

***Sola Scriptura* in Luther's Translations**

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Studies of Martin Luther as a translator of Scripture have routinely demonstrated the profound influence that Luther's theological convictions had on his rendering of the Old and New Testaments into German. Johann M. Reu, for example, in his classic work *Luther's German Bible*, concludes that chief among the distinctive characteristics of Luther's translation was his belief that "its content [was] illuminated by Christ."¹ Heinz Bluhm, similarly, in his various studies of Luther as a "creative translator," contends that Luther's "ultimate standards were theological and religious. To these considerations his final allegiance was due."² More recently, Birgit Stolt has reiterated from the perspective of modern linguistics that "as a Bible translator, Luther is always in the first instance a responsible theologian. This approach . . . shapes his individual translating decisions."³ Perhaps the most famous example of an "individual translating decision" fueled intensely by Luther's theology is his addition of "alone" to Romans 3:28, a move that he later defended at some length in his *On Translating: An Open Letter* (1530).⁴

Luther as a translator, of course, is a massive topic, with implications theological, historical, and sociopolitical. The aim of the following study is a modest one, and that is to bring greater precision to the longstanding observations above by examining three instances in Luther's translations where his most central conviction about Holy Scripture—that Christ is its subject matter—clearly takes precedence over matters of grammar and syntax. To what extent does Luther allow

¹ Johann M. Reu, *Luther's German Bible: An Historical Presentation, Together with a Collection of Sources* (Columbus, OH: Lutheran Book Concern, 1934), 259. Reu further explains: "This illumination through Christ is what the rabbinical commentators had lacked and what the Christian commentators before him had not adequately used" (258). Reu's conclusion lines up nicely with the earlier study of E. Hirsch, *Luther's deutsche Bibel* (1928), whom the former cites approvingly on pp. 259–260.

² Heinz Bluhm, *Martin Luther: Creative Translator* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1965), 123. Again, Bluhm notes that "Luther's highest set of values was not aesthetic or literary but definitively and unalterably theological and religious" (123).

³ Birgit Stolt, "Luther's Translation of the Bible," *Lutheran Quarterly* 28, no. 4 (2014): 377.

⁴ Vol. 35, pp. 175–202, in *Luther's Works, American Edition*, vols. 1–30, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955–1976); vols. 31–55, ed. Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia/Minneapolis: Muhlenberg/Fortress, 1957–1986); vols. 56–82, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009–), hereafter AE. Luther also defended his approach to translating one year later in *Defense of the Translation of the Psalms* (1531), AE 35:203–223.

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the meaning of a text to overshadow its form? What happens, moreover, when the *res* appears to be at odds with its *litterae*? While it is quite common to characterize Luther as a “historical-grammatical” theologian,⁵ a close look at how he chooses to translate three well-known Old Testament texts—Genesis 4:1; Psalm 2:12; and 22:16—should cause us to qualify how we use this popular descriptor for the reformer. As we will see from the discussion below, Luther’s chief concern in translating these passages was consistently the text’s subject matter, not its grammar. One way of capturing this phenomenon is to affirm that Luther’s *sola Scriptura*, in the sense of his persistent appeal to Scripture as the final source and norm for the theological task, reigned supreme in his work as a translator as well.

I. Genesis 4:1

We turn first to Genesis 4:1, which recounts Eve’s rather cryptic announcement after giving birth to her firstborn son, Cain. What follows is the last phrase of this celebrated verse, which captures the extent of Eve’s response, in the Hebrew Masoretic Text (MT), the Greek Septuagint (LXX), and the Latin Vulgate (Vul), as well as Luther’s preferred translation underneath these three versions of the text that were readily available to him.

MT: קָנִיתִי אִישׁ אֶת-יְהוָה

“I have gotten a man [direct object marker] Yahweh”

LXX⁶: ἐκτησάμην ἄνθρωπον διὰ τοῦ θεοῦ

“I have gotten a man through God”

Vul⁷: Possedi hominem per Dominum

“I have gotten a man through the Lord”

Luther: Ich habe den Man des HERRN⁸

⁵ For more on this nomenclature, including its history and its presuppositions, see Raymond F. Surburg, “The Presuppositions of the Historical-Grammatical Method as Employed by Historic Lutheranism,” *The Springfielder* 38, no. 4 (1974): 278–288.

⁶ Passages marked “LXX” are from Alfred Rahlfs and Robert Hanhart, eds., *Septuaginta: id est Vetus Testamentum Graece iuxta LXX interpretes*, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2006).

⁷ Passages marked “Vul” are from Robert Weber, Roger Gryson, and Bonifatius Fischer, eds., *Biblia sacra iuxta Vulgatam versionem* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2007).

