

Luther's Linguistic Ability In His Classic, The "Grosse Genesis"

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This paper is not intended to be a theological treatise, although it is inevitable that a certain amount of theological information will be included in the presentation. As Martin Luther was a theologian *and a scholar*, so one must expect to find his work in the field of Biblical scholarship to show the influence of his theological convictions, just as the latter were definitely shaped by his study of the words of Holy Writ, both as to their individual significance and their contextual connotation. While we emphasize, therefore, that this is a linguistic investigation, certain theological implications are bound to be in evidence. For the book which we shall examine for certain linguistic characteristics is a commentary, the fruit and culmination of almost four decades of intensive study of the Holy Scriptures, and rightly regarded by many students of Luther as a masterpiece of Biblical interpretation. In this explanation of the Book of Genesis Luther's remarkable genius for language, plus his *Sprachgefühl* in shaping the chancellery German of his day, combined with his comprehensive knowledge of the Bible in producing an exposition that is as unique as it is edifying. In fact, one might almost be tempted to apply Lessing's famous dictum to this last great *opus* of the great Reformer, including the fact that his memory occasionally failed him, causing him to be guilty of small *naeri*, as when he declared Bethuel and Laban to be brothers (Vol. 1, 1720), whereas Laban was the son of Bethuel and a brother of Rebekah, Gen. 28:5; 22:23; 24:29f., cp Vol. 2, 475, where Luther has the correct explanation, and when he became guilty of an overstatement in stressing the fact that the patriarchs owned not a foot of land in Canaan (Vol. 2, 141), whereas Jacob evidently regarded the land taken by his sons Simeon and Levi as his possession, Gen. 48:22, which may, or may not, be the same parcel of ground that is referred to in Josh. 24:32, the purchase price being given as one hundred pieces of silver. But these slight faults cannot even remotely form a blemish on the great classic as such, since its many superb sections, many of which rise to heights of lofty and sustained eloquence, put it in a class by itself.

This impression is heightened by the fact that Luther was, with reference to the original languages of Holy Writ, an *autodidaktos*, a self-taught scholar. His knowledge of Greek he had acquired under the direction of Johann Lang, with whom he was associated even at Erfurt and later was proud to call his colleague at the university in Wittenberg. During those years, when Luther took his first uncertain steps in using the original text in his lectures on Romans and Galatians, he still considered himself a mere tyro in the language. When he felt the need of a translation of the New Testament into German, his humility caused him to appeal to Johann Lang, urging him to undertake the task, and the latter had published a translation of the Gospel of Matthew in June, 1521, an achievement of which Luther did not hear until later in the year. (Vol. 15, 2555.) Such was Luther's humility with respect to his linguistic ability that he, even after accomplishing the stupendous task of rendering the New Testament into German, between the middle of December, 1521, and the beginning of March, 1522, that is, approximately two and one-half months, still felt compelled to confer with Melancthon, his colleague in the chair of Greek at the university, to whose learning he constantly deferred.

Apparently Luther made his first contact with Hebrew somewhat earlier, namely during his stay at Erfurt between 1509 and 1510, before his journey to Rome. He became acquainted with Reuchlin's *Rudimenta*, that famous introductory textbook for the study of Hebrew, but he did not, at that time, bring his studies in connection with the Old Testament, since he was at that time still under the domination of the Vulgate. As highly as Luther later valued the Hebrew language and as proficient as he became in the use of the same, he nevertheless always depreciated his ability, especially as grammarian. While he very strongly emphasized the use of grammar and of a comprehensive linguistic apparatus, he deprecated all pedantic stressing of grammar and regarded usage and understanding as more important factors in reproducing any writing in a different language. (Vol. 1, 451.) In other words, grammar is to serve as a means to an end, not an end in itself. He writes: "No one is to interpret my stand or understand me to mean that I reject grammar, which is very necessary; but this much I say: If one does not, in addition to grammar, study the content of Holy Scripture, he will never become a good teacher. For, as some one has said, in the case of a teacher or preacher speech should

follow or grow out of the heart, and not out of the mouth.” (Vol. 1, 1000.) These expressions must be kept in mind if one wishes to evaluate the linguistic ability of Luther, especially in his last great exegetical *opus*.

