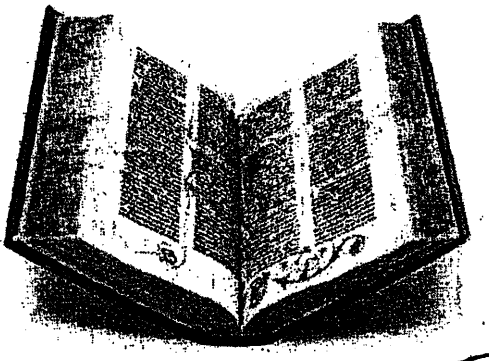
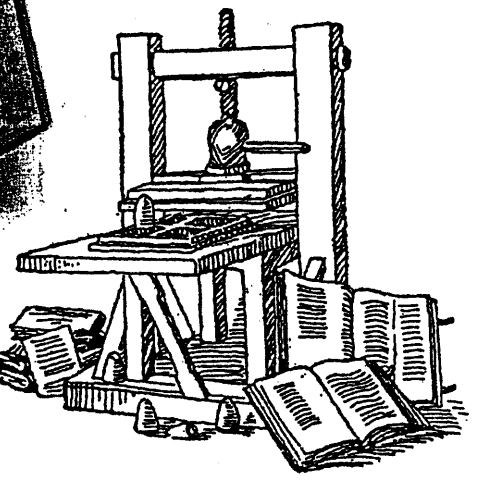
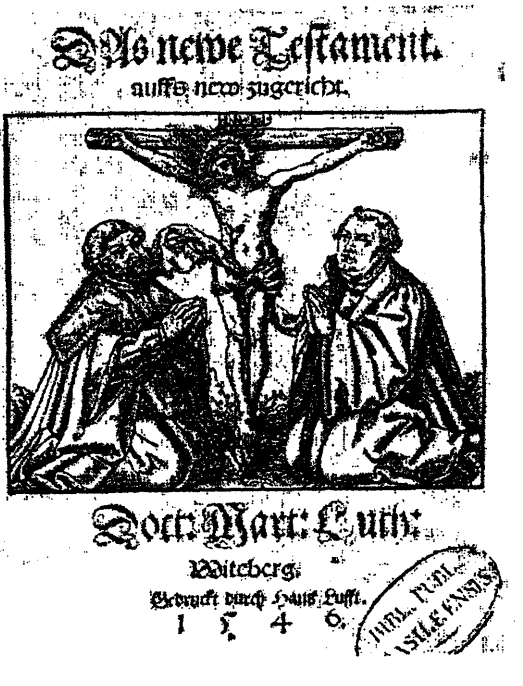
THE REMARKABLE PROVIDENCE IN THE PUBLICATION OF THE NEW TESTAMENT—AN UNTOLD STORY OF THE REFORMATION

Manfred E. Kober, Th.D.







The Significance of the Reformation

1. The Prophecy of Jan Hus:

As Hus was burned at the stake he predicted in 100 years a swan would arise who would be indestructible.

2. The Premonition of Frederick the Wise:

The Duke dreamed three identical dreams about a monk writing on a church door, at the very time Luther posted his theses.

3. The Posting of the 95 Theses:

Luther posted 95 theses to occasion a debate about the efficacy of the indulgences and the primacy of the pope.

4. The Publication of the German New Testament:

Luther translated the New Testament in the incredible space of 11 weeks and published the first edition in September 1522.

5. The Persecution of Luther:

Luther's sworn enemy, Duke George of Saxony, forbad the purchase of Luther's New Testament and instead commissioned his court theologian, Hieronymus Emser, to make a translation for Catholics.

6. The Plagiarism of Emser's New Testament:

Emser, Luther's most fierce opponent, began the translation work, swoon gave up and virtually plagiarized the entire Luther's New Testament.

7. The Providence of God in Duke George's decree:

The publication of Luther's N.T. was forbidden but Emser's N.T. of 1527 was commanded to be read, which, in fact, differed very little from Luther's translation! The situation is a vivid illustration of Psalmist's assertion that God makes even the wrath of man to praise Him and the remainder of wrath He will restrain (Psalm 76:10).

THE REMARKABLE PROVIDENCE IN THE PUBLICATION OF THE GERMAN NEW TESTAMENT – AN UNTOLD STORY OF THE REFORMATION

Manfred E. Kober, Th.D.

1. THE PREDICTION OF JAN HUS

The Czech reformer Jan Hus was burned at the stake on July 6, 1415. He had been summoned to the Council of Konstanz (1414-1418) by King Sigismund who wished to end the dissension in the church. The reluctant Hus, who had accepted many of Wycliffe's ideas on the church and salvation, was promised safe conduct from Bohemia to the Council. Both Sigismund and the Pope assured Hus of their protection. Nevertheless, soon after his arrival in Konstanz, he was arrested and eventually consigned to the dungeon of the Dominican monastery.

