

The Contested History of a Book: The German Bible of the Later Middle Ages and Reformation in Legend, Ideology, and Scholarship

Andrew C. Gow

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5508/jhs.2009.v9.a13>

ABSTRACT The wide distribution and availability of German and other vernacular Bible translations in the late fourteenth and fifteenth

centuries, with 22 printed full Bible translations into German/Low German/Netherlandish appearing before Luther's famous Bible translation, has been known to scholars since at least the early eighteenth century, when various works on German Bibles before the Reformation began to appear. However, the existence of such translations did not guarantee that scholars, especially church historians and historians of the Reformation took such Bible translations seriously. Luther himself had claimed (polemically) that the Bible had been entirely unknown and unavailable when he was a young man. The rather dispassionate scholarship of the eighteenth century, which included important works on pre-Reformation German Bibles by orthodox Lutheran divines, gave way in the second half of the nineteenth century to a rather bitter polemical discourse in the context of the *Kulturkampf* in Germany. Luther the linguistic genius and Luther the theological hero were the protagonists on one side; the late medieval Bible, on which Luther drew heavily for his own translation, was on the other. Not so much a Catholic-Lutheran debate as an ideological one about the place, value and influence of medieval piety and culture (and their relation to German national culture) was played out by prominent church historians. By the eve of WWII, German Bible scholarship had become a more clear-eyed exercise in historical evaluation--yet immediately after the war, in the context of the Cold War and the construction of a lineage of democratic and liberty-oriented values for Christian western Europe, the Luther Bible began to loom ever larger, especially in textbooks and general surveys, as a turning point in the history of western culture. Since the 1990s, more specialized and careful assessments of the importance of pre-Reformation German Bibles have prevailed, perhaps as part of a general re-evaluation of medieval culture and piety from perspectives informed more by anthropology and literary theory than by ideological polemic. These findings might shed light on the modes of history-writing in the contexts of both myth-making and source analysis.

 PDF

PUBLISHED

2009-05-07

HOW TO

CITE

Gow, A. C. (2009). The Contested History of a Book: The German Bible of the Later Middle Ages and Reformation in Legend, Ideology, and Scholarship. *The Journal of Hebrew Scriptures: ARCHIVES*, 9. <https://doi.org/10.5508/jhs.2009.v9.a13>

More Citation Formats

ISSUE

Vol. 9 (2009): Volume 9

SECTION

ABOUT JHS

The Journal of Hebrew Scriptures (JHS) is an internationally peer-reviewed, open-access journal established in 1996, to foster scholarly research on the Hebrew Bible, ancient Israel's history, and cognate fields of study.

[OFFICIAL SITE](#)

[SUBMISSIONS](#)

Journal of Hebrew Scriptures | ISSN 1203-1542
Editor: Christophe Nihan (University of Lausanne)
[Contact](#) | [Privacy Policy](#)



UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA
LIBRARY

--History - Modern American Inquisition - The Era of McCarthyism American Presidency from Roosevelt to Reagan Brotherhood of the Revolution: How America's Founders Forged a New Nation Enlightenment - Reason, Tolerance, and Humanity Epochs of European Civilization - Reformation To the Twenty-First Century How America Survived the Civil War - A House Reunited Liberty and Its Price: Understanding the French Revolution Rethinking our Past - Recognizing Facts Fictions and Lies in American History Russian Revolution: From Tsarism to Bolshevism Six Months that Changed the World - the Paris Peace Con The Middle Ages and the Renaissance (c. 500-1500). Defining periods in history can be difficult. "Middle Ages", "Renaissance," and "modern period" are ambiguous terms. Middle Ages refers to the development of theology during the dark ages to the time of the Reformation. One of the most significant movements to emerge during the Middle Ages was Monasticism. It began in the remote areas of Egypt and eastern Syria. The primary ideology of this movement surrounded a withdrawal from the sinful and distracting world to abide within a given community together for the common spiritual good (common life = *vita communis*). Pachomius built an early monastery during 320-325. This monastery created a pattern by which other monasteries would later develop. In the Middle Ages, the Holy Writ was believed to be a sacred book "where even the word order holds a mystery",⁶³ not to be touched or changed. Therefore, transforming the form and content was considered to be a serious heresy, which resulted in the predominance of the literal translation of the Bible. The greatest event in the early Middle Ages was the Bible as translated by St. Jerome(342-419/20). His Bible, known as the Vulgate, or standard Latin Bible, had great influence on succeeding generations of translators. The cardinal principle of that time, the ideology of the Reformation, was that each person should be granted access to the text of the Bible in his or her own tongue, that is, in the vernacular. The result was the development of education and literacy.