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Bibliographic Description of a 1523 Luther New Testament
(Burke Catalogue: CB77/1523)

This book is most likely a 1523 reprinting of Martin Luther's German translation of the New Testament. His 1522 translation was groundbreaking and was immediately re-printed that same year and in dozens of forms in the next three years. This particular edition was printed by Schott in Strasbourg, as noted in a handwritten note inside the front block and in Gatch's description found in *'so precious a foundation': the Library of Leander Van Ess at the Burke Library of Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York*. 1523 saw twelve to thirteen re-prints of Luther's New Testament; according to Mark Edwards, one or two of these were printed in Strasbourg (Edwards 123). He also notes that one way of identifying a 1523 edition has to do with Luther's glosses: instead of printing these notes in the margins where he initially placed them, a 1523 edition from Strasbourg collected them all and instead printed them between Acts and Romans (Edwards 127). Union's copy of the Luther New Testament retains the glosses in their original locations, though it does not include the large woodcuts found in the September Testament. Instead, it has smaller woodcuts in black ink marking the beginning of most of the books that appear to represent the presumed author or audience; many of the Pauline epistles include the same images to mark the beginning of the book, but the images change for the letters of Peter, John, Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation.

As for its other material qualities, the book is made from paper at least some of which has been quired (folded sheets have been tucked into one another) for binding. Those have been gathered, sewn, and bound between leather covered wood boards. The cover was then blind

stamped. “Blind” means that no gilding was added to the hot metal tools used to impress images into the leather; in this case, the images are now very faint (Gaskell 149).

Accompanying the printed text are lines of words, letters and numbers at the top and bottom of each page to assist the printers in ordering the leaves of the book after printing; those at the bottom are called the direction line (Gaskell 7). In that direction line are numbers and letters denoting which gathering they belong to. The bottom right side of the left page, or the inner tail margin of the verso, includes catchwords to help the printer gather the leaves in the correct order. These are the first words or letters of the page meant to follow. The head of both pages includes a headline, a title that runs across the two pages and is repeated for the duration of the section. In this New Testament the headlines use the names of the books. Any repeated section like this would be part of the “skeleton forme,” the framework that can be reused to speed along printing (Gaskell 109). There are dangers to that process, though. It is likely that a printing error in the book of Romans came from repeated use of the same skeleton forme; the reader will note that while the content of the pages is correct, the headline between Romans VI and Romans VIII is Corinthians VII. Perhaps the printers either changed too soon from Romans to Corinthians or vice versa, or both sections were being printed and the forme was accidentally swapped.

The top right of the recto, or right-hand page, bears a Roman numeral. These record the “foliation” rather than “pagination,” meaning instead of each side of a page getting a number, each leaf gets a number. The printers of this copy changed foliation partway through the text, giving the gospels and Acts one set of numbers and starting at I again with Romans. Oddly, in the second foliation the numeral L for fifty is switched out for a lowercase l from a different font.

It is unclear whether this was an accident or served a particular purpose (say replacing an L that went missing).

The book measures 31cm x 21cm x 3cm and is categorized as a folio; that is, each sheet of paper has been folded once for binding rather than folded multiple times and cut at the edges to make a smaller volume like a quarto (folded twice to make four sheets) or octavo (folded three times to make eight sheets). This is useful information when hazarding guesses at who would have used this book and for what purpose. A large folio edition like this one would have been significantly more expensive than a quarto or octavo edition and many times more expensive than a small soft covered pamphlet. Edwards is helpful here. He notes that a folio of the September Testament cost “half a gulden for an unbound, undecorated copy, the rough equivalent of the price of ... two weeks’ wages for a baker or four months’ wages for a serving maid at the city hospital in Vienna” (Edwards 123). The first owner of this copy, then, is likely to have been relatively wealthy in order to purchase a book without needing to save for a far later edition. We know from the notes written in the margins that this book was not only admired but read and that the reader had opinions about its content, so the book had at least one literate owner – or a reader who borrowed and notated their friend’s copy – who had stakes in Luther’s translation, whether as a parish priest or monastic, or as a wealthy person who was watching the political climate change and wanted to keep up with the times. I think the latter, while possible, is less likely to influence the purchase of a New Testament. The translation of a New Testament would impact political thinking about who is in charge of the church and how we understand hierarchy, of course, but it would also be a matter of inward devotion. There would be considerably more affordable ways to read Luther’s thoughts that are particular to the use of the papacy, for instance, than purchase of this volume.