At his trial he was accused of 39 heresies and when urged to recant, he declared himself willing to do so if his errors could be proven from the Bible. He was condemned as a heretic and led to the stake outside the city wall. As he was being chained to the stake, he reputedly said to his executioner, "Today you are frying a goose (Hus in the Czech language means "goose") but in 100 years there will come a swan who will sing a different song to the Roman church. Him you can neither roast nor boil!"

This prophecy, many believe, was fulfilled in the person of Martin Luther. He and his closest associates certainly were convinced that the prediction applied to the fearless Reformer. One hundred years later, on October 31, 1517, the monk and theologian posted his 95 theses on the church door of All Saints Church at the castle of Wittenberg, an action which led to the Protestant Reformation. It is only right that believers remember this brave action.

2. A PREMONITION OF FREDERICK THE WISE

On the night of October 30-31 in 1517, Frederick the Wise (Friedrich der Weise, 1463-1525), the Elector of Saxony and Luther's protector, had a strange dream at his castle in Schweinitz. Three times he had the same dream, each time with additional detail. The dream greatly agitated him.

In this dream the Duke was approached by a monk who asked for permission to write something on the castle church in Wittenberg, and Frederick the Wise would not regret it. The permission was granted. The monk, who claimed to be the physical son of the Apostle Paul, wrote in such large letters that the words could be read in Schweinitz, 30 km to the East. The giant feather quill reached all the way to Rome, where it penetrated the head of a lion and nearly knocked off the Pope's tiara (triple crown), which Frederick helped stabilize.

Frederick awoke and soon fell asleep again. While the monk wrote and wrote, the lion roared in great pain and the Pope asked Frederick to stop the monk's writings.

No one could break the quill; it seemed to be made of iron. The duke asked the monk about the origin of the quill and he replied that it came from a 100-year-old Bohemian goose. It was given to him by his old schoolmaster and was indestructible because the feather had its own soul.

At this point Frederick awoke, greatly perplexed, wondering whether his strange dream was from God or the devil. He shared the night vision with his brother Johann and his counselor and then decided to write down what he thought it meant, to see later if he was correct. What he wrote down he never divulged. The incident, apparently historically attested and accepted as such by Reformation scholar Merle D'Aubigne (*History of the Reformation in the Sixteenth Century*, 1889, 281), points to the providential guidance of a monk who shook the world on that fateful October 31.

Martin Luther had been called to teach at the University of Wittenberg, where, studying the Scriptures, he saw ever more clearly the evils of the sale of indulgences and the assumed authority of the Pope to forgive sins.

His journey to Rome in 1510 left him deeply grieved over the luxurious living and loose morals he observed there . After his journey he would repeat the Italian proverb, "If there is a hell, Rome is built over it" (T. M. Lindsey, *Luther and the German Reformation,* 1900, 44).

3. THE POSTING OF THE 95 THESES

The day after Frederick's remarkable dream, on October 31, 1517, the monk Martin Luther posted his famous 95 theses on the church door. The theses were part of a paper he had written a on the "Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences." In it he proposed a number of propositions or theses for debate. Luther's brave act that day started the Protestant Reformation.

In Rome, Pope Leo X (1475-1521), was in the midst of raising funds for the construction of St. Peter's Basilica in Rom. The Dominican priest Johann Tetzel was commissioned to go to Germany and sell indulgences—the papal practice of asking payment for the forgiveness of sins. The indulgences or permits offered release from all temporal punishment, and even the punishment in purgatory, for a sum of money determined by the church. The rhyme relating to that is well known:

> As soon as the coin in the coffer rings,
> The soul from purgatory springs.

Frederick the Wise, the elector of Saxony, prohibited the sale of indulgences in Wittenberg and yet, many individuals traveled to purchase indulgences for themselves or their departed loved ones. Then they showed these paper permits to Luther during confession time, insisting that their sins had now been forgiven.

Luther clearly stated that the Pope had no power to forgive sins. Thus Luther wished to debate this unbiblical merchandising with his fellow theologians. The 95 theses were soon translated from Latin into German and spread widely throughout Germany. It is not clear whether Luther was a believer at that time. It may have been one year later when Luther pondered in his tower study the meaning of Romans 1:17, "the just shall live by faith." Luther reflected on his experience, "Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise" (Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand – A Life of Martin Luther,* 1950, 65).

At last the Reformer's spiritual anguish and diligent search were over. He saw that man cannot do any meritorious work. The free grace of God, which he receives by faith in Christ, alone saves him. From that

time on, Luther proclaimed fearlessly and forcefully the glorious truth he had already intimated in his theses, that salvation in Christ is apart from the Church and without the intervention of priests.

4. THE PUBLICATION OF THE GERMAN NEW TESTAMENT

Pope Leo X, greatly disturbed by Luther's attack on his absolute spiritual power, formally excommunicated Luther. At the Diet of Worms in 1521, Emperor Charles V demanded that Luther recant. When Luther refused, he was declared an outlaw and heretic. Anyone who killed Luther would be free of any penalty. In fact that person was assured immediate access to heaven.

