



Martin Luther as Ethnographic Translator: The Ciceronian Precedent

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For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

Isaiah 55:10–11

I have learned from experience what an art and what a task translating is.

Martin Luther¹

¹ Martin Luther, *On Translating: An Open Letter* (1530), in *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Helmut Lehmann, and Christopher Boyd Brown, 75 vols. (Philadelphia and St. Louis: Fortress Press and Concordia Publishing House, 1955–), 35:193. Hereafter referred to as *LW*.

Martin Luther 1522 German edition of the New Testament (the September Testament) is still regarded as a ground-breaking example of translation. In his approach to translation, Luther relied heavily on the Roman writer Cicero, especially to understand the role of ethnography (the cultural systems of language) in producing a vibrant and meaningful biblical translation.

If one desires to know what a particular author said, it suffices simply to read the works of this author. Should one, however, wish to go to the heart of the matter and understand why this author said what he said, then one must read what he read.

Steven Ozment²

Five hundred years ago this fall, September 2022, Martin Luther's German translation of the New Testament was published. He had taken three of his ten months of being sequestered by his own prince at the Wartburg Castle (May 1521–March 1522) to accomplish the translation draft. When it was published six months later, his German readers affectionally christened it the "September Testament."

As we will see below, the September Testament soon came under attack by papal loyalists. In September 1530 Luther composed *On Translating: An Open Letter* to defend his translation as well as the entire Reformation movement. As I will contend, his ethnographic approach to translating resonates deeply in two ways with the precedent set by Marcus Tullius Cicero (106–43 BCE), the Roman lawyer, orator, politician, and philosopher whom Luther considered "the wisest man" and with whom he had a lifelong love affair.³

FROM SEPTEMBER TESTAMENT TO 1534 BIBLE

When Luther returned in March to Wittenberg from the Wartburg, he continued to hone the translation that he had drafted, using primarily Erasmus's 1519 second edition of his Greek New Testament. He also used his in-depth knowledge of the Latin Vulgate and may have also consulted certain previous medieval German translations.⁴ As he himself admits, he was only modestly competent in Greek

² Steven Ozment, *Homo spiritualis: A Comparative Study of the Anthropology of Johannes Tauler, Jean Gerson and Martin Luther (1509–1516) in the Context of Their Theological Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 1969), Preface. Ozment call this a "common-sensical hermeneutical principle."

³ LW 54:171. Ethnography, or ethnographic studies, is a subdiscipline of sociology that gained scholarly status with the emergence of interpretive sociology, which was introduced and developed at the University of Chicago beginning in the teens of the twentieth century. See Mary Jo Deegan, "The Chicago School of Ethnography," as well as Paul Rock, "Symbolic Interactionism and Ethnography," both in *The Handbook of Ethnography*, ed. Paul Atkinson, Sara Delamont et al. (Los Angeles: Sage, 2007), 11–38. Ethnographers "analyze the everyday life, communities, and symbolic interactions characteristic of a specific group." Deegan, "The Chicago School of Ethnography," 11. As ethnography theorists Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson note, in the scholarly discipline itself the term *ethnography* has a "variable and sometimes contested" meaning. See Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson, *Ethnography: Principles in Practice*, 4th ed. (London: Routledge, 2019), 1. I, therefore, am using the notion of ethnography (and ethnographic) in quite a generic sense, and yes, when portraying Luther's Ciceronian approach to translation as ethnographic, I am of course using the term in an anachronistic way. See "Anachronism" in Wikipedia for a helpful historical overview of the advantages, and liabilities, of using anachronism: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anachronism> (accessed June 1, 2022).

⁴ Between 1466 and 1522 there had been fourteen High German and four Low German translations (see Christoph Burger, "Luther's Thought Took Shape in Translation of Scripture and Hymns," in *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther's Theology*, ed. Robert Kolb, Irene Dingel, and L'Urbormir Batka (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 481.

