

LUTHER'S CONDEMNATION OF THE ROSTOCK NEW TESTAMENT

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It may seem a strange paradox that Martin Luther, champion of the cause for the vernacular Bible, should have condemned a German Bible translation of his day. Yet this is precisely what occurred late in 1529 as the Reformer initiated a chain of correspondence which led to the interruption and cutting short of work on a New Testament being produced by the Brethren of the Common Life at Rostock. Luther's efforts to suppress this publication were so successful that its extant representations are few indeed. Only four nearly complete copies, plus some additional fragments, are known to us.¹

I

Before we turn our attention to the historical circumstances surrounding the printing and condemnation of this Rostock New Testament, it will be well to give a brief description of the work itself. The publication is an octavo edition. The print of its main text is roughly comparable to what we call "pica," while that used for glosses and other additions is

¹ Three of the nearly complete copies are in Germany: at the State Library in Stuttgart, the University Library in Rostock, and the State Library in Schwerin. The fourth copy is in America, at the Harper Library of the University of Chicago. Regarding locations of the copies in Germany, as well as the fragments, see Carl Meltz, "Die Drucke der Michaelisbrüder zu Rostock 1476 bis 1530," in *Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift der Universität Rostock*, V (1955-56), 246, 247; and Conrad Borchling and Bruno Claussen, comps., *Niederdeutsche Bibliographie* (Neumünster, 1931-36), No. 1059 (I, col. 473). Selections from the Lemgo fragments have been published in Ernst Weissbrodt, *Das niederdeutsche Neue Testament nach Emsers Übersetzung Rostock 1530* (Bonn, 1912). An Introduction on p. 2 of this work furnishes some information about other fragments as well.

slightly smaller. There is profuse marginal space, but much of this is taken up with various kinds of notes. The Biblical text itself, from Matthew through the Book of Acts, where the publication ends, is given on the recto and verso of leaves numbered from 1 to 248. In addition, there are some sixteen preliminary leaves, containing the following items: title-page, copy of Emser's epitaph, general foreword explaining the contents of the work, Duke George's foreword or "privilege" to the 1527 edition of Emser's New Testament,² and a list of differences to be found in two particular printings of Luther's version.

The foregoing description represents the contents as known from our most nearly complete copy, located at the State Library of Württemberg in Stuttgart, Germany. A copy at the University of Chicago Library lacks the preliminary leaves containing the list of differences in the two Lutheran editions. It apparently lacks some other leaves as well, and much of it is sadly mutilated.³ There is some question as to whether even the Stuttgart copy is complete. The foreword explaining contents indicates that the preliminary pages should contain three items which are not in evidence in any of the extant materials: a second ducal authorization or "privilege," a register for the Church Year, and an introduction from St. Jerome. These portions may or may not have been printed.

The page style of the Brethren's Testament is as follows: The main, central portion of the page is devoted to the presentation of the Low-German translation of the Biblical text. Interspersed with the text are notations designated as "glosses," and at the beginnings of the chapters are other notations called "summaries." The page margins toward the binding

² More will be said below concerning this New Testament.

³ One strange pattern which occurs with respect to leaf after leaf in this copy is the removal of a vertical strip from the center of the leaf. In reality, the University of Chicago copy might be spoken of more correctly as a "collection," for it was compiled from various bindings by Wilhelm Walther.

edge contain capital letters as paragraph indicators, and the outer margins contain such items as scriptural cross-references, notations of Luther's renderings, and references to the Church Year.

II

We must now ask, Who were these Brethren of the Common Life at Rostock—the publishers of this New Testament—and why did Luther condemn their Bible translation?

The Rostock Brethren of the Common Life were part of a significant spiritual and intellectual movement known as the "Devotio Moderna."⁴ This movement, a reform movement within the Roman Catholic communion, had originated in the Low Countries toward the end of the fourteenth century, and from thence had spread into Germany during the fifteenth century. The Brethren house at Rostock had its beginnings in the year 1462 when three Brothers from Münster arrived in Rostock and began to live the Common Life there.⁵ This Rostock establishment of the Brethren came soon to be known as the "House at the Green Garden," and its mem-

⁴ The first comprehensive work in English on this movement is that of Albert Hyma, *The Christian Renaissance: A History of the "Devotio Moderna"* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1924). A more recent work on the same subject by Professor Hyma is *The Brethren of the Common Life* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1950). The latter is useful for its expansion on earlier information and for a particularly interesting discussion on the question of the authorship of the *Imitation of Christ*. In European literature on the subject, a recent general treatment is that of R. R. Post, *De Moderne Devotie* (Amsterdam, 1950). For further bibliography, see J. M. E. Dols, *Bibliographie der Moderne Devotie* (Nijmegen, 1941).

