Luther's *Biblia Sacra* of 1529

Martin Luther is well-known for his German translation of the Bible, but his Latin translation, the *Biblia Sacra* of 1529 has received less attention. He was translating the Bible when learning Greek was still a relatively new European phenomenon; the Greek New Testament had only been available since Erasmus's 1516 *Novum Instrumentum*. The only physical copy of the first edition of Luther's Latin *Biblia Sacra* is at New College, Oxford, and I am extremely grateful to the college for allowing me access to it.[1] This short article demonstrates some of the ways in which I have started to use the material in the *Biblia Sacra* to explore how Luther's translation of the New Testament in Latin was influenced by how he learned Greek, by his relationship with Erasmus, by his need to create a new philology for a new theology, and therefore how his understanding and use of Latin had an influence on the way he construed his Reformation ideas. Given the brevity of the piece, I mainly point at areas worth further investigation, but this approach to reading the three Latin translations with an eye to the importance of philological and theological context is new, and brings promise of fresh insights into the development of Reformation thought, and the nature of Classical reception.

In general, Jerome, Erasmus, and Luther's translations are remarkably similar. Given the vehemence with which both Erasmus and Luther disagreed with the Catholic Church, this seems somewhat unexpected; great overt reworking of Jerome might have been expected. Lorenzo Valla's 1504 *Adnotationes ad Novum Testamentum* had challenged Christian reformers to rethink translating the New Testament. Erasmus lauded Valla as the best guide for Latin grammar. Luther had a similarly high regard for his work. Valla (1407–1457) criticised the weakness of the Vulgate, and argued for a return to the Greek. Valla believed that human culture, Christianity, and Latin were coterminous, allowing for a dialogue between the literatures and languages involved. Valla argued the Vulgate's Latin should correspond to the New Testament's Greek in register and meaning, in a less ad verbum manner, although he also criticised inconsistency in the translation of individual terms. Valla saw Latin as an instrument of reform, and the New Testament a unique place for its deployment. Celenza discusses how Valla's work opened up the use of Latin to create a reformed theology, or in Erasmian terms, a new 'grammar of theology'. Luther, however, was not entirely satisfied with Erasmus's approach towards religion, and the two fell out. Luther was not as systematic as Valla in the pragmatism needed to reform theology by reforming philology, but the same mission underpinned his use of Latin. In reading the *Biblia Sacra*, therefore, we may expect to read Latin that remodels both Jerome's Vulgate, and Erasmus's *Novum Instrumentum*. We might also expect a move towards a more functional style of translation.