⁸ Luther, *Deutsche Bibel* (1545): vol. 8, p. 47 in *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Deutsche Bibel*, 12 vols. in 15 (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1906–), hereafter cited as WA DB. Admittedly, one can find several different renderings of this phrase in Luther throughout his various discussions of it (e.g., “I have gotten the man of the Lord,” “I have the Man, the Lord!,” “I have gotten the Man, Jehovah,” etc.), but they all form a kind of constellation around the import of the translation given here.

“I have the Man of the Lord”⁹

While Luther naturally references Genesis 4:1 a number of times throughout his career, our focus here will remain on two of his more popular and extended treatments of it: those found in his *Lectures on Genesis* (1535–1545/1544–1554) and in his *Treatise on the Last Words of David* (1543). In the first of these, Luther begins his discussion of Eve's words by asserting that one can see in Eve the conviction that “Cain would be the man who would crush the head of the serpent.”¹⁰ Genesis 3:15 clearly influences Eve's confession in Luther's view, which suggests to him that “Eve was a saintly woman and . . . believed the promise concerning the future salvation through the blessed Seed.”¹¹ Eve's excitement about this perceived fulfillment of God's promise is so great, in fact, that she even foregoes the expected term *son* for *man* because of it. This, as we will see below, is a kind of first principle for Luther before deciding how best to translate Genesis 4:1: Eve is convinced that “[Cain] is the man of God who was promised and provided by God.”¹²

In his later work *Treatise on the Last Words of David*, composed roughly seven years after the lecture referenced above,¹³ Luther is even more explicit about the nature of the one Eve has in mind. In a polemical treatise written against those who would deny that doctrines such as the Trinity and the two natures of Christ could indeed be found in Old Testament texts, Luther sets out on a prolonged detour from David's words in 2 Samuel 23:1–7 in order to garner further support from other Old Testament passages that he deems well-suited to make his case, and this includes Genesis 4:1. In this treatment of the verse, one quickly senses that Luther is not only interested in rehearsing his earlier position about what Eve is supposed to have believed, but he also wants to reiterate the divine nature of the promised Seed in even sharper terms. A good example of this can be seen in how he chooses to paraphrase Eve's pronouncement: “Eve means to say here: ‘I have borne a son, who will develop into a real man, yes, he is *the* Man, God Himself. . . .’ How is this possible? How could the idea come to her which induced her to say of this child: ‘I have the Man, the Lord!’ if she had not understood God's statement to mean that the woman's Seed would have to be God, who would carry out what God had

⁹ Except for those appearing in quotations from other sources and those marked ESV, all Scripture translations are my own.

¹⁰ Luther, *Lectures on Genesis* (1535–1545/1544–1554), AE 1:242. Luther's *Die Deutsche Bibel* of 1545 includes a marginal notation to the same effect: “Ey Gott sey gelobt, Da hab ich den HERRN den Man, den Samen, der dem Satan oder Schlangen den Kopff zutretten sol, Der wirts thun” (WA DB 8:47; “God be praised, for I have the LORD, the man, the Seed, who will crush the head of Satan, or the serpent; he will do it”).

¹¹ Luther, *Lectures on Genesis* (1535–1545/1544–1554), AE 1:242.

¹² Luther, *Lectures on Genesis* (1535–1545/1544–1554), AE 1:242.

¹³ See the remarks of Pelikan in AE 1:ix–x, which would put Luther's lecturing on Genesis 4 most likely in 1536.

told them?”¹⁴ In short, for Luther, Eve confesses that this firstborn son of hers is none other than “the Man Jehovah.”¹⁵

Once he establishes this, however, Luther is still quite aware that he will also have to defend his understanding of Eve’s words with a faithful translation of the Hebrew text, even if it means going against the many other options for rendering it that preceded him in the history of its transmission. Luther senses that this obvious objection could be raised and addresses it in the following way.

Someone may interpose here: How do you account for it that no Christian or Jew has seen such a meaning in this passage? *All other translators do it differently.* The Latin reads: “I have gotten a man through God.” Other Hebraists say: “I have gotten the Man from the Lord.” That does not interest me now. . . . If it pleases no one else, it is sufficient that it pleases me. The little Hebrew word **אֶת** means “the.” As all grammarians will agree, it is the accusative case article.¹⁶

In order for his translation (and, ultimately, his interpretation) to stand, Luther recognizes the need for the **אֶת** in Eve’s speech to function as the direct object marker, which is what Luther gets at when he says that this “little Hebrew word **אֶת** means ‘the’” in this instance. So, as one would expect of Luther, he then searches the Scriptures diligently for corroborating examples and comes up with no lack of support, citing Genesis 1:1, 5:22, and 6:9 among other passages that in his view are more than sufficient to prove his point. At the same time, Luther also includes a couple of counterexamples to demonstrate his awareness of some instances where the same word is used to show means or agency instead (e.g., “from”); for this, he quotes Genesis 44:4 (“They went out *from* the city” [**וַיֵּצְאוּ אֶת־הָעִיר**]) and Exodus 9:29 (“When I have gone out *from* the city” [**כִּי־צֵאתִי אֶת־הָעִיר**]).