It is interesting to note that Luther did some work in Genesis shortly after he had received his degree as doctor of divinity, that is, during the winter term, 1512–13, and that this book always had a special appeal for him, so that he finally gave it the rather extravagant praise that “in the entire Bible there is nothing more beautiful than the Book of Genesis.” (Vol. 2, 1022.) Apparently he did not attempt any more comprehensive work in the first book of the Bible till 1527, when he, after delivering some sermons on Genesis, issued his *In Genesin Declamationes*. This rather ambitious undertaking was launched on May 1, in the press on July 22, and completed on October 6.

But Luther’s exegetical labors reach their culmination in his “Grosse Genesis,” the content of lectures that extended from August 1536, to November 17, 1545. It stands to reason that his work in the classroom was frequently interrupted by his many trips in the interest of the Gospel, as the Buchwald-Kawerau *Kalendarium* shows. The mechanical work connected with the publishing of such a comprehensive commentary was so time-consuming that Luther turned it over to George Roerer and Veit Dietrich (Vol. 22, 2918f.), but some work was done also by Wenceslaus Link in Nürnberg, to whom the Reformer on January 17, 1545, sent 41 completed chapters. He was then working on chapter 45. (Vol. 22, 3061.) Luther’s state of mind at that time is brought out by his remark: “May the Lord, with the completion of Genesis, also grant me the end of this mortal and sinful life, or even, if it pleases Him, before that; please intercede for me in this.” At the conclusion of his final lecture on the Book of Genesis, Luther remarked: “I can’t go on, I am weak; pray God for me, that He may grant me a good and blessed final hour.” (Vol. 21b, 2139; 2, 2091.) This presentiment of his death may be said to go back at least to September 1544, when he made the statement that he was on his way to the grave (*als der ich nun auf die Grube gehe*). It is evident, therefore, that in the “Grosse Genesis” we are dealing with an *opus* which, in Luther’s own estimation, should be placed among his foremost productions, also in giving evidence of the linguistic ability which he had acquired in almost four decades of successful teaching and of intensive study of the Hebrew language. Since it would make this paper too long and tedious to present every point of Luther’s linguistic remarks, we shall offer only some of the most significant discussions.

It was only natural, in view of the opinion held by some of the church fathers, that Luther should discuss the meaning of the word *yom*, day, as used in Gen. 1:5 and throughout the creation story. With a full knowledge of the fact that Ps. 90:4 and 2 Pet. 3:8 speak of the timelessness of God and do not apply to creatures subject to time, and with the conviction that his conception of *yom* is supported by Ex. 20:11 and 31:15–17, Luther calmly states: “Therefore one must understand these six days as true (natural) days, contrary to the opinion of the holy fathers. For if we see that the opinion and thoughts of the fathers will not agree with Scripture, we do indeed bear them with patience and acknowledge them with all reverence as our fathers and ancestors, but on their account we do not depart from the authority of Scripture.” (Vol. 1, 149.)

Luther was very indignant on account of the traditional mistranslation in Gen. 3:15, where the Vulgate reads: *Ipsa conteret caput tuum*. There can be no question that the Hebrew text has the masculine pronoun, *hu*, a fact that is also conceded by notable Roman Catholic theologians, such as Stummer in his *Geschichte der lateinischen Bibel*. The LXX have *autos*, the *Biblia Bezae* has *hoc*, the Spanish, following the Vulgate, has *ella*, the Authorized Version, strangely enough, has *it*, which is somewhat strange, especially in view of the parallel passages adduced. Luther was particularly concerned about this text, because it had been falsely explained as referring to the Virgin Mary. He writes: “Concerning the recent teachers we know this rogues trick, that they have falsified this text and have made of the word ‘he’ the feminine ‘she,’ and have, with open malice and sin, applied this text to the Virgin Mary... Who would not be surprised, yea, who would not curse the poisonous and evil counsel of Satan, that he, through clumsy interpreters, applies this text, which contains such rich comfort regarding the Son of God, to the Virgin Mary?” (Vol. 1, 225. 234.) Luther then shows that the text has received greater clarity by the statement in Is. 7:14.

