more important Luther Bible".<sup>29</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Margaret Deanesly, *The Lollard Bible and other medieval versions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1920; reprint 1966).

<sup>25</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, *The reformation of the Bible, the Bible of the Reformation: a catalog of the exhibition by V. R. Hotchkiss and D. Price* (New Haven: Yale University Press; Dallas: Bridwell Library, 1996), 49.

<sup>26</sup> Owen Chadwick, *The Early Reformation on the Continent* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1. Chadwick cites only 16 German Bibles before 1522 and does not mention the Low German ones, which were equally important (and see below).

<sup>27</sup> Thomas Kaufmann, "Vorreformatorische Laienbibel und reformatorisches Evangelium," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 101 (2004), 138–174. On Hans Rost's early writings and career as an anti-Semitic publicist and agitator, see Gerhard Hetzer, "Stellungnahmen zum Judentum im Werk des katholischen Publizisten Hans Rost," Peter Fassl, Katrin Holly and Gerhard Willi (eds), *Geschichte und Kultur der Juden in Schwaben* vol. 3 (Augsburg: Wissner Verlag, 2007), 111–130.

<sup>28</sup> M. Lamberigts and A.A. den Hollander (eds), *Lay Bibles in Europe 1450–1800* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2006), esp. the article by Nikolaus Staubach, pp. 3–26.

<sup>29</sup> Bentzinger, "Zur spätmittelalterlichen deutschen Bibelübersetzung."



As Michael Milway has shown, printers generally printed only for a market, to *meet* demand; and the vast majority of works printed in the fifteenth century were manuals and devotional works printed for clerics, followed by primers printed for students, then works of biblical and devotional content<sup>30</sup>. Uwe Neddermeyer has discussed the relationship between manuscripts and printed books in this period in his voluminous 1998 *Habilitationschrift*.<sup>31</sup> He sees print versions largely as a function of pre-existing manuscripts: those books that existed in large numbers of manuscript copies were those most likely to be printed. Aside from the many tens of thousands of medieval Bible manuscripts still extant, he estimates that from 1450–1519, there were in the Empire 65 printed Latin editions of the Bible and 22 Germanic ones; in Italy 41 Latin editions and 14 Italian ones; in France 45 Latin editions and 1 French one, as well as 21 of the *Bible abrégée*; making, by Neddermeyer's impressionistic calculation, for a total of 20,000 copies of Germanic Bibles in the Empire; 13,450 Italian Bibles in Italy; 1200 French Bibles in France as well as 23,700 *Bibles abrégées*.<sup>32</sup> These figures leave out the much larger numbers of manuscript and printed partial, para- and quasi-Biblical texts ('plenaries' [lectionaries], historiated Bibles, devotional works, etc.) and single books or partial editions of the Bible—and because these have not yet been adequately surveyed, we can only guess at their numbers as a multiple of the number of printed Bibles. Neddermeyer also estimates the number of readers in the Empire as follows: between 1470 and 1500, over 125,000 (male) clerics and 30,000 nuns, not counting those who could read only the vernacular; learned people, including university members, students and graduates, secretaries, scribes, etc.: over 80,000, as well as over 200,000 children in Latin schools, and somewhat fewer than 20,000 readers of the German vernaculars.<sup>33</sup> While Neddermeyer's charts<sup>34</sup> show an explosion in

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<sup>30</sup> "Forgotten Best-Sellers from the Dawn of the Reformation," Robert Bast and Andrew Gow (eds), *Continuity and Change. The Harvest of Late-Medieval and Reformation History. Essays presented to Heiko A. Oberman on his 70<sup>th</sup> Birthday* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 113–142.

<sup>31</sup> Uwe Neddermeyer, *Von der Handschrift zum gedruckten Buch, Schriftlichkeit und Leseinteresse im Mittelalter und in der frühen Neuzeit, Quantitative und qualitative Aspekte* (Buchwissenschaftliche Beiträge aus dem deutschen Bucharchiv München 61, Wiesbaden: Harassowitz, 1998). Neddermeyer thus corrects the obsolete figures of Hans Rost, *Die Bibel im Mittelalter*, 418–419.

<sup>32</sup> Neddermeyer, *ibid.*, I, 461. See also the classic work in French by Samuel Berger, *La Bible française au moyen âge. Etude sur les plus anciennes versions de la Bible écrites en prose de langue d'oïl* (Paris: s.i., 1884; Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1966).

<sup>33</sup> Neddermeyer, *ibid.*, I, 515.

<sup>34</sup> Neddermeyer, II, 706–707.

the printing of Bibles in the Empire after 1522, namely the Luther Bible, there was also a strong increase in the printing of French Bibles in the period 1510–1519. Because he uses different scales, it is hard to see how important the tradition of printing both Latin and vernacular Bibles was in the Empire before 1500 (table 17a).<sup>35</sup>

Not one of the 22 Germanic Bibles printed before 1522 received official licence from an episcopal or other ecclesiastical agency, despite ongoing efforts all through the Middle Ages to prevent the Bible from falling into the ‘wrong’ (i.e., unlearned) hands (efforts that clearly met with less and less success) and even efforts to control such printing, such as the decree of the Archbishop of Mainz, Berthold von Henneberg (1442–1504) in 1485<sup>36</sup>—which perhaps ensured that German Bibles continued not to be printed at Mainz, but seems to have had little effect anywhere else.<sup>37</sup> A Latin Bible printed at Cologne in 1479 had the censor’s approval; the 1480 German one printed there did not! Other than in England, actual ecclesiastical bans on making or owning translations of the Bible into the vernacular were generally local and temporary, or even equivocal: the decree of the archbishop of Metz of 1199 against ‘Waldensians’ and their Bibles was confirmed by Innocent III but without expressly *prohibiting* Bible translations, even though that was how theologians and churchmen understood *Cum ex iniuncto* for some time.<sup>38</sup> And when such decrees were made for

<sup>35</sup> Neddermeyer, *ibid.*, II, 707–708.

<sup>36</sup> See Fritz Hartung, “Berthold von Henneberg, Kurfürst von Mainz,” *Historische Zeitschrift* 103 (1909), 527–551; Christine Roll, “>Sin lieb sy auch eyn kurfurst...<. Zur Rolle Bertholds von Henneberg in der Reichsreform,” Peter Klaus Hartmann (ed), *Kurmainz, das Reichskanzleramt und das Reich am Ende des Mittelalters und im 16. und 17. Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1998), 5–43; Joseph Weiß, *Berthold von Henneberg, Erzbischof von Mainz (1484–1504). Seine kirchenpolitische und kirchliche Stellung* (Freiburg i.B.: Herder, 1889); see Falk Eisermann on Berthold’s edict, *Verzeichnis der typographischen Einblattdrucke des 15. Jahrhunderts im Heiligen Römischen Reich Deutscher Nation* (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2004; 3 vols.), R–31 (p. 419–420, vol. III), including further literature; Deanesly gives a partial English translation: *The Lollard Bible*, 124–125; see also Rudolf Hirsch, “Pre-Reformation Censorship of Printed Books,” in R. Hirsch, *The Printed Word: Its Impact and Diffusion* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1978), 102f. for a partial English edition of the edict and further commentary, and Klaus Schreiner, “Volkssprache als Element gesellschaftlicher Integration und Ursache sozialer Konflikte. Formen und Funktionen volkssprachlicher Wissensverbreitung um 1500,” Ferdinand Seibt and Winfried Eberhard (eds), *Europa 1500. Integrationsprozesse im Widerstreit: Staaten, Regionen, Personenverbände, Christenheit* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1987), 468–495: esp. 491–493.

<sup>37</sup> Deanesly, *Lollard Bible*, 124–126; 125.

<sup>38</sup> Deanesly, *Lollard Bible*, chapters 2–4 deal with the Continent from 1199 through the Reformation; on Metz, 30–32; on the absence of licences in 15th-century German printed Bibles, see 123–124. See also on

larger areas, as by Emperor Charles IV for the Empire in 1369, they were ineffective and unenforceable.<sup>39</sup>

In the later fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, Biblical material was widespread, popular and well known among literate townspeople, clerics and nobles alike, especially in the Empire.<sup>40</sup> Full Bible translations usually belonged to wealthy burghers, the gentry/nobility and religious houses (Brethren of the Common Life, etc.), with relatively large numbers of German Bibles showing up in inventories especially for the period 1500 to the Reformation. Translations of particular sections of Scripture were even more common and widespread. The large number of printing presses in the German-speaking world played an important role here too.

Because they were under the direction of a warden or house confessor, nuns had relatively good access to vernacular translations. A fifteenth-century Netherlandish manuscript specified that the sister who was in charge of the books was to see that

If anything in the book appeared to be false, it should be brought before the rector of the house for him to examine, before it is allowed to be commonly used by the sisters. (...) Great care is to be taken not to lend books to outsiders without the permission of the rector. (...) Uncommon books are not to be read at meals until the rector has first seen that their contents are good and profitable. (...) Books are not to be lent to ignorant people.<sup>41</sup>

Although great care was enjoined on the sister in charge to see that such vernacular books did not fall into the ‘wrong’ hands, such an admonishment documents both the relatively mild attitude of the church regarding such books and the interest of the unlearned laity in them (the learned laity also had good access to vernacular books, including Bibles). In those important female houses whose library catalogues have survived, we notice the existence not merely of many vernacular works of Biblical piety and devotion, but also of vernacular Bibles.<sup>42</sup>

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the topic of local and temporary bans decreed to combat particular outbreaks of ‘heresy’, especially in France, Guy Lobrichon and Pierre Riché (eds), *Le Moyen-Age et la Bible (La Bible de tous les temps)*; Paris: Beauchesne, 1984).

<sup>39</sup> Deanesly, *Lollard Bible*, 83–86.

<sup>40</sup> See Falk, *Die Bibel am Ausgang des Mittelalters*, and Zimmermann, *Die deutsche Bibel*; Lockwood, “Vernacular Scriptures,” mentions over 800 known pre-Reformation German Bible manuscripts.

<sup>41</sup> J.H. van Loten (ed), *Verzameling van Nederlandsche Prozastukken van 1229–1476, naar Tijdsorde gerangschikt (Nederlandsch Proza, van de dertiende tot de achttiende eeuw I [only volume to appear]; Leiden, 1851), 297–299.*

<sup>42</sup> See Gow, “Challenging the Protestant Paradigm,” 181–183.