What is striking about this discussion is what Luther gives as the *ultimate* basis for determining whether “the little Hebrew word **אֶת**” functions in Genesis 4:1 as a direct object marker or as a marker of agency. Rather than pointing to any syntactic clues or contextual matters or kindred concerns, Luther contends that the decision *ultimately* comes down to the subject matter (*res*) of sacred Scripture. He explains:

Since [the Jews] cannot tolerate the truth that God became incarnate through a woman, this text and all of Scripture must stand mistaken, or they must give it an entirely new face. All other Hebraists would also be obliged to admit this if

¹⁴ Luther, *Treatise on the Last Words of David* (1543), AE 15:319 (emphasis original).

¹⁵ Luther, *Treatise on the Last Words of David* (1543), AE 15:320. Again, a bit later, “This Seed of the woman is Jehovah” (323).

¹⁶Luther, *Treatise on the Last Words of David* (1543), AE 15:320 (emphasis added).

they scrutinized the text closely *and if they believed that this Seed of the woman is Jehovah, that is, God and man.*¹⁷

Yes, a close scrutiny of the grammar and syntax of Genesis 4:1 is certainly necessary for any interpretation to stand, but it is also the case that the best translation of this verse will depend finally on one's "believ[ing] that this Seed of the woman is Jehovah, that is, God and man." Until then, for Luther, "The Jews cannot know the meaning of all the words as the subject reveals them."¹⁸ Again, this is not at all to suggest that matters of Hebrew grammar or divergent parallel passages are essentially trivial in nature, but it is to claim for Luther that the best translation of Genesis 4:1 *first* considers the subject matter at hand and only secondarily asks how best to extol that very subject matter through a translation of the words that does not violate any syntax or grammar *as found elsewhere in Scripture*.

II. Psalm 2:12

Another example of Luther's passionate concern for translating Scripture in accordance with its subject matter takes place when he journeys through the last verse of Psalm 2. What follows below are, once again, the three versions of the text that were most central for Luther's work as a translator (the MT, the LXX, and the Vulgate), this time with their respective texts for the opening phrase of Psalm 2:12 (the bracketed portion of the MT is given for the sake of what immediately follows the phrase in question). Here, however, because Luther shows an awareness of two different editions of the Vulgate Psalter—one that Jerome translated from the MT (*Liber Psalmorum iuxta Hebraicum*) and one that Jerome emended to make it agree more closely with the Greek of Origen's Hexapla (*Liber Psalmorum iuxta Septuaginta Emendatus*)¹⁹—these two renderings are also provided, with "Vul (MT)" referring to the former and "Vul (LXX)" referring to the latter. As before, Luther's preferred translation is then noted as well.

MT: [פֶּן-יִאַנֵּן וְתֵאָבְדוּ דְרָדוּ] נִשְׁקוּ-בֵר

"Kiss the son [lest he become angry and you perish in the way]"

LXX: δράξασθε παιδείας

"Seize discipline"

Vul (LXX): Adprehendite disciplinam

"Seize discipline"

Vul (MT): Adorate pure

¹⁷ Luther, *Treatise on the Last Words of David* (1543), AE 15:321 (emphasis added).

¹⁸ Luther, *Treatise on the Last Words of David* (1543), AE 15:322.

¹⁹ For more on this, see Weber et al., *Biblia sacra iuxta Vulgatam versionem*, xxxiii.

“Worship purely”

Luther: Kusset den Son²⁰

“Kiss the Son”

To set the stage for the ensuing discussion: Psalm 2 opens with peoples and nations raging “against the LORD and against his Anointed” (v. 2, ESV²¹). We then hear that the Lord has chosen to respond to this raging by setting his king, who is also his son, on Zion, his holy hill (vv. 6–7). Because of this king’s/son’s anointing, all worldly kings are then admonished to be wise, to “serve the LORD with fear, and [to] rejoice with trembling” (vv. 10–11, ESV). At the end of the psalm, these rulers are even told, in Luther’s rendering, to “*kiss the Son*, lest he be angry and you perish in the way” (v. 12, ESV). Our discussion of how Luther translates the first words of this psalm’s last verse will draw exclusively from his lecture series on Psalm 2 from 1532.