Duke Frederick, although a Roman Catholic all his life, appreciated Luther's fearless stand. As the Catholic Church plotted to kill Luther, as they had done with other reformers before him, the Elector secretly spirited Luther away to the Wartburg Castle, a formidable fortress which Luther called his "Isle of Patmos." There in seclusion, the Reformer accomplished an incredible task. In the space of eleven weeks he translated the Greek New Testament into the German language. He had available the 1519 edition of the Greek New Testament published by Erasmus of Rotterdam. One cannot help but share C. S. Wegener's admiration of Luther's major lifetime accomplishment:

"Luther began the work in 1521 and finished the whole of the New Testament four months later—a fantastic achievement possible only to a man of complete single-mindedness, inexhaustible energy and formidable learning" (*6,000 Years of the Bible*, 1958, 205-206).

Church historian Philip Schaff echoes similar sentiments:

"The richest fruit if Luther's leisure in the Wartburg, and most important and useful work of his whole life, is the translation of the New Testament, by which he brought the teaching and example of Christ and the Apostles to the mind and heart of the Germans in life-like reproduction. It was a republication of the gospel. He made the Bible the people's book in church, school, and house. If he had done nothing else, he would be one of the greatest benefactors of the German-speaking race" *(History of the Christian Church, Volume VII. Modern Christianity. The German Reformation,* n.d., 191*).*

Luther's first edition of the German New Testament appeared in September 1522 and was illustrated with 22 wood cuts from the studio of Lucas Cranach.

After leaving the Wartburg Castle, Luther gathered a group of linguists around him to whom he referred as his "Sanhedrin." They translated the Old Testament. The first complete German Bible was published in 1534.

Not only did Luther's Bible have an enormous influence in extending the Reformation. It was a national work and fixed the German language by making High German the common dialect. Luther's translation was based on how the common man spoke. Luther said that one has to look at the mouth of the child in the alleyway, the man on the street, and the mother in the kitchen, and then translate the Bible into the common tongue.

People grasped at Luther's Bible. Three years after the New Testament first came out, 120,000 copies were already in circulation. The invention of the printing press by Johann Gutenberg in 1440, with obvious providential timing, made the speedy and wide dissemination of printed materials possible. By 1546, three years after the entire German Bible appeared, the Bible was in every 2.5 homes, in many cases the only book a family possessed. People read it, memorized it and carried the New Testament with them as a talisman.

Apparently Luther was motivate to make a translation of the German Bible because of his view of the priesthood of the believer. In 1521 he formulated the notion that the clergy is no closer to God than other believers and, as a corollary, that everyone is capable of studying and understanding the Bible.

5. THE PERSECUTION OF LUTHER

The publication of Luther's New Testament brought an immediate response from Duke George the Bearded (Georg der Bärtige, 1471-1539). He was the cousin of Frederick the Wise and also ruled parts of Saxony. He feared Luther's Bible so much as to make it a criminal offense to buy it. After beheading three individuals for distributing the New Testament, he offered to purchase it back from anyone who had secured a copy. Very few people, treasuring the printed Word of God, responded.

Duke Georg appealed to Emperor Charles V and a number of German princes to silence Luther once and for all, by any means. His cousin, Duke Frederick, knowing full well what happened to Jan Hus, and very sympathetic to Luther's ideas, faithfully protected the Reformer.

6. THE PLAGIARISM OF HIERONYMUS EMSER

Without asking the Pope's permission, Duke George commissioned his secretary and court theologian, Hieronymus Emser, to make a Catholic translation of the New Testament. Years before, Luther and Emser had been friends. However, after the disputation in Leipzig in 1519, Duke George and Emser turned on Luther, accusing him of following Hus in questioning the absolute authority of the Pope and advocating the abominable heresy of letting the common people participate of the cup at the Lord's Supper.

Luther had no greater opponent than Emser, who referred to him as the "Bull of Wittenberg." Luther responded by referring to Emser as the "He-Goat of Leipzig," since Emser's coat of arms showed the front of an he-goat. He further referred to him as the "Scribbler of Dresden."

Hieronymus Emser (1478-1527) Luther's senior and probably one of his teachers in Erfurt, was trained in the humanities and in theology but was hardly a linguist. He soon perceived that he was not up to the task. What did he do? Realizing he could not improve on Luther's New Testament, he removed the introduction and title page and basically retained Luther's translation word for word. He simply made a few changes based on the Latin Vulgate. Earlier, in one of his eight published and vicious attacks on Luther, Emser had charged that Luther's New Testament contained 1,400 errors and heresies. Now, in 1527, he published it as his own. Even the format was similar to that of Luther's New Testament. Luther had an interesting response: "I like Emser's Testament as far as the wording is concerned, since it is essentially my text and was stolen from me word for word" (Julius Köster and Gustav Kawerau, *Martin Luther*, 1903, II, 140, [Translation by this writer]).

7. THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD IN DUKE GEORGE'S DECREE

In the foreword to his New Testament, Emser accused Luther of starting a godless sect and advocating a heretical teaching which would bring great harm to Christendom. Duke George added that this is the true translation of the New Testament which people should read. In fact, recognizing the beauty of Luther's New Testament, he expressed the hope that Luther would translate the Old Testament as well—and then go to hell.