(and Hebrew), so once back in Wittenberg, he also intently consulted with his younger university colleague, Philip Melanchthon, who had considerable expertise in Greek.⁵

Luther, it pays to note, had been undertaking numerous short biblical translation projects since at least the spring of 1517, already several months before the posting of the Ninety-Five Theses, which had catapulted him into the historical limelight.⁶ In the mid-twentieth century, the well-known Union Theological Seminary church historian, Philip Schaff, exuberantly proclaimed the September Testament as “the most important and useful work of Luther’s entire life.”⁷ The publication of the 1522 September Testament both excited Luther, and incited him, to take on translating the entire Bible, including the Apocryphal books. Culturally, his German Bible would become “a milestone in the development of Early Modern German.”⁸ That Luther recognized his vocation as a Bible translator ought not really surprise us, for as Christoph Burger notes, borrowing an insight from mis-siologist Lamin Sanneh, “The Christian message creates translations.”⁹

One hallmark of Luther the translator was his dedication to translation as a consultative process. As Schaff noted:

In the progress of the work [in 1531] he founded a *Collegium Biblicum*, or Bible club, consisting of his colleagues Melanchthon, Bugenhagen (Pommer), Cruciger, Justus Jonas, and Aurogallus. They met once a week in his house, several hours before supper. Deacon Georg Rörer (Rorarius), the first clergyman ordained by Luther, and his proof-reader, was also present; occasionally foreign scholars were admitted; and Jewish rabbis were freely consulted.¹⁰

After 1522 Luther had the parts of Scripture published as he finished translating them, and retranslating them. The entire Bible, illustrated with magnificent woodcuts by Lucas Cranach and accompanied by prefaces that Luther wrote for each Testament and for each of the Bible’s books, was published in 1534 by Wittenberg’s own Hans Lufft. He published well over 100,000 copies during the next

⁵ Johann Michael Reu presents much source research in his *Luther’s German Bible: An Historical Presentation Together with a Collection of Sources* (Columbus: Lutheran Book Concern, 1934). He cites Luther’s self-evaluation in a Table Talk, *Tischrede* No. 1040, see page 267.

⁶ See especially Heinz Bluhm’s first four essays in *Martin Luther: Creative Translator* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1965).

⁷ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 7 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950), 341. Burger characterizes Luther’s Bible “as the center of his theological work and the sum of his theology . . . his most significant work, judging on the basis of the effort made, the intensity of his contribution, the number of print runs, the reception of the work, and the number of colleagues who collaborated with him.” Burger, “Luther’s Thought Took Shape,” 484.

⁸ Burger, “Luther’s Thought Took Shape,” 481.

⁹ Burger, “Luther’s Thought Took Shape,” 481. See Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2009).

¹⁰ Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 347. However, Luther refers to translation consultants already in 1530 in *LW* 35:188.

forty years, an enormous venture for the time. Luther continued to improve his translations until his death on February 18, 1546.

TRANSLATION CONTROVERSY AND FAITH ALONE

From the beginning, the 1522 September Testament had been a kind of prison literature, so to speak, and it soon became a heated part of the overall Reformation controversy. So beloved had the September Testament become among the German population that Duke George of Saxony—a supporter of papal primacy, a vehement critic of Luther’s reforms, and the cousin of Elector Frederick—banned the September Testament from his duchy. Moreover, he commissioned his personal secretary, the theologian and lawyer Jerome Emser (1478–1527), one of Luther’s most caustic critics, to produce a rival German translation of the New Testament, one loyal to papal teachings. Emser purportedly used the Latin Vulgate and the Medieval German translations. What he kept secret, at least for a while, was how often he simply plagiarized from Luther’s own September Testament. On top of that, he also wrote prefaces to the various New Testament books, aiming to countermand Luther’s prefaces and also to nullify justification by “faith alone,” the interpretive key that Luther promoted for rightly hearing and understanding the entire biblical message. Luther was incensed.

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Among Emser’s acts of nullification he targeted Luther’s translation of Romans 3:28. There Luther had inserted the German word *allein*—the equivalent of the Latin word *sola* and the English *alone*—into his translation where no literal equivalent existed in St. Paul’s Greek. The controversy over faith “alone” grew ever more weighty over the ensuing years, setting the stage for the 1530 Diet of Augsburg, a key inflection point in the Lutheran Reformation.

