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The Contested History of a Book: The German Bible of the Later Middle Ages and Reformation in Legend, Ideology, and Scholarship

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Abstract

The wide distribution and availability of German and other vernacular Bible translations in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, with 22 printed full Bible translations into German/Low German/Netherlandish appearing before Luther's famous Bible translation, has been known to scholars since at least the early eighteenth century, when various works on German Bibles before the Reformation began to appear. However, the existence of such translations did not guarantee that scholars, especially church historians and historians of the Reformation took such Bible translations seriously. Luther himself had claimed (polemically) that the Bible had been entirely unknown and unavailable when

he was a young man. The rather dispassionate scholarship of the eighteenth century, which included important works on pre-Reformation German Bibles by orthodox Lutheran divines, gave way in the second half of the nineteenth century to a rather bitter polemical discourse in the context of the Kulturkampf in Germany. Luther the linguistic genius and Luther the theological hero were the protagonists on one side; the late medieval Bible, on which Luther drew heavily for his own translation, was on the other. Not so much a Catholic-Lutheran debate as an ideological one about the place, value and influence of medieval piety and culture (and their relation to German national culture) was played out by prominent church historians. By the eve of WWII, German Bible scholarship had become a more clear-eyed exercise in historical evaluation--yet immediately after the war, in the context of the Cold War and the construction of a lineage of democratic and liberty-oriented values for Christian western Europe, the Luther Bible began to loom ever larger, especially in textbooks and general surveys, as a turning point in the history of western culture. Since the 1990s, more specialized and careful assessments of the importance of pre-Reformation German Bibles have prevailed, perhaps as part of a general re-evaluation of medieval culture and piety from perspectives informed more by anthropology and literary theory than by ideological polemic. These findings might shed light on the modes of history-writing in the contexts of both myth-making and source analysis.

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