Strangely, Duke George and Emser published their own New Testament but Emser cautioned against reading the Bible. What a paradox! In the afterword, Emser insists that lay people stay away from his translation: "Thus every lay person should follow my counsel and be more concerned about his pious life [gottseliges Leben] rather than the Scriptures which are entrusted solely to scholars." (Gustav Kawerau, "Hieronymous Emser," *Realenzyklopädie für protestantische Theologie und Kirche,* 3 Auflage, V, Leipzig, 1899, 341 [Translation by this writer]).

It has been noted that the publication of Luther's New Testament was forbidden, but Emser's New Testament of 1527, virtually identical with Luther's, was made available to the public. While Duke George encouraged people to read the Bible, Emser discouraged them from doing so.

The episode of the publication of the two New Testaments is a vivid illustration of the Psalmist's assertion in Psalm 76:10, **"Surely the wrath of man shall praise thee and the remainder of wrath shalt thou restrain."**

The meaning is clear. Even the machinations of the enemies of God will eventually demonstrate God's sovereignty. God turns the evil works of men so as to display His glory. The remainder of wrath He restrains, literally, "puts on like a belt." That is, He puts the wickedness of man to His use in further judgment. The lesson is this: God will deal sovereignly with human wickedness which the wrath of man produces, with the result that He brings glory to Himself.

Duke George and Emser meant to silence the Word of God by preventing the publication of Luther's version. In the process, they helped to make the Bible available to a greater number of people. Catholics who would not normally have read a Protestant translation of the Bible purchased Emser's plagiarized version, which was basically Luther's New Testament.

It is ironic that the Catholics themselves, against their own will, promoted the distribution of the Word of God among the people. But there is a double irony. When Emser published his version of the New Testament, he purchased from Lucas Cranach the arresting woodcuts for the Book of Revelation which had been commissioned for Luther's New Testament. Two of the pictures, one on Revelation 14:8 and the other on Revelation 18:2, depict the fall of Babylon. Both woodcuts portray Rome as Babylon and graphically depict the divine destruction of Rome and the Vatican! Apparently neither Emser nor Duke George noticed!

EPILOGUE

There is an interesting detail about Duke George, the enemy of Luther and the Reformation. It relates to his condition at the end of his life. Franz Dibelius writes,

> While he lay dying, his heart's true language apparently spoke once more. As he already had comforted his dying son Johannes in 1537, placing before him the merits of Jesus Christ, on whom Johannes alone should look and not his own merits, nor the merits of the saints, thus it is reported that his own last words in 1539 were, "Oh, please help me, you faithful Savior, Jesus Christ: have mercy upon me and save me through your bitter suffering and death." (Franz Dibelius, "Georg der Bärtige," *Realenzyklopädie für protestantische Theologie und Kirche,* 3. Auflage, VI, Leipzig, 1899, 533 [Translsation by this writer]).

It seems that he was sincere in appealing to Christ alone for salvation. The Savior undoubtedly answered this fervent prayer. We can expect to meet Duke George in glory. Such are the marvelous providences of God at the time of the Reformation. The discerning believer sees a sovereign, saving God still at work in the world today.

„Dies iſt das Bildnis weiland des ehrwürdigen Hus,
Da er für Chriſtus ſeinen Leib in den Feuertod gab."