Emperor Charles V convened the Diet of Augsburg from June to September 1530 in order to bring about religious unity in the empire between Luther and his followers, on the one hand, and the loyalists to the Roman papacy, on the other. The single four-letter Latin word *sola* stood at the theological center of the overall dispute, which the diet never did resolve. Charles banked on a united empire in order to ward off the 100,000-plus-strong army of the Ottoman Empire under Suleiman the Magnificent. For years Suleiman’s front line had been encroaching on the eastern borders of the Holy Roman Empire and in 1529 had even laid siege to Vienna, the seat of the Hapsburg Dynasty, Charles’s own dynastic heritage.

In the waning days of this fateful moment at Augsburg, Luther wrote the treatise *On Translating: An Open Letter* (September 1530) in order to defend this *sola*. Because of the May 1521 Edict of Worms, which put a legal stamp on Luther's conviction of heresy in January 1521 and made him an enemy of the empire, he did not attend the 1530 Diet. He stayed safely behind at the Coburg Castle in Saxony, where he was able to communicate rather easily with Melanchthon and others at the diet and where he then translated the Prophets into German. Meanwhile, at the diet, Melanchthon and the other Lutheran confessors delivered their *Augsburg Confession* (June 25, 1530), with justification by "faith alone" at its center. How the doctrine of justification is understood and taught affects how all other doctrines of the Christian faith are understood and taught, as well as how the Christian life is lived on an everyday basis, as we will discuss below.

ON TRANSLATING—ONE PART TRACT, ONE PART THEORY, ONE PART TREATISE

To compose *On Translating*, Luther blended three ingredients: one part tract-for-the-times, one part theory of translating, and one part theological treatise.

One Part Tract

Luther's *Open Letter* has definite hints—indeed, more than hints—of a tract-for-the-times. Tracts, as one scholar has put it briefly, are rhetorically bent "to be . . . argumentative [rather] than educational."¹¹ As is common in such tracts, Luther relentlessly employs irony, sarcasm, and invective, long the rhetorical tools of resistance movements. In such situations, tracts regularly strive to establish urgency where they perceive that the lackadaisical, the unreliable, the inept, the renegade, or even the blasphemous have taken over. Finally, to sustain resilience, tracts specialize in "laughing" in the face of adversity, in the face of danger, even in the face of the devil.¹²

Luther begins his *Open Letter* by noting that he is simply responding to a friendly letter of inquiry, likely only a literary device, regarding his translation of Romans 3:28, dealing with justification by faith alone, and concerning his theological judgment regarding the cult of the saints.¹³ Both were unresolved, lynchpin issues at the Diet of Augsburg, though in the end, Luther gives little ink in his *Open Letter* to the latter, which was not a translation matter per se. Sometimes he aims his irony, sarcasm, and invective at "papists" in general and even at "all the papists taken together."¹⁴

¹¹ A. R. Buckland, "Tract," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 11th ed. (New York: The Encyclopædia Britannica Company, 1911), 17:117/2.

¹² LW 35:185.

¹³ LW 35:182.

¹⁴ LW 35:182.

First if I, Dr. Luther, could have expected that all the papists taken together would be capable enough to translate a single chapter of the Scriptures correctly and well, I should certainly have mustered up enough humility to invite their aid and assistance in putting the New Testament into German. But because I knew—and still see with my own eyes—that none of them knows how to translate, or to speak German, I spared them and myself that trouble. It is evident, indeed, that from my German translation they are learning to speak and write German, and so are stealing from me my language, of which they had little knowledge before. They do not thank me for it, however, but prefer to use it against me. However I readily grant them this, for it tickles me that I have taught my ungrateful pupils, even my enemies, how to speak.¹⁵

At other times, Luther zeroes in with intent on Jerome Emser for “stealing from me.” As noted above, Duke George of Saxony had employed Emser to produce a German New Testament to supplant the September Testament. Luther refuses even to name Emser, who had died three years earlier, calling him instead “the Dresden scribbler”¹⁶ or “Master Know-it-all,” the latter being one of Luther’s frequent but tamer invectives. Master Know-it-alls have always plagued good Bible translators, notes Luther, as they did Jerome with his Vulgate, for instance. Emser

played the master to my New Testament. . . . He admits that my German is sweet and good. He saw that he could not improve on it. But eager to discredit it, he went to work and took my New Testament almost word for word as I had written it . . . and thus sold my New Testament under his name.¹⁷

One Part Theory

Against “Master Know-it-alls,” Luther’s theory of translating accounts for the sheer bulk of his *On Translating*.¹⁸ He stresses that a “good translator,” a “decent translator,” does not automatically simply switch, in a slavish and mechanistic manner, one literal word in the original language—Greek—with a supposed matching literal word in the other language—German.¹⁹ “Master Know-it-all” translators

¹⁵ LW 35:182–83.