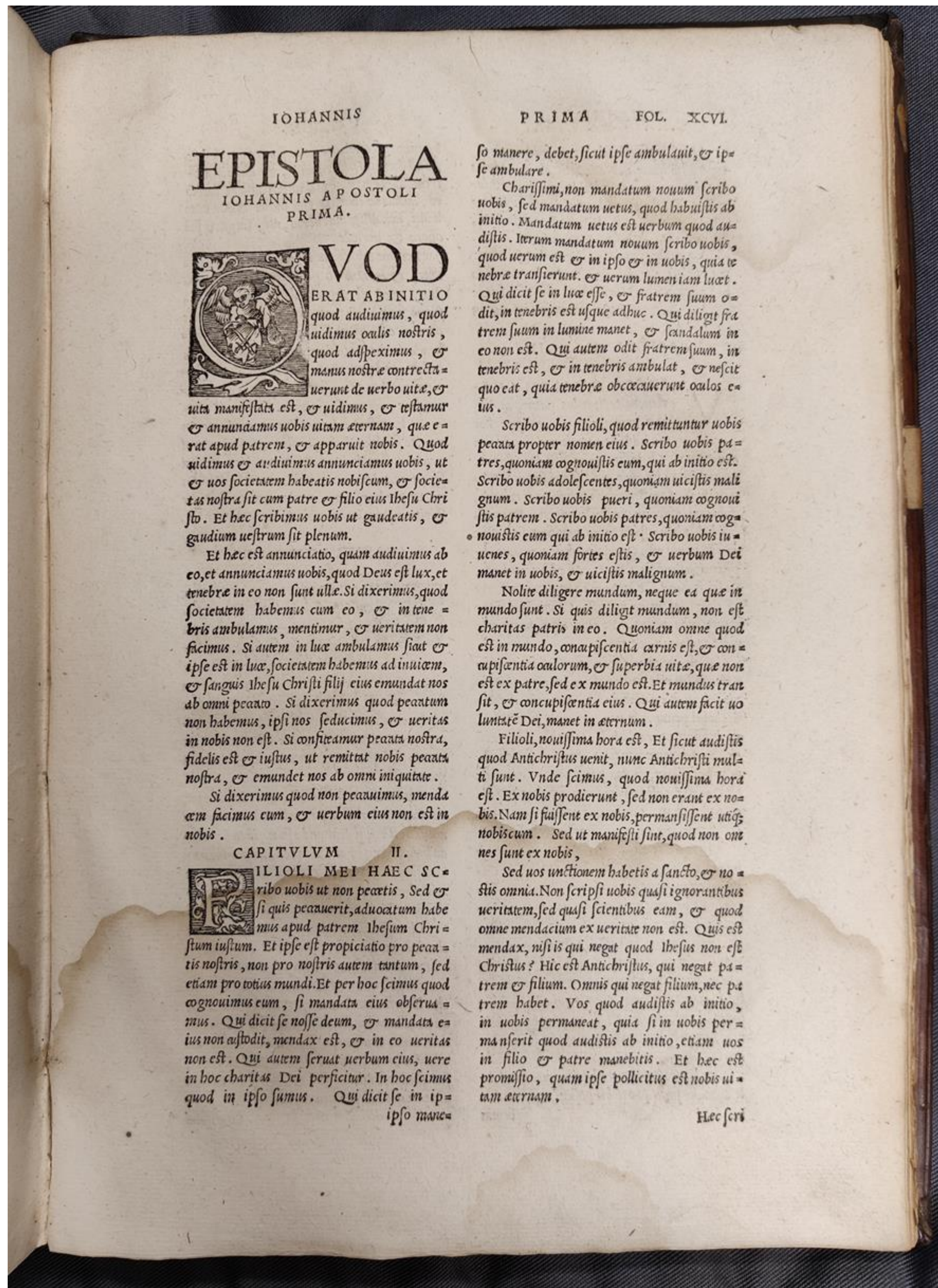
In this short piece I offer a close reading of differences between Jerome, Erasmus, and Luther in translating 1 John 2:1–11. This passage exhibits a number of unusual lexical, morphological, and syntactical features, as well as communicating some of the core Christian messages about Christian ethical life, and the development of Christianity from its Old Testament roots. The differences between the three Latin translators are subtle, but begin to point towards patterns of thought and approach which underpin larger Reformation concerns, and some of the strands of my larger research project. Luther's Latin reads as tending to:

1. Modify Jerome's Vulgate only slightly, but in systematic ways which suggest a process of editing and reworking Jerome with a distinctive mindset, rather than any strident acceptance or rejection. This is particularly evident at a rhetorical level.
2. Echo changes made by Erasmus when these are not too radical a departure from Jerome.
3. Flatten out differences in nuance between Greek expressions and their plurality of translation possibilities as seen in Jerome and Erasmus.

[1] Martin Luther, *Biblia Sacra* (Impressum Wittenbergae: Per Nicolaum Shirleitz, M D XXIX [1529]), New College Library, Oxford, BT1.22.12.

ISSN 2517-6935

4. Change the balance between physical and psychological expressions of Greek ethical and emotional language.



IOHANNIS PRIMA FOL. XCVI.

EPISTOLA IOHANNIS APOSTOLI PRIMA.

