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H. O. Keinath

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

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Melanchthon and Luther's Translation of the New Testament.

When Philip Schwartzerd changed his German name to Melanchthon, this act might have been considered symbolic of the linguistic interest which was to be dominant throughout his life: Greek. As a student of Greek he proved to be the ready helper who enlisted much technical knowledge of the language in the service of Luther's translation of the New Testament. True it is, Luther was the translator, but he was a translator who did not hesitate to draw upon reliable information wherever he found it in order to produce an adequate version. Melanchthon therefore became one of the great colaborers of Luther in the translation of the New Testament.

When Melanchthon, in 1522, was called upon to assist in the process of getting Luther's translation ready for the first edition, he brought to this task a background of training and study admirably suited for the purpose. At the Latin school in Pforzheim, where he studied until his twelfth year, no provisions had been made in the curriculum for the study of Greek; but one of the teachers, George Simler, the author of a Greek grammar, gave the lad private instruction in this language. Another contact at this school may have had its far-reaching influence. On his mother's side Melanchthon was related to the famous Johann Reuchlin, and this celebrated scholar knew how to fire the interest of the eager boy by the gift of a Greek grammar and a Greek lexicon.¹⁾

At the early age of twelve years, Melanchthon matriculated in Heidelberg University; two years later the bachelor's degree was conferred upon him. Since Heidelberg refused to admit one so young to a candidacy for the master's degree, Melanchthon went to Tuebingen. Here again the classroom did not offer the desired instruction in Greek, and the young man once more had recourse to private study of this language. Johannes Husgen, later famous as Oecolampadius, was his diligent companion. By 1516 Melanchthon dared to dedicate a Greek poem, the product of his own pen, to the man who at that time was the idol of all humanists: Erasmus. A more ambitious undertaking was the planning of a new edition of Aristotle, even though it was never carried out. But Melanchthon's mark as a linguist was made by the publication of his Greek grammar in 1518, at a time of his life when the average Greek student is happy to have mastered a few of the elements of Greek syntax.

Such was the man who in 1518 was called to the young Wittenberg University. Here he was to come into contact with the man destined to lift him from professorial obscurity to a position of importance in

1) Hartfelder, *Ph. Melanchthon als Praeceptor Germaniae*, p. 8.

a world movement. Luther was not slow in recognizing the talents of the retiring young man, who now became his colleague. Melanchthon's inaugural address, an attack upon the scholastic method, elicited the following encomium from Luther: "He delivered an address, very learned and entirely faultless, which called forth the approval and admiration of all, and henceforth he no longer needs a recommendation. I desire no other teacher of Greek so long as he is well."²⁾ A few days later he wrote: "Melanchthon has his classroom full of hearers; he is especially apt in making the theologians, from the greatest to the least, eager for the study of Greek."³⁾ And a year later Luther expresses the wish that all the brethren might attend Melanchthon's lectures on Matthew and adds: "This little Greek excels me also in theology."⁴⁾ Little wonder, then, that, when the time for putting the final touches to the translation of the New Testament had come, the advice of Melanchthon was freely sought.⁵⁾

Melanchthon's teaching activity in Wittenberg was such as to make him a great Greek authority of the time. He lectured on an imposing array of classical Greek authors, such as Homer, Plutarch, Hesiod, Demosthenes, Theocritus, Aristotle, Sophocles, Isocrates, Euripides, Thucydides, Pindar, Theognis, Aristophanes, Aeschines, and others. But that which gave him still more immediate equipment for his work on the New Testament was the lecturing on books of the Scriptures. By 1522 he had lectured on the following books: Titus, Romans, Matthew, First Corinthians, Colossians, Second Corinthians, and John.⁶⁾ *Docendo discimus*; there could have been no better training for one who was to be the Elisha for the Wittenberg Elijah.

From Melanchthon's acquaintance with Greek sources and from the impetus given to a study of the Greek New Testament by the work of Erasmus it can readily be expected that a proposed translation taken from the original language would at once enlist Magister Philip's interest. At what time the first suggestion for undertaking this work may have been made in the intimate dealings between these two Wittenberg men, we do not know. We do know that, when Luther returned to the Wartburg after a secret trip to Wittenberg in December, 1521, he at once proceeded to translate at the amazing speed of about ten average-sized pages of Greek a day.

The most important work of Melanchthon in the translation of the New Testament was done after Luther had permanently taken up his abode in Wittenberg again. Luther brought the draft of the whole

2) St. L. Ed., XXIa, 105. 106. Luther to Spalatin, Aug. 31, 1518.

3) *Ibid.*, 2399. *Ad eundem*, Sept. 2, 1518.

4) *Ibid.*, XXIa, 215.

5) *Ibid.*, VIII, 1621.

6) Hartfelder, *Philipp Melanchthon als Praeceptor Germaniae*, pp. 555-565.

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New Testament in German with him from the Wartburg. On the same day, March 30, 1522, both Luther and Melanchthon wrote to Spalatin, informing him of this fact. At that time a beginning had already been made of carefully going over the translation and polishing it with the help of facilities available in Wittenberg, facilities which Luther could not always employ at the Wartburg.

Modern commentators on the Scriptures often take delight in criticizing the free rendition of the original as found in Luther's German Bible and offer more literal translations in attempts at improvement. The impression is made that Luther's translating *ad sensum* did not give sufficient attention to linguistic technicalities, or, in other words, thoroughness was sacrificed in favor of practical interests. Nothing could be farther from the truth. While Luther's principle confessedly was, *Man muss dem gemeinen Mann aufs Maul schauen*, his famous statement about the difficulties encountered in translating Job as well as the many changes found in later editions of his Bible as compared with earlier ones sufficiently show that his method was certainly not superficial.

