

features

# Luther's coffee-table Bible — before coffee

Martin Luther published a complete Bible, in German, in 1534. The illustrations, from the workshop of Lucas Cranach, cut new ground, says *Stephan Füssel*

**H**ANDED DOWN, commented on, and interpreted — mostly in Latin — for more than 1000 years, the Bible was increasingly being read in German-language translations after the invention of printing in about 1450 by Johannes Gutenberg in Mainz. The pinnacle is Martin Luther's extraordinary translation, dating from the early 16th century.

It is still appreciated today for its innovative, theologically bold, and vivid language. Within the German-speaking community, Luther's translation holds a unique position from both a theological and a linguistic point of view, and has influenced the German language down to this day.

Eighteen German-language Bible editions existed before Luther's time,

a remarkable number. If their impact was limited, this was because they were not only expensive but used obsolete language, and followed the translation principle *verbum de verbo*, i.e. they stayed too close to the original Latin. This often led to misunderstandings and misinterpretations.

Moreover, since the Church claimed to be the sole authority for interpreting scripture, there was no great motivation to purchase these early versions.

Luther gave scripture a completely new status in theological thought and church practice, asserting the sole authority of scripture and the ability of the laity to read the Bible and distinguish between revealed truth and the distorted practice of the "Ancient Church". He provided a new German version of the Bible

which drew on the original texts with innovative freshness, thus ensuring that his translation enjoyed unprecedented popularity.

Between 1522 and 1546 (the year of Luther's death) more than 300 High German Bible editions were published, totalling more than half a million copies — an incredible number, given that the book market was still in its infancy, and the majority of the population were illiterate. During the first half of the 16th century, Luther's writings constituted one third of all books printed in German.

For the 1534 edition, "the Master MS", one of Cranach's collaborators, conceived 117 woodcuts and various initials. The wood blocks used to create the illustrations have survived, and are now kept in the Biblioteka Jagiellonska in Cracow.



Biblical images: *above*: Samson tearing the lion apart; *below, left*: Elijah being taken to heaven in the chariot of fire, with the "fifty men of the sons of the prophets" (2 Kings 2.7) in the background. Elisha kneels on the banks of the Jordan, by the place where Elijah has prepared a way through the river for them; *below right*: the Evangelist Matthew seated in his garden before a desk with writing utensils; in front of him, his attribute, the angel, revising the written text

If the Master MS made use of a centuries-old Christian iconography, especially for the attributes of the prophets and the Evangelists, he relied only sparingly on the 18 Bibles that had been printed before that of Luther. In a few cases, his motifs are found in manuscripts, church windows, or other woodcuts in books, although there is no proof that they were directly derived from these sources.

The coherent cycle of 117 illustrations thus constitutes a unique composition, which served as a model for subsequent Bibles.

*This is an edited extract from The Bible in Pictures: From the workshop of Lucas Cranach (1534) by Stephan Füßel (Taschen, £24.99 (£22.50); 978-3-8365-1814-7).  
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