QVOD ERAT AB INITIO quod audiuimus, quod uidimus oculis nostris, quod adspeximus, & manus nostrae contrectauerunt de uerbo uitae, & uita manifestata est, & uidimus, & testamur & annunciamus uobis uitam aeternam, quae erat apud patrem, & apparuit nobis. Quod uidimus & audiuimus annunciamus uobis, ut & uos societatem habeatis nobiscum, & societas nostra sit cum patre & filio eius Ihesu Christo. Et haec scribimus uobis ut gaudeatis, & gaudium uestrum sit plenum.

Et haec est annunciatio, quam audiuimus ab eo, et annunciamus uobis, quod Deus est lux, et tenebrae in eo non sunt ullae. Si dixerimus, quod societatem habemus cum eo, & in tenebris ambulamus, mentimur, & ueritatem non facimus. Si autem in luce ambulamus sicut & ipse est in luce, societatem habemus ad inuicem, & sanguis Ihesu Christi filij eius emundat nos ab omni peccato. Si dixerimus quod peccatum non habemus, ipsi nos seducimus, & ueritas in nobis non est. Si confiteamur peccata nostra, fidelis est & iustus, ut remittat nobis peccata nostra, & emundet nos ab omni iniquitate.

Si dixerimus quod non peccauimus, mendacem facimus eum, & uerbum eius non est in nobis.

CAPITVLVM II.

FILIOLI MEI HAEC SCribo uobis ut non peccetis, Sed & si quis peccauerit, aduocatum habemus apud patrem Ihesum Christum iustum. Et ipse est propiciatio pro peccatis nostris, non pro nostris autem tantum, sed etiam pro totius mundi. Et per hoc scimus quod cognouimus eum, si mandata eius obseruamus. Qui dicit se nosse deum, & mandata eius non custodit, mendax est, & in eo ueritas non est. Qui autem seruat uerbum eius, uere in hoc charitas Dei perficitur. In hoc scimus quod in ipso sumus. Qui dicit se in ipso mane-

so manere, debet, sicut ipse ambulauit, & ipse ambulare.

Charissimi, non mandatum nouum scribo uobis, sed mandatum uetus, quod habuistis ab initio. Mandatum uetus est uerbum quod audistis. Iterum mandatum nouum scribo uobis, quod uerum est & in ipso & in uobis, quia tenebrae transierunt. & uerum lumen iam lucet. Qui dicit se in luce esse, & fratrem suum odit, in tenebris est usque adhuc. Qui diligt fratrem suum in lumine manet, & scandalum in eo non est. Qui autem odit fratrem suum, in tenebris est, & in tenebris ambulat, & nescit quo eat, quia tenebrae obcoecauerunt oculos eius.

Scribo uobis filioli, quod remittuntur uobis peccata propter nomen eius. Scribo uobis patres, quoniam cognouistis eum, qui ab initio est. Scribo uobis adolescentes, quoniam uicistis malignum. Scribo uobis pueri, quoniam cognouistis patrem. Scribo uobis patres, quoniam cognouistis eum qui ab initio est. Scribo uobis iuuenes, quoniam fortes estis, & uerbum Dei manet in uobis, & uicistis malignum.

Nolite diligere mundum, neque ea quae in mundo sunt. Si quis diligt mundum, non est charitas patris in eo. Quoniam omne quod est in mundo, concupiscentia carnis est, & concupiscentia oculorum, & superbia uitae, quae non est ex patre, sed ex mundo est. Et mundus transit, & concupiscentia eius. Qui autem facit uoluntatē Dei, manet in aeternum.

Filioli, nouissima hora est, Et sicut audistis quod Antichristus uenit, nunc Antichristi multi sunt. Vnde scimus, quod nouissima hora est. Ex nobis prodierunt, sed non erant ex nobis. Nam si fuissent ex nobis, permansissent utiq; nobiscum. Sed ut manifesti sint, quod non omnes sunt ex nobis,

Sed uos unctionem habetis a sancto, & nostis omnia. Non scripsi uobis quasi ignorantibus ueritatem, sed quasi scientibus eam, & quod omne mendacium ex ueritate non est. Quis est mendax, nisi is qui negat quod Ihesus non est Christus? Hic est Antichristus, qui negat patrem & filium. Omnis qui negat filium, nec patrem habet. Vos quod audistis ab initio, in uobis permaneat, quia si in uobis permanserit quod audistis ab initio, etiam uos in filio & patre manebitis. Et haec est promissio, quam ipse pollicitus est nobis uitam aetrnam.