Before commenting specifically on any verse of this widely influential psalm in the history of interpretation, Luther begins by stating that “David in this psalm depicts the kingdom of Christ according to all its circumstances.”²² The tumult depicted in the first part of the psalm, then, refers to what happens when “Satan and the godless world” hear the gospel preached, a phenomenon that continues for Luther in many respects in his own day when he considers “the Turk, the pope, kings and rulers, when they set themselves against this King.”²³ The Lord’s response to this hostility, as we may expect from such a christological reading, is to set a king on Zion who is also his beloved son, begotten from all eternity.²⁴ This king, for Luther, is one who breaks any and all resistance by the power of his word, convicting the world of sin and laying bare any false hopes of security. While Luther does not imply that these worldly kings are to forsake their offices and run from their respective vocations, he does urge that “they should acknowledge this King, humbly bow before Him, and embrace His Word.”²⁵

Luther continues to see a stern warning lodged against worldly kings as the psalm concludes, but he sees the force of the psalm’s closing admonition severely

²⁰ Luther, *Deutsche Bibel* (1531/1545), WA DB 10/1:111.

²¹ Scripture quotations marked ESV are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

²² Luther, *Commentary on Psalm 2* (1532/1546), AE 12:7.

²³ Luther, *Commentary on Psalm 2* (1532/1546), AE 12:15.

²⁴ See Luther’s defense of this view—that verse 7, “You are my Son; today I have begotten you,” refers to the son’s eternal generation—in *Commentary on Psalm 2* (1532/1546), AE 12:41–54, esp. 46–47. Following is one of several snippets: “For ‘today’ in the case of God . . . has no beginning and has no end. Thus the present text joins together the divine and the human so that they are one, so that you may correctly say: This man is God” (47).

²⁵ Luther, *Commentary on Psalm 2* (1532/1546), AE 12:74.

weakened if he follows either edition of the Vulgate. The first order of business for Luther, then, is to clarify the first word of verse 12, נִשְׁקוּ. “As a point of grammar, those who understand Hebrew know that one must here read ‘kiss’ and not ‘seize,’ as the Latin text has it.”²⁶ That is to say, first of all, that *adprehendite*, which follows suit with the LXX’s δρᾶξασθε, is not, in Luther’s view, as accurate as *osculamini* for the MT’s נִשְׁקוּ.²⁷ So far, so good.

It is the second word, בֵּר, however, that stirs up a much longer discussion. The issue stems in large part from the use of (the Aramaic) בֵּר for “son” at this point in the psalm instead of the far more common בְּנֵי, especially given the latter’s occurrence earlier in the same psalm at verse 7. Luther begins to tackle the issue by granting up front that “the meaning of this word is quite broad, for it is an adjective and means pure or elect. Jerome, therefore, translates: ‘worship purely’ [i.e., in Jerome’s translation of the MT].”²⁸ But there is much more to say here for Luther, because in his further searching the Scriptures, he notices how the same word can *also* be used at times to signify something or someone far more specific through a rhetorical device that falls under the category of antonomasia.²⁹ Luther cites “grain” in Scripture as a prime example: “On account of its special excellence, wheat or grain is called בֵּר, as something elect. In that way we understand ‘the Apostle’ to mean Paul; ‘the Prophet,’ David; ‘the Philosopher,’ Aristotle; ‘the Soldier,’ Georg von Frundsberg, etc. For often, because of its excellence, a common noun comes to be used as a proper noun.”³⁰ While Luther is aware that בֵּר could

²⁶ Luther, *Commentary on Psalm 2* (1532/1546), AE 12:82.

²⁷ Luther refers to this preferred Latin term several times in *Commentary on Psalm 2* (1532/1546), AE 12:82–83 (WA 40/2:297–299).

²⁸ Luther, *Commentary on Psalm 2* (1532/1546), AE 12:82. Already in his first psalms lectures (the *Dictata super Psalterium* of 1513–1515), Luther has a problem with the Vulgate’s “disciplinam” as a translation for the MT’s בֵּר (cf. the LXX’s παιδείας) because of its lack of support elsewhere in the Scriptures: “Nowhere else is this noun בֵּר translated by ‘discipline,’ as it is here. Therefore it should read ‘kiss the son,’ נִשְׁקוּ-בֵּר, as Lyra says” (*First Lectures on the Psalms* [1513–1515], AE 10:38). Several years later, in his next lecture series on the psalms (the *Operationes in Psalmos* of 1519–1521), Luther recognizes that בֵּר may also signify “pure” or “elect” in addition to “son,” but he is still unable to find anywhere in Scripture where it signifies “discipline” and so decides to merge all of these meanings with the text of the Vulgate in the following way: “And with respect to the other word BAR, which has been translated ‘son,’ ‘pure,’ and ‘discipline,’ let us proceed to harmonize these renderings thus. Faith in Christ is, rightly, our discipline. And therefore he who believes in Christ, that is, kisses the Son, truly lays hold on discipline, carrying the cross of Christ in himself. . . . Therefore our translation, though by no means correct with regard to the literal meaning of the Hebrew, is yet most agreeable to truth and experience” (Martin Luther, *Martin Luther’s Complete Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, vol. 1, trans. Henry Cole [London: W. Simpkin and R. Marshall, 1826], 84).