⁵ A comprehensive treatment of the Devotio Moderna in Germany has been presented by William M. Landeen, *The Devotio Moderna in Germany in the Fifteenth Century: A Study of the Brethren of the Common Life* (Ph. D. Dissertation, University of Michigan, 1939). Landeen has published the results of this and further research in a series of articles in *Research Studies of the State College of Washington* (hereafter cited as *RSSCW*). The portion of this series dealing with the Rostock Brethren house is "The *Devotio Moderna* in Germany (Part IV)," *RSSCW*, XXII (1954), 57-71. This section represents material not presented in the original study.

bers derived somewhat later the name "Michaelisbrüder."⁶

About the year 1475 these Brethren of the Common Life at Rostock instituted a printing press at their establishment.⁷ It is interesting to notice that a large number of the works issuing from this press during its operation under the auspices of the Brethren—that is, from about 1475 to 1532—were in the vernacular. Most of these works were in German, but some were in Danish.⁸

The pioneer leaders of the "Devotio Moderna" had favored and encouraged the use of the vernacular. Gerard Groote (d. 1384), the founder of the movement, translated portions of Scripture into his native Dutch language,⁹ and Gerard Zerbolt of Zutphen (d. 1398), an early writer for the Brethren of the Common Life, went so far as to produce a book in which he presented reasons why laymen should have the Bible in the vernacular.¹⁰ In view of such facts, it is hardly

⁶ The "Green Garden" was the name of the first parcel of ground placed at the disposition of the Brethren in Rostock, and even though other premises were occupied by them later, the name derived from this original location stayed with the House. The name "Michaelisbrüder" seems to have been connected with the fact that the Brethren's new church, completed by about 1488, was dedicated to St. Michael the Archangel.

⁷ The authoritative treatment concerning this press is Meltz, *op. cit.* The work of Meltz supersedes that of all earlier investigators, including Lisch and Hofmeister, and corrects in many places the results achieved by them.

⁸ See esp. the listing given in *ibid.*, pp. 243-247. Of the 32 16th-century works noted there as having been printed by the Brethren (this means omission of Nos. 31 and 57-60), about two-thirds were entirely or partly in Low German. And five other of these publications were in Danish.

⁹ See, e.g., Albert Hyma, "Een Vergeten Werk van Geert Groote," in *Nederlandsch Archief voor Kerkgeschiedenis*, XL (1954), 87-95; and Willem Moll, *Geert Groote's Dietsche Vertalingen* (Amsterdam, 1880), pp. 53-77. In the last-mentioned work, note also pp. 78-115, and the introductory discussion on pp. 1-49.

¹⁰ See Albert Hyma, "The 'De Libris Teutonicalibus' by Gerard Zerbolt of Zutphen," in *Nederlandsch Archief voor Kerkgeschiedenis*, XVII (1924), 42-70; also Hyma, *Renaissance to Reformation* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1951), pp. 578-580.

strange that the Catholic Brothers at Rostock should undertake to publish a Low-German edition of the New Testament.

Luther's opposition to the Brethren's Testament was evidently caused neither by objection to the language used, for he himself favored use of the vernacular, nor by opposition to the Brethren themselves, for the Reformer evidenced a favorable attitude toward the Brotherhood of the Common Life. In January of 1532, for example, he came to the defense of the Brethren at Herford when these were involved in difficulties with the Protestant city authorities there.¹¹ And it must also be remembered that Luther himself had spent one year of his youth with the Brethren of the Common Life at Magdeburg, and so had been able to obtain first-hand knowledge about their manner of life and their piety.¹² Apparently his first contact with the Brethren had left a lasting and favorable impression upon him.¹³