### 3. THE LUTHER BIBLE: CLAIMS AND COUNTERCLAIMS

Luther's 1522 'September Testament' was immediately and wildly successful, selling out rapidly and experiencing multiple reprintings in the same year.<sup>43</sup> As Johannes Cochlaeus, one of Luther's fiercest opponents, later wrote with some venom,

Luther's translation was read (as the source of all wisdom, no less) by tailors and shoemakers, even women and simpletons, many of whom carried it around and learned it by heart, and eventually became bold enough to dispute with priests, monks, even masters and doctors of Holy Scripture about faith and the gospels.<sup>44</sup>

Medieval prelates' fears had come true, Cochlaeus is informing us. He tells the story in this form not necessarily because these were the only people reading the Luther Bible, but because they were precisely the unqualified readers of Scripture the medieval church had sought to discourage or exclude. The popular success of Luther's Bible translations of the period 1522 to 1534 prepared for them a special place in many histories: not merely those of the 'Protestant Reformation', but also of such varied epochs and developments as the (supposed) transition from the 'Middle Ages' to 'modern times', of 'western civilisation', or even of the Bible itself. The appearance of Luther's vernacular Bible has been credited with:

- freeing the Word of God and making it accessible for the first time to the common people;
- liberating the western Christian mind from the dead hand of ecclesiastical authority over the interpretation first of Scripture and by extension of everything else; and even with
- introducing a common German language.

I am going to except from further consideration the proposition that the diction of one person could shape an entire language, regardless of its frequent citation. The fact that later generations, after continually hearing and reading the authoritative and normative Luther Bible, chose Luther's diction as especially appealing and normative does not prove that he *formed* the language. Indeed, Volker Leppin has made a clean sweep of this topic in a recent

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<sup>43</sup> See Rudolf Hirsch, *Printing, selling and reading, 1450–1550* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1974) for statistics, as well as Hirsch, *The Printed Word: its impact and diffusion: primarily in the 15th-16th centuries* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1978), and Robert W. Scribner, *For the sake of simple folk: popular propaganda for the German Reformation* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

<sup>44</sup> Johannes Cochlaeus, *Historia Martini Lutheri* (Ingolstadt, 1582), 120.

article.<sup>45</sup> Thomas Kaufmann has recently expressed the idea of liberation on a slightly higher level of abstraction, speaking of the entire Reformation as a time of epochal transformation.<sup>46</sup>

These ideas are all part of long-lived, ideologically fraught retellings of an interesting episode in the very long history of Bible translation. In the nineteenth century, there were two sides to this debate. One consisted of Catholic controversialists such as Malou, Janssen, and Franz Falk *and* of more careful Lutheran scholars such as Wilhelm Krafft, who were open to the evidence of the circulation of vernacular Bibles before Luther's, and even to their influence on his translation. The other side defended an orthodox and confessional view of both Luther and the Luther Bible, often to the point of discounting pre-Reformation vernacular Scripture and overplaying the originality of Luther's translation.

I will argue in what follows that factors essentially *extrinsic* to the importance of the Luther Bible have played the largest role in making it appear to be a fulcrum or turning point in the stories mentioned above. Bernard Reardon wrote that the September-Testament was Luther's "most signal contribution"; by contrast,

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<sup>45</sup> Leppin, "„Biblia, das ist die ganze Heilige Schrift deutsch" Luthers Bibelübersetzung zwischen Sakralität und Profanität," Jan Rohls and Gunther Wenz (eds), *Protestantismus und deutsche Literatur*, (Münchener Theologische Forschungen 2; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 2004), 13–26. On the other myths, see, for instance, Hans Rost, *Die Bibel im Mittelalter*, 310–12; Friedrich Kantzenbach's tendentious introduction to Hans Volz, *Martin Luthers deutsche Bibel*; and for an earlier version of these heroic myths, see Willi Gerber's 'Lutherocentric' comments of 1923: "Die Bibel/das Buch der Menschheit," Carl Paul and Albert Schramm (eds), *Luther und die Bibel. Festschrift zum Lutherischen Weltkongress Eisenach*, August 1923 (Leipzig: Karl Hiersemann, 1923), II, 3–52; e.g., "Damit stehen wir an dem wichtigsten Punkt in der Geschichte der Bibel: bei Luther." [Here we are at the most important point in the history of the Bible: Luther.], 9. This view is entirely consonant with the polemical view the author expresses at the end of his pious disquisition regarding "books of human religion, such as the Qur'an" which "are all limited and can have no true place in world history" [!]; "only the Bible knows no boundaries" (53). Eurocentric and christonormative ideas of this kind have for too long decided what does and does not have a place in 'world history'.

<sup>46</sup> "Aus *kirchenhistorischer* Perspektive ist jedenfalls mit Nachdruck auf dem epochalen Umbruchcharakter der Reformation [...] zu beharren.", from "Die Konfessionalisierung von Kirche und Gesellschaft. Sammelbericht über eine Forschungsdebatte," *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 121 (1996), 1008–1025 and 112–1121; 1118. Heiko Oberman refuted this concept and all its corollaries in a lengthy review of Bernd Moeller (ed), *Die frühe Reformation in Deutschland als Umbruch. Wissenschaftliches Symposium des Vereins für Reformationsgeschichte 1996* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1998), in the *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 91 (2000), 396–406.

the Lollards had had “poor translations”.<sup>47</sup> This habit of mind has variously been parsed as modernism or as historicism, but whatever the form we imagine it might take, it begins with a supposed break that is the generative force behind a huge difference perceived between the laudable, enlightened ‘here and now’ and the transcended, obsolete, wrong-headed past. For modernists to be modern, there must be something they have left behind, having rejected it as inadequate or transcended it. Early Protestants, including Luther, were often sympathetic to humanist fancies that a rebirth of antiquity would put paid to the preceding ‘dark ages’ of barbarism—whence our term the Middle Ages: in the middle of, between, antiquity and the humanists’ present. Early Protestants put an ecclesiological spin on a philological program and invested the intervening period with further ignominy, namely the papal tyranny and ecclesiastical tutelage they themselves claimed to have discovered, unmasked and thrown off. Luther himself did his best to shore up this reading of the immediate and proximate past.

Earlier generations of German scholars unravelled Luther’s polemic about the inaccessibility of the Bible.<sup>48</sup> Rost notes that eighteenth-century scholars were often surprised to discover that German Bibles had been circulating in large numbers well before Luther’s translation, so steeped were they in the story of Biblical inaccessibility started by Luther himself.<sup>49</sup> Johann Friedrich Mayer (1701), Christian Friedrich Boerner (1709), Johann Baptist Ott (1710), and Johann Melchior Kraft (1714) all produced works on German Bibles before the time of Luther.<sup>50</sup> In 1719, the Lutheran pastor and theologian Joachim Ernst Berger (1666–1734) wrote “From this material that I have brought forth piece by piece and according to the truth of the matter, anyone can see for himself that our saintly Luther was not the first to translate the Bible into

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<sup>47</sup> *Religious Thought in the Reformation* (Essex: Longman Group Ltd., 1981; 2nd ed. 1995), 65, 7.

<sup>48</sup> See, for example, the survey of earlier scholarship that emphasized the large number and broad diffusion of German Bibles before the Reformation in Kropatschek, *Schriftprinzip*, 136–165; Hans Rost, *Die Bibel im Mittelalter*, 37–66; 314–316.

<sup>49</sup> Rost, *Die Bibel im Mittelalter*, 311.

<sup>50</sup> Listed but not commented on by Rost, *Die Bibel im Mittelalter*, 317–318. Mayer (1650–1712), a Lutheran theologian from Leipzig and was a theologian, defender of Lutheran orthodoxy against Pietism, and supporter of the early Enlightenment at Hamburg, wrote a *Historia versionis germanicae bibliorum Luther* (Hamburg, 1693); Boerner (1683–1753), was also a Leipziger, orthodox Lutheran and Professor of Theology; Ott (1661–1744) was Archdeacon of the Großmünster at Zurich; Kraft (1673–1751), a pastor and theologian from Wetzlar, wrote *Prodromus historiae versionis germanicae bibliorum, d.i., vorläufige Anzeige und Abhandlung der in die deutsche Sprache übersetzten Bibel* as well as a later work (1735) about Luther’s Bible translation.

German, as many believe and would have him be.”<sup>51</sup> In 1737, the learned Lutheran pastor and historian of philosophy Johann Jakob Brucker (1696–1770) wrote “Our learned divines have been in error, when they have believed that before Luther’s translation only three others had appeared.”<sup>52</sup> The Lutheran pastor and scholar Johannes Nast published in 1767 a short piece about the six earliest German printed Bibles, with a brief survey of later ones.<sup>53</sup> The great bibliographer Georg Wolfgang Panzer surveyed pre-Lutheran German Bibles in 1777.<sup>54</sup> And Johan Melchior Goeze published a similar piece in 1775 about the printed Low German Bibles.<sup>55</sup> None of this pioneering scholarship is cited in notes other than in specialist volumes like Rost’s.<sup>56</sup>

Leopold von Ranke, in a letter to his brother Heinrich (a pastor), wrote “Even though the Gospel was revealed by God’s grace originally to Luther, the success of the message was based on completely different grounds. Only dry wood is ignited immediately when exposed to flames.”<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> “Aus diesem also, was ich stückweise und nach der Wahrheit fürgebracht, ersieht ein jeglicher für sich selbst, daß unser seliger Lutherus wol nicht der Erste, der die Bibel in die deutsche Sprache übersetzt, wie viele glauben und dafür halten mögen.” Joachim Ernst Berger, *Instructorium Biblicum, oder Unterricht von den Deutschen Bibeln, wie auch vom rechten Bibel-Lesen*, 2nd ed. (Berlin: Nicolai, 1719; Latin ed. Regensburg, 1720), 5; also cited in Rost, *Die Bibel im Mittelalter*, 310.

<sup>52</sup> “Unsere Gottesgelehrten haben sich geirrt, wenn sie geglaubet, vor Lutheri Übersetzung wären nur drey andere deutsche herausgekommen.” Brucker, *Abhandlungen von einigen alten deutschen Übersetzungen der Hl. Schrift...* (Leipzig: Breitkopf, 1737), 22, cited from Rost, *Die Bibel im Mittelalter*, 310.

<sup>53</sup> Johannes Nast, *Historische critische Nachrichten von den sechs ersten deutschen Bibel-Ausgaben, die zu Maynz, Strasburg und Augspurg vom Jahr 1462 ... 1477 sind gedruckt worden...* (Stuttgart: Cotta, 1767).

<sup>54</sup> Georg Wolfgang Panzer (1729–1805), pastor of the important burgher church St. Sebald in Nuremberg, *Litterarische Nachricht über die allerältesten deutschen Bibeln aus dem 15. Jahrhundert welche in der öffentlichen Bibliothek der Reichsstadt Nürnberg aufbewahrt werden* (Nürnberg: Felßcker, 1777); also *Versuch einer kurzen Geschichte der römisch-catholischen deutschen Bibelübersetzung* (Nürnberg, 1781; repr. Leipzig 1971).

