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While he was in hiding, protected by Frederick III of Saxony (also known as "Frederick the Wise"), Martin Luther began to translate the Bible from its original languages into German. This is a page from the published Luther Bible (which was printed on Gutenberg's printing press). Image online via the Library of Congress.

Martin Luther, a Catholic monk, thought the Church had gone too far when it required people to buy indulgences (a kind of financial transaction to absolve sins). Luther was especially upset with Johann Tetzel, a Dominican monk, who told gathered crowds they could get their deceased friends and family out of purgatory if they only dropped money into Tetzel's indulgence box.

Remorse for sins—not coins dropping into a money box—was Luther's interpretation of the Bible. He thought it was wrong for people to think they could "buy" their way to salvation. He believed that the Pope wanted people to buy Indulgences to profit the Church (and build St. Peter's in Rome), not to save the souls of the buyers.

He said so publicly in his list of "95 Theses."

Not content to merely write-up the abuses, Luther tacked them to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany for all to see. That event took place on October 31, 1517.

If no one had paid attention to Luther, perhaps the Vatican would have ignored this impertinent monk. But that is not what happened. Many others agreed that the Catholic Church had no business raising money through the selling of Indulgences.

Pope Leo X was furious. On 15 June 1520, he issued a document called Exsurge Domine, ordering the burning of Luther's writings and threatening to excommunicate Luther if he didn't recant in sixty days. Luther's response was to burn the Papal Bull plus other Church-issued materials with which he disagreed.

Luther was then summoned to a trial in Worms. The Diet (as the governing council was known) was convened in April of 1521 to judge Luther. At that "trial," Luther refused to recant and uttered his famous (probably apocryphal) words:

Here I stand; I can do no other.

Saved from the stake by the help of the German ruler, Frederick the Wise, Luther had to hide from ecclesiastical authorities. Frederick housed him in the Castle of the Wartburg. During his time-in-hiding, Luther translated the new Testament into German and ultimately translated the entire Bible.

Luther's Bible was the first book published for mass circulation on the Gutenberg press in the nearby city of Mainz. But Luther's Bible, like so many vernacular translations before it, fell victim to the Pope's decrees and was burned in 1624.

Luther's books were exquisitely illustrated, like this prayer book, and his hymns are still sung today. ("A Mighty

Fortress is our God" is just one example). One particularly beautiful page, of Luther's 1582 Bible, depicts Joshua praying for the people's courage and protection.

Even though Luther's Bibles were ordered to be burned, the new invention—Gutenberg's printing press—made destruction of all Luther's translations very difficult. When books were no longer copied by hand, there were thousands more to find and destroy.

Luther's actions against the Catholic Church began the "Protestant Reformation." Gutenberg's invention was able to print many books, thereby spreading new ideas.

The world, in other words, was about to change forever.

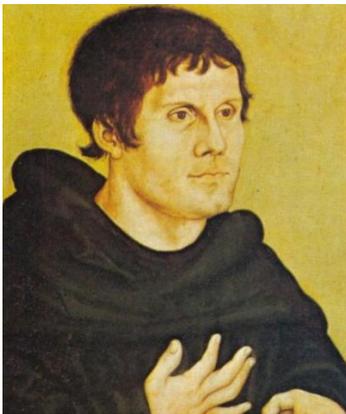
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Media Stream



Martin Luther

Image of young Martin Luther, online courtesy Wikimedia Commons. Unknown artist.

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Tetzel Selling Indulgences and Collecting Money

This illustration, described above, was published (in Leipzig) in the German-language journal *Die Gartenlaube* ("The Garden Arbor"), in 1869 (at page 639).

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Indulgence Box

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Luther - Before the Council at Worms

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Frederick the Wise

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Martin Luther - Later Years

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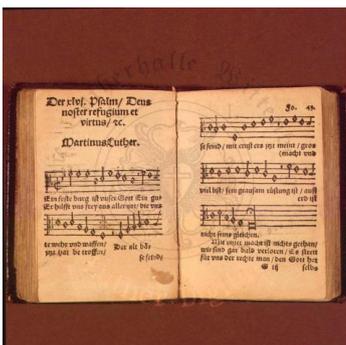


Luther's German Bible

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Luther Hymn Book

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