

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

Manfred E. Kober, Th.D.



*W. Schönschneider in Nürnberg 1517*



# 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, forbade 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, soon 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 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 safe conduct. 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 if his errors could be proven from the Bible. He was condemned as a heretic and was 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 the fearless Reformer. 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 the historical and brave action.

## 2. A PREMONITION OF FREDERICK THE WISE

On the night of October 30-31 in 1517, Frederick the Wise (Friedrich der Weise), the Elector of Saxony and Luther's lord, 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 they could be read in far-away Schweinitz. 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 triple crown which Frederick helped stabilize.

Friedrich awoke and soon fell asleep again. While the monk wrote and wrote, the lion roared in great pain and the Pope asked Friedrich 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.



Whereupon 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 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, 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 sin, immorality and greed he witnessed there.

### 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. He had written a paper on the "Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences." In it he proposed a number of propositions for debate. The action of Luther that day started the Protestant Reformation.

The Pope, Pope Leo X, was in the midst of raising funds for the construction of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. He commissioned the Dominican priest Johann Tetzel 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:

The coin into the coffer clings,  
A 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, 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.

### 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 Friedrich, although a Roman Catholic for all his life, appreciated Luther's fearless stand. When the Catholic Church plotted to kill Luther, as they had done with other individuals before him, the Duke secretly spirited Luther away to the Wartburg Castle. There Luther in seclusion 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 share C. S. Wegener's admiration of Luther's 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).

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 whom he called 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 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 in 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 the 1400's, with obvious providential timing, made the speedy and wide dissemination of printed materials possible. By 1546, three year 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.

Luther was prompted to make a translation of the German Bible because of his view of the priesthood of the believer. He formulated in 1521 the notion that the clergy is no more closer to God than other believers and as a corollary, that everyone is capable of immersing himself in 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 one. 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 Fredrick, knowing full well what happened to Jan Hus, and very sympathetic to Luther's ideas, faithfully protected him.



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 a he-goat.

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 realized 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.

## 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 wrote in the foreword 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 was hoping that Luther would translate the Old Testament as well—and then go to hell.

Interestingly, in the afterword, Emser warns lay people against reading the Bible, "Thus every lay person should follow my counsel and be more concerned about his pious (gottseliges) life rather than the Scriptures which are entrusted solely to scholars." ("Hieronymus Emser," *Realenzyklopädie für protestantische Theologie und Kirche*, 3 Auflage, V, Leipzig, 1899, 341).

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 commanded to be read!

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 I will restrain."**

The meaning is clear. The machinations of the enemies of God will eventually acknowledge 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 Ludwig 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 (see appendix) 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 [translated 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

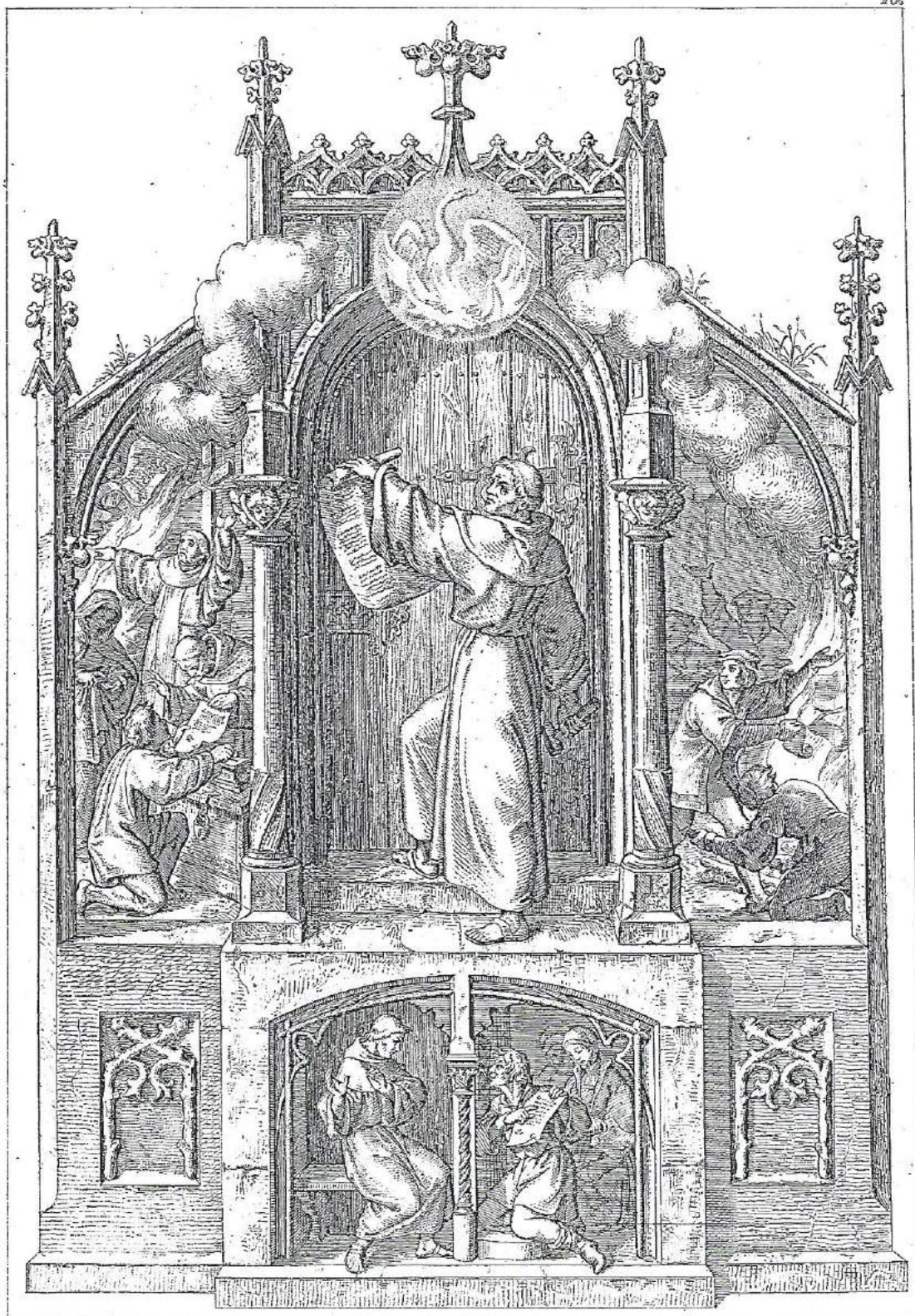