<sup>55</sup> Johan Melchior Goeze (1717–1786), was a pastor (St. Catherine’s, in Hamburg), theologian and fiery defender of Lutheran orthodoxy against Enlightenment ideas. He wrote a number of books, including the *Versuch einer Historie der gedruckten niedersächsischen Bibeln vom Jahre 1470 bis 1621* (Halle: Gebauer, 1775). His collection later became the kernel of the Deutsches Bibel-Archiv at Hamburg (unfortunately destroyed in WWII).

<sup>56</sup> Rost, *Die Bibel im Mittelalter*, lists dozens of early scholarly works on pre-Lutheran German Bibles on pages 317–320.

<sup>57</sup> “Denn obwohl das Evangelium ganz ursprünglich durch Gottes Gnade Luthern geoffenbaret worden, so ruht doch der Erfolg der Mittheilung noch auf ganz andren Gründen. Nur das trockene Holz faßt sogleich die Flamme.” From late March, 1820. Leopold von Ranke,

In 1883, Wilhelm Krafft entered the lists with a short piece (published as a monograph) arguing that the large number of editions of the German Bible before Luther proves that it was not merely kept in the libraries of princes and religious houses or schools, but that it was read “in accordance with the repeated urgings of the editors and other Christian writers by educated lay-people”. For example, he cites the editor of the 1480 Cologne Bible, who wrote in his preface that all ‘good hearts’, clerics and lay-people, who see and read this Bible should unite themselves with God and ask the Holy Spirit, master of this text, to help them to understand this translation according to His will and for the salvation of their soul. Other editors of German Bibles and writers of the later fifteenth century also recommended that their readers read for themselves in the Bible.<sup>58</sup>

The positive comments on religious and Biblical teaching in the later Middle Ages, and on the large circulation of vernacular Bibles of the influential Catholic historian Johannes Janssen (1829–1891)<sup>59</sup> and the equally negative voice of the conservative Protestant apologist and defender of the great originality and singularity of Luther’s Bible translation, the Hamburg scholar Wilhelm Walther, are foundational and packed with information, but so seriously biased that they now figure only in accounts of historiographical controversies and in learned footnotes.<sup>60</sup>

By 1904, Kropatschek announced “If we sum up all that has been said [on the pre-Lutheran German Bible], it is now impossible to say in the old polemical sense that the Bible was an unknown book to theologians and layfolk. The more we find out about the Middle Ages, the more this legend evaporates.”<sup>61</sup> The great Lu-

*Sämmtliche Werke*, edited by Alfred Dove, 54 vols. (Leipzig: Duncker und Humblot, 1867–1890); vol. 53/54, *Zur eigenen Lebensgeschichte*, Ausgewählte Briefe, 88–90; here 89; the translation in Leopold von Ranke, *The Secret of World History. Selected Writings on the Art and Science of History*, edited, with translations, by Roger Wines (New York: Fordham University Press, 1981), 240–241, is adequate but renders the last sentence in a slightly less satisfactory way.

<sup>58</sup> Krafft, *Die deutsche Bibel vor Luther*, 6.

<sup>59</sup> Johannes Janssen, *Geschichte des deutschen Volkes seit dem Ausgang des Mittelalters. I: Deutschlands allgemeine Zustände beim Ausgang des Mittelalters* (Freiburg: Herder, 1913; 19th/20th ed.; 1876); esp. on vernacular Bibles 78ff.

<sup>60</sup> *Die deutsche Bibelübersetzung des Mittelalters*. 3 vols. (Braunschweig, 1889–1892; repr. Nieuwkoop 1966). See also Julie M. Winter’s discussion of Walther’s unconvincing attempts to refute the arguments of Krafft and Wedewer about Luther’s massive use of the Printed German Bible: *Luther Bible Research in the Context of Volkish [sic] Nationalism in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Peter Lang, 1998), 35–36.

<sup>61</sup> “Nimmt man alles Gesagte zusammen, so wird man in der Tat nicht mehr in dem alten polemischen Sinne sagen, die Bibel sei bei Theologen



theran church historian Karl Holl (1866–1926) took the ‘Protestant’ side of this debate decisively in his volume ‘Luther’, the first of his *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Kirchengeschichte*.<sup>62</sup> In 1927, the prolific Bible scholar and later director of the Deutsches Bibel-Archiv Hans Vollmer (†1941) wrote in the foreword to an edition of a fifteenth-century glossed German excerpt from the Prophets that “It is quite common in Protestant circles to underestimate the knowledge of Biblical texts among late-medieval Christians.”<sup>63</sup> However, this developing consensus was cut short in Germany by the war. It never really extended beyond that country and a narrow circle of anglophone scholars of older German literature in any case. The period from 1933 to 1945 produced a serious gap in the accessibility of German scholarship both to English-speakers and to German scholars, and the war did the rest.<sup>64</sup>

The more complete books of Hans Rost (1939) and Erich Zimmermann (1938) are not easy to find, and almost never appear in post-WWII literature regarding the Bible in the Middle Ages. The reasons for this scholarly amnesia or at least ignorance lie in both the vicissitudes of war and generational change, and in the whiggish historical narratives that became useful in the West during the course of the Cold War and came to dominate Anglo-American scholarship as a result. In the 1960s and 1970s, German scholars returned to the topic and produced, mainly in specialized journals, a certain highly technical literature concerning late medieval knowledge and use of the Bible.<sup>65</sup> Kenneth Strand published in 1966 a slim commemorative volume (that is rarely cited) on the pre-

und Laien ein unbekanntes Buch gewesen. Je mehr man sich mit dem Mittelalter beschäftigt, desto mehr zerrinnt diese Legende.” Kropatschek, *Schriftprinzip*, 163.

<sup>62</sup> Vol. I. Tübingen 1923.

<sup>63</sup> “Nicht selten unterschätzt man in protestantischen Kreisen die Bekanntschaft mit dem Bibelwort unter den Christen des Mittelalters.” Hans Vollmer (ed), *Ein deutscher glossierter Auszug des 15. Jahrhunderts aus den alttestamentlichen Propheten* (Materialien zur Bibelgeschichte und religiösen Volkskunde des Mittelalters, III; Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1927), xiii.

<sup>64</sup> Thomas Mann summed up what would be the attitude of German and non-German scholars alike to books published during the Third Reich: refusing an invitation to return to Germany after the war, he said that any books printed in Germany between 1933 and 1945 were less than worthless, smelled of blood and shame and should be pulped: J.F.G. Großer, *Die große Kontroverse* (Hamburg: Nagel-Verlag, 1963), 31, and Jost Hermand and Wigand Lange (eds), “Wollt Ihr Thomas Mann wiederhaben?” *Deutschland und die Emigranten* (Hamburg: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1999), 25.

<sup>65</sup> E.g., Olaf Schwencke, “Ein Kreis spätmittelalterlicher Erbauungsschriftsteller in Lübeck,” *Jahrbuch des Vereins für niederdeutsche Sprachforschung* 88 (1965): 20–58.

Lutheran German printed Bibles.<sup>66</sup> Such books simply did not find their way onto the shelves and into the footnotes of (largely Protestant) church historians in post-war Germany, never mind in the English-speaking world.

The career of Erich Zimmermann (1912–1995), whose short 1938 monograph<sup>67</sup> provides a masterful survey of the importance and distribution of the German Bible in the later Middle Ages, was interrupted by WWII, during which he served as an officer in the German Navy. After the war he had a long and distinguished career as a librarian, and did not return to the Bible as a research topic. It is possible that the reigning spirit of the age was simply unattuned to the sort of non-aligned, interdisciplinary scholarship his 1938 book represented; and post-war Germany offered new and more pressing challenges to an experienced leader (including refounding the Deutsches Bibel-Archiv).<sup>68</sup> His survey of the extensive evidence of clerical, noble and burgher ownership of Bibles, books of the Bible and historiated Bibles in the fifteenth century (pp. 57–90) has not yet been replaced or even equalled. It is worth repeating his insistence that burghers, both men and women, frequently appear in the sources as owners of Bibles. The scribal workshop of Diebold Lauber in Hagenau, active 1427–1467, produced a large number of Bible manuscripts, mainly historiated Bibles.<sup>69</sup> Their clients included burghers in the imperial cities, about whom we know the most, and in other cities. Zimmermann lists dozens of burgher owners of Bibles.<sup>70</sup> It would stretch the reader's patience if I were to enumerate here every late-medieval burgher or family Zimmermann knew to have possessed a Bible, yet it is only such particular evidence that we can have: statistics are not available (unless we count the over 60 biblical texts, of whatever sort, listed by Zimmermann as having been at one time or another in burgher hands, many of them even copied out by burghers). We must rely on impressionistic accounts that do not seem strong enough to overturn conventional wisdom. As Zimmermann points out, vernacular Bible texts that were once in burgher hands are known to

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<sup>66</sup> Kenneth Albert Strand, *German Bibles before Luther: the story of 14 High-German editions, in celebration of the earliest vernacular printed Bible, 1466* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1966).

<sup>67</sup> *Die deutsche Bibel im religiösen Leben des Spätmittelalters* (Potsdam, 1938). Originally his dissertation, submitted at Marburg, 1937. The printed version runs to 178 pages.

<sup>68</sup> Yorck A. Haase, "Nachruf Erich Zimmermann," *Zeitschrift für Biblioteksvesen und Bibliographie* 43/2 (1996), 204–206.

<sup>69</sup> See Andrea Rapp, *bücher gar hübsch gemolt: Studien zur Werkstatt Diebold Laubers am Beispiel der Prosabearbeitung von Bruder Philipps "Marienleben" in den Historienbibeln IIa und Ib* (Bern: Peter Lang 1998) and Lieselotte Saurmajeltsch, *Spätformen mittelalterlicher Buchherstellung: Bilderhandschriften aus der Werkstatt Diebold Laubers in Hagenau* (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2001).