¹⁶ The footnote to “scribbler” in *Luther’s Works* states: “*Sudler* [Luther’s German word] was a choice bit of invective. Derived from the term to ‘dirty’ or ‘deal in dirt’ and ‘handle dirty things,’ it had come to be used of any craftsman—even an author—whose work was poor, clumsy, unreliable, and superficial. Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, X, 972.”

¹⁷ LW 35:184–85.

¹⁸ See Bluhm, *Martin Luther*, 120–23. In his analyses Bluhm rightly addresses “Luther the theorist.” Bluhm stresses that Luther brings together science—the learning of languages, etc.—and art—the task of bringing these language skills and knowledge together into an effective translation. Cicero, however, sees the art of eloquence as a department within the civic sciences, as he calls them in *On Invention*, 1.6, a famous work in which Luther is again very well versed.

¹⁹ LW 35:183, 194.

“scrupulously” and “stubbornly” heed to such mechanistic, literalistic, and slavish switching at every point, as Luther noted a year later in a follow-up treatise to *On Translating*.²⁰ Such slavish translating is why Luther often calls these translators “asses” and “mules.”²¹

Unlike “Master Know-it-alls,” competent translators aim for “full,” “clear,” and “vigorous” translations.²² To achieve this “fullness,” the translator must recognize the hermeneutical principle—as we would call it today—that words mean something only as they are used and that they are used always within wider fields of meaning, usage, and everyday life within cultures, communities, and institutions.²³ This principle, of course, pertains to both languages in the translation process. Luther also had a revision protocol whereby he would gather numerous German words next to each other, “a great store of words,” before deciding which one would best promote in German the Scriptures’ meaning and vivacity.²⁴ Let’s call this the thesaurus protocol—after all, *thesaurus* is the Latin word for “treasury,” a favorite metaphor of Luther’s to extol God’s own abundance.²⁵

“Words are to serve and follow the meaning, and not the meaning the words.”²⁶ The competent translator, therefore, “concentrates on the sense of the text.” Luther calls this “the rule that . . . all schoolmasters teach,” surely an exaggeration since many teachers in the Renaissance actually taught mechanistic word switching. Sometimes the consummate translator will even run “quite a risk,” says Luther, by “relinquishing a word and rendering the sense.”²⁷ “On the other hand,” notes Luther, “we have at times also translated quite literally—even though we could have rendered the meaning more clearly another way—because everything

²⁰ Martin Luther, *Defense of the Translation of the Psalms* (1532), in *LW* 35:213. Whereas in *On Translating* Luther refers almost exclusively to Romans 3:28, in this treatise he takes up many examples of his ethnographic approach to translating. Further, because he is dealing with the Psalms, many of his translation differences are with Jewish translators, and sometimes his differences and/or disputes with them have as much or more to do with theological matters of the Christian faith than with translation matters per se.

²¹ Throughout this essay I am using the tripartite categorization of the art of persuasive communication—rhetor, sophist, orator—made famous in Western civilization by Gaius Marius Victorinus (4th c. CE). See *The Rhetoric of Cicero in Its Medieval and Early Renaissance Commentary Tradition*, ed. Virginia Cox and John O. Ward (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2006), 6. Victorinus was St. Jerome’s teacher and a significant influence on St. Augustine. In this categorization a rhetor is a theorist and teacher of the practice of oratory; a sophist is a street-corner, soapbox declaimer of his own willy-nilly thoughts subject only to the test of fleeting and boisterous popularity; the orator is a publicly accountable practitioner of the rhetorical arts in the courts and political arenas of various kinds. Luther’s “Master Know-it-alls” and “asses” are tract-oriented sobriquets for Victorinus’s sophist. Referring to himself, he notes, “It takes a great deal of patience to do a good thing publicly,” public accountability being something that “Master Know-it-alls” evade like the plague. *LW* 35:184, 185, 187, 189, 192, 193, 201.

