

3-1-1956

## Luther Speaks English

Lewis W. Spitz

*Concordia Seminary, St. Louis*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm>



Part of the [History of Christianity Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Spitz, Lewis W. (1956) "Luther Speaks English," *Concordia Theological Monthly*. Vol. 27, Article 16.  
Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm/vol27/iss1/16>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Print Publications at Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in Concordia Theological Monthly by an authorized editor of Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. For more information, please contact [seitzw@csl.edu](mailto:seitzw@csl.edu).

# Luther Speaks English

By LEWIS W. SPITZ, JR.

ON Reformation Day, 1955, the first volume of the great American edition of Luther's works was presented to the public. When complete with its fifty-five volumes, it will be by far the largest English edition, a truly outstanding monument of Luther scholarship and a major contribution to the mighty Luther renaissance in our century.

How productive, how prolific was this little monk Martin—*fraterculus* his opponents jibed! The mere bulk of his writings is so impressive and their content so powerful that from Coelius, who thought him a second Elijah, to Carlyle and admiring moderns he has seemed a *Wundermann*—a divinely inspired leader. "I deliver as soon as I conceive!" exclaimed Luther. Parts of his address "To the Christian Nobility" were in the press while he was still penning the final paragraphs. That is how he worked. Valdes, secretary to the emperor, declared: "I see that the minds of the Germans are generally exasperated against the Roman See, and they do not seem to attach great importance to the Emperor's edicts, for since their publication Lutheran books are sold with impunity at every step and corner of the streets and in the market places." For years his books were best sellers at the Frankfort and Paris fairs. From 1517, when he published his first work, to his death in 1546 he wrote one or two treatises a month, totaling about four hundred titles in all. At the diet of Worms the papal nuncio Aleander and Emperor Charles could not believe that in so short a time Luther could have written all the works which lay before them. The number of books published in Germany from the beginning of the century to 1517 averaged roughly forty a year. Then Luther's writings began to appear. In 1523 Luther's contribution to the German publishing business amounted to 180 titles in a total of 498. "The art of printing," Luther said, "is the highest and ultimate gift whereby God advances the cause of His Gospel." And now we have the beginning of the American edition of Luther's works which offers to the English-speaking world its first really substantial edition, for its very size a respectable piece of theological engineering.

The courage required for such an enterprise is underlined by the experience of German scholarship with the even more arduous task of publishing the definitive scholarly edition of Luther's works, the



**Weimar Ausgabe.** Launched in 1883 on the occasion of the Luther jubilee, in the same year which saw the organization of the Verein für Reformationsgeschichte, it is only now reaching completion with nearly one hundred folio volumes. It is already apparent that some of the earlier volumes are in need of revision in the light of later manuscript discoveries and perfected readings. There have been many lesser editions as well: the Erlangen edition of sixty-seven volumes, the St. Louis edition of twenty-three volumes in German, the Philadelphia edition of six volumes in English. Besides these, there are many still smaller editions, such as Wace and Buchheim's primary works, Bertram Lee Woolf's Reformation writings, the Calwer edition of six volumes in modern colloquial German, and many others. In its coverage, its grandness of design, and its special purpose and style the new American edition will take its place with the best of the major editions of Luther's works.

The capable general editors of the American edition are Dr. Jaroslav Pelikan and Dr. Helmut Lehmann. Dr. Pelikan, a graduate of Concordia Seminary, has held professorships at Valparaiso University and Concordia Seminary and is now associate professor of historical theology in the federated theological faculty of the University of Chicago. Dr. Lehmann, who received his doctor of theology degree at Erlangen University, has taught at Hamma Divinity School and Wittenberg College and served as president of Waterloo College and Seminary at Waterloo, Ontario, Canada. He is now devoting his full time to religious publishing. The editing of this challenging project will be a long and arduous task, but its importance justifies the greatest labor. "Does it not occur to you," Leibniz once wrote to Basnage, who had urged him to do editorial work, "that the advice you give me resembles that of a man who should wish to marry his friend to a shrew? For to engage a man in a lifelong work is much the same as to find him a wife." Editing requires the patience of a saint, but the first volume to appear shows that it will be carefully and intelligently done.