This copy is missing the title page but includes interesting printing elements that begin after that first page. As early as the third page we can see where the ink from the first woodcut has stained the page facing it, a detail found near other heavily inked texts, as well. We know demand for Luther's New Testament was high enough to warrant multiple printings in this second year alone; perhaps it was high enough to warrant gathering the pages for sale or binding before they had completely dried! In the listing of the books of the New Testament, as Edwards points out, Luther changes the format for those books which fall outside of his "canon within the canon" – that is, books he finds objectionable and less important than the others – separately from the others, and fails to assign the names in their titles the prefix of "Sanct" given to the others. So, where we read "Sanct Matthes" in the beginning, we only read "Jacobus" in the latter section. Some of Luther's other opinions about the text that can be seen in his printed translation of the New Testament are found in the commentary. As previously noted, this copy kept Luther's commentary in the margins where it was originally placed. Even a non-German speaker can see where Luther engaged the text the most by his rate of glossing, found most frequently in Romans at a rate of 2.5 glosses per page, most of which were on Luther's essential themes of law and gospel (Edwards 117)! Given Romans' status as one of the greatest influences on Luther as well as the location of much of Luther's arguments for his own theological work, it is no surprise to see a long preface here as well.

This section is where readers have left the strongest record of their engagement with the text. At least two if not three different sets of handwriting and ink are found in this section and there is marginalia in the form of hands pointing to texts (*manipula*), illustrations, written notes, and possibly other notations. There is more marginalia scattered throughout the volume, but no one book with as high a proportion as this one. It is clear that whatever other reasons the owners

and readers may have had for purchasing and making use of this book, their engagement with this particular book was as heavily emphasized as Luther's own. It is likely that this engagement is precisely because of the references that Luther made along the margins to guide reading, though certainly it is also possible that the reader had previously read the text in Latin or even in Greek and was agreeing or arguing with changes that Luther made in his translation. Their personalities even shine through: one particularly fastidious writer has drawn many hands pointing their index finger at the text to pay attention to and has carefully each their own individualized cuff, while another writer has more sloppily drawn illustrations like faces in letters that are accompanied by large ink stains.

The handwritten notes are not the only wear and tear found in this volume beginning with the covers. Some of the wood has been chipped from the bottom right side of the front cover and of the top and bottom clasps of the front and back covers, only the bottom clasps remain but no longer function. The cover shows many wormholes which go through the book to the back. While certainly it is less than ideal, *ABC for Book-collectors* reports that "Worming, provided it is not in battalion strength, is considered by many collectors a less offensive blemish than dirt or browning. And since the worm normally ate steadily through the leaves, his track is occasionally useful in detecting made-up copies" (Carter 217). The worming here is a noticeable presence with nearly 50 holes in the back cover which stretch through much of the book, though this writer was unable to check to see if every worm ate directly through the volume, but if that quote is correct some of the stains within its covers may be greater damage than the wormholes.

The stains may be from grease and the worst appear to have landed close to the spine and spread through the leaves on either side of a central point. The leaves also have discoloration that looks like freckles, a phenomenon known as "foxing" which is a part of the aging process of a

book weirdly akin to age spots that increase in number on humans and not due to any active damage like a stain. The stains do point to the use of the book: it was seen as a document to be read and worked with, not only to be put on display and kept for aesthetic reasons. Other damage was in fact repaired by preservationists: according to Matthew Baker, the change in color at the spine of the inside covers shows where the cover, pages, and spine have been reconnected by use of a special Japanese paper to prevent further tearing.

Works Cited

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