Hec scri

New College Library, Oxford, BT1.22.12, Prima Epistola Iohannis, f. XCVI

How then do we see formation of a new and distinctive but not revolutionary Latin in action in 1 John 2:1–11? It opens with an unusual word, τεκνία (teknia, 'little children') which is only used nine times in the New Testament, all in the vocative plural, and mainly in 1 John (seven times, with one more at John 13:33, and another at Galatians 4:19). This is an unnecessary

ISSN 2517-6935

diminutive which seems to be used as a term of endearment by the writer of 1 John. All three Latin translations use *filioli*, an unusual word attested in Terence, Plautus, Cicero, and Juvenal, that is, in mainly comical or satirical contexts. The cultural baggage of the Latin term is very different to that of the Greek, but all three have chosen to try to reappropriate it for a Christian context, a pattern of linguistic appropriation and translation style which merits further attention.

As suggested above, Luther often seems to align himself more with Jerome than with Erasmus. Examples include *scandalum* in Jerome and Luther for σκάνδαλον (*skandalon*, a temptation/inducement to sin; cause of offense, stumbling block), but *offendiculum* in Erasmus in verse 10. *Scandalum* transliterates the Greek, giving it a Latin termination. The associated verb, σκανδαλίζω (*skandalizō*) is factitive, sins are made to happen. Repeating the Greek term maintains the obvious correspondence with the Greek metaphor. While *offendiculum* also means 'obstacle, stumbling block, hindrance', the moral overtones which *scandalum* has accrued are missing, and Erasmus's quest for novelty has come at the expense of integration with the greater moral theme of the text.

Sometimes Luther makes subtle changes to Jerome in the process, e.g. in verse 8, παράγεται (*paragetai*, pass by) is translated as transeunt by Jerome, *praetereunt* by Erasmus, and *transierunt* by Luther. The present tense in Greek is made perfect by Luther. This difference in aspect is an important part of how Luther reads the New Testament. The Greek perfect is complex, but points in part to a present state resulting from a past action. To describe the darkness as having past demonstrates that Christ, the light, is now present and has transformed our world, in a way that is less apparent in either Jerome or Erasmus. Christ as a present embodiment of light, hope, and salvation is key to the Reformation sense of justification by faith alone, and the transformative nature of the Greek perfect conveys this well, and is, I would suggest, carried over by Luther into his use of Latin. The same verb is repeated at verse 17, where Luther uses the present tense, *transit*; here it is the world passing away as we live, however, rather than an old order supplanted. This sense of the perfect tense used to make a theological point is strong throughout 1 John, which is includes a disproportionate number of uses of the perfect in the New Testament. The impact of this on Jerome, Erasmus, and Luther's understanding of the New Testament may be further evident in verses 3-4. In verse 3, γινώσκομεν ὅτι ἐγνώκαμεν (*ginōskomen hoti egnōkamen*, we know that we have known) becomes '*scimus . . . cognovimus*' in all three, and in verse 4, the perfect Ἔγνωκα (*egnōka*, I have known) is rendered using a Latin perfect by all three translators (*nosse*, *novi*, *nosse* respectively). Coming to know God, as I discuss elsewhere, is a transformative process with an ontological impact which can only be expressed by the perfect. Sometimes tense makes a significant difference to exegesis, and sometimes this points to differences between the three translators' approach to the text.