The plans for publication call for a schedule of approximately four volumes a year over a fifteen-year period, beginning with 1957. The first thirty volumes will be devoted to Luther's exegetical writings. Twenty of these will include the Old Testament commentaries and the next ten those of the New Testament. Luther would have approved of giving priority to his exegetical writings. For him the Biblical translation and commentaries took precedence over all his other writings. Luther was a theological professor who year after year for



thirty years entered the classroom twice a week at the set hour and lectured to his university students. Very properly the selections chosen for this edition are arranged to correspond to the order of the books of the Bible, so that Volume I will contain his final commentary on the Book of Genesis. The last twenty-four volumes, with an index volume added, will be devoted to the career of the Reformer, Reformation writings and debates on Word and Sacrament, church and ministry, devotional tracts, the Christian in society, the correspondence, sermons, liturgy and hymns, and the table talk.

The purpose of the present edition is to make Luther's writings available to those who are unable to read them in the original. The scholar will still refer to the definitive Weimar edition. An effort is therefore being made to present Luther's works in as attractive a style as the translator's skill can achieve. The edition uses good idiomatic American English, which will appeal to interested and intelligent lay members as well as the clergy of the church. The attempt is to be literate without being learned, faithful without being literal. Such acceptable colloquialisms as "to square with" are employed to good advantage.

This approach agrees entirely with Luther's own conception of the translator's task as reflected in his *Sendbrief vom Dolmetschen* and *Ursachen des Dolmetschens*. "And what all should I say at great length about translating? If I were to show the causes and reasons of all my words, I would have to write fully a year. I have experienced what art, effort, and work translating involves; therefore I will not allow any papal ass or mule who has attempted nothing to be my judge or critic," he avowed. He always aimed to present his translation in good clear German and often searched two, three, and four weeks for a single word and even then did not always find it. He found himself in the position of Jerome, whom the whole world wished to advise, for translating was like building a house by the side of the road, where every passer-by paused to offer his opinions. Luther mocked the *Meister Klügling*, who found a word or two amiss and pretended to be the *lux mundi*, although he could not handle a single verse himself. Luther offered fifty gulden to anyone who could take a simple and common Hebrew word like יָד and give a proper German equivalent for it. It is necessary to give the sense of a Hebrew passage and not merely a verbal transliteration. "I do this with such care in translating Moses," he complained, "that the Jews accuse me of rendering only the sense and not the precise words. In rendering Moses I make him so German that no one would know he was a Jew."



The Hebrew prophets proved particularly obstreperous: "We are sweating over the task of translating the prophets into German. God, how much of it there is and how hard it is to make these Hebrew writers talk German! . . . It is like making a nightingale leave her own sweet song and imitate the monotonous voice of the cuckoo, which she detests." But once the hard work was done, how easy reading the translation seemed to others: "Master Philip, Aurogallus, and I were sometimes barely able to get through three lines of Job in four days. But, my friends, now that it is translated into German, everyone can read it and master it and run his eyes over three or four pages without meeting a single obstacle, nor does he perceive what rocks and stumbling blocks lay in the path he now glides along as easily as on a polished board." Luther understood the translator's trials.

Luther had a fine sense of the meaning of words and a real genius for expressing himself. His aim was always simplicity. His method was to ask the mother in the home, the children in the streets, and the ordinary man in the market place. "We must take the words from their very lips . . ." he wrote. "Then the people will understand." Luther did not want a learned or ecclesiastical vocabulary. In asking Spalatin's help in selecting the proper equivalents he admonished: "But send us plain words, not the language of the court or the camp. This book must be translated simply." The editors and translators of Luther's works are attempting to follow in his footsteps. Though the task is not so great as were his pioneer efforts, his schoolish Latin and what philologists are now pleased to call early new High German provide difficulties enough. Only very inadequate lexicographical aids are available to the modern translator. Ph. Dietz's *Luther Wörterbuch* goes only to the letter *H* and is unsatisfactory at that. It is for this reason that Dr. John G. Kunstmann of the University of North Carolina, research director of the Lutheran Academy for Scholarship, has for some years been advocating the publication of a good Luther dictionary. Luther's translations were successful. Although his German New Testament cost the equivalent of approximately five and a half to six dollars when it first appeared in September 1522, the whole first edition of five thousand copies was sold out in a few days, and reprints were later bought by the tens of thousands. It is to be hoped that his own works will fare at least somewhat as well.