The true basis for Luther's opposition to the New Testament which was being produced by the Brethren of the Common Life at Rostock is revealed in two letters he penned in November of 1529. The first, dated on the 23rd of that month, was a request made to his own prince, the Elector John of Saxony.¹⁴

¹¹ "Such monasteries and Brethren houses please me beyond measure" were among Luther's words to the Herford city council. See Weimar ed., *Briefwechsel*, VI, p. 255 (Letter No. 1900). The story of the Reformer's relationship with the Brethren in Herford has now been brought to light in a well-documented account by William M. Landeen, "Martin Luther and the *Devotio Moderna* in Herford", in Kenneth A. Strand, ed., *The Dawn of Modern Civilization: Studies in Renaissance, Reformation and Other Topics Presented to Honor Albert Hyma* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1962), pp. 145-164.

¹² Concerning Luther's stay at Magdeburg, see Landeen, "The *Devotio Moderna* in Germany (Part III)," *RSSCW*, XXI (1953), 302-308. Also cf. Albert Hyma, *New Light on Martin Luther* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1957), p. 12.

¹³ Luther must have been overjoyed too, of course, by the Herford Brethren's adoption of "the gospel," an event of which he makes mention in his letter to the council of that city. See Weimar ed., *Briefwechsel*, VI, p. 254: Letter 1900.

¹⁴ See Weimar ed., *Briefwechsel*, V, pp. 183, 184. The entry is No. 1497.

In this letter, Luther stated that according to word he had received from several pious burghers of Lübeck some "Lollbrothers" at Rostock were in the process of printing a Saxon translation of Jerome Emser's Testament. For his own part, he could tolerate the text of Emser's publication, for it was essentially the Reformer's own translation. However, this Emserian Testament had been so knavishly poisoned with Emser's glosses and annotations that it could bear no fruit, but do only harm. Luther's request therefore to the Elector was that the latter would make intercession with Duke Henry of Mecklenburg, one of the rulers of the Duchy in which Rostock was located.¹⁵

Upon receiving word from John's counsellors that the Elector was away, Luther hastily prepared the second letter of which we have spoken. This was addressed directly to Duke Henry, and bore the date of November 27.¹⁶ In it Luther repeated the information sent to John, and besought Henry to honor the Gospel of Christ and to rescue all souls as far as possible by not allowing the printing of the Brethren's New Testament.

Thus, Luther's objection to the Brethren's project was based on his having heard that they were printing Jerome Emser's version. But the offensive portion was not so much Emser's rendition of the Biblical text as it was the glosses and other additions.

Though Luther had not himself seen the Brethren's translation (as evidenced from the correspondence itself), the report he had received seems to have been quite accurate. The very title-page of their Low-German Testament announces it to be "The New Testament as translated into German by the Highly Learned Jerome Emser . . ." And the contents indicate the same, both as to the text itself and as to the other

¹⁵ The two dukes of Mecklenburg at this time were Henry V and Albert VII.

¹⁶ See Weimar ed., *Briefwechsel*, V, pp. 187, 188. The entry is No. 1499.

items included. Moreover, the page style of the Brethren's work is strikingly similar to that of the 1528 and 1529 Leipzig editions of Emser's version.¹⁷

But just who was this Jerome Emser and what can we say of his New Testament?¹⁸ Emser, a Swabian nobleman, was at the time of the publication of the first edition of his Testament, in August of 1527, a private secretary and commissioner for Duke George of Albertine Saxony, in whose service he had been since 1505. His earlier education had been acquired at Tübingen, Basel and Leipzig, and he had taught for a short while at Erfurt, where he claimed to have had Luther as a student.¹⁹ After the Leipzig Disputation of June 27 to July 16, 1519, a fiery literary feud developed between Emser and

¹⁷ These editions, both of which were published by V. Schuman, have glosses interspersed with the Biblical text, use chapter summaries, and contain marginal references to the Church Year calendar and to Luther's rendition. In these respects these publications and the Brethren's Testament are precisely alike. On the other hand, the first Emserian edition, published in 1527 by W. Stöckel at Dresden, has its glosses in the margins and lacks both the chapter summaries and the marginal notations referring to the Church Year and to Luther's rendition. Some other High-German editions published in 1529 by H. Fuchs in Cologne and by J. Fabrum (Faber) in Freiburg i. B. are more similar to the Leipzig editions and to the Brethren's Testament. But here there is notable dissimilarity as well, inasmuch as the Cologne edition contains lengthy "annotations" at the end of its Bible chapters, and the Freiburg publication has its glosses in a sort of appendix at the end of the work.

