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The Wurker-Gibson Bible Collection and the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation

Lawrence Onsager and Terry Dwain Robertson

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Introduction

As part of the celebration of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, Terry Robertson and I decided to highlight the James White Library's copy of Luther's 1534 Bible, the role of Chester Gibson in donating the Bible to Andrews and the story of Paul Wurker, who collected this particular Bible and the other Bibles which we are calling the Wurker-Gibson Bible Collection.

The Story of the Wurker-Gibson Bible Collection

The Wurker-Gibson Bible Collection was collected by Paul Wurker, a German immigrant, over a period of three decades or more. After taking up residence in San Francisco, California in the 1930s, Paul placed regular ads in the San Francisco *Chronicle* for old books and Bibles. In addition, Paul obtained many of the Bibles in the Eastern Sector of Germany after World War II, when he visited relatives before the building of the Berlin Wall. Other books and Bibles he gathered in France, Switzerland, and Argentina.

Sue Huett, the daughter of Chester Gibson, relates that her father, a prominent dentist in McMinnville, Oregon, came into possession of the collection after a conversation with Paul at the time he was considering retirement. Paul was concerned about what would eventually happen to his Bibles. Realizing the importance of the Bibles, Dr. Gibson quickly decided to purchase the Bibles from Paul. As Sue tells it, "Paul did not believe in making money from Bibles and sold the collection to her father for a ridiculously low amount of money." The figure that she remembers is \$600.

The total collection was valued at \$41,845 in 1992. The 1617 King James Bible, alone, was valued at \$10,000. This book is described as having "some definite defects, especially internally, but because the early James folios were almost always read very hard, this is, relatively speaking, quite an appealing copy. The original, untampered-with binding makes this especially desirable. The 1617 folio is rarer than the 1611 or 1613 editions, but it is only the first printing that has the capability of bringing eye-popping prices (as much as \$100,000 or more for a fine copy). Still this amount is nothing to sniff at." Nine other Bibles, including the 1763 Saur Bible at \$1,200, were valued between \$1,000 and \$2,500.

After acquiring the collection, Dr. Gibson lectured on the collection whenever he had the opportunity. The members of his extended family were well aware of his pride in owning the collection and sharing information about its interesting titles.

Donation to Andrews

In 1985, Chester Gibson donated to Andrews University, in his words, . . . “several German Bibles . . . and an early-English-imprint ecclesiastical history.” Only Luther’s first complete Bible of 1534 has been identified from this donation.

Description of the Collection

At that time, Dr. Gibson described the total collection as consisting of some 65 Bibles and other rare books. Included in the collection were the Koberger Nuremberg Bible printed in 1516, the Luther Bible of 1534 (donated to Andrews in 1985), and a Paris Bible of 1532. The Bibles in the collection consist, for the most part, of German Bibles of Reformation and of early Post-Reformation times. The collection also included some English language publications, imprints from several European countries, and from Germantown, Pennsylvania during colonial times. Several volumes in the collection include exquisite woodcuts.

Second Donation to Andrews

In 1991, Dr. Gibson donated the copy of the King James English Bible of 1617 and a complete copy of the Christoph Saur German Bible of 1763 to the Adventist Heritage Center of the James White Library at Andrews University. The 1617 King James Bible, printed in London by Robert Barker, is particularly valuable because of its rarity. This Bible was printed 400 years ago this year. The Saur Bible appeared in three significant editions and represents the earliest publication of Luther’s Bible version in America.

Donation to Walla Walla

In 1992, Dr. Gibson donated the remainder of the Bibles to the Walla Walla University Library. A search of the Walla Walla library catalog using the phrase “Gibson Bible Collection” and restricting the retrieval to “WWU Only” provides the patron with this list of 53 Bibles.

Biographical Information on Paul Wurker

Ernest Paul Wurker (AKA Paul Wurker) was born on June 16, 1892 in Zschorlau, Saxony, Germany. Zschorlau is located in southern Germany near the border with the Czech Republic. Paul was married on February 17, 1917 in Zschorlau to Elsa Klara Schubert. Elsa was born on June 16, 1893 in Zschorlau.

After World War I, Ernest and Elsa, along with many of their countrymen, migrated to Argentina to escape the aftermath of the war. Argentina offered free land and equipment with which to farm. In telling his story to friends in later years, Paul stated, "We were given a parcel of land in the jungle and the equipment was a shovel and a spade!"

On August 23, 1923 in Buenos Aires, Argentina, Paul and Klara welcomed a daughter, Lydia, into their family. Dissatisfied with their experiences in Argentina, Paul and Klara with daughter, Lydia, migrated to the United States in 1928. They settled in San Francisco, California where Paul engaged in Bible collecting. After Klara's death in 1952, Paul relocated to McMinnville, Oregon.

During the 1960s and 1970s, Paul displayed the Bibles several times in the Linfield College Library in McMinnville. They were also displayed in the Lutheran Church in McMinnville.

Paul Wurker died in 1977.

Martin Luther's 1534 Bible

Description

The 1534 Luther Bible we have from the Wurker-Gibson collection is a large folio volume, 13 x 8.5 x 3 inches, 33 x 21.6 x 7.6 cm. We have the 2nd volume which includes four sections: Isaiah-Ezekiel -- Daniel-Malachi -- Judith-Prayer of Manasseh -- New Testament, comprising 479 leaves.