Luther's use of the Scriptures adds special problems for the translator. Luther had an absolutely prodigious memory, which enabled him to reproduce long selections from books which he had read



many years before. He knew what a writer had said and usually also what he had not said, which is even more remarkable. He read the Bible through twice a year and had the closest knowledge of both Testaments. Moreover, he did not use a few isolated passages to prove special points, but had a grasp of all Scriptures and the whole sweep of *Heilsgeschichte*. Luther used the Vulgate, his own translation, or the translations of others. He frequently made free paraphrases, and occasionally, intentionally or through the conflation of ideas by an astounding though fallible memory, he combined passages or made offhand references to incorrect chapter and verse. The translators render the passages wherever possible in the Revised Standard Version, except where the Authorized Version is closer to his text. Where the AV is used, an allusion identified, or a correction made, the proper references are indicated in the footnotes. Luther worked under immense pressure, and his mistakes were never due to indifference, as in the case of David Hume, of whom it is said that in writing his *History of England* he did not consider it worthwhile to cross the room to verify a single trifling fact.

It is most appropriate that the pilot volume of the American edition, Volume XII, should be a book of commentaries on a number of psalms, for Luther's very first publication in 1517 was a study of the seven penitential psalms. The whole volume emphasizes Luther's profound sense of sin and the depth of God's mercy. As the editor explains, the commentaries in this volume illustrate a number of the various ways in which Luther chose to expound the Scriptures. They represent in part his university lectures in Biblical exegesis, in part his Biblical sermons, and in part the worship in his own home. They illustrate the uniformity of Luther's procedure in approaching the study and exposition of the Scriptures. They illustrate, moreover, vexing problems of dating and perplexing problems of contradictory internal historical evidences with which the editor must come to grips with adequate scholarly tools. Finally, they underscore the fact that Luther's works were all "occasional writings," almost always prompted by a concrete historical situation or intellectual and religious interest. The way in which Luther described Moses in his preface to the Book of Exodus applies just as well to himself: "Moses writes as the case demands, so that his book is a picture and illustration of government and life. For this is what happens when things are moving—now this work has to be done, and now that—and a man must be ready every hour for anything and do the first thing that comes to hand. The books of Moses are mixed up in just this way." For Melancthon,



indeed, Luther stood in a long line from the patriarchs and the great fathers of the church who followed one another, "just as those who fall in an order of battle are replaced by others." Like the church fathers Luther wrote always on occasion and to a specific point. As Robert of Milan observed in the thirteenth century: "Sacri patres, quod non oppugnabantur, non defendebant." Just as the fathers were busy rethinking the universe in Christian terms, so Luther was engrossed in rethinking theology in the light of his basic evangelical insight. With his works in hand, it is possible for the student to organize the results, just as later ages systematized the fathers.

No doubt, the deepest impression left by a reading of this present volume on selected psalms is the centrality of Christ in Luther's theology. Amid the scholarly conversation of Karl Holl, Anders Nygren, and others, regarding Luther's theocentrism, in contrast to the alleged anthropocentrism of the Middle Ages, there emerges from Luther's own writings a clear picture of his Christocentrism and what Walther von Loewenich calls the *theologia crucis*. "Let the whole world perish, and let Christ remain safe by me," he cried (p. 15). He explains this approach of his in the first words of his study of Psalm Eight: "We want to talk a little about our dear Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. For He has commanded us to remember Him till He comes, and He has also deserved never to be forgotten. To give us an occasion to talk about Him, we shall take up the Eighth Psalm of David, which was written about our Lord Jesus Christ, and follow the example of this prophet as he prophesies to us." Through his eyes the reader learns to perceive also in the Old Testament the antithesis of Law and Gospel, the bounty of God's grace, and that the "righteousness" of God refers to his mercy. (Cf. pp. 306 f., 321, 325.) "This is true theology about the true God and the true worship of God," Luther affirms (p. 322). To Luther the Psalter was a "clear mirror of Christianity." For him the *Novum Testamentum in Vetere patet*. Herder rightly called Luther "a true son of St. Paul." And though theocentrism emerged as a predominant motif in Italian Renaissance Neoplatonism, Christocentrism was the heart of German Reformation Protestantism. Like John the Baptist in Grünewald's crucifixion scene on the Isenheim altar, Luther was pointing to the Redeemer of the world. S. T. Coleridge, in commenting on Luther's Table Talk, declares that "in almost all the qualities of a preacher of Christ, Luther after Paul and John is the great master."