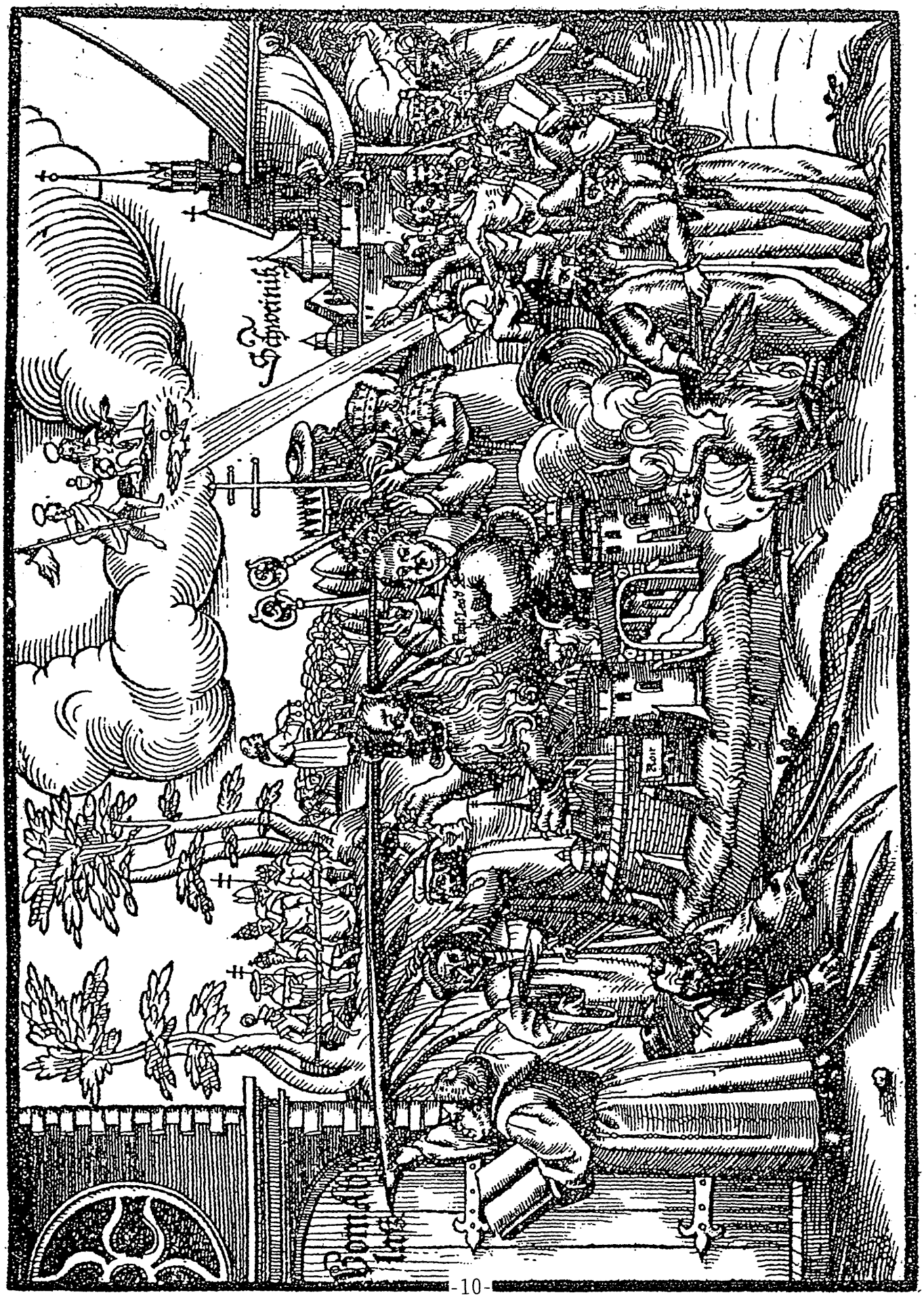
Hus auf dem Scheiterhaufen.

Holzſchnitt aus der Poſtille Huſſens vom Jahre 1563. Nach dem Original in Prag.

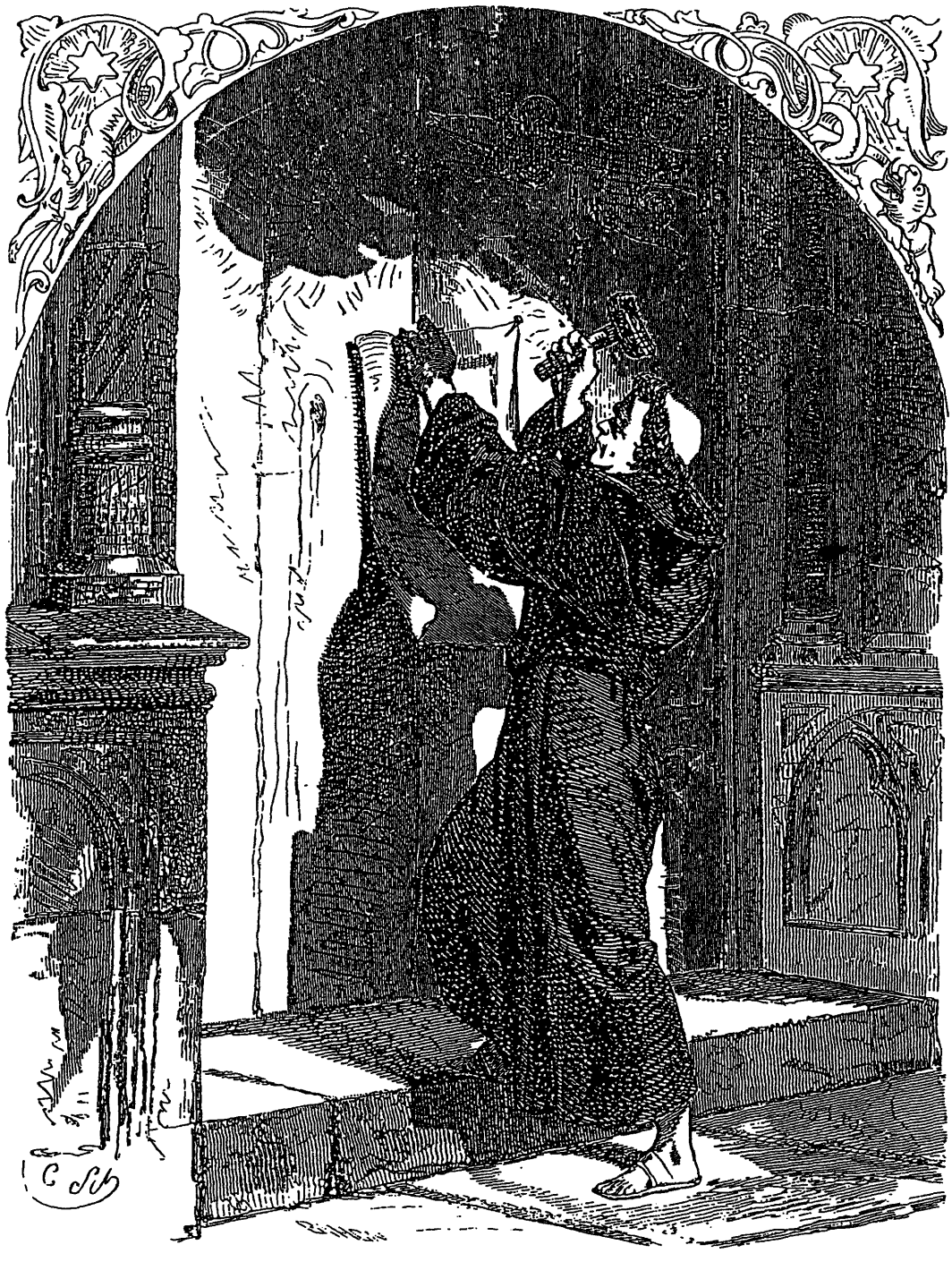
JOH. HUS.

