

500th Anniversary of the Wartburg Project: Luther at the Wartburg

The year 2021 is the 500th anniversary of the Wartburg Project, that is, it is the 500th anniversary of the first Wartburg Project, Luther's initial translation of the New Testament, which he completed during his exile to the Wartburg Castle from May 1521 to March 1522.

Luther's refusal to recant and his defiant confession before the Emperor at the Diet of Worms (April, 1521) put him in very serious danger. For this reason, Luther was rushed back to Wittenberg. On the way back, he was overtaken by a band of highwaymen, who were actually a group of Elector Frederick the Wise's guards. They escorted the Reformer to the Wartburg Castle where he would remain for the next ten months. Wartburg Castle was a hunting castle that belonged to the ducal family of Saxony. It was located in the Thuringian forest in north-central Germany near Eisenach.

For his quarters, Luther was given a single room for work, along with a rather narrow adjoining bedroom. This bedroom and living quarters were located in the northern bastion above the dwelling place of Hans von Berlepsch, the fortress' *Burgmann* (guardian of the castle). Normally, this was the area of the castle where prisoners were kept if they were knights. This was part of the effort to conceal the identity of the new resident of the Wartburg.

Luther's location in this castle was kept an absolute secret. Indeed, even Duke John (Frederick the Wise's brother) was not aware of Luther's whereabouts until he happened to visit the castle in September, 1521. To add further to the secrecy, Luther grew a beard and began to call himself by the alias *Junker Jörg*" (Knight George).

Although Luther was in hiding during this period, it did not mean that he entirely stopped his scholarly and reforming activity. He continued with correspondence and writing.

The most important of Luther's accomplishments at the Wartburg was his translation of the New Testament from Greek to German. Luther used Erasmus' 1516 edition of the Greek New Testament as the basis for his translation. Erasmus had constructed his edition with the original Greek text on one page, with his own fresh Latin translation on the opposite page. This allowed Luther to compare his own German rendering to Erasmus' contemporary Latin translation of the text. Similarly, there were annotations in the Erasmus' edition which highlighted where the original Greek text differed from the Vulgate, the standard Latin translation of Bible in the Middle Ages.

The initial translation was completed in about ten weeks, and it was published in September 1522, six months after Luther had returned to Wittenberg. Luther's was not the first German translation of the Bible, but it quickly became the most well known and most widely circulated.

Luther translated the Bible into contemporary German in order to make it more accessible to all. To help him translate into good contemporary German, Luther would make forays into nearby towns and markets to listen to people speaking. He wanted to ensure their comprehension of his translation by translating as closely as possible to the usage of their contemporary language.

The translation of the entire Bible into German was published in a six-part edition in 1534, a collaborative effort of Luther and many others, including Johannes Bugenhagen, Justus Jonas, Caspar Creuziger, Philipp Melancthon, Matthäus Aurogallus, and Georg Rörer. Luther worked on refining the translation up to the time of his death in 1546.

Luther's Bible became a bestseller in its time. About 200,000 copies in hundreds of reprinted editions appeared before Luther died in 1546. However, the book remained too expensive for most people; an unbound copy of the complete 1534 Bible cost the equivalent of a month's wages for the average laborer. The Bible was purchased by churches, pastors, and schools.

Luther's translation remained a standard for centuries. It laid the foundation for the English translations leading up to the King James Version.

Our project that resulted in the Evangelical Heritage Version was named the Wartburg Project because it built on Luther's foundation and shared his goals and principles.

For a more in-depth scholarly treatment of Luther's stay at the Wartburg and his translation work see E. G. Schwiebert, *Luther and his Times*, p. 513-534. A more popular treatment is found in Roland Bainton's *Here I Stand, A Life of Martin Luther*, p 193-196, 326-335 (with caution). Or read one of the many online treatments such as that on *Lutheran Reformation.org*, which is the source of much of the information in this article. <https://lutheranreformation.org/history/luthers-time-wartburg/> by Jack Kilcrease.