We also see differences in how relationships within the New Testament are configured. In verse 3, for example, ἐν τούτῳ (*en toutō*) would translate baldly as 'in this', but is used frequently in this text as a way to structure the argument and move between points. Both Jerome and Erasmus write *in hoc*, where Luther writes *per hoc*. The change of preposition (in > through) may seem minor, but it is indicative of two clear trends in Luther's translation. The first trend is the already mentioned tendency to reformulate Jerome in subtle but systematic ways which demonstrate independent engagement with the text, even if the basic text is broadly comparable. The second trend is the particularly challenging nature of prepositions in the New Testament. Several volumes have been written on 'the theology of prepositions', demonstrating their awkwardness in the New Testament, but also cautioning against allowing philology to drive theology, in relying on understanding the Greek to understand the Theology. The Johanine prologue is the best example here (a text linked to the Johanine letters). John 1:1 ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν (*ho logos ēn pros ton theon*, the word was X God). I say 'X' for πρὸς (*pros*) as this is the contested term. A standard Greek lexicon would read 'towards', whereas a standard Greek translation of this text would read 'with'. The New Testament expresses a new relationship between God and mankind, indeed with a Trinitarian hat on, the New Testament expresses God AS relationship. Expressing relationships

ISSN 2517-6935

in different ways, even just for rhetorical structure, as in 1 John 3, therefore demarcates an approach to the text which is grounded in reimagining relationships, which is a clear Reformation principle.

This passage also opens with a particularly beautiful example of the strain put on trying to express relationships. In 1 John 2:1, with reference to sin, we are told that we have Jesus Christ as an advocate with the Father. All three translations here translate πρὸς as *apud* (among, at the house of). Here there is no disagreement in the nature of the relationship between Jesus and the Father. Indeed, barring differences in spelling conventions, there is only one difference between all three translations: Erasmus uses *ne* where Jerome and Luther use *ut non* in order to negate the performance of since. Erasmus's translation therefore construes ἵνα (hina) as a fear (or result clause?) 'lest you might sin' where Jerome and Erasmus read it as a negative purpose close, 'so that you don't sin'. The difference may be subtle, but it contributes to an ethical picture we build up throughout the translations of where moral culpability lies, and what it means to take responsibility for one's sins. Luther's translation predates the rediscovery of Aristotle's *Poetics*, and the messier understanding of ἡ ἁμαρτία (*hē hamartia*, sin) which results from this, and leads to subsequent confusion over the difference between *peccatum, error,* and *culpa*; the *Biblia Sacra* is a work of its time, and reminds us not to read Bible translations with synchronic eyes and anachronistic assumptions.

My final point considers some of the apparently minor differences between the three translations which may begin to point to different rhetorical frameworks for understanding the New Testament. In verse 3, for example, Erasmus changes Jerome's *quoniam* for *quod*, a change maintained by Luther. This kind of change is also evident in verse 8, where Jerome's *quoniam* becomes *quia* in both Erasmus and Luther. Where Erasmus uses *aut* for Jerome's *autem*, however, Luther returns to Jerome, and where in verse 8 Erasmus gives *rursum* for πάλιν (*palin*, again / back), against Jerome's *iterum*, Luther also uses *iterum*. Luther follows Erasmus in some of the details which create the rhetorical architecture of the passage, but also returns to Jerome in other places, creating a new intellectual framework for expressing his New Testament interpretation. The systematic use of such particles or discourse markers has an overall effect on the rhetorical impact of the text, and over the course of the whole text, it is to some degree in this subtle reconfiguration of New Testament internal architecture which marks out Luther's translation as different.

I have suggested ways in which word choice and grammatical features point towards areas of both agreement and disagreement between the three translators. Translation is never a neutral process, and in translation the New Testament into Latin as a response to both Jerome and Erasmus, Luther was able to begin to create a new thought-world, non-Roman, non-Catholic, blending appreciation of his sources with a new philology and a new theology which could then underpin the development of Reformation thought. In my extended work I am investigating each element of this more thoroughly, but in this short case study point out just a few of the key issues and possible ways of reading the New Testament. I am grateful to New College for supporting this work through access to the *Biblia Sacra*, and look forward to piecing together more of what it has to say.

Cressida Ryan
Lecturer in New Testament Greek
University of Oxford

ISSN 2517-6935