²² *LW* 35:188–189.

²³ *LW* 35:192.

²⁴ *LW* 35:193.

²⁵ Reu gives numerous examples of Luther’s revision protocols. He also gives examples of Luther’s thesaurus protocol, as I call it, when it comes to phrases and sentence constructions. See Reu, *Luther’s German Bible*, 277–81.

²⁶ *LW* 35:213.

²⁷ *LW* 35:213. In Luther’s Table Talk cited in note 5 above, he also stresses that the very combination of words in a sentence can change the meaning of a word when it stands alone.

turns on these very words.” In such situations, a literal word itself “propagates . . . rich, glorious, and comforting doctrine.”²⁸ Throughout the ages, the good translator has always “extolled the principle of *at times* retaining the words quite literally, and *at times* rendering only the meaning.”²⁹ Rather than a slavish translator, Luther portrays himself as a liberated translator, thoroughly open to correction, to consultation, and to continual revision.³⁰

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Cicero as Precedent

With “skill, energy, sense, and brains,” translators must always “conscientiously” attune themselves to the dynamic interplay of meaning and words, notes Luther.³¹ By rejecting translation as a simple and automatic switching of literal words from one language to another, Luther is following the first of the two precedents that Cicero had set for those undertaking the art and task of translation. As we will see, Luther adheres to both precedents, albeit without mentioning Cicero by name in either *On Translating* or *Defense of the Translation of the Psalms*.³²

²⁸ LW 35:216.

²⁹ LW 35:222, my emphasis.

³⁰ Bluhm calls Luther’s approach “responsible freedom.” See Bluhm, *Martin Luther*, 117–24.

³¹ LW 35:183.

³² I am not aware of any Luther scholar who traces Luther’s approach to the translation of the Scriptures back to Cicero. Indeed, very few scholars ever say anything substantive about Luther’s overall, lifelong indebtedness to Cicero. Actually, only now as I am writing this essay have I come across one scholar who at least hints at Cicero as a precedent for Luther’s Bible translating. This person is Wilhelm Walther, a late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century German scholar of Medieval German Bible translations, a chief source of Reu’s account. Reu notes Walther’s plaint:

Even those who attempted to speak good German, with few exceptions, had no idea as to what was required of a good translation. . . . That the German Bible must also be a work of art, that the different moods of the originals were to be reproduced, that the German reader should feel what the readers of the original felt, that Cicero had correctly said that the orations of Demosthenes must be reproduced *non ut interpres sed ut orator*, was a knowledge of which we find only very slight traces in a very few of the translators. Most of them were fearfully prosaic, all on one note, and insufferably tedious. (Reu, *Luther’s German Bible*, 26–27.)

Walther’s reference to Cicero is precisely to a reference that I have pointed to in a previous short essay and that I will again consult below in this essay.

Throughout Luther's life he regularly acknowledged his indebtedness to Cicero as a philosopher, ethicist, orator, rhetorical theorist, and the ancient world's most prolific and self-reflective letter writer.³³ Moreover, he declared Cicero's treatise on ethics, *De Officiis*, the ancient world's most significant treatise on the subject; he patterned his own approach to ethics after Cicero's; and he urged his Wittenberg students to "learn Cicero."³⁴ In fact, Luther even patterned his explanations to the Ten Commandments in both of his Catechisms after *De Officiis*.³⁵

Here we highlight Luther's indebtedness to Cicero as a translation theorist. Cicero was the ancient Western world's most prolific, most poignant, and most impactful translator. For instance, he not only translated entire treatises of Plato into Latin, making them available to the Latin West, but in most of his own treatises he engaged in constant translation maneuvers that he forthrightly discusses along the way as he dialogues with a multitude of Greek philosophers, orators, and writers in general.³⁶

Even though Cicero practiced, and thereby modeled, both of his own translation protocols all the time, he spotlighted them only once that appears in his extant writings, in a short treatise he wrote for budding students of oratory: *The Best Kind of Orator*. Importantly for our project here, he intended this treatise, as he says, to be an Introduction to his translations of two famous, antithetical Greek orations by the two most eloquent orators of the ancient Greek world, one by Demosthenes and the other by Aeschines.