Some of the thoroughness of this monumental work becomes evident also from a study of Melanchthon's letters referring to his share in the undertaking. Melanchthon, the man of the study rather than the forum, is well known for his skill in choosing an accurate phraseology in his writings. His *Locci* and the different confessional writings which he drafted show his passion for correct terminology and Aristotelian power of distinction. This interest was now brought to bear upon the work of polishing Luther's translation before it appeared in print.

It seems that one of the special investigations assigned to Melanchthon was to find adequate German words for the coins mentioned in the New Testament. The problem of giving modern equivalents for ancient coins is the despair of every translator, since not only names, but also values must be taken into account. In modern works names of coins are usually left untranslated. But Luther and his collaborators were not satisfied with choosing the path of least resistance. They looked for German words.⁷⁾ That in doing so they were treading a difficult path was fully appreciated by Melanchthon; for he complains about the earlier translators, who paid no attention to the numismatics of the New Testament. In May, 1522, we find him getting in touch with friends and asking them for information about

7) We note that the Roman denarius is translated *Groschen*, except in Mark 6, 37 and John 6, 7, where *Pfennig* is used. The corresponding Greek *δραχμή* is also rendered *Groschen*. *Στατήρ* in Matt. 17, 27, however, is left untranslated as *Stater*.

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coins. The inevitable Spalatin⁸⁾ is appealed to: "If you know anything definite about ancient coins, I urgently ask you to let me know. For in translating the New Testament, we must study them. . . . I have written to several friends about this matter, also to Mutianus. If you have anything, let us use it for Christ's sake. Here you see the carelessness of translators, who never considered this an important thing."⁹⁾ Mutianus was considered an authority on Roman antiquities. To make their knowledge of New Testament money more accurate, the translators made a collection of ancient coins, just as Luther had collected some precious stones to serve him in translating. Two months after the study of coins had been begun, Melancthon was still wrestling with the problem. He writes to Spalatin: "I should like to compare your coins with our collection. For we do not have as many as we should have for the undertaking. We have seen eight gold coins (*aureolos*) of different weight; we have one of Emperor Honorius. We also have some denarii which the Romans generally used and one tetradrachma. The Greeks used drachmas and tetradrachmas."¹⁰⁾ Looking back upon this investigation of coins, this man, who always delighted in problems, was happy to write: "It was my great delight to investigate such a difficult matter where we professorlings got into deep water whenever we came to such a passage. . . . Whatever we may have accomplished, we certainly did not miss the mark by very much. For in addition to what we found from Budeus we also found something in Plutarch that shed light on the subject."¹¹⁾ Thus the ancient classics and archeology were enlisted in the cause of giving Germany an accurate translation of the New Testament.

In determining the finer shades of meaning in certain words, Melancthon was a worthy associate in the task of translating. He

8) The reader of Luther's or Melancthon's letters will notice how often these men write to George Spalatin. Spalatin had received a good education at Wittenberg and at Erfurt, was interested in Humanism, and had acquired a fine knowledge of Greek. Although ordained a priest, he was more of a Colonel House and secretary to the Elector of Saxony. He thus was the contact man for this ruler. He translated documents for his master, kept him informed about current events by his voluminous correspondence, accompanied him on affairs of state, advised him about the appointment of officials, appealed for funds where needed, and acted as a kind of state inspector at the University of Wittenberg. Luther's contacts with the elector were usually made through Spalatin, whether it was merely a request for an increase in Melancthon's salary or some important political matter. The Wittenberg translators evidently respected the literary ability of this man. It is unfortunate that only a few of Spalatin's letters to Luther have come down to us.

9) *Corpus Reformatorum*, I, 570.

10) *Ibid.*, I, 575.

11) *Ibid.*, I, 574. 575.

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was above all a linguist, and words were his field. Not infrequently, it seems, he carefully weighed Latin, Greek, and German words against each other in an effort at finding expressions of coinciding import. In Matt. 26 the words *λυπεῖσθαι* and *ἀδημονεῖν* caused difficulty. The Latin *stupere* comes into consideration. But what is the exact meaning of *stupere*? Melanchthon considers a proper translation of this one word of sufficient importance to leave this whole matter unsettled until a letter can be sent to Spalatin for his opinion. The same man is consulted for an acceptable translation of Matt. 20, 25: "Ye know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them."

Melanchthon's accuracy in translating is shown also by an attempt to find a correct word for some grain. To establish this, he writes to Chilianus Goltstein for the name of this grain, what its shape is and how it compares with rye. This information is to be gained, not from some commentary, but from a farmer who knows something about it.¹²⁾

After the first edition of this New Testament had appeared in September, 1522, Melanchthon was still concerned with improvements to be made in future editions. The teacher becomes evident when the plan of having a map of Palestine in the next edition is broached. He had heard that such a map could be obtained, and he planned to get the money from university authorities for its purchase.¹³⁾

Thus Melanchthon labored with Luther in this epochal undertaking. As we see these men wrestling with stubborn Greek phrases, writing down words and crossing them out again, postponing this or that section, gathering bits of information here and there, writing letters, consulting men far and near, grasping at every available source of help, the magnitude of their labor becomes more and more impressive. Against this background of painstaking accuracy we can appreciate Luther's own words concerning this task: "Now, since it is translated and prepared, every one can read and understand it. The reader can run through three or four pages without a single difficulty, and he never realizes what rocks and stumps formerly lay there. Now he glides along as on a smooth board, where we had to toil and labor to remove these stumbling-blocks. It is easy to plow after the field has been cleared."¹⁴⁾

Seward, Nebr.

H. O. A. KEINATH.

12) *Ibid.*, I, 568.

13) *Ibid.*, I, 583.

14) *St. L.*, XIX, 973.