The discussion concerning chapter 4:1 is somewhat puzzling. The translation that Luther adopted in the last revision in which he took part is: *Ich habe den Mann, den Herrn*, that is: I have (received) the man, the Lord. There can be no doubt that this is what the Hebrew text says, literally rendered, for the *eth* is the *signum*

accusativi, and all attempts of recent translators to alter the fact savor of preconceived misconceptions, such as the AV: I have gotten a man from the Lord; the French: J'ai acquis un homme par la grace du Seigneur; the Revised German: *Ich habe einen Mann gewonnen reit dem Herrn*, are out of harmony with the original and with the entire *ductus* of the inspired account. In view of Luther's final text it seems strange to have him offer the translation, in his commentary: *Ich habe überkommen den Mann des Herrn*. This is not written in the spirit of the mistranslations just referred to, nor is it along the lines of textual emendations, like the suggestion of Gesenius, who would read *me'et Jahweh*, that is, from, or, with the help of the Lord. Luther's comment is: "Eve ... did not want to call him son, but she thought he would be something greater, namely the Man who would bruise the head of the serpent. For that reason she does not call him simply a man, but a 'man of the Lord,' as the one whom the Lord had meant when He said, 'Thy Seed shall bruise the head of the serpent.' ... Since she therefore makes a deduction concerning the person, she errs and gives her son such a glorious and happy name in vain. For the text indicates that the name Cain is derived from the word *kanah*, which means to possess or to receive, so that with this name she comforts herself over against the damage sustained." (Vol. 1,296.) Note: The opinion of Gesenius is embodied in the edition of Cowley, 117, i. and k.

The passage Gen. 4:7 caused Luther some difficulties, and he states, very frankly: "At present there are many who far surpass me in grammar of the Hebrew language." (1, 322.) Nevertheless, as he states, since he had a better understanding of the content, his translation: *Wenn du fromm bist, so bist du angenehm*, If thy conduct is pious, thou wilt be acceptable, is preferable to that offered, for example, by Gerundensis: If thou wilt be pious, thy sacrifice will be more acceptable than that of thy brother, for thou art the firstborn. Over against this biased application Luther declares: "Therefore this is the meaning: If thou wert pious, this is, If thou wouldest have faith, then thou wouldest have a gracious God."—But the second part of the verse caused some real trouble. Luther's translation, *so ruhet die Sünde vor der Tür*, is indeed literally correct, but the sense of the passage depends upon the connotation of the verb *ruhen*, rest, and this is Luther's understanding of the statement: "That the text reads, Sin is lying or resting at the door, is a rhetorical description of sin... For that is in reality the way of sin, that it lies or rests, while it is active, like a wild beast that has gone to sleep, that is, that it does not bite, does not terrify or vex, but rather flatters and tickles." (Vol. 1, 325.) But the Hebrew word *robez* signifies a lurker or croucher (substantial participle), with the connotation of lying in wait, crouching to leap upon its prey. Therefore the text says, in effect: If thy conduct is not pious, sin is crouching at the door (like a wild beast in a cage); and it is eager to dominate thee, but thou must rule over it. This thought Luther presents very nicely: "Sin will entice and urge thee to seek revenge, but thou shalt say: Sin, I shall not follow thee; so that thou wilt restrain thyself and be its master." (Vol. 1, 330.)

Luther meets the difficulty of Gen. 5:32 in a very decisive way. The text merely states, at this point: "And Noah was five hundred years old; and Noah begat Shem, Ham, and Japheth," whence it was commonly assumed that this indicated their age sequence. But Luther remarks: "Scripture compels one to assume that Japheth is the first-born, but Shem the next one, and Ham the third. And this is proved in this manner: Shem begot his son Arphachsad two years after the Flood, but Shem was at that time one hundred years old, Gen. 11:10. Therefore Shem at the time of the Flood was ninety-eight years old. But Noah was four hundred and ninety-eight years old when Shem was born. But Japheth was older than Shem, Gen. 10:21. It follows then that only Ham, the youngest brother, was born in the five hundredth year of Noah."* (Vol. 1, 435. 502.)