And I did not translate them as an interpreter, but as an orator, keeping the same ideas and the forms, or as one might say, the "figures" of thought, but in language which conforms to our usage. And in so

³³ See the very informative book by Carl P. E. Springer, *Cicero in Heaven: The Roman Rhetor and Luther's Reformation* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2018). As the subtitle indicates, Springer's work confines itself to Cicero's influence as a rhetorician and orator on Luther. Further, he does not investigate Luther's approach to Bible translation or the key Ciceronian impulse in Luther's approach to ethics.

³⁴ LW 2:159.

³⁵ Historically, *De Officiis* is translated into English as *On Duties*. More recent English translations title it *On Obligations*; some recent Cicero scholars have suggested *On Appropriate Actions*, and there are credible reasons for this latter translation rooted in the nature of Cicero's account of moral agency. Luther's love affair with Cicero never waned. He referenced Cicero over three hundred times, as listed in the *Weimare Ausgabe*, the authoritative original languages edition of Luther's writings. Springer, *Cicero in Heaven*, 57. The noted Reformation scholar Heiko Oberman has summed it up nicely: "Luther owed his love for the classical writers, especially for Virgil and Cicero, to the Erfurt humanists; through his contact with them he acquired a feeling for rhetoric and rhetorical figures, which he later considered crucial prerequisites for a proper scriptural exegesis." Oberman, *Luther: Man between God and the Devil* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 259. Notice, however, that Oberman confines Luther's love for Cicero to rhetoric; his love is in fact rooted more broadly.

³⁶ Cicero, as Luther once asserted, "read all the books of the Greeks. I marvel at this man." LW 54:171. As a theologian, Luther was neither intimidated nor repulsed by worldly wisdom—Cicero's or anyone else's. To have admiration, even affection, for Cicero was actually to follow Jesus himself as precedent, thought Luther. He regularly cited Luke 16:18, as he did in his dispute with Erasmus in *The Bondage of the Will*: "For as Christ himself confesses, the children of the world are wiser than the children of light. What Christian can compare to a Cicero alone (not to mention the Greeks) for talent, learning, or diligence?" LW 33:87.

doing, I did not hold it necessary to render word for word, but I preferred the general style and force of the language. For I did not think I ought to count them [the words] out to the reader like coins, but to pay them by weight, as it were.³⁷

What I call Cicero's first precedent—the priority of meaning over mindless, simple word switching—is easy enough to see in this quotation. His contrasting comparisons of individual words to coins and meaning to weight are striking indeed.

Cicero's second precedent is more subtle in the quotation but actually much more deeply rooted in his overall rhetorical theory, philosophical ethics, and oratorical practice. He notes that he translated these Greek speeches "as an orator." That is, he hewed to the values, adhered to the criteria, and exercised the skills that a consummate orator would employ when composing and declaiming an actual public oration. Notice that Cicero stresses "in language that conforms to *our usage*," what linguistic philosophers today call language pragmatics. Finally, this second precedent is especially germane for the appellation of "ethnography" to the character of a translator and to the act of translation. While Luther's aim was for a vernacular translation, as scholars regularly underscore, his means was ethnography.³⁸

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And Now, Luther the Ethnographer!

[We will not translate] as these asses do. Rather we must inquire about this of the mother in the home, the children on the street, the common

³⁷ Cicero, *The Best Kind of Orator*, 14 in Loeb Classical Library II. 386, trans. H. M. Hubbell (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1949), 365. These two translations, if Cicero actually finally made them, no longer exist.