²⁹ Pelikan offers the following definition for this literary phenomenon: “The substitution of a title, class name, or epithet for a proper name” (see *Commentary on Psalm 2* [1532/1546], AE 12:82n32).

³⁰ Luther, *Commentary on Psalm 2* (1532/1546), AE 12:82.

simply be an adjective (“pure or elect”), he finds other occurrences of the word functioning elsewhere in Scripture as a *noun* that in his judgment extol even more vividly the subject matter of the psalm under discussion, and he uses this alternate rendering as a basis to see in בֵּר a special reference to Christ. As he explains it, “Thus because of His excellence Christ is spoken of as the Righteous One, the Wise One, the Priest, the Son of Man, the King, etc. In this way בֵּר, used substantively, means also ‘son,’ as something especially elect, beloved, and pleasing to the parents.”³¹

What is particularly remarkable about Luther’s way of proceeding here, however, is what he is willing to grant to the other possible renderings of Psalm 2:12, *so long as the subject matter of the psalm remains as clear as possible*. Regarding Jerome’s “worship purely,” for example, one might suppose that Luther, with his strong conviction that Psalm 2 speaks everywhere about “the kingdom of Christ according to all its circumstances” (see above), would not budge an inch on the translation of בֵּר in verse 12 as “son.” It turns out, however, that this is not the case, as Luther grants that Jerome’s rendering of בֵּר as “pure” could indeed be allowed to stand so long as it is made clear that this word *pure* refers (by way of antonomasia) to the purest One and not to the quality of one’s worship. He explains, “If [Jerome] had translated it as a noun, he would have done it correctly: ‘worship the Pure One, the Elect, the Light.’”³² Jerome’s translation of בֵּר as “pure,” in other words, would have been acceptable to Luther had Jerome taken the further liberty *made available to him on the basis of other scriptural examples* of rendering בֵּר as a noun and hence (in Luther’s view) as a more explicit reference to Christ, *even if it means departing from Luther’s own preferred translation of בֵּר as “son.”* Why, finally, in Luther’s opinion, does the psalm switch from בֵּן for “son” in verse 7 to בֵּר for “son” in verse 12? He surmises: “[David] uses the vocable בֵּר in order to make the prophecy obscure for the devil and the impious, who are not worthy of seeing it.”³³

III. Psalm 22:16

Our last example of the extent to which the subject matter of Scripture governs Luther’s translations—arguably one of the clearest windows into his thinking and *modus operandi* in this regard—comes from another psalm that is equally as rich as

³¹ Luther, *Commentary on Psalm 2* (1532/1546), AE 12:82.

³² Luther, *Commentary on Psalm 2* (1532/1546), AE 12:83. Luther later elaborates in this way: “He is my Beloved, my Pure One, my Elect One, in whom alone I rejoice, my Heart, my Delight. Therefore worship Him who is the Only-Beloved of God and most pleasing to Him, and you will be worshipping God. You will be doing God a pleasing service. Bend the knee to Him, kiss His feet” (83).

³³ Luther, *Commentary on Psalm 2* (1532/1546), AE 12:82.

Psalm 2 in its reception history, Psalm 22. Our focus here is the last part of verse 16 (MT v. 17), which is another cherished piece of psalmody that not only comes to us by way of the standard ancient versions but also contains a few textual variants in the ancient manuscripts. What follows below are again the versions of the text that were most central for Luther's translations (including both editions of the Vulgate mentioned above), accompanied by the textual variants for the first word of the phrase in the MT, all followed by Luther's preferred translation.

MT: כְּאַרְיֵי יָדַי וְרַגְלָי

*A few Hebrew manuscripts have כְּאַרְוֹ, while 2 have כְּרֹו

“As a lion (they are at) my hands and my feet”

LXX: ὥρυσαν χεῖράς μου καὶ πόδας

“They dug my hands and feet”

Vul (LXX): foderunt manus meas et pedes meos

“They dug my hands and my feet”

Vul (MT): vinxerunt manus meas et pedes meos

“They bound my hands and my feet”

Luther: Sie haben meine Hende und Fusse durchgraben³⁴

“They pierced my hands and feet”

By way of summary, Psalm 22 is a breathtaking psalm of David that transitions rather jarringly from severe lamentation to majestic deliverance. After opening with the memorable words, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (v. 1, ESV), David speaks of overwhelming scorn and contempt, extreme mockery and physical affliction, even as he also shows signs of sure trust in God. A sudden shift then comes at verse 21, which the ESV (along with many other modern English translations) signals by rendering עֲנִיתִנִּי in the *past* tense: “Save me from the mouth of the lion! *You have rescued me* from the horns of the wild oxen!” (emphasis added). David concludes the psalm by describing in its last ten verses how this striking deliverance will be proclaimed to his brothers in the congregation (v. 22), to those who fear God (v. 23), to the ends of the earth (v. 27), and even to those who have yet to be born (v. 31). All four evangelists make reference to Psalm 22 through allusion or direct citation in their passion narratives (see Matt 27:35, 39, 43, 46; Mark 15:24, 29, 34; Luke 23:34–35; John 19:24), and the author of Hebrews quotes verse 22 (“I will tell of your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you,” ESV), albeit with a slight modification (“I will tell of your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will *sing your praise*,” ESV, emphasis added), in Hebrews 2:12.