¹⁸ On the career of Jerome Emser, see esp. Gustav Kawerau, "Hieronymus Emser," in *Schriften des Vereins für Reformationsgeschichte*, No. 61 (Halle, 1898), 1-110.

¹⁹ Most of Emser's work toward the Baccalaureate was done in Tübingen, where he had matriculated in July, 1493. He actually took his Bachelor's examination, however, in Basel, in the winter semester of 1497. At Basel he also earned a Master's degree, in 1499. At the University of Leipzig he pursued studies in the theological field, being awarded a Bachelor's degree in the theological faculty in January, 1505. His brief period of teaching at the University of Erfurt was during the summer semester of 1504, and his claim to have had Luther as a student was made in his *Hieronymi Emsers Quadruplica auff Luters Jungst gethane antwort/sein reformation belangend* (Leipzig, 1521), fol. Giii, verso. It has been republished in Ludwig Enders, *Luther und Emser* (Halle a. S., 1890, 1892), II, 179.

Luther. And when the latter issued his "September Testament" of 1522, Emser hastened (in 1523) to publish a detailed and incisive critique of it.²⁰ Then some four years later Emser issued his own rival New Testament.²¹ A comparison of this Testament with Luther's reveals that Emser simply revised Luther's text, often with the obvious purpose of bringing certain of the Lutheran readings into harmony with the Vulgate and with Catholic interpretation of Scripture.²²

The glosses in the Emserian publication were of quite another stamp, however. Though a number of these were historical explanations and the like—and thus must have been innocuous even from Luther's point of view—, others were critical of the Reformer and his teachings. For example, Emser's gloss following²³ Mt 3: 2 includes the words, "Take heed for the heretics, who despise penance and confession." Then a few verses further along, another gloss draws an analogy between the Jews boasting of Abraham and the

²⁰ The first edition of this critique was published by Wolfgang Stöckel in Leipzig in September, 1523. It bore the following title: *Auss was gründ vnnnd vrsach Luthers dolmatschüng / vber das nawe testament / dem gemeinē man billich vobotten worden sey*. A revised edition appeared the following year at Dresden, under the title, *Annotationes Hieronymi Emser vber Luthers naw Testamēt gebessert vnd emēdirt*.

²¹ The first edition (Dresden: Stöckel, 1527) was entitled *Das naw testament nach lawt der Christlichē kirchen bewertē text / corrigirt / vñ widerumb zu recht gebracht*. The second edition (Leipzig: Schuman, 1528) was entitled *Das New Testamēt / So durch L. Emser sälligē vteuscht / vnd⁷ des Durch lewchtē Hochgebornē Furstē vñ herrē Herrē Georgē hertzogen zu Sachssen*. For reference to some other early editions, see note 17, above. Emser's death occurred on November 8, 1527, only a few months after the appearance of the first edition of his New Testament.

²² See the comparisons presented by Kawerau, *op. cit.*, pp. 67-70; also those furnished by the present writer in his *Reformation Bibles in the Crossfire: The Story of Jerome Emser, His Anti-Lutheran Critique and His Catholic Bible Version* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1961), pp. 101-110.

²³ *I.e.*, following the verse, as per the style used in the 1528 and 1529 Leipzig editions and in the Brethren's own Low-German translation. The first Emserian edition, as indicated in note 17, above, had its glosses in the page margins.

“heretics” of Christ. In the next chapter a gloss following verse 6 states that “here the devil leaves out a part of the Scripture, taking only what serves him, as his sons the heretics also do.” And in a gloss following Mt 7:20, we read that “every heretic is a bad tree, which brings no good fruit.” Such glosses must have seemed to the Reformer somewhat like a running commentary directed against the Reformation.