<sup>70</sup> Zimmermann, *Die deutsche Bibel*, 76–82.

us largely because they were at some point donated, often as pious bequests, to monastic (mainly convent) libraries and thus were preserved; the less-expensive manuscripts and printed books that burghers typically owned (including Bibles) have not otherwise survived very well—they were not well protected and may have been read to pieces or otherwise come to harm. They did not represent substantial capital investments and thus were not as carefully guarded as luxury editions.<sup>71</sup>

#### 4. THE SCARCE BIBLE: ORIGINS AND EXPLANATIONS

If the Bible was as widely known in the later Middle Ages as our evidence suggests, then where did the story of its unavailability come from? In his 1543 pamphlet “On the Jews and their Lies”, Luther wrote, as an illustration to his charge that contemporary Jews knew nothing of ‘Moses’, that is of the Bible, and that their ‘doctrine’ is nothing but the “additions of rabbis”, “[j]ust as among us [Christians] under the papacy the Bible became unrecognizable.”<sup>72</sup> In his ‘Table Talk’, Luther is reported to have presented an example of the ‘extreme blindness’ under the Papacy, on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of February, 1538, namely that “Thirty years ago, no-one read the Bible, and it was unknown to all. The prophets were not spoken of and were considered impossible to understand. And when I was twenty years old, I had never seen a Bible. I thought that the Gospels or Epistles could be found only in the postills [lectionaries] for the Sunday readings. Then I found a Bible in the library, when I first went into the monastery, and I began to read, re-read and read it many times over and reread the Bible many times, to the great wonderment of Doctor Staupitz”.<sup>73</sup> Luther argued in his exegesis

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<sup>71</sup> Zimmermann, *Die deutsche Bibel*, 80.

<sup>72</sup> *D. Martin Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar: Hermann Böhlau Nachfolger, 1920), *Werke*, 53, 523: “Gleich wie bey uns unter dem Papstum die Biblia unkendlich geworden ist.”

<sup>73</sup> “Extrema caecitas sub papatu. 22. Februarii dicebat de insigni et horrenda caecitate papistarum: Nam ante 30 annos nullus legit bibliam, eratque omnibus incognita. Prophetæ errant innominati neque possibile intellectum. Nam ego, cum essem viginti annorum, nondum vidi bibliam. Arbitrabar nullum esse euangelium aut epistolam, nisi quæ in postillis dominicalibus errant scripta. Tandem in bibliotheca inveni bibliam, et quamprimum me in monasterium contuli, incepti legere, relegere et iterum legere bibliam cum summa admiratione Doctoris Staupitii.” *WA Tischreden* 3, 3767, from Anton Lauterbach’s diary for 1538 (Dresd. I. 423, 119; Lauterbach 1538, 36). A slightly different version is found in *D. Martin Luther’s Tischreden oder Colloquia, so er in vielen Jahren gegen gelahrten Leuten, auch fremden Gaesten und seinen Tischgesellen gefuehret... / nach Aurifaber’s erster Ausgabe*, Karl Eduard Förstemann (ed), (Leipzig: Gebauer, 1844–1848), vol. III (1846), 299: “Annis XXX ante Biblia erant incognita, prophetæ innominati et putabantur impossibiles intellectu. Ego cum essem XX annos, nondum videram Biblia. Arbitrabam nullum esse Evangelium nec

of the book of Zechariah in 1527 that under the old Church, the Bible was openly contradicted by the Church and thus kept hidden away, ‘unter der Bank’, beneath the bench.<sup>74</sup> Memory plays tricks, and an old man’s reminiscences about a period for the putative end of which he had come to consider himself to have been a cause might not be the best source of information for historical inquiry. And a few of Luther’s contemporaries saw things quite differently. Henri Daniel-Rops, in *The Protestant Reformation* addressed the question from the point of view of a putative late-medieval decadence in faith:

Was the Church in Germany in need of reform? The need here was no greater and no less than elsewhere in Christendom. Faith was very much alive in Germany. In 1494 a worthy merchant wrote in his diary: “My country abounds in Bibles, works on salvation, editions of the Fathers, and other books of a like sort.”<sup>75</sup>

While that burgher (*bourgeois*) was clearly talking about his class as well as his country, we should not discount such evidence as ‘mere anecdote’. Regardless of such contemporary evidence, Luther’s comments would later fit seamlessly into a historical accident that has had a lasting effect on the study of the Bible in the later Middle Ages and Reformation. The 1408 Constitutions of Oxford,

Epistolam nisi in Postillis. Tandem in Biblioteca inveni Biblia et relegi saepius cum summa admiratione D. Staupitii.” Similar ideas are expressed in *WA Tischreden* 4, 5008: “Olim me monacho contemnebant [or –bam?] biblia. Psalterium nemo intellexit, Epistolam ad Romanos credebant aliquot disputationes habere de causis tempore Pauli; nihil usus esse ad nostra secula.” (from Johannes Mathesius’ *Nachschriften* of 1540). Furthermore, “Die Biblia war im Papstum den Leuten unbekannt.” *WA Tischreden* 3, No. 2844b (Konrad Cordatus, Dec. 11, 1532 – 2 January, 1533), first published in Johannes Aurifaber, *Tischreden* (Eisleben 1566), p. 9; cf. the Latin version in Aurifaber’s source, Anton Lauterbach’s collection: “Biblia olim erant incognita.” Luther, *WA Tischreden* 5, No. 6278. Luther also claimed to have read the Bible a great deal when he was a young monk: “Ich habe viel gelesen in meiner Jugend, weil ich ein Mönch war, die Bibel; und leset ihr sie auch fleißig, denn dieses thuts allein.” *WA Tischreden* 6, 7070.

<sup>74</sup> *WA* 23, 606.

<sup>75</sup> *The Protestant Reformation*, trans. Audrey Butler (London: J.M. Dent/New York: E.P. Dutton, 1961), 295: “Mon pays, écrivait un bourgeois dans son journal, regorge de Bibles, d’ouvrages sur le salut, d’éditions des saints Pères et de livres semblables.” in: *idem, L’Eglise de la Renaissance et de la Réforme. Une révolution religieuse: La Réforme Protestante* (Paris: Fayard, 1955), 329. Butler’s genteel translation misses the sense of *regorge*—meaning that Germany is absolutely stuffed, full to the point of spitting up, with Bibles and such books. Unfortunately, Daniel-Rops exercised the prerogative of seniority by not bothering to cite his source—neither its origin nor the original German text.

composed at the behest of Archbishop Arundel and brought into force in 1409 to combat the popular ‘heresy’ of Lollardy, effectively ended the lively trade in English Bibles, and the widespread reading of them, characteristic of the Wycliffite and Lollard movements (at Oxford, among clerks, and in the towns, among burgesses and nobles, respectively). The Constitutions forbade ‘new’ translations and were supposed to suppress the Wycliffite English Bible. And in fact, from 1410 to the 1550s, ecclesiastical ordinances and oversight made it very hard for English laypeople to possess or even to read an English Bible; for a time, the mere possession of English books of any kind by ordinary layfolk could result in a charge of heresy. The English Reformers and their historians made a good deal of hay from this restriction, and permanently coloured the English-language scholarship on the vernacular Bible, whether regarding England or the Continent. As we have already seen, on the Continent there never was a general prohibition on the possession or reading of vernacular Scriptures—just a kind of loose licensing regime that tried to keep Scripture out of the hands of those who, from a contemporary ecclesiastical perspective, could not but misunderstand it to their detriment. Alister McGrath notes that the possession of vernacular Bible translation had been “illegal, dangerous and ultimately fatal”<sup>76</sup> for many, and this is true for fifteenth-century England. It is not exactly untrue even for the Continent; it simply distorts the larger picture. Careful distinctions must be drawn between the centralised kingdoms and the decentral Empire. Deanesly lists the various local prohibitions and clearly inadequate attempts at broader territorial restriction on lay possession of vernacular Bibles; the net effect is of a hopeless patchwork of attempts to staunch the ground-swell of popular interest in Scripture, repeated and simply ignored (as the history of German Bible printing alone proves).<sup>77</sup>

So far as we know, no new manuscript copies of English Bibles were made in the rest of the fifteenth century, and no English Bibles were printed. Perhaps the relative dearth of English printing was itself the result of the ban on English Bibles: as Owen Chadwick reports of the incunabula or cradle-printing period as a whole (not specifically for England), “the printers’ chief object was the Bible”,<sup>78</sup> which makes sense only if we understand ‘the Bible’ as Biblical materials in all forms, not pandects. Devotional works in all forms clearly were their main stock-in-trade. And if the Bible did not make up the bulk of their sales, it was certainly the single largest-selling printed title in the fifteenth century. Chadwick’s numbers end arbitrarily and misleadingly in 1500, with the conventional

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<sup>76</sup> McGrath, p. 88.

<sup>77</sup> Deanesly, *The Lollard Bible*, esp. chapter 4 on the Empire in the fifteenth century.

<sup>78</sup> Chadwick, *The Early Reformation*, 1.

but especially in this context meaningless end of the ‘incunable period’: by 1519, there were 151 printed editions of the Bible in Latin (Empire, France and Italy alone); and by 1522, there were 18 printings of the Bible in German dialects (high and low German) and a further 4 in Netherlandish,<sup>79</sup> as Uwe Neddermeyer demonstrates in wonderful detail. Between ten and twenty thousand printed German Bibles were to be found in the High and Low German-speaking territories by the end of the fifteenth century, so far as we know mainly in the cities, from the Baltic to the Adriatic and from Brabant to contemporary Estonia. And this accounts only for these printed versions of the full Bible (‘Old’ and ‘New’ Testaments together, or pandects), never mind the many manuscript pandects, the printed and manuscript versions of single books or sections (most commonly Psalms, Gospels, and ‘gospel harmonies’ or retellings), and the thousands of devotional works based on Biblical stories or themes, both manuscript and increasingly printed, that informed lay piety in the fifteenth century. Indeed, as Hans Rost demonstrated in 1939 in a lengthy and detailed chapter, biblical piety and knowledge of the Bible were central to public, iconic, dramatic, literary, musical, liturgical and architectural culture in the Middle Ages in general.<sup>80</sup>

If the Bible was, as Luther asserted, kept ‘under the bench’ in Eisleben and Erfurt in the fifteenth century, it was not because of a shortage of the physical object. It is possible that provincial schoolboys and monastic novices did not, in the 1490s and early 1500s, have good access to German Bibles. Luther began lecturing on Scripture in 1513. From 1505 on, a full Latin Bible was certainly available to him in his monastery.<sup>81</sup> More importantly, precisely those people whose early enthusiasm for ‘evangelical preaching’ and reform placed them at the forefront of the nascent Reformation, burghers, magistrates, priests, monks, nuns, nobles and especially urban patricians, had quite easy access to German Bibles—especially when compared to the situation in England, say, or in the twelfth century. Every such assertion is necessarily relative, and the most important term of comparison here is not merely Luther’s famous comment, but the historiographical echo of that comment, reaching from the polemical writings of Luther’s immediate disci-

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<sup>79</sup> Low German and Netherlandish were at that time two mutually roughly comprehensible dialects that covered the immense area from Dunkirk to Riga and from Denmark to the Rhineland, now survived only by Dutch/Flemish, Frisian, and a number of mainly spoken dialects in what is left of northern Germany.

<sup>80</sup> Rost, *Geschichte der Bibel*, “Die Bibel im Kulturleben des Mittelalters,” 225–291.