Another interesting translation and discussion is that pertaining to Gen. 6:4, where the Authorized Version has "giants" and Luther's rendering is "Tyrrannen." His solution of the difficulty is given in these statements: "Concerning the word *nephilim* there is dispute regarding the meaning, and some say it is derived from the verb *naphal*, which means to cause to fall, so that, when other human beings saw such horrible, great people, they fell down for fear... But it is certainly ridiculous to assume that they are called *nephilim*, because others fall before them... Therefore this text, and wherever anything more is presented of this kind, indicates to me that *nephilim*, that is, giants, are not called thus because of their size, as the rabbis suppose, but of the

* According to Luther Noah would have been 502 when Shem was born, and older even when Ham was born.

tyranny and violence with which they raged, and regarded neither law nor decency, but simply followed their lusts and desires.” (1, 474f.)

Luther has a somewhat strange explanation of the name Japheth in connection with Gen. 9:27. His own final rendering is: *Gott breite Japhet aus*, which is adopted by the AV: God shall *enlarge* Japheth, with the marginal reading: *persuade*. In his commentary Luther uses the translation: *Gott wird freundlich reden mir Japhet*, God shall speak in a friendly manner with Japheth. Here is a part of Luther’s argument: “The grammarians argue the question as to why the Latin translators all offer: *Dilatet Deus Japhet*, May God enlarge Japheth, since the Hebrew language does not yield this meaning here. Although not only the Hebrew, but also the Chaldaic translators understand the word *japheth* as meaning ‘to spread out’.” Then Luther rules out a possible derivation from *japha*, to be beautiful, and offers the following explanation: “Why, then, have the Latin translators offered, ‘May the Lord enlarge Japheth,’ although the text does not offer *pathach*, which means ‘to enlarge or open,’ but *pathah*, which means ‘to persuade’? My answer is: I do not doubt that the translators took offense, for since this is a promise, it would seem an inconvenient and hard thing to suppose that Noah would say: May God persuade or deceive Japheth. For that would make it seem that these were words of a curse, and not a blessing.” Luther then suggests that the word is to be understood in the good sense, namely that the Lord would gently persuade Japheth not to begrudge Shem the honor of being the progenitor of the Messiah. (1, 651f.) We may note here that, apart from Luther’s final rendering, as noted above, modern Hebrew scholars seem to connect the word with *pathach*, “to spread out,” and the word *japheth* is translated “wide-spreading.”

With regard to Gen. 10:11. 12 Luther offers a very ingenious explanation concerning the names of the four cities grouped with that of Nineveh, the three others being Rehoboth, Calah, and Resen. He remarks: “Of this city of Nineveh it is said that it was divided into four sections or cities, as the story of Jonah indicates that it was very large and wide... If it was then divided into four sections, Nineveh was the central and best part, where the court of the king was situated. Rehoboth was the place where the merchants lived; Ir, where the council had its sessions, and Calah, where the farmers lived. At some distance from these cities was located Resen, where the gardeners lived.” (1, 674.) This description, in general, agrees remarkably well with modern discoveries, which suggest the translation: “He founded Rehoboth-Ir, Calah, Resen, and Nineveh.” The first three cities are here grouped with Nineveh and called the great city. All these cities in reality formed one unit, and ruins of royal palaces have been found in various sections.

In connection with Gen. 13:10 Luther evidently was casting about for another word beside *Ebene*, plain, as a rendering of *kikkar*. (1,849.) His description favors the meaning *Talkessel*, that is, a wide valley or basin, and that is what the word evidently indicates; this also agrees with the present topography.

In connection with Gen. 13:16 and related pertinent passages, and particularly with reference to the word *olam*, forever, Luther offers an interesting and satisfactory explanation, chiefly because of the literalist stressing of the idea of a condition which should last to eternity, or at least as long as the world stands. He writes: “Therefore one should note that this word *olam*, forever, does not mean an eternal duration, or endless time, but a long period of time without specific determination as to how long it will last. In Ex. 21:6 we have: ‘And his master shall bore his ear through with an awl; and he shall serve him forever,’ that is, as long as he lives; and so, throughout the books of Moses the word ‘forever’ is repeated as meaning an uncertain, and yet an enclosed and ultimate period of time, as in Num. 18:23: ‘They shall bear their iniquity; it shall be a statute forever throughout your generations,’ that is, until the coming of Christ... Unlearned and foolish people permit themselves to be led astray and taken captive by this one word, which Moses here uses, and understand it in this fashion that the Jews were to keep their ceremonies and services into eternity, and declare that therefore the Sabbath, circumcision, and other ceremonies should not have been done away with, but retained.” (1, 873.)