³⁴ Luther, *Deutsche Bibel* (1531/1545), WA DB 10/1:167.

With all of this at the forefront of his mind, Luther's discussion of his translation—and eventual interpretation—of verse 16 takes a considerable amount of time (seven pages of commentary in modern printed editions). His first order of business is to acknowledge that the first word of the phrase in question in the MT, כְּאַרִי, simply does not look the way that it should:

The Jews here pertinaciously contend that this passage should not be read “*they pierced*,” but, “*like a lion*,” alleging this excuse,—that the verb “*they pierced*,” is written in the Hebrew with a *Caph*, a *Raish*, and a *He*, without an *Aleph*; but that, on the contrary, in this passage the word is written with an *Aleph* between the *Raish* and the *He*, and is read CARRI not CARU; and that CARRI signifies “*like a lion*,” but CARU, “*they pierced*.”³⁵

The basic issue at the outset, as Luther sees it, is the presence of the aleph in כְּאַרִי, leading one to believe that this word should really be translated as “as/like a lion” and not “they pierced,” which would simply be כָּרוּ, the third masculine plural of כָּרָה, meaning “to dig, excavate.” Luther admits that the presence of the aleph here is indeed a problem: “I do not see how they [the Jews] can be forced by the rules of grammar to understand CARRI in this passage to signify ‘*they pierced*.’ Most certainly *outward appearance* stands strongly in favor of them, and not at all for us, as far as outward appearance and grammar are concerned.”³⁶ The ordinary rules of grammar, Luther concedes, will not be of much help this time around. Even so, his repeated qualifications about mere “outward appearance” suggest to his hearers that he has much more to say about the issue at hand, and at this point in our study, perhaps we can guess where Luther intends to go with this. He continues:

We who believe in Christ, and who hold it as a certainty, from the authority of the Gospels, that the whole of this Psalm refers to Christ, may easily be convinced that the passage should here be read “*pierced*,” not “*like a lion*.” . . . We illustrate the Old Testament by the Gospel; and not, the meaning of the latter from the sense of the former: and thus we make them both look, like the cherubim on each side the mercy-seat, toward Christ. . . . As, therefore, we are fully assured that the hands and the feet of Christ were pierced upon the cross, so, we are not less certain that this Psalm wholly agrees with Christ, and that

³⁵ Martin Luther, *Martin Luther's Complete Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, vol. 2, trans. Henry Cole (London: W. Simpkin and R. Marshall, 1826), 404. Note that this is the *second* p. 404 in the book, as pp. 261–308 have mistakenly been printed as 381–428, thus leaving duplicates of every page number within the range 381–428. All citations from this work in the upcoming discussion will be in reference to the *second* occurrence of that respective page number in this particular volume of Luther's work on the psalms. This volume will be cited hereafter as “Cole 2.”

³⁶ Cole 2:405 (emphasis added).

the rest of the sense wonderfully applies to him, and requires us to read it, “*they pierced;*” and *especially so as no grammatical rigor resists such a reading;* and therefore, without controversy and without hesitation, we read it “*they pierced.*”³⁷

Because the subject matter of Scripture’s two testaments is Christ, with each testament facing him like the twin cherubim facing the mercy seat, Luther sounds forth his verdict that **פָּאָרְזְרִי** should most certainly be translated as “they pierced,” even if it flies in the face of the strongest “grammatical rigor.”

But the word is still not spelled correctly if one wants it to mean “they pierced,” so Luther also knows that his work is far from over. In order to strengthen his case, he first takes up the alternative (“Jewish”) contention that the phrase should be rendered “as a lion (beset) my hands and my feet.” This option is itself beset with problems for Luther, primarily because “the Scripture always speaks of a lion with an open mouth, and as roaring and seizing, that he may wholly devour.”³⁸ Luther’s strongest line of attack against rendering **פָּאָרְזְרִי** as “as/like a lion,” then, is based on his searching of the Scriptures all the same, only this time with polemical purposes in mind. Ask the Jews whether Mordecai and Esther, for example, ever were attacked by a lion, or if any other individual in Scripture could clarify by way of experience what this attack is all about. In short, for Luther, “They can adduce nothing applicable to a lion, and to hands and feet, which any one of the saints ever suffered.”³⁹ He, on the other hand, has Christ, “who is memorably known to have suffered a signal affliction in his hands and his feet; and it is this to which the whole verse, with evident application, refers, and with which it agrees.”⁴⁰