<sup>81</sup> Friederich Wilhelm Kantzenbach, Introduction to Hans Volz (ed), *Martin Luthers deutsche Bibel* (Hamburg: Friedrich Wittig Verlag, 1978), 7–18; 9.

ples through early modern scholars<sup>82</sup> to those of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century proponents of Protestant cultural and political superiority—from Ranke and Burckhardt through Bismarckian *Kulturkämpfer* (e.g., Wilhelm Walther), Max Weber, Treitschke, the *völkisch* Right, the Lutheran and Nazi Lutheran Right (e.g., Paul Althaus), to a number of contemporary historians of the Reformation. Yet the other side was not idle. Both contemporary Catholic polemicists as well as those of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries tried hard to show that Luther was exaggerating or lying. In 1876, Janssen noted that Luther's opponent at the Leipzig Disputation of 1519, Johannes Eck, claimed to have read almost the entire Bible by the time he was ten years old; and the Xanten chaplain Adam Potken had to learn the four Gospels by heart in his youth in the 1470s and read excerpts from the Old and New Testaments daily with his eleven- and twelve-year-old fellow pupils.<sup>83</sup>

While the church was certainly concerned with the dangers of 'unqualified' Bible-reading by the untrained laity,<sup>84</sup> events had definitively overtaken that concern by the second half of the fifteenth century at the latest—events in the form of many tens of thousands of printed Biblical texts in German, circulating very freely and widely in the Empire.

## 5. ORIGINAL LANGUAGES

One of the most persistent critiques levelled at the medieval Bible, the Vulgate, and at its late-medieval vernacular translations, whether German, Dutch, French or Italian, was that the Vulgate was itself corrupt and inaccurate, so all translations based upon it must also be inadequate. This argument has been repeated by generations of scholars as a kind of article of philological and/or confessional faith. Yet these were the Bibles of the Middle Ages and they had (whatever their form) an immense impact on medieval

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<sup>82</sup> See Rost, *Die Bibel*, 310.

<sup>83</sup> Janssen, *Geschichte*, 81

<sup>84</sup> Even so careful a scholar as Thomas Kaufmann repeats some of the elements of the 'hidden Bible' narrative, citing, for example, Klaus Schreiner's report, attributed to a general past, of a clerical play on Matthew 7,6 according to which the church did not want to "throw the pearls of the Bible's secrets before the swinish laity". Kaufmann, "Vorreformatorische Laienbibel," 138, citing Klaus Schreiner, "Laienbildung als Herausforderung für Kirche und Gesellschaft. Religiöse Vorbehalte und soziale Widerstände gegen die Verbreitung von Wissen im späten Mittelalter und in der Reformation," *Zeitschrift für historische Forschung* 11 (1984), 257–354; esp. 290–291 and "Laienfrömmigkeit – Frömmigkeit von Eliten oder Frömmigkeit des Volkes? Zur sozialen Verfaßtheit laikaler Frömmigkeitspraxis im späten Mittelalter," K. Schreiner (ed), *Laienfrömmigkeit im späten Mittelalter. Formen, Funktionen, politisch-soziale Zusammenhänge* (Schriften des Historischen Kollegs 10; Munich: Oldenbourg Wissenschaftsverlag, 1992), 1–78; esp. 25.

piety: they were linguistic ‘inadequate’ from the perspective of learned scholarly Biblical philology and exegesis, but that has nothing to do with the needs, perceptions or priorities of the (not-quite-secular) laity in later medieval Europe.

The learned Lutheran pastor of St. Michael’s in Hamburg, Johannes Geffcken (1803–1864), wrote in 1855 that the youthful experiences of a poor mendicant are an inadequate measure of the educational level of the entire German people at that time, and that the language of the pre-Reformation translations was nowhere near as bad or as lacking in influence on Luther’s translation as some have argued:

The experiences of a poor mendicant are not sufficient to describe the state of education of the entire German people. In any case the works of the fifteenth century provide unambiguous proof that a quite thorough acquaintance with Scripture was no rarity. [...] It is admittedly the easiest thing in the world to put together, and in short order, a long list of the errors in both the High and Low German editions and which are mostly the result of a word-by-word rendering of the Latin. But it would be a great error to imagine that these translations were utterly clumsy, had no influence on the people, and passed nothing on to Luther’s translations. We find that a sort of German Vulgate had developed over the fifteenth century, which Luther often adopted without having to change much.<sup>85</sup>

In 1883, Wilhelm Krafft questioned the reigning orthodoxy concerning Luther’s unique genius, arguing that vernacular Bibles circulated widely before Luther’s time, and echoing Geffcken’s

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<sup>85</sup> “Die Erfahrungen, die in seiner Jugend ein armer Bettelmönch machte, sind noch nicht geeignet, den Bildungszustand des ganzen deutschen Volkes zu bezeichnen. Jedenfalls liegt uns in den Werken des 15. Jahrhunderts das unzweideutige Zeugnis dafür vor, dass eine genauere Bekenntenschaft mit der Schrift durchaus keine Seltenheit war [...] Freilich ist es das Leichteste von der Welt, in kurzer Zeit ein langes Verzeichnis von Fehlern anzufertigen, welche sich sowohl in den hochdeutschen als in den niederdeutschen Ausgaben finden und die meist von dem zu wörtlichen Wiedergeben des Lateinischen herrühren. Aber wenn man diese Übersetzungen für ganz und gar ungeschickte Arbeiten hält, die gar keinen Einfluß auf das Volk gehabt hätten, und aus denen in Luthers Übersetzungen nichts übergegangen wäre, so ist man doch in großem Irrtume [...] wir finden, dass sich schon im 15. Jahrhundert eine Art deutscher Vulgata gebildet hatte, die Luther oft nur wenig zu verändern notwendig fand.” Johannes Geffcken, *Der Bildercathechismus des 15. Jahrhunderts und die cathechetischen Hauptstücke in dieser Zeit bis auf Luther* (Leipzig: Weigel, 1855), 5. Geffcken’s contemporary, Eduard Reuss, contributed to the debate with *Die deutsche Historienbibel vor der Erfindung des Bücherdrucks* (Stuttgart: Fischer, 1855; repr. Wiesbaden: Sändig, 1966).



point by arguing Luther was able to translate the New Testament so quickly because so much of the Bible—especially the Sunday Gospels and Epistles—was already widely known and read, thus providing a “large storehouse of usable Biblical linguistic material on which he could draw.” Krafft compared in parallel columns a large number of passages from the “ninth” printed German Bible (Nuremberg: Anton Koberger, 1483) with Luther’s September Testament, then with passages from the Hebrew Scriptures in Luther’s 1541 German Bible. Krafft concluded, on good evidence, that these passages are too similar for Luther not to have drawn on the older German tradition.<sup>86</sup> The Catholic scholar Hermann Wedewer supported him,<sup>87</sup> and the debate opened by Malou took on a new shape, this time as a scholarly campaign of the *Kulturkampf*. The Luther scholar Paul Pietsch, who was happy to insist on the idea that Luther’s Bible was better than its predecessors because it was based on the original texts and reached a much higher literary standard, attempted to strike a balance between Protestant allegiance and dispassionate scholarship when he wrote in 1881 that

It is not our task to decide whether or not a specious enthusiasm for the Protestant cause has contributed to this neglect [of the pre-Lutheran German Bible]. Biltz<sup>88</sup> ... is very much inclined to the position that many are indeed still caught in the trap of imagining that Luther’s accomplishments might be lessened if the existence of a pre-existing German Bible translation were admitted and accorded any sort of closer attention. ... Luther’s Bible translation ... does not need us to consider, falsely, the older translation to be a mere slavish imitation of the Vulgate. Luther’s importance is not lessened by the recognition that an active concern for the German Bible existed throughout the Middle Ages, that it was stronger than ever in the 14th and 15th centuries, and that the greatest manifestation of this concern was precisely the pre-Lutheran printed German Bible.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Krafft, *Die deutsche Bibel vor Luther*, 12ff.

<sup>87</sup> See his article on Dietenberger (Luther’s Catholic competitor in Bible translation) in Wetzer and Welte, *Kirchenlexikon* 3rd ed. (Freiburg: Herder, 1884), 1740ff; see also the sharpest formulations in Wedewer, *Johannes Dietenberger* (Freiburg: Herder, 1888), esp. 174ff.

<sup>88</sup> “Über die gedruckte vorlutherische Bibelübersetzung,” *Archiv für das Studium der neueren Sprachen und Literaturen* 61 (1879), 369–392.

<sup>89</sup> Paul Pietsch, review of *Der Codex Teplensis enthaltend die Schrift des neuen Gezeuges. Älteste deutsche Handschrift, welche den im XV. Jahrhundert gedruckten evangelischen Bibeln zu Grund gelegen*, *Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie*, vol. 14 (1882), 112–117, p. 112; dated 1881; also cited in Rost, *Die Bibel im Mittelalter*, 311.

The formidable Wilhelm Walther (1846–1924) disagreed, attacking both his Protestant and Catholic colleagues, defending Lutheran orthodoxy and cultural hegemony against an imaginary claim (announced in an overwrought title) of ‘plagiarism’, asserting that Luther’s translation was original and entirely *sui generis*, and did not draw on the fourteenth-century (manuscript) tradition that was first printed in the 1466 Mentelin Bible.<sup>90</sup> Walther’s arguments are at least as unsystematic as those he attacks. The great Friedrich Maurer ducked the question in 1929, claiming that the debate had not yet been decided and calling for fundamental research on the pre-Lutheran German translations and their relationship to one another as a precondition for answering the question of their influence on Luther.<sup>91</sup> Maurer himself only started the work he called for. In 1939, Rost announced that the research of the previous two centuries had conclusively shown how dependent Luther was on earlier German Bible translations.<sup>92</sup> After WWII, this topic was not systematically pursued.<sup>93</sup> Perhaps it would have been an unnecessary waste of time, given the strong evidence for influence; perhaps since the later medieval Bible does not ‘belong’ to Lutheran Church historians the way the Luther-Bible does, nor (if Luther is assumed not to have used it) could its value as a literary monument be such that succeeding generations of *Germanisten* (German-literature scholars) would have returned to carry out Maurer’s commission, given the obsolescence of the confessional rivalry that had animated the debate in the first place. Yet given the literary kudos heaped on Luther’s translation, if he was influenced by earlier texts, surely their literary status should also be quite high—unless one admits the subjective and situational nature of such aesthetic judgments.