In addition to the glosses, some of the marginal notations may have been offensive to Luther too, especially the ones which pointed in a critical tone to his renditions of Scripture. Furthermore, in the rather popular 1529 Cologne edition of the Emserian New Testament there were lengthy sections of critical material bearing the designation “annotations.” These appeared at the end of various Bible chapters and represented excerpts from the second edition of Emser’s critique of Luther’s version.

It is possible that the Reformer may have had these “annotations” in mind as he penned his letters to Elector John and Duke Henry in November of 1529, for those letters specifically mention “annotations.” But if this was the case, the Brethren’s Testament must have been somewhat less objectionable than Luther had expected it to be, for the Brethren did not incorporate these particular extended critical notes in their edition. They did, however, present notations of Lutheran readings, and references to the places in the Emserian critique where such readings were challenged. Moreover, they did little or nothing to ameliorate the anti-Lutheran, anti-Reformation glosses.²⁴

III

Luther’s letter to the Reformation-minded Duke Henry brought quick results. On December 18, the very day on which Henry received the Reformer’s letter, the Duke sent

²⁴ A further brief word will be said about this below.

a dispatch to the Rostock city council.²⁵ In this communication he spoke of the Brethren's New Testament as "objectionable" and "not allowable." And he requested that the council would, with the threat of penalties, bring about the cessation of the Brethren's printing of the said Testament and also recall any copies which might already have been circulated. The council, itself favorable to the Reformation and under the influence of the strongly Protestant syndic John Oldendorp, took action forbidding the Brethren's project.

The Brethren did not give up easily, however. Their printer John Holt visited the court of Duke Albert VII of Mecklenburg, who was more Catholic-minded than was Henry.²⁶ Holt's trip, though apparently unproductive of tangible aid, must at least have given the Brethren moral support for the continuation of their undertaking. In any event, they decided to proceed—secretly—with their project. What the precise schedule of their printing was we do not know. Nor do we know the exact chronology of the delay or delays which they encountered. It does seem likely, however, that their partially completed New Testament did not issue from the press until early in 1532.²⁷ The final termination of their project appears to have been brought on by the city council's taking action against Holt, the printer, and Martin Hilleman, the rector of the Rostock Brethren house. These men were arrested because of their manifest non-compliance with the council's earlier restraining order. They were able to secure their

²⁵ This letter has been published in Friedrich Jenssen, *Emser's Neues Testament in niederdeutscher Übertragung* (Schwerin i. Mecklbg., 1933), pp. 6, 7.

²⁶ Concerning this trip, see, e.g., Jenssen, *op. cit.*, pp. 7, 8; and Landeen, "The *Devotio Moderna* in Germany (Part IV)," *RSSCW*, XXII (1954), 67.

²⁷ The date 1530 appears on the title-page, but is probably that for the woodcut used there. See the discussion in Otto Leuze, "Ein doppelt denkwürdiges Neues Testament in der Bibelsammlung der Württembergischen Landesbibliothek in Stuttgart," in *Besondere Beilage des Staats-Anzeigers für Württemberg*, No. 2 (1926), 33.

release only by swearing loyalty to the council, as the document containing their declaration indicates.²⁸

IV

Though the Brethren's New Testament was based primarily on the Emserian version, both as to text and glosses, an interesting fact is that the Brethren also used other German versions. Among these were a Low-German translation of Luther's New Testament, the Lübeck Bible of 1494 and possibly other sources.²⁹

While it may not seem strange that the Brethren should use the Lübeck Bible and other Catholic versions, how can we account for their use of a Lutheran version? Concerning this problem, Friedrich Jenssen has remarked that Emser himself had used Luther's version.³⁰ Such a comment, however, does not seem to shed light on the question. For we must remember that Emser was working under conditions quite different from the circumstances facing the Brethren. His was the task of providing a new Catholic Bible. The Brethren, on the other hand, already had one, and merely needed to translate it into Low German. What Emser apparently was trying to do was to "correct" the existing Lutheran text according to Catholic interpretation. What the Brethren were doing was just the opposite: they were "correcting" the now-existent and popular Catholic translation by reference to Luther's version!

Perhaps the most we can say regarding the reason for the Brethren's use of a Lutheran New Testament is that in all

²⁸ This document bears the date of June 28, 1532. It has been produced in full by Jenssen, *op. cit.*, pp. 8-10. The original is in the Rostock Stadt-Archiv.