Hæc fuit effigies quondam uenerabilis Hulsi,
Dum sua pro Christo membra cremanda dedit.

Na Obraz Mistra Jana Husy/
Mučedníka Božího.

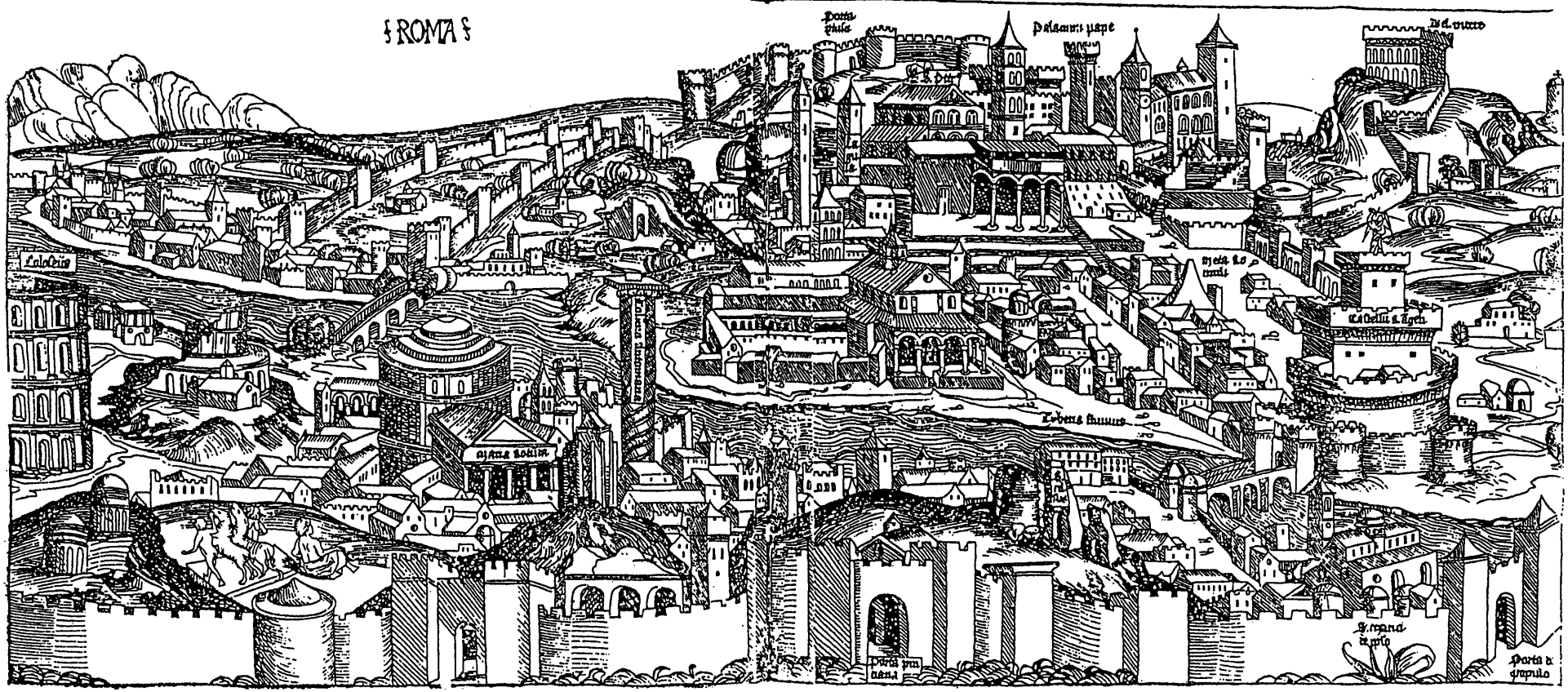


Der christliche Lutheraner. 1717. 4.