The catalog description reads as follows:

"Bound in two volumes in contemporary roll-stamped pigskin over wooden boards, brass clasps and catches. Plain end papers and edge Includes dedication to Johann Friedrich of Saxony, general introduction, and introductions to each section Text printed in single column, paragraph form, without verse nos. Title centered across top of both pages with folio no. in outer corner of recto. Occasional references in inner margins. Borders and 122 woodcuts by Melchior Schwarzenberg; woodcuts are colored, the first letter of each book is ornate with some being colored and some not." (James White Library Catalog, <https://jewel.andrews.edu/record=b3848245~S9>.)

A couple of clarifications are in order. The reference works on the 1534 Bible list 117 woodcuts, not 122. Some of these have the initials MS, and so it is a reasonable assumption that they were prepared by Melchoir Schwarzenberg. There are other possibilities, so this is a likely but not certain claim.

The James White Library copy lacks a title page and some pages are damaged or missing; the book of Revelation is incomplete. The front cover is loose and the clasps are missing.

On the inside cover, Paul Wurker signed his name, giving San Francisco, 1934. His stamp is also there, and on a couple of other pages.

Publication

The 1534 Luther Bible was the first German language translation from the original languages. Previous German language Bibles had been translated from the Latin. But this translation stands out even more so because of Luther's principles for translation and his dynamic use of the German language.

The printer was Hans Lufft in Wittenberg. Martin Luther lived in close proximity to his shop, so there was a good working relationship between the two. During Luther's lifetime, Lufft printed more than 100,000 copies of Luther's Bibles. (Nieden, 2012). It has been documented that between the publication of the New Testament in 1526 and Luther's death, 445 complete or partial editions of the Bible were published. (Barbier, 2017, p. 254). Lufft and a couple of other printers in Wittenberg were licensed by Johann Friedrich of Saxony to publish and sell the Bibles. As can be expected pirated copies began to appear in other cities. At one point Martin Luther expressed his frustration with these infringements, not so much because of lost income, but these other printers were not accountable to him for accuracy. He was worried they might tweak the text, or leave out the marginal notes.

Printing technology was still a new innovation. Printers could not invest in enough type and frames to set aside a completed Bible until they were ready to print a new edition. So each edition represents a skilled worker resetting the type for the Bible once again. It was possible for a good typesetter to produce up to 2000 characters per hour. Both the typesetting and the proofing were completed on a mirror version of the final printing.

The 1534 Luther Bible was printed as a Quarto, four pages per impression, eight pages per leaf. The presses were hand powered. Thus this Bible required about 500 impressions for the two volumes. Good press operators managed up to four impressions per minute, or 240 impressions per hour. (Pollak, 1972, p. 242)

Marketing the Bible

Kolb (2016, p. 217) described the Bible as selling for two guilden eight groshen, approximately the price of ten bushels of oats. Assuming that this bushel is about the same measure as today, data from the 16th century on the price of oats compared with the wages of agricultural workers suggests the Bible would be equivalent to about sixteen days of work. (Global Price and Income History Group, 2006). Converting that measure at current basic wages would figure to about \$2000. (If the word bushel refers to the achtel, the cost would be three times as much). In other words, the cost would be prohibitive for these workers, but could be managed by the urban middle class. Over time, owning a Bible became a middle class status symbol in Protestant regions.

In addition to cost, the low literacy rates served to reduce the potential readership to a very small fraction of most congregations. Yet the availability of the Bible was a significant factor in driving literacy growth so that by the end of the 15th century, the rates were much higher in Protestant regions. (Haile, 1976).

The Woodcuts

Dr. Kenneth Strand (1985), professor of church history and editor of the Andrews University Seminary Studies, was publishing on the Reformation era woodcuts. He included reproductions of three pages from this Bible in his 1985 article, “Early Luther Bibles: Facsimiles from Several Significant Editions.”

The 1534 Luther Bible has 117 original pictorial images, praised as the finest examples of Reformation book illustration. Many of the earlier German translations of the Bible also included woodcuts, but this translation had more than three times as many.

The woodcuts are 5.75 inches wide by 4.25 inches (14.6 cm wide x 10.8 cm), and then colored, individually, by hand. (Christensen, 2005, p. 394).

A few of the woodcuts are initialed by MS, hence the suggestion of Melchior Schwarzenberg, but there are several other known artists with those initials. Luther also had a strong relationship with Lucas Cranach, and so it is a warranted speculation that these woodcuts may have come from his studio, if not his hand. (Christensen, 2005, p. 392).

There is also documented evidence that Luther was actively engaged in selecting passages for woodcuts, and in designing the pertinent theological details. (Christensen, 2005, p. 393)

In terms of distribution, Revelation has 26, but each of the Gospels only have a portrait of the author. (Christensen, 2005, p. 395). These woodcuts proved durable, and were used in nine of the ten complete editions of the Bible printed during Luther’s lifetime.

Each of the woodcuts is a study in and of itself, and it would be interesting to “exegete” each in context and as it is reflected in the larger work of Martin Luther. In the time we have, hopefully we can peak your curiosity, and enjoy together this highlight in the story of the Bible.

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