Right after the war, in 1949, we find the archaeologist and *Landeskonservator* of Baden-Württemberg (not a professional scholar of the Bible or of the Reformation), Oscar Paret (1889–1972) claiming that Luther had relied solely on Erasmus’ Greek New Testament. Paret does admit that the latter left a good deal to be

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<sup>90</sup> Wilhelm Walther, “Luthers Bibelübersetzung kein Plagiat” (1891); reprinted in Walther, *Zur Wertung der deutschen Reformation: Vorträge und Aufsätze* (Leipzig: Georg Böhme, 1909), 123–169.

<sup>91</sup> *Studien zur mitteldeutschen Bibelübersetzung vor Luther* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1929), 1–3.

<sup>92</sup> Rost, *Die Bibel im Mittelalter*, 316–317. Rost cites most of the relevant literature.

<sup>93</sup> The exception is a partial attempt by Sönke Hahn, *Luthers Übersetzungsweise im Septembertestament von 1522; Untersuchungen zu Luthers Übersetzung des Römerbriefs im Vergleich mit Übersetzungen vor ihm* (Hamburg, H. Buske, 1973), cited above. Hahn’s analysis reproduces the orthodox Lutheran view that Luther was *discovering* or deciphering the true meaning of complex or controversial passages.

desired itself.<sup>94</sup> We find the same position in the great Yale church historian Roland Bainton's 1952 textbook, *The Reformation of the Sixteenth Century*.<sup>95</sup> Bainton seems to have been unaware of the debate and of the strong evidence for Luther's reliance on earlier German versions. He simply asserts that the translation was made entirely from Erasmus' Greek text; this article of faith is repeated in the article by Hans Volz on German Bibles to 1600 in the 1963 *Cambridge History of the Bible*<sup>96</sup> and in the 2001 *Oxford Illustrated History of the Bible*.<sup>97</sup>

## 6. PRICE AND ACCESSIBILITY

It has also been repeated that early printed Bibles were too expensive for the common people,<sup>98</sup> but pandects made up only the *minority* of printed biblical texts available; cheaper partial printings and prints of single books were even more readily available than pandects.

In fact, we have a good deal of third-party contemporary evidence that biblical texts in the vernacular were relatively cheap and easy to find just before the Reformation. A historiated Bible now at

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<sup>94</sup> *Die Bibel, ihre Überlieferung in Druck und Schrift* (Stuttgart: Privileg. Württ. Bibelanstalt, 1949), 17.

<sup>95</sup> With a new foreword by Jaroslav Pelikan (Boston: Beacon Press, 1980/1985), 62.

<sup>96</sup> The 'printed German Bible' was "clumsy in its linguistic form, and partly incomprehensible." (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 94–109; 94. The idea that any Bible translation (or the original) was ever entirely comprehensible is itself a *Lutheran* idea, largely popularized by Luther himself: thus his exegetical principle is being used here to justify his view of the previous printed German translation—from which he himself borrowed in his own translation!

<sup>97</sup> David Wright, "The Reformation to 1700," *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 192–217; 201.

<sup>98</sup> E.g., Alister McGrath, *Reformation Thought. An Introduction* (Maiden, MA: Blackwell, 1999); 235–236; For a recent statement of this long-lasting view, see Hans Volz's introduction to *D. Martin Luther, Die gantze Heilige Schrift Deudsch, Wittenberg 1545. Letzte zu Luthers Lebzeiten erschienene Ausgabe*, ed. Hans Volz (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1972), 2 vols., I, 41: "Schöpften im ausgehenden Mittelalter die breiten Volksschichten ihre Bibelkenntnisse vorwiegend aus Predigten oder aus Plenarien und Postillen, so war demgegenüber die damalige deutsche Bibel sowohl wegen ihres hohen Preises wie auch wegen ihrer großen sprachlichen Mängel weit davon entfernt, ein wirkliches Volksbuch darzustellen, wie sie es erst durch Martin Luthers einzigartiges Übersetzungswerk wurde." (While the common people of the later Middle Ages drew their knowledge of the Bible mainly from sermons or 'plenaries' and postills, the contemporary German Bible was, by comparison, very far from being the sort of truly popular work—because of its high price and serious linguistic failings—that Martin Luther's unique translation would be.)

Vienna was copied on commission by one Ulrich Sesselschreiber (!), and its price noted at the end of the manuscript: 14 shillings or half a gulden.<sup>99</sup> In 1493, a fine manuscript Bible of the 14th century on 319 sheets of parchment could be had for as little as 4 gulden (richly illustrated and bound Bibles could cost a large multiple of that price), whereas a fattened ox could be had for 3; a printed Bible of the later Middle Ages might cost between 6 and 12 ducats at Venice, hence between 7 and 16 Rhenish gulden<sup>100</sup> (a German university teacher might earn 100 gulden in a year, an amount more than adequate to purchase a small farm).<sup>101</sup> Luther's September Testament *seems* to have been much cheaper than earlier Bibles, as Rost claims, at half a gulden—an eighth of the price of at least one late-medieval manuscript pandect—but it contained only the New Testament and thus perhaps a quarter of the total text; the price relationship would thus be around half—not so large a difference.<sup>102</sup> And if we compare it to an entire manuscript historiated Bible for the same price, it would appear that not much had changed. Half a gulden was half a week's wages for a master carpenter or mason, or a journeyman in Cranach's workshop; or a week's wages of a journeyman carpenter, or three weeks' worth of mid-day dinners (the main meal) for a student. By comparison, an uncoloured copy of Luther's 1534 full Bible cost just under 2 and a half gulden (2 fl. and 8 Groschen), not all that much less than a late-medieval manuscript.<sup>103</sup>

It is difficult to pinpoint and describe in accurate quantitative terms lay use and ownership of Bibles, though there are some interesting examples and prescriptive formulations regarding both Bible ownership and Bible reading among the laity. In 1939, Rost listed many dozens of examples of full Bibles, New Testaments, individual books and Biblical texts of other kinds known to have been in the hands of laypeople (and many more in religious houses) in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.<sup>104</sup> Sebastian Brant wrote

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<sup>99</sup> Zimmermann, *Die deutsche Bibel*, 77. Ms. Nationalbibliothek Wien 2823.

<sup>100</sup> Peter Spufford, *Handbook of Medieval Exchange* (London: Royal Historical Society, 1986); the exchange rate for the first third of the 15th century fluctuated from between 100 Venetian ducats to 110 Rhenish gulden to 100:125; accessed 14 February 2006 via the Medieval and Early Modern Database at <http://scweb.scc-net.rutgers.edu/memdb>

<sup>101</sup> Hans Rost, *Die Bibel im Mittelalter*, 61; Hans Rost, *2000 Jahre Bibel. Ein kulturgeschichtlicher Bericht* (Munich: J. Pfeiffer, 1965), 161.

<sup>102</sup> Kantzenbach, introduction to Volz, *Martin Luthers deutsche Bibel*, 8; citing from Aloys Ruppel, ed., *Gutenberg-Festschrift 1925*, 147ff.; also in the *Gutenberg-Jahrbuch 1972*, 169–173.

<sup>103</sup> Konrad Kratzsch, "Zur Druckgeschichte der Luther-Bibel," Brendler, Endermann, Kratzsch, Fühmann (eds), *Zu Martin Luther: Biblia* (Leipzig: Reclam, 1983), 35–49; 39, 48.

<sup>104</sup> Rost, *Die Bibel im Mittelalter*, "Die Verbreitung der Bibel", 37–66;

in the Ship of Fools (Narrenschiff) in 1494 that “All Land sind jetzt voll Heiliger Schrift” (All countries are now full of Holy Scripture). His satirical point was that despite its omnipresence, people still had not amended themselves according to its example. As Olaf Schwencke has argued, the compilers of the early Lübeck plenaries<sup>105</sup> belonged to a circle of *Erbauungsschriftsteller* (edifying writers) who wrote in a number of genres with similar pious intentions.<sup>106</sup> The 1492 and 1493 Lübeck plenaries, which are based on the 1475 Low German version, repeat the most frequent admonition of the genre: that *simpelen lude* (simple folk) should read from the Scriptures,<sup>107</sup> and admonish the reader:

Shame on you, you arrogant person, that you do not take care to provide yourself with some suitable books, which you can buy for a small amount of money, so that you can extract from them and learn the things that make you prideful, because you spend and waste much more money on the devilish items with which you strengthen and adorn your pride. There are also many books in which fables or other worldly stories are contained; such books are not what we are discussing here. Man, if you can read, you can buy for very little money such books as we are discussing here, from which you can read the will of God, so that the light does not shine uselessly on your days [i.e., so that you use the light that is given to you during your lifetime]. For Holy Scripture is like a light by which we poor sinners can find the path to eternal life.<sup>108</sup>

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the list of examples is staggering.

<sup>105</sup> On plenaries (lectionaries) see Paul Pietsch, *Evangelij und Epistel Teutsch: die gedruckten hochdeutschen Perikopenbücher (Plenarien) 1473–1523: Beiträge zur Kenntnis der Wiegendrucke, zur Geschichte des deutschen Schrifttums und der deutschen Sprache, insbesondere der Bibelverdeutschung und der Bibelsprache* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1927), and Winfried Kämpfer, *Studien zu den gedruckten mittelniederdeutschen Plenarien* (Münster: Böhlau-Verlag, 1954).

<sup>106</sup> These included the German Psalter (*Salter to dude mit der vtblegginge*) of 1493, the Lübeck *Totentanz* (Dance of Death) texts of 1463 and especially the printed Dance of Death books of 1489/96, the 1520 Dance of Death (based on an older model), and the 1496 *Speygel der Leyen* (Mirror of the Laity): O. Schwencke, *Ein Kreis spätmittelalterlicher Erbauungsschriftsteller in Lübeck*, 26.

<sup>107</sup> Schwencke, *Kreis*, 29, from the 1492 plenary.