³⁸ Past scholars of Luther as a translator have, like Philip Schaff, regularly listed Luther's numerous competencies for the task of translating, including "mastery of the vernacular" in Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 345. At the end of his list Schaff puts down "intuitive insight" as Luther's "crowning qualification." Without disavowing the notion of intuition altogether, much of what passes for it are, quite frankly, the values, criteria, and practices of ethnography.

man in the marketplace. We must be guided by their language, the way they speak, and do our translating accordingly. That way they will understand it and recognize that we are speaking German to them.³⁹

The *Luther's Works* translators here, I suppose trying to have Luther speak respectable English, totally flattened Luther's own quite vivid German metaphor that sets up this crucial ethnographic principle and practice. Where the English translation has "We must inquire about this of the mother . . .," Luther's literal German uses the arresting metaphor, we "must . . . look in the mouths" of the mother in the home, of the children on the street, etc.⁴⁰ To look into the mouths of your audience, now that's ethnography!

Cicero knew, preached, and practiced that a lively translation, like a gripping oration, will aim "to instruct, to delight, and to move."⁴¹ In order to attain these outcomes, he stressed that the orator must constantly inquire, "*Quid deceat?*" "What fits?" What fits this audience; at this time; in this place; in this situation; under these conditions; with these relationships, powers, and institutions in play; with these possible, or even probable, outcomes on the horizon? "What fits?" And thus, the ethnography moniker.

Significantly, in *De Officiis*, Cicero installed the constantly practiced inquiry "*Quid deceat?*"—"What fits?"—as the fourth of the four cardinal virtues, replacing Plato's "temperance" and Aristotle's "means"-between-two-extremes. Cicero had also elevated the steadfast inquiry for the fitting, for the appropriate, into a kind of super-virtue that pertains and prepares each of the first three virtues—prudence, justice, and fortitude—to meet with wisdom the particular opportunities and challenges of our down-to-earth conditions and situations. Indeed, he regarded the "What fits?" super-virtue as the element that binds the four cardinal virtues together into an ethical whole, so to speak. Finally, this binding as a moral whole is the root of honor, integrity, and dignity.⁴²

Luther knew that *Quid deceat?* stood at the heart and soul of Cicero's entire rhetorical theory and oratorical practice. Furthermore, he knew that this same *Quid deceat?* also stood at the very heart and soul of Cicero's theory of ethics. At one point, Luther even confessed specifically regarding Cicero's *Quid deceat?*: "That's why I love Cicero."⁴³ Indeed, it is Cicero's *Quid deceat?* that stands at the

³⁹ LW 35:189.

⁴⁰ Luther's German is "*auff das maul sehen*." With *maul* being his word for "mouth" and *sehen* his word for "look," I prefer to translate Luther's preposition *auff* in this construction as "must . . . look in the mouths." Schaff has "look them **on** the mouth" (p. 345). Luther also used the preposition *auff* in the prepositional phrase "the common man **in** the marketplace," as the translators of *Luther's Works* have it. Luther's metaphor reminds me of cognitive scientist Alexandra Horowitz's provocative book, *On Looking: Eleven Walks with Expert Eyes*, which begins with inattention but moves to the practice of attending to the joys of the unattended, of the perceived "ordinary" (New York: Scribner, 2013).

⁴¹ Cicero, *Best Kind of Orator*, 16. St. Augustine made this Ciceronian triplet famous in the Christian West through his influential *On Christian Doctrine* (12.27), a work that Luther knew well.

⁴² See Cicero, *On Obligations* 1.93–106 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). How *Quid deceat?* plays itself out as a virtue in *On Obligations* is a complex subject for another time.

⁴³ I am here using Springer's translation of a letter from Luther. Springer, *Cicero in Heaven*, 76.

heart of Luther's testimony, "I have learned from experience what an art and what a task translating is."⁴⁴ Like the consummate orator, the competent translator will be an ethnographer of the mundane, an expert novice who graciously and deeply enters into the everyday lives of those for whom the translator is translating.

One Part Treatise

The third ingredient in *On Translating* is a miniature theological treatise—or perhaps a basic catechism for the people—on justification by "faith alone," "the main point of Christian doctrine."⁴⁵ Dominant medieval Christianity had promoted a doctrine of justification based upon a combination of God's grace, on the one hand, and a person's faith plus good works of love, on the other.⁴⁶ The theological shorthand was "faith formed by love" justifies. On a practical level in this framework, faith is a rather small, not fully formed or developed matter. Faith is *inchoate*, as the scholastics put it, and by itself, therefore, does not sufficiently justify in God's sight. Like a child, inchoate faith must be formed—that is, be brought to maturity, to perfection. What ultimately brings inchoate faith to perfection are the Christian's own good works of love done, presumably, for God and the neighbor as commanded by God's law. In this framework, God would reward your inchoate faith with another measure of grace that would spur on your good work efforts that then would merit even more of God's grace, spurring on again more good works, and so on.