²⁹ Jenssen, *op. cit.*, pp. 35-54, has furnished evidence that the Brethren used a Low-German Lutheran edition and the Lübeck version. The present writer would not be quite so hasty as Jenssen, however, in dismissing the Halberstadt Bible of 1522 and the Cologne Low-Saxon Bible of ca. 1480.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 44, 45.

likelihood some of the Rostock Brothers were at this time friendly to the Reformation forces.³¹ This was not the case, of course, with Hilleman, who showed a definitely hostile and non-cooperative attitude toward the city council. But a later rector, Henricus Arsenius, manifested a friendly spirit toward the Reformation party,³² and it may be that other Brothers with similar sentiments were already members of the "House at the Green Garden" at the time when work was begun on the Low-German Emserian Testament. If such were the case, we could well expect these Reformation-minded Brothers to have been responsible for securing the use of Luther's New Testament in the preparation of the Rostock translation.³³

But we must take care, on the other hand, not to over-emphasize the Brethren's use of a Lutheran New Testament. For even though they did revise a strikingly large number of the Emserian readings on the basis of the Lutheran version, their Testament was still definitely "Emserian." This is true of the text itself as a whole, especially in points where Emser

³¹ This possibility was suggested earlier, in my *A Reformation Paradox: The Condemned New Testament of the Rostock Brethren of the Common Life* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1960), p. 44. In view of the recent work of William M. Landeen, referred to in note 11, above, the suggestion is now, however, made even more plausible. At least, we now have evidence of what would seem to be a parallel situation in the case of the Brethren house at Herford, where Jacob Montanus apparently was the earliest representative of Luther and his reform. But on the other hand, that whole establishment seems ere long to have accepted Luther's "gospel." Cf. note 13, above.

³² See Landeen's comments on Arsenius in "The *Devotio Moderna* in Germany (Part IV)," *RSSCW*, XXII (1954), 70, 71.

³³ It is interesting to notice that the Brethren had earlier printed a work by the Reformation-minded Urbanus Rhegius, as well as a Danish edition of Luther's *Gebetbuch*. See Meltz, *op. cit.*, pp. 247, 244 (entries 55 and 30). The *Gebetbuch*, or *Bede bog* (as it was called in Danish), represented the translation of Poul Helgesen. But inasmuch as Helgesen was an opponent of "heresy" (he had written a *Reply to the Heretic Hans Michelsen of Malmö*), it is questionable that this work can be considered as good evidence of Protestant inclinations among the Rostock Brethren.

had criticized Luther's rendition. It is also true of the glosses and other additions. The Brethren consistently adopted glosses of the type to which we have already made reference, regardless of how injurious these may have been to Luther and the Reformation interests. For the Brethren, as for their Emserian prototype, the "heretics" constituted an evil tree, were the devil's "sons" or "children,"³⁴ and so forth.

This modified anti-Lutheran publication failed, however, to accomplish its manifest purpose; namely, to counteract Luther's New Testament in the Low-German-speaking area in and around Rostock. For as we have already seen, Luther's influence and activity brought the Brethren's work to premature termination, followed by confiscation and destruction. Then came silence and well-nigh oblivion—silence and oblivion almost unbroken until nineteenth-century discoveries began to bring to light the scant remains now in evidence of this intriguing Reformation-era vernacular Bible edition.³⁵

³⁴ In the gloss following Mt 4: 6 the Brethren use the term "kyndere de kettere" in place of Emser's "sohne / die ketzer." The meaning is, of course, substantially the same, and the gloss was certainly no improvement from the point of view of the Reformers.

³⁵ Elsewhere I have also treated various aspects of the subject dealt with in this article. A more extensive presentation of historical backgrounds, plus technical details regarding the sources used by the Brethren, has been published in *A Reformation Paradox*. Further information on Emser, his anti-Lutheran critique, and the early High-German editions of his New Testament may be found in *Reformation Bibles in the Crossfire*. And evidence regarding the Low-German Lutheran edition used as a source by the Brethren is provided in the brief article, "The Lutheran New Testament Used by the Rostock Brethren of the Common Life for their Catholic Bible Translation," *ARG*, LII (1961), 99, 100.