To read this volume of commentaries is to come to know Luther as a learned man who employed all sides of his amazing knowledge



in the interest of his theology. This he does not by way of idle erudition but in order to use all his intellectual resources for the instruction of the people. His writings are studded with allusions to the Apocrypha, patristic thought, the classics, history, martyrology, scholastic philosophers, and prominent contemporaries like Cardinal Sadoleto. He demonstrates again and again how a knowledge of Hebrew and Greek enriches the understanding of the Scriptures. Nor was he one for waste motion. A constantly recurring phrase reads: "I pass over the useless disputations of the schools" (p. 377).

Luther's strong personality shows through in almost every passage. He was a controversial figure in a polemical age, and the tensions of his struggle are in evidence also in his exegetical writings as he guards and defends the truth against misunderstandings and attacks from both the papal right and the sectarian left. Luther had a pictorial mind, and his pages are filled with colorful images. Also in translation the force and freshness of his language pours forth like an emerging underground stream. His sudden turns of phrase and changes of mood, his swift righteous wrath, his sweet mildness, his insistent reasonableness, his subtle melancholy, his surges of contrition, his bursts of confidence and joy, all these never cease to surprise, delight, and inspire the reader like one who watches a fountain illumined with changing and many-colored lights. There can be no more beautiful Biblical commentary than Luther's explanation of the Twenty-third Psalm contained in this volume, for his great heart beat to David's rhythm. "That man had spiritual eyes and therefore saw plainly what is the best and noblest thing on earth," writes Luther of the singer of Israel (p. 161).

Luther can be familiar and earthy, as when he speaks of "our Lord God's bag of tricks" and of man's mortal body as a "bag of worms" (pp. 25, 105). He can employ powerful irony and taunt, as when he mocks the rulers of this world: "Our job is to have a large open eye so that we can with one glance take in all the kings with all their wisdom and power and take them for a burning straw which He who established heaven, earth, and all things can extinguish with one breath. . . . It truly is like a spark of fire compared with the whole sea, as if He wished to say: 'Is it not the greatest folly that you, little spark, wish to dry up the whole sea?'" (Page 12.) He can exploit the full reaches of the allegorical method, play on paradox and dialectic, and excel in dogmatic application (pp. 162, 173, 304). He is winsome and encouraging: "We who serve the church and hold the teaching office are certainly in a poor and lowly position,



measured by the standard of the world against that of other professions. . . . But if you look at this question in the right way, no matter how miserable and despised he may be, the theologian is in a better position than all the teachers of the other professions. For as often as he performs his duty, he not only does his neighbor a valuable service, which is superior to all the favors of all other men, no matter how precious or useful they might be; but he also offers to God in heaven Himself the most pleasant sacrifice and is truly called the priest of the All-highest. For everything that a theologian does in the church is related to spreading the knowledge of God and to the salvation of men." (P. 4.) The reader is almost sure to share the experience of Bunyan who said of Luther's commentary on Galatians that it was "as if the book had been written out of my own heart."

It was one of those unpredictable turns in history that because of the course of the English reformation very little of Luther was translated into English until a generation or more after his death, although his writings were almost immediately put into Spanish, Italian, French, and other languages. Too bad that more of his works have not been available in English until now! It is to be hoped that churchmen and laymen alike will make full use of this great boon to Biblical and Reformation studies. In format this volume is sturdy and handsome, an excellent addition to every man's library. The publication of *Luther's Works* is one more milestone in this present generation's achievement of making a successful transition from a foreign-language to an English-speaking church. And just as such giants in the kingdom as Tyndale, Calvin, and Wesley once read Luther with passion, many a reader today will breathe in new inspiration from his faithful words. It is no mere chance that more books have been written about Luther than about any other person with the exception of Christ, according to Albert Hyma.

Melanchthon announced Luther's death to the students at the University of Wittenberg with these words: "Alas, gone is the horseman and the chariots of Israel!" But in another sense his books are his powerful chariots. His words are his beautiful songbirds:

Still are his pleasant voices, his nightingales, awake:

For Death, he taketh all away, but them he cannot take.

(HERACLITUS)

University of Missouri, Columbia, Mo.