On the description of Ishmael in Gen. 16:12: “He will be a wild man,” Luther offers this remark: “The Jews say that *pere* means an animal which they call *onager*, wild ass.... To this the angel points when he calls him *pere*, a wild person, who would not care much about cities, laws, and ordinances, which are necessary for the preservation of the society of humanity.” (1, 997.)

How thorough Luther was in determining the meaning of every word of the Hebrew text is seen from his remarks on Gen. 18:1, where the AV text has: “The Lord appeared unto him in the *plains* of Mamre,” the

Hebrew text having the word *elon*, a terebinth or Oriental oak-tree. Luther offered the translation *Hain*, grove, but with some caution: “Although some Latin translators call the place an oak grove, others an open space or a level field, yet it seems to me that it is a small woods or a grove, in the midst of which he had a small hut.” (1, 1141.) It is generally assumed that the reference is to a terebinth-grove, for the Massoretic punctuation seems to be correct.

In Gen. 18:10 Luther’s accepted translation, which he also uses at the head of this section in his commentary, is: *Ich will wieder zu dir kommen, so ich lebe*, literally: I shall return to thee, if I live. The Revised German Bible renders the significant expression, *über ein Jahr*, a year from now, while the AV has, “according to the time of life, “and the same Hebrew expression in verse 14 is translated, “at the time appointed.” Luther explains the somewhat difficult expression: “The words are to be applied to the promised son, as though this were the meaning: I shall come again according to the time of life, that is, after the time required by a child in order to live on earth... that he should be a natural son, and she should bear him in the same way as fruit is born by a young woman... She will conceive, he says, from the man, and bear the fruit in her body in the natural and usual manner, so that he be a true son.” (1, 1166.) We might then transcribe the expression: “According to the time that commonly elapses between the conception of a child and its birth.”

The acknowledged difficulty in Gen. 20:16 caused Luther to complain: “This text is difficult on account of the grammar, for that reason the translators are not in agreement. And it is no wonder that there are some places in Holy Scripture that one cannot sufficiently understand.” (1, 1358ff.) The difficult expression is at the end of the sentence, where the AV has: Behold, he is to thee a covering of the eyes, unto all that are with thee, and with all other; thus she was reproved. The Revised German translation has the last sentence reading: And therewith she was vindicated. This agrees fairly well with Luther’s transcription and explanation: “The king says to Sarah, To thee I give not so much as one farthing, namely that thou mayest have a covering for thine eyes, that is, a certain testimony of thy honor and modesty, that I have not touched thee. For, if I should give thee something special, I should arouse the suspicion in others as though thy honor had been violated.” (1, 1360.) The Hebrew text permits both connotations, since it literally signifies (Nifal): to be set aright or reprimanded; to be justified; to be safeguarded. Luther’s surmise could be put in the following transcription: “For Sarah the gift to Abraham should be in the nature of a restitution for the wrong which she had suffered, by which she was justified before her associates and all others.”

The last text that we shall examine for the purpose of this paper is Gen. 26:25 (cp chapter 12:8): “And he builded an altar there, and called upon the name of the Lord.” Luther has: *Und predigte von dem Namen des Herrn*, And proclaimed the name of the Lord. He defends his rendering in the following statement: “In this passage we preserve the distinction between these two expressions, namely ‘to call upon the name of the Lord,’ and, ‘to proclaim in the name of the Lord’; for the first means to call upon or pray, as in Psalm 50:15: ‘Call upon Me in the day of trouble.’ But ‘to proclaim in the name of the Lord’ signifies so much as preaching in the name of the Lord, as in chapter 4 of this First Book of Moses: ‘At the time of Enos men began to preach of the name of the Lord.’ The Hebrew word *kara* really means to call, to name, to read out of a book, to preach.... For that reason we understand the word to mean, in this passage, to teach or in public worship to read something, if indeed they had books.” (Vol. 2, 223.)

Although we have confined ourselves, in this paper, almost entirely to texts taken from the first part of the Book of Genesis, we believe that there is sufficient material to prove that Luther was not only a great theologian, but that his linguistic ability, also in Hebrew, was definitely of the scholarly kind, showing a high degree of competency in independent research and judgment, far from a slavish adherence to tradition. This fact, in addition to the beauty of his language, offers another reason for the study of Luther.