<sup>108</sup> “Scheme dy, du homodige mynsche, dattu nicht vlyt deyst, dath du dy schaffest welke ghenochlike boke, de du umme ringe ghelt tuegen macht, unde mochtest dar uth sughen unde leren de dynghe, de dy to othmode mochten reysyghen, wenthe du doch vele meer gheldes uthghyfst unde vorspyldest to den duuelschen stucken, dar du dynen homoed mede starkest unde tzyrest ... Dar werden ock vele boke ghemaket, dar fabulen efte andere wertlike ystorien ynne staen; alsodane boke werden hir nicht gemenet. Men kanstu lesen, so machstu umme eyn ghans ringe ghelt

The Basel plenary (*Evangelienbuch*) of 1514<sup>109</sup> recommends reading scripture aloud after the Sunday sermon and at dinner among the family, and says that there ought to be no man who does not have a copy of the holy gospel with him in his house.<sup>110</sup> While this was a sales pitch in the preface to the plenary, finding and buying one of the 102 editions of plenaries<sup>111</sup> cannot have been especially difficult. This plenary also notes

If you are a pious person, hear the word of God and do not disdain it, if you do not want to suffer eternal misery [hunger]. Even though you have books in your house, the Gospels or other spiritual books, that is no reason to neglect the word of God, as you are required to listen to it for the sake of your soul's salvation.<sup>112</sup>

The *Sonderlich nützlich und trostlich Buchlin* (Leipzig, 1508) and the 1509 *Weibegärtlein* (now lost)<sup>113</sup> recommended to the faithful to read the scriptures for themselves in a spirit of humility (noting that if you read them in a spirit of pride, they will be hurtful to you). The 1513 *Himmelstür* admonished its readers:

All that you hear in sermons or through other modes of instruction ... should incite you to read with piety and humility the holy Scriptures and Bibles, which are now translated into German, and printed and distributed in large numbers, either

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wol dy de boke schaffen, de hir ghemenet, dar du den willen godes uth lesen unde leren machst, uppe dat dy dyt lycht nicht vorgeues en luchte in dynen dagen. Wente de hilghe schryft wert ghelikent eyner luchten, dar by wy armen sunders mogen wandern na deme ewyghen leuende.” 1492 Plenary, cited in Wolfgang Stammer (ed), *Spätlesse des Mittelalters II. Religiöses Schrifttum* (Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag, 1965), 62–63.

<sup>109</sup> See Pietsch, *Evangelij und Epistel*, 233f.

<sup>110</sup> Johannes Janssen, *Geschichte des deutschen Volkes*, I, 74; see also the English translation: *History of the German People at the close of the Middle Ages*, trans. M.A. Mitchell and A.M. Christie (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1905, 2 vols.): I, 54.

<sup>111</sup> Janssen I, 74; English 54.

<sup>112</sup> “Bist du ein frummer mensch, hör das wort gottes und verschmahe es nit, wiltu nit leyden den ewigen hunger. Ob schon du hast bücher in deinem hauß, die ewangelia oder ander geistliche bücher, darumb solt du nit verseumen das wort gottes, wann du bist es schuldig zu hören bey deiner selen heyl.” Cited from Stammer, *Spätlesse*, 63.

<sup>113</sup> Janssen I, 80–81; English 59. Janssen cites the reference and text from an article by Franz Falk in *Der Katholik* (sometimes known as the *Mainzer Katholik*), 1907 (2), 217. Deanesly seems to have confused the 1509 (?) *Würrgärtlein* (little herb garden) with the *Weibegärtlein* (sacred little garden); *Lollard Bibles*, 129.

in their entirety or in part, and which you can purchase for very little money.<sup>114</sup>

Indeed, they were widely available, along with at least 22 German editions of the psalms before 1509, and 25 of the epistles and gospels before 1518.<sup>115</sup> In his famous *Manuale curatorum* (see Milway, as above),<sup>116</sup> Ulrich Surgant urged preachers, after reading the Gospel in church, to say

This is the meaning of the words of the Holy Gospel. ... I say deliberately 'the meaning of the words' because the Evangelists have been printed in the German language and one translates thus, the other thus, and the laypeople, who have read the Gospel at home before [the service] could then say 'In my book it is different from what the preacher says', as though he had read it incorrectly.<sup>117</sup>

By 1515, a German preacher could complain of people who said they had the Scriptures in their own hands and can know and interpret themselves what is necessary for salvation, and do not need the church and pope.<sup>118</sup> The cat was obviously already out of

<sup>114</sup> "Alles, was die heylige Kirche lehrt, alles, was du in Predigen horest und in anderen Unterweysungen horest und liesest, was in geystlichen Büchern geschrieben steet, was du singest zu Gottes Lob und Ere, was du betest zu diner Sele Seligkeit, und was du lidest in Widderwertikaiten und Trübsal, alles so dich anreizen zu lesen mit Frumheit und Demütikait in den heiligen Schriften und Bibeln, als sy yetzund in dutsche Zungen gesetzt werden und getruckt und usgestreut werden in gar groszer Zal gantz oder in Teilen, und als du sy umb wenig geld yetzund keuffen magst." Fol. 19; cited in Janssen I, 77–78; English, 56; I have emended the translation somewhat. The German capitalization seems to be of the nineteenth century.

<sup>115</sup> Deanesly cites only four known instances of English laypeople, from 1399 to 1474, who owned either vernacular Bible texts or a Bible History, noting that in England, there is little evidence other than that of Thomas More for lay ownership of vernacular Bibles after 1408. Deanesly, 130.

<sup>116</sup> *Manuale curatorum praedicandi praebens modum, tam latino quam vulgari sermone practice illuminatum...*, the first printed edition of which is Basel: Michael Furter, 1503, cited by Janssen with extensive scholarly bibliography in *Geschichte*, 41, note 1.

<sup>117</sup> This passage cited by Janssen, *Geschichte*, 82, note 5 from p. 81: "Dis ist der Synn der Worte des heyligen Evangelii. Ich sage absichtlich ... der Synn der Worte, deßhalb, weil die Evangelien in der deutschen Sprache gedruckt sind und der Eine so, der Andere anders übersetzt, und die Laien, die zu Hause vorher das Evangelium gelesen haben dann sagen könnten: 'In meinem Buche steht nicht so, wie der Prediger sagt,' gleich, als obe er unrichtig gelesen hätte." Text reproduced as slightly modernized by Janssen.

<sup>118</sup> "Wir hant ietz die heilig Geschrift selbs in Handen und können

the bag, despite the public and printed calls by the Straßburg preacher Geyler of Kaysersberg<sup>119</sup> and the futile attempts by the archbishop of Mainz, Berthold von Henneberg, in 1485 to ensure that the Bible be interpreted to the laity correctly and to name particular offices in Mainz, Erfurt and Frankfurt to supervise printing.<sup>120</sup> Such decrees and attempts at censorship of Holy Scripture in the Empire seem to have had little or no effect, as we have already noted.

## 7. LINGUISTIC QUALITY AND THE CRITERIA OF IMPORTANCE

The other major argument of this type is that the quality of late-medieval translations of the Vulgate was unsatisfactory: apparently not much more than word-for-word renderings interspersed with material from the various glosses; and therefore had to be transcended by not only philologically more accurate translations, but aesthetically more pleasing wording or diction.<sup>121</sup>

Wilhelm Walther's assertion (a corollary of his 'original translation' argument) of the inferiority of the language and translations in earlier printed German Bibles relates mainly to a rather old-fashioned Lutheran 'Biblical literalism'. Other Protestant scholars such as Adolf Risch echoed Walther's strictures regarding the early printed Bibles' language and inaccuracy, while praising the relative fluidity and contribution to the German literary language of the (manuscript) German *Historienbibel*.<sup>122</sup> But errors in the earlier translations, while sometimes hair-raising, and occasional wooden diction do not on their own invalidate the experience of those who read and applied the text in their everyday life. The aesthetic and philological quality of the German Bible probably was not the top priority of its noble, burgher and cloistered readers.

selbs wissen und ußlegen, was zur Seligkeit Not, und bedorffent nit dazu Kirche und Papst." Johannes Janssen, *Geschichte* I, 797; Janssen's capitalization.

<sup>119</sup> Janssen, *Geschichte*, 797–799.

<sup>120</sup> Janssen, *Geschichte*, 798; citing Valentin Ferdinand von Gudenus, *Codex diplomaticus anecdotorum, res Moguntinas...* (5 vols., 1743–1768); vol. 4 continued by Friedrich Karl von Buri (Frankfurt and Leipzig: Stoehr, s.d.), p. 469; the five volumes were published by four different publishers in three different places); Deanesly, *Lollard Bible*, 125–125, as above.

<sup>121</sup> See, for example, Pietsch, cited above (from Rost, *Die Bibel im Mittelalter*, 311); Gerber, *Die Bibel*, 10; Volz, *D. Martin Luthers*, I, 41, as cited above in note 89: "While the common people of the later Middle Ages drew their knowledge of the Bible mainly from sermons or 'plenaries' and postills, the contemporary German Bible was, by comparison, very far from being the sort of truly popular work—because of its high price and serious linguistic failings—that Martin Luther's unique translation would be."

<sup>122</sup> Risch, *Luthers Bibelverdeutschung*, 7–9.



Thomas Kaufmann has suggested that although the Reformation and ‘its’ Luther-Bible were a world-historical *Umbruch* (break, watershed; perhaps from the perspective of a German Lutheran they are), the late medieval vernacular Bible and the humanist concern for original texts, beginning with Erasmus, were a *precondition* and even an *preliminary advertising campaign* (*Werbevorlauf*) for the Reformation—but not its *causes*.<sup>123</sup> Fair enough: I would argue the same thing if I were weighing preconditions and causes for the Reformation. Kaufmann is concerned with classical questions regarding historical contingency; he wants to avoid the ‘backwards-looking prophecy’ that historians so favour when trying to deduce effects from what they would like to have been *necessary* causes; he sees Luther (with Heiko Oberman<sup>124</sup>) at the end of time grasping for solutions and finding them in the Bible; and he sees Luther and *his* Bible as decisive in the *articulation* of the Reformation.<sup>125</sup> But this remains at the level of meta-narrative. Translated down into the textual, Kaufmann’s Lutherocentric and Bibliocentric stance blocks our view of the relationship between Luther’s *German* Bible and earlier German Bibles.<sup>126</sup>

Kaufmann’s argument about biblical humanism makes of Luther’s relatively broadly comprehensible (proto-)standard form of the language a retroactive argument for the need for his translation. Again, we have little or no reason to suppose that the buyers of German printed Bibles before 1522 groaned at the ‘stilted and unnatural’ German of the sacred translations they so eagerly bought—had that been the case, we would hear about it *before* the Reformation. The humanist concerns at work in such critiques need to be taken seriously, but they should not be confused with

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<sup>123</sup> Kaufmann, “Vorreformatorische Laienbibel,” 170. See Kantzenbach’s report of the assessment of the great Bible translator (collaborator of Martin Buber) Franz Rosenzweig (1886–1929) of the Reformation and Luther’s Bible as a world-historical event: “Die Reformation ist das erste deutsche Ereignis, das in die Welt hinausgewirkt hat und nicht wieder aus ihr geschwunden ist. Seitdem ist das deutsche Schicksal in das Weltschicksal verwoben. Luthers Übersetzungstat bezeichnet diesen Punkt.” Volz, *Martin Luthers deutsche Bibel*, 9. Kantzenbach wrongly attributes this statement to 1937, which is when Rosenzweig’s *Kleinere Schriften* were published at Berlin by Schocken. The Germanocentric character of this sentiment as uttered by a Jew was possible in the period before Rosenzweig’s death in 1929, but would hardly have seemed natural coming from him in 1937.