Tearing down the opponent’s position, however, is only half the battle. Even after refuting the “Jewish” option, Luther knows that a glaring “grammatical difficulty” remains.⁴¹ What kind of corroborating evidence could he possibly muster on his end for seemingly disregarding the aleph in **פָּאָרְזְרִי**? Once again, Luther returns to the same Scriptures in search of any similar phenomena and believes that he has indeed found something of the sort in the first word of Isaiah 9:7 (MT 9:6), **לְטֹרְפָה**. Luther exclaims,

Who knows but that the prophet [of Psalm 22], using a license of his own, put *Aleph*, instead of *Vav*, on account of the new and singular event? For we read

³⁷ Cole 2:405 (emphasis added).

³⁸ Cole 2:406.

³⁹ Cole 2:407.

⁴⁰ Cole 2:407.

⁴¹ “Nothing now remains, therefore, but the grammatical difficulty, and this ought to give way to the theological evidence; . . . the word must yield to the evident sense, and the letter be subservient to the spirit” (Cole 2:407).

in Isaiah, chap. ix. the same license as used by that prophet, where he puts the *Mem* final in the middle of the word LEMARBE [לְמַרְבֵּה], contrary to all the custom and usage of the Hebrew language, and that too, on account of the signal and peculiar mystery of the kingdom of Christ, which, though confined and narrow in the things there mentioned, is nevertheless multiplied and opened abroad throughout the whole world.⁴²

The very strange appearance of the *final* mem in the *middle* of לְמַרְבֵּה in Isaiah 9, in other words, is analogous for Luther to the appearance of the aleph (instead of the vav) in כְּאַרִי in Psalm 22. Scripture itself offers a parallel example of a letter appearing mysteriously, and that in another passage quite rich in reception history for its testimony to the person and work of Christ. Luther continues his reasoning for these two textual oddities by way of christological conjecture:

And what if the prophet inserted *Aleph* on purpose that he might prevent the elusion of equivocation on the one hand, and meet it by absurdity on the other, so that they might not dare to say CARRI; that is, “like a lion;” and yet that he might, at the same time, by this signal admonition call them away, by this *Aleph*, from their equivocation, and thus hold them in the middle, shut in between both, so that they should not be able to escape from the true sense and meaning which agrees and harmonizes with the thing that took place in fact. And yet, that which was contrived to prevent their pertinacity,—that very thing their pertinacity perverts in order to support itself. And who knows but that the Spirit changed this word for this intent, that it might be a hidden mystery until it should be fulfilled[?]⁴³

The strange appearance of the aleph in כְּאַרִי serves a twofold purpose for Luther: to support those who adhere to the proper subject matter of Scripture, while at the same time to befuddle those who operate without it. Similar to what we observed above in Psalm 2:12, where Luther held that the unusual presence of בַּר in that verse was “to make the prophecy obscure for the devil and the impious,” this one Hebrew letter in Psalm 22:16 is thus also its own kind of stumbling block, a stone holding up those with the proper confession of Christ but simultaneously smashing to pieces the arguments of those wishing to pervert it. And with that in place, Luther sounds forth the final blow: “We have hitherto ever held fast our faith and have defended our reading of the passage, so that they cannot, by any

⁴² Cole 2:407.

⁴³ Cole 2:408. Eventually Luther summarized this by simply saying that “[David] is at the same time the most clear and the most obscure in the same words” (410).

grammatical rigor, nor by any seeming appropriateness of sense, nor by any arguments of facts, compel us to read it otherwise than thus,—‘*they pierced.*’”⁴⁴

Far from merely searching for clever ways to disregard the plain sense of a text for something fashioned after his own devices (in this case, a word's common spelling for a different word altogether), Luther remains convinced that even the linguistic peculiarities of a given text are able to bear witness in their own ways to the overarching subject matter of Scripture, *provided this can be demonstrated from analogous passages elsewhere in the Bible* (in this case, one from Isaiah 9). Once this kind of support is invoked, even the most hostile “grammatical rigor” cannot prevail against such a translation, in Luther's view, because it now stands on what he believed to be the highest authority available to any translator, able to shed light even on words whose outward appearance defies human reason.

IV. Conclusion

To be sure, Luther highly esteemed grammar throughout his life, and he even praised it to the point of saying that “Among all the fields of knowledge discovered by man, chiefly grammar is useful for extending theology.”⁴⁵ At the same time, however, Luther also believed that “the Holy Spirit has his own grammar,”⁴⁶ and this meant for him, among other things, that grammar as a kind of self-contained philological discipline would always take on a subordinate role in relation to the subject matter of sacred Scripture. While this was noted as taking place in Luther periodically throughout our study, consider also the following closely related statements from elsewhere in his writings about the role of grammar in translating the Bible:

⁴⁴ Cole 2:409.