Luther, to put it rather simply, was quite sure that within this faith-formed-by-love framework of the Christian life, no conscientious person could ever be truly trusting and confident of being sufficiently justified and beloved in God's sight. On the basis of one's own good works, either devastating anxiety and despair would mark the Christian life—I'm never good enough—or self-deceiving presumption and pride would mark it—just take a look at my moral résumé! Indeed, Luther had witnessed both in spades in others and had experienced both in the extreme within himself. Furthermore, the faith-formed-by-love framework for the Christian life actually instrumentalizes the neighbor, who becomes in this framework an instrument, a mere stepping stone toward my becoming ever more justified and beloved in God's sight. Luther abhorred this formation of the Christian life, leading to his fierce critique of this false, instrumental love, as we might call it.

Against this predominant medieval framework, and on the basis of Scripture, Luther taught that in God's sight we are justified by "faith alone" in Christ alone, without good works of love. Luther also fiercely taught that justifying faith

⁴⁴ LW 35:193. Cicero himself had coupled art and task to describe the vocation of an orator in *On the Orator*, 1.154–59 in Loeb Classical Library III.348, trans. E. W. Sutton and H. Rackham (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1942), 104–09. Not surprisingly, Luther was well versed in *On the Orator*.

⁴⁵ LW 35:195.

⁴⁶ While there were various accounts of God's grace in medieval theology, the threefold account predominates: initial grace, healing grace, and elevating or perfecting grace.

never exists simply alone because, like a good tree, it invariably produces the good fruit of works of love that actually help the neighbor—one of Luther’s favorite metaphors gleaned from Jesus himself.

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Luther found justification by “faith alone” throughout the Scriptures, and Romans 3:28 plainly epitomized it: “We hold that a man [sic] is justified without the works of the law, by faith alone.”⁴⁷ But why purposefully add the word “alone” when it does not appear in St. Paul’s Greek text, as Luther obviously knew? Two reasons conjoin, one based on his ethnographically oriented theory of translation, the other based on his broad-based theology of justification. When German mothers, children, and adults in the marketplace want to speak of two things at the same time and to “clearly and vigorously” deny one and affirm the other, they will stress the affirmation by using the German word *allein* [English *alone*; Latin *sola*). Luther gives numerous examples: for instance, the farmer has no money and brings grain *alone*. In English, we might do something similar: the farmer has no money and brings *only* grain.

In the chief matter of justification, St. Paul was denying one—works—and affirming the other—faith. “The nature of our German language” demands the *allein*, the *alone*, at Romans 3:28.⁴⁸ Beyond this single text, however, Luther was convinced that loyalists to the faith-formed-by-love framework would “stare” at the four letters of the Latin theological *s o l a* “like cows at a new gate” and continue to propagate their spiritual “tyranny.”⁴⁹ Such loyalists had little idea of what was at stake, thought Luther. Many common people did. They refused to “wander away from faith and lose Christ.”⁵⁰ This brings Luther’s little treatise on “faith alone” to an end here in *On Translating*.

Might we not imagine Luther’s ethnographic enthusiasm as a Bible translator as the funding for a vocation of midwifery in service of the Scriptures? In this way, the Scriptures themselves pass through the birth canal to breathe the Spirit of the *viva vox evangelii*, “the living voice of the gospel.” In this way also, Luther’s ethnographic enthusiasm aids the birth of God’s own promise within the Scriptures

⁴⁷ LW 35:182.

⁴⁸ LW 35:189.

⁴⁹ LW 35:188, 202.

⁵⁰ LW 35:198.

themselves: “My word . . . shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose” (Isa 55:11).⁵¹ ⊕

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⁵¹ Perhaps it's no accident that Luther's own preaching changed so radically after 1521. See John W. Doberstein's "Introduction," in *LW* 51:xvi–xviii.