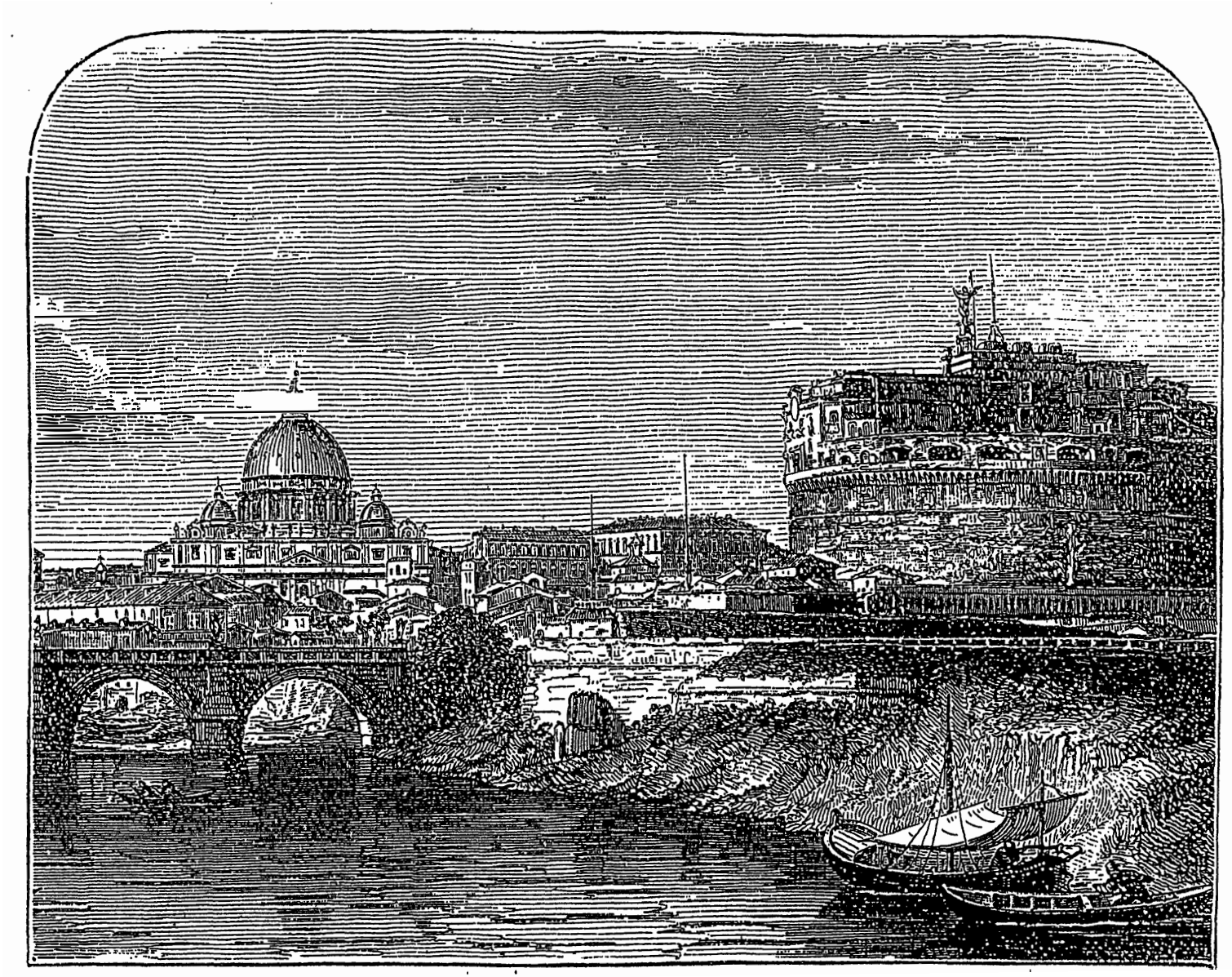


LUTHER AFFIXES HIS NINETY-FIVE PROPOSITIONS TO THE CHURCH DOOR.

173 Hartmann Schedel, Liber chronicarum – Das Buch der Chroniken. Anton Koberger, Nürnberg 1493.
Weitgehend auf der Phantasie beruhende Ansicht der Stadt Rom.



The Nürnberg Chronicle of 1498 contained drawings of the major cities of the world. The somewhat idealized picture of Rome clearly portays the Papal Palace on the horizon, the Tiber River in the foreground and the massive St..Angelo Castle on the right. An angel with a drawn sword is perched on top. When Luther's friend Lucas Cranach illustrated the September Testament, he pictured the Babylon of the Revelation as Rome. The Catholic scholar Hieronymus Emser not only plagiarized Luther's translation of the N.T. but also used the identical Cranach pictures, apparently not realizing the graphic destruction of the Vatican on the illustrations for Revelation 14 and 18 (see below).



ROME AND THE CASTLE OF ST. ANGELO.