⁴⁵ Luther, *Conclusiones quindecim tractantes, An libri philosophorum sint utiles aut inutiles ad theologiam* (1519), WA 6:29.7; cf. Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation*, trans. Thomas H. Trapp (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 27. See also the superb study of the profound role that Hebrew grammar played in Luther's interpretation of the royal psalms in Christine Helmer, “Luther's Trinitarian Hermeneutic and the Old Testament,” *Modern Theology* 18, no. 1 (2002): 49–73.

⁴⁶ “*Spiritus sanctus habet suam grammaticam.*” This phrase comes in the context of a disputation from 1540 on the humanity and divinity of Christ and can be found at *Disputation de divinitate et humanitate Christi* (1540), WA 39/2:104.24. For a recent and helpful treatment of its implications, see Robert Kolb, *Martin Luther and the Enduring Word of God: The Wittenberg School and Its Scripture-Centered Proclamation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016), 89–91, as well as the insightful analysis of it in Joachim Ringleben, “Theological Language,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Martin Luther*, ed. Derek R. Nelson and Paul R. Hinlicky, vol. 3 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 403–416. Ringleben writes, for example, that “this grammar does not fit into the predetermined narrow forms of intellectual thought and its syllogisms” (407).

Languages themselves do not make a theologian but they are of assistance, for it is necessary to know the subject matter [*rem*] before it can be expressed through languages.⁴⁷

It's not enough to know the grammar. One must observe the sense, for a knowledge of the matters treated [*rerum*] brings with it an understanding of the words.⁴⁸

Nor can anyone restore Hebrew grammar except the Christians, who comprehend the substance [*rem*] of Holy Scripture, that is, Christ, the Son of God; and if He is known, everything else becomes plain and perspicuous.⁴⁹

Whoever wants to study Hebrew should first of all possess a proper New Testament and confidently commend himself to Christ as the sun, light and guide. If anyone fails in this response and simply depends on the grammar like Muenster and Sanctes he will err.⁵⁰

Indeed grammar is necessary for declining words, conjugating verbs and construing syntax, but for the proclamation of the meaning and the consideration of the subject matter, grammar is not needed. For *gram-mar should not reign over the meaning*.⁵¹

When we speak of Luther as a “historical-grammatical” theologian, then, we must be careful to clarify how Luther himself spoke of the role of grammar within the various facets of theology; in his work as a translator, it simply does not tell the whole story. Since “the Holy Spirit has his own grammar,” any act of biblical translation for Luther would always be working with a unique subject matter expressed by a unique corpus of (divine) speech. As such, Luther believed that the best way to translate one portion of the Spirit’s speech was to compare it with another portion of the Spirit’s speech from elsewhere in the same Spirit’s

⁴⁷ “*Linguae per se non faciunt theologum, sed sunt adiutorium. Oportet enim ante rem scire, quam linguae illam possunt exprimere.*” Luther, table talk recorded by Conrad Cordatus (Sept. 28–Nov. 23, 1532), vol. 2, p. 639, no. 2758a, lines 14–15 in *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Tischreden*, 6 vols. (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1912–1921), hereafter WA TR, as quoted in W. Schwarz, *Principles and Problems of Biblical Translation: Some Reformation Controversies and Their Background* (Cambridge: University Press, 1955), 210.

⁴⁸ Luther, *Table Talk* (1540), AE 54:375.

⁴⁹ Luther, *Lectures on Genesis* (1535–1545/1544–1554), AE 7:285.

⁵⁰ Luther, table talk recorded by Kaspar Heidenreich (winter of 1542–1543), WA TR 5:220.7–11, no. 5535, as quoted in Reu, *Luther’s German Bible*, 265.

⁵¹ Luther, table talk recorded by Anton Lauterbach (March 27, 1538), WA TR 3:619.28–30, no. 3794, as quoted in *Reformation Commentary on Scripture: Psalms 1–72*, ed. Herman J. Selderhuis (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 119 (emphasis added).

speaking. In the examples cited above, he was primarily concerned with how best to extol the person and work of the one about whom the Spirit is speaking *on the basis of* the Spirit's other speech about him. In our judgment, Luther's most basic question as a translator was *how can a particular text be translated such that it gives the clearest testimony to the person and work of Christ while at the same time remains grammatically justifiable when compared to other passages of Scripture?* It was Scripture itself, therefore, that served as the ultimate source and norm for Luther as he carried out the task of translating, and another way of saying that, of course, is that his deeply held convictions about *sola Scriptura* reigned supreme in this area of his life and work as well.