

*Non nobis solum nati sumus.*<sup>1</sup>

## The Latin Bible at the Reformation (1517-1648)<sup>2</sup>

### 1 The Old Testament



It was at the Reformation that the great movement for translating the Bible into the language of the common people began. Latin was no longer spoken as a common native language (a vernacular) and people could no longer read it for themselves unless they had learned Latin. The invention of printing enabled the new translations to be widely spread. However, although ordinary people did not speak Latin, it was not a dead language. Scholars still used it as a regular means of communication, enabling them to exchange ideas all over Europe regardless of their individual mother tongue. Recognising the defects in Jerome's translation, especially in the rather corrupted form in which it circulated at the time, some reformed scholars made a new translation into Latin.

Immanuel Tremellius (1510-1580) was a Hebrew expert. He made a translation of the Old Testament which was very popular among protestant scholars. A Jew by birth born in Italy he became a Christian, joining the Catholic church in the first instance, then after only a year he declared himself a Protestant. He left Catholic Italy and went to Protestant Strasbourg where he became a professor of Hebrew at the university. War in Germany led him to come to England where the young Edward VI was king. He became Regius Professor of Hebrew at Cambridge but when the boy king died England was no longer safe for him under Queen Mary and he returned to Germany. His translation of the Old Testament into Latin began to appear in print in 1575. This was the favourite translation of the Old Testament of John Milton and it was very influential among scholars in England.

Tremellius is said to have died exclaiming, “*Vivat Christus, et pereat Barabbas!*” Can you guess what this means?<sup>3</sup> Bearing in mind his Jewish nationality why do you think he said this?

Tremellius' skills equipped him specially for the work of translating the Old Testament. What about the New?<sup>4</sup>

Exercise: (Don't forget to write your answers by hand on paper!)

At the time of the Reformation why was the Latin Bible less useful than it had been originally?

What invention helped the spread of new translations?

What is the meaning of “vernacular?”

Who used Latin as a means of communication at this time and why?

To what people-group did Tremellius belong?

Why was this useful to him as a Bible translator?

Answers on the next page.

1 We are not born just for ourselves. (Cicero)

2 These dates are arbitrary and are decided upon because 1517 was the year in which Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the door of the castle church in Wittenberg and 1648 was the year of the Treaty of Westphalia.

3 Answer on the next page.

4 See next week's lesson for the answer!

Answers:

“Let Christ live and let Barabbas perish!” As a Jew, Tremellius was conscious that his people had cried out, “Away with this *man* [Jesus] and release unto us Barabbas,” (Luke 23:18). He was a descendant of those who had cried, “His blood be on us, and on our children,” (Matthew 27:25) and he wanted to personally reverse the sentence. One old commentator also explained, “The sense of them [ Tremellius' words] take thus: Let Christ live, and whatsoever comes into competition with Him, die.”<sup>5</sup>

At the time of the Reformation the Latin Bible was less useful than it had been originally because the common people did not speak Latin.

Printing helped the spread of new translations.

A vernacular is a language spoken by ordinary people, a mother tongue.

Scholars used Latin as a means of communication so that they could communicate with each other across Europe whatever their own individual vernacular.

Tremellius was Jewish.

He had a good grasp of Hebrew which was useful to him in translating the Old Testament.

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5 Mall, Thomas, *A Cloud of Witnesses* (Edinburgh, 1747)