25

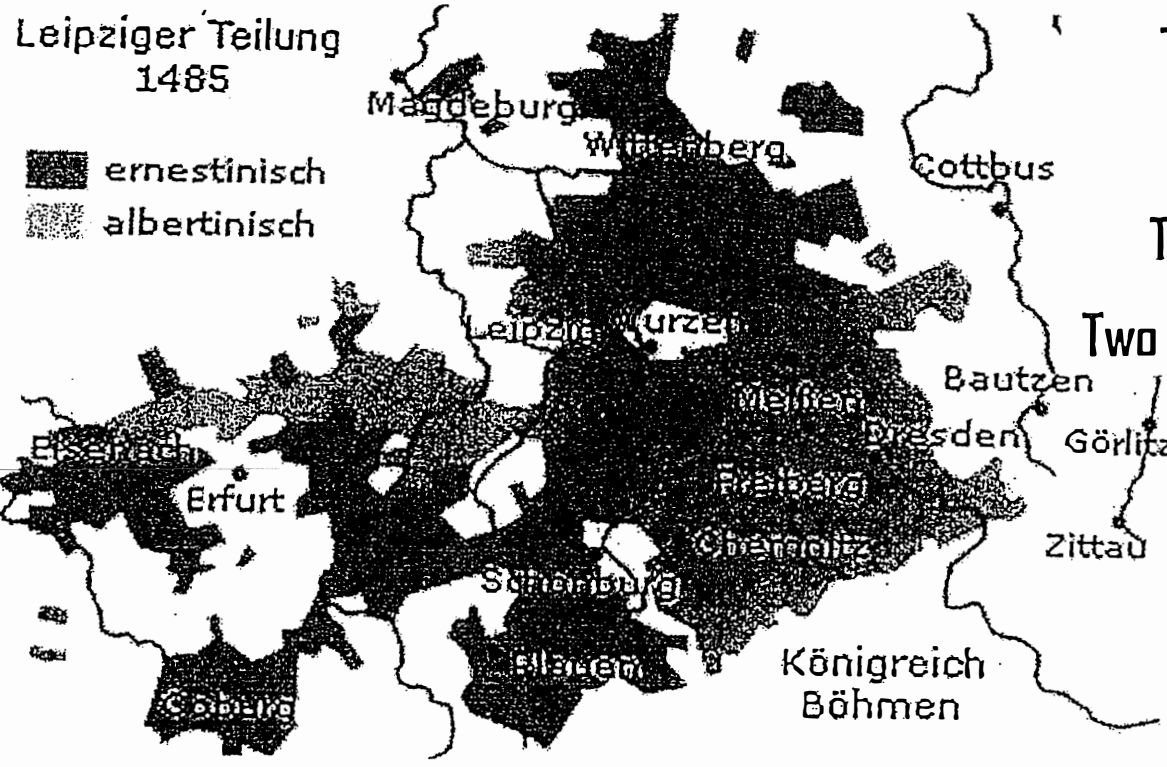
Revelation 14:8

And there followed another angel, saying, Babylon is fallen, is fallen, that great city, because she made all nations drink of the wine of the wrath of her fornication.

Revelation 18:2

And he cried mightily with a strong voice, saying, Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen, and is become the habitation of devils, -16- the hold of every foul spirit, and a cage of every unclean and hateful bird.

Herzog Georg der Bärtige. 1500—1539.



Two Cousins,

Two Faiths,

Two Scholars,

Two New Testaments

Martin Luther

1483-1546

Hieronymus Emser

1477-1527

Duke George's Death

Herzog Georg der Bärtige. 1500 – 153

While he lay dying, his heart's true language apparently spoke once more. As he already had comforted his dying son Johannes in 1537, placing before him the merits of Jesus Christ, on whom Johannes alone should look and not his own merits, nor the merits of the saints, thus it is reported that his own last words in 1539 were, ***"Oh, please help me, you faithful Savior, Jesus Christ: have mercy upon me and save me through your bitter suffering and death."***

(Franz Dibelius, "Georg der Bärtige," *Realenzyklopädie für protestantische Theologie und Kirche*, 3. Auflage, VI, Leipzig, 1899, 533.)

The Savior undoubtedly answered this fervent prayer. We can expect to meet Duke George in glory! – What or whom are you trusting for your salvation? (Acts. 4;12; John 14:6).

For our German friends, here is the original citation:

Im Sterben ſoll ſeines Herzens Sprache wieder laut geworden ſein: wie er ſchon 1537 ſeinen ſterbenden Sohn Johannes unter Vorhaltung des Verdienſtes Jeſu Chriſti tröſtete, auf den er allein ſehen ſolle, und nicht auf das eigne Verdienſt, noch auf das Verdienſt der Heiligen, ſo ſoll es 1539 ſein eigenes letztes Wort geweſen ſein: Ei ſo hilf mir, du treuer Heiland, Jeſu Chriſte; erbarme dich über mich und mache mich ſelig durch dein bitter Leiden und Sterben!

D. Franz Dibelius.