<sup>124</sup> *Luther: Man between God and the Devil* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

<sup>125</sup> Kaufmann, “Vorreformatorische Laienbibel,” esp. 170–171.

<sup>126</sup> For an interesting variant of this argument, see Heribert Smolinsky, “The Bible and its exegesis in the controversies about reform and Reformation,” Benjamin Uffenheimer and Henning Graf Reventlow (eds), *Creative Biblical exegesis: Christian and Jewish hermeneutics through the centuries* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1988), [115] – 130; here 125, bottom.

late-medieval layfolks' ideas about vernacular scripture—nor, for that matter, with official ecclesiastical ideas about it. In Erika Rummel's perceptive analysis of the issues at stake between scholastic and humanist academics, and of the 'dialogue of the deaf' the scholastics were engaged in, one sees how this argument worked at the time: late fifteenth-century humanists challenged scholastic philosophers and theologians to recognise the authority of the Hebrew and Greek originals of Scripture, while the scholastics insisted on not merely the accuracy, but even the primacy of Jerome's divinely inspired Latin Vulgate.<sup>127</sup> In 1939 and again in 1965, Rost pointed out the many passages Luther used from the late-medieval German translations.<sup>128</sup> I would evoke Ranke's remark about 'dry tinder' to suggest that both the Erasmian and Lutheran concern for the original languages, however imperfectly implemented, were themselves the result of the pre-existing enthusiasm and widespread knowledge of the Bible in German.

The debate over linguistic quality became fossilised in the argument that only the Luther Bible was a philologically adequate substitute, indeed the first ever, for the original texts because Luther had referred to them in making his text. Heinz Blanke has argued that Luther's knowledge of Hebrew hardly exceeded the rudiments.<sup>129</sup> In Luther's translations, philological accuracy was frequently a casualty of what Luther might have called theological accuracy—or Christological translation, 'was Christum treibet'<sup>130</sup>—and of an aesthetic of fluency and currency: 'dem gemeinen Mann aufs Maul schauen', taking one's example from the common speech of ordinary people. Neither Christian theology nor populism accords well with learned Hebrew philology, however. The principle of following common speech was part of Luther's central principle of interpretation that Biblical texts were in and of themselves clear, with one easily understood message—often the literal one, but then again, sometimes a hidden, Christological one. Any scholar who has taken the trouble to learn some Hebrew and read a psalm or two, or any of the visionary passages in the Book of Reve-

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<sup>127</sup> Erika Rummel, *The Humanist-Scholastic Debate in the Renaissance and Reformation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

<sup>128</sup> *Die Bibel im Mittelalter*, 312–313, and Rost, *2000 Jahre Bibel*, 159.

<sup>129</sup> Heinz Blanke, "Die Abteilung „Die deutsche Bibel“ in der Weimarer Lutherausgabe," *D. Martin Luthers Werke. Sonderedition der kritischen Weimarer Ausgabe. Begleitheft zur Deutschen Bibel* (Weimar: Böhlau, 2000), 25–60, 31 f; see also Leppin, "„Biblia, das ist die ganze Heilige Schrift deutsch“," as above, note 45. For an older and more optimistic view of Luther's Hebrew skills, see Siegfried Raeder, "Luther als Ausleger and Übersetzer der Heiligen Schrift," Helmar Junghans (ed), *Leben und Werk Martin Luthers von 1526 bis 1546. Festgabe zu seinem 500. Geburtstag*, (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1983), 2 vols., I, 253–78.

<sup>130</sup> Gow, "Christian Colonialism: Luther's Exegesis of Hebrew Scripture," Bast and Gow (eds), *Continuity and Change*, 229–252.

lation in Greek, generally admits that poetic or prophetic diction is not often plain, clear or easily understood. Luther was opposing—as he often did, in a rhetorically enhanced or hyperbolic way—a ‘democratic’ principle of interpretation (or so he has been credited with doing) to the medieval Church’s ‘teaching authority’ (*magisterium*) or control of the interpretation of Scripture, an authority that allowed easier access to the letters of Paul than to Revelations, to the historical books of the Hebrew Bible than to the prophets. It was important to Luther that his view of Scripture carry the day for programmatic reasons: clear meaning justified universal access and undermined the Church’s *magisterium* over interpretation—regardless of how much he would later chew on, (re-)invest with Christological significance, or simply gloss over knotty Hebrew passages in his Lectures on Genesis (1535–1545).<sup>131</sup> The trouble, of course, is that if a text is (held to be) clear, no-one will misunderstand it except through stupidity or malice—precisely the failings Luther would consistently attribute to his opponents, indeed to all who interpreted Scripture differently than he did: Jews, papists, ‘Anabaptists’/Baptists, and other ‘sectarians’, enthusiasts and muddle-headed people.<sup>132</sup>

## 8. IDEOLOGY AND OBLIVION

The dozens of fine empirical studies, books, articles and editions concerning pre-Reformation German Bibles that appeared before WWII, especially in German and in Dutch, are now essentially invisible, and have hardly ever been cited in the work of American or European church historians, historians of economic development and trade, historians of politics, or even historians of theology. There are many possible reasons for this neglect, and I shall sketch just a few. Much of that older scholarship was written by specialists in German or Dutch literature and language—nationalist antiquarians, perhaps, but also linguists. Neither ‘old-fashioned’ confessional church history as it continued in Germany and the Low Countries after WWII, nor the relatively newer disciplines of economic and social history had any interest in the bibliography of vernacular Bibles and/or biblical texts in the Middle Ages. From the perspective of secular materialists, who had come to dominate the historical profession by 1970, religion was supposed to wither up and disappear, and thus even the history of religion was in eclipse in the secular post-war world. Theologians were understandably preoccupied with the evil that had so recently convulsed

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<sup>131</sup> See Heinz Blanke, “Die deutsche Bibel,” 31 f.; and Siegfried Raeder, *Das Hebräische bei Luther, untersucht bis zum Ende der 1. Psalmenvorlesung* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1961).

<sup>132</sup> See, for example, Hayo Gerdes, *Luthers Streit mit den Schwärmern um das rechte Verständnis des Gesetzes Mose* (Göttingen: Göttinger Verlagsanstalt, 1955).

Europe, with the legacy of two thousand years of bad relations with Jews and Judaism, and with the depressingly close relationship of German Christians, especially Lutherans, to Nazism. Protestant Church history was (and generally still is) about the Reformation, and perhaps about its ‘forerunners’.

The valuable books of Franz Falk, Erich Zimmermann, and to a slightly lesser extent of Hans Rost, the glorious editorial and bibliographical work of the Deutsches Bibel-Archiv under Hans Vollmer at Hamburg, and the superbly detailed work of C.C. de Bruin are essentially absent from post-war treatments of both medieval and Reformation book culture, religion and the Reformation. Rudolf Hirsch had to practically re-invent the study of early printing in the 1940s, and work on the still-fragmentary *Gesamtkatalog der Wiegendrucke* (the most important bibliographic repertoire of incunabula) was very much slowed down by forty years of socialist shortages in East Berlin. It is also important to remember that scholarly books and journals published between 1930 and 1950 were issued in ever smaller print runs, due to paper and other restrictions, and that most of those published in Nazi Germany did not find their way to foreign libraries. Moreover, such works were suspect both to foreigners before and during the war, and to everyone after the war. Even Margaret Deansely’s magisterial *The Lollard Bible and other medieval versions* (Cambridge, 1920) has been largely ignored, probably because the title announces a narrow focus on a failed English Bible tradition (though the book delivered a good deal more than that).

On the other hand, a huge amount of effort has been devoted, since the war, to the study of the vernacular Bible *since* the Reformation: the Luther Bible itself, the Coverdale, Tyndale, Douai and King James versions, and various Protestant translations into other languages. The Vulgate and learned uses of the Bible have received a modicum of attention, mainly from scholars working in traditional ‘elite culture’ paradigms at American, German, French and British universities.<sup>133</sup> The volume edited by Lobrichon and Riché in 1984, *Le Moyen-Age et la Bible* (cited above), provides excellent general coverage. For the later period, Christopher Ocker’s contribution to the *New Cambridge History of Christianity*, “The Bible in the Fifteenth Century”, provides a magisterial survey of all the relevant points.

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<sup>133</sup> Beryl Smalley’s work, especially *The study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1985 [3rd. rev. ed.]; orig. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1941), helped to shape the field in English and exercised immense influence; a more recent giant in this field, Gilbert Dahan, published a substantial work in 1999: *L’exégèse chrétienne de la Bible en Occident médiévale. XIIe-XIVe siècle* (Paris Editions du Cerf, 1999); the accumulated bibliography is too large to list here.

Relatively little recent work—and almost none in English—has addressed pre-Reformation vernacular Scripture. Intellectual historians and historians of theology have almost completely ignored vernacular Scripture because it was not read or at least not cited by the figures who are the subjects of such work.<sup>134</sup> It is thus all the more noteworthy that Thomas Kaufmann argues that the popularity and distribution, especially in the Empire, of late medieval vernacular Scripture was part of a set of preconditions that helped shape the Reformation. He ties the humanist movement and its pious step-child, biblical humanism, to medieval vernacular Scripture as one of two such preconditions, whereas one might just as easily argue that biblical humanism was as much a result of lay Biblicism as the Luther Bible was, though perhaps only a mediate result. Kaufmann has also used the analogy of watershed or breaking point (*Umbruch*) to describe the Reformation. He avoids simplistic models of causality and thus goes much farther than previous generations of Lutheran Reformation historians have ventured in placing the Reformation—the necessary center of their historical interest, after all—in a less parallax-inducing and larger historical framework. He retains, if implicitly, the notion that the Luther Bible itself was a type of watershed (a theological one) within the watershed of the Reformation. If the Luther Bible and the Reformation were to lose their numinous and watershed-like qualities, Protestantism itself would seem not to have been quite so earth-shaking, quite so ‘world-historical’ in nature. Kaufmann cannot quite shake the Wilhelm Walthers and the more celebrated recent Reformationists (he cites their work lavishly) whose professional position, *raison d’être historien* and other personal engagements rest to some extent upon there having been a Reformation, and upon it having been a world-historical event characterized by world-historical changes. I would like to assume the voice of Wilhelm Krafft, the iconoclastic nineteenth-century Lutheran theologian, for a moment, and ask if the events and personalities and ideas of the Reformation would not still be interesting and worth studying even if we were to stop insisting on their supposed world-historical character. It is time to stop considering the Luther Bible as a watershed. It may have become one—or at least have come to seem like one *ex eventu*; but that does not help us to understand it in its original context.

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<sup>134</sup> See for example G.R. Evans, *Old Arts and New Theology: The Beginnings of Theology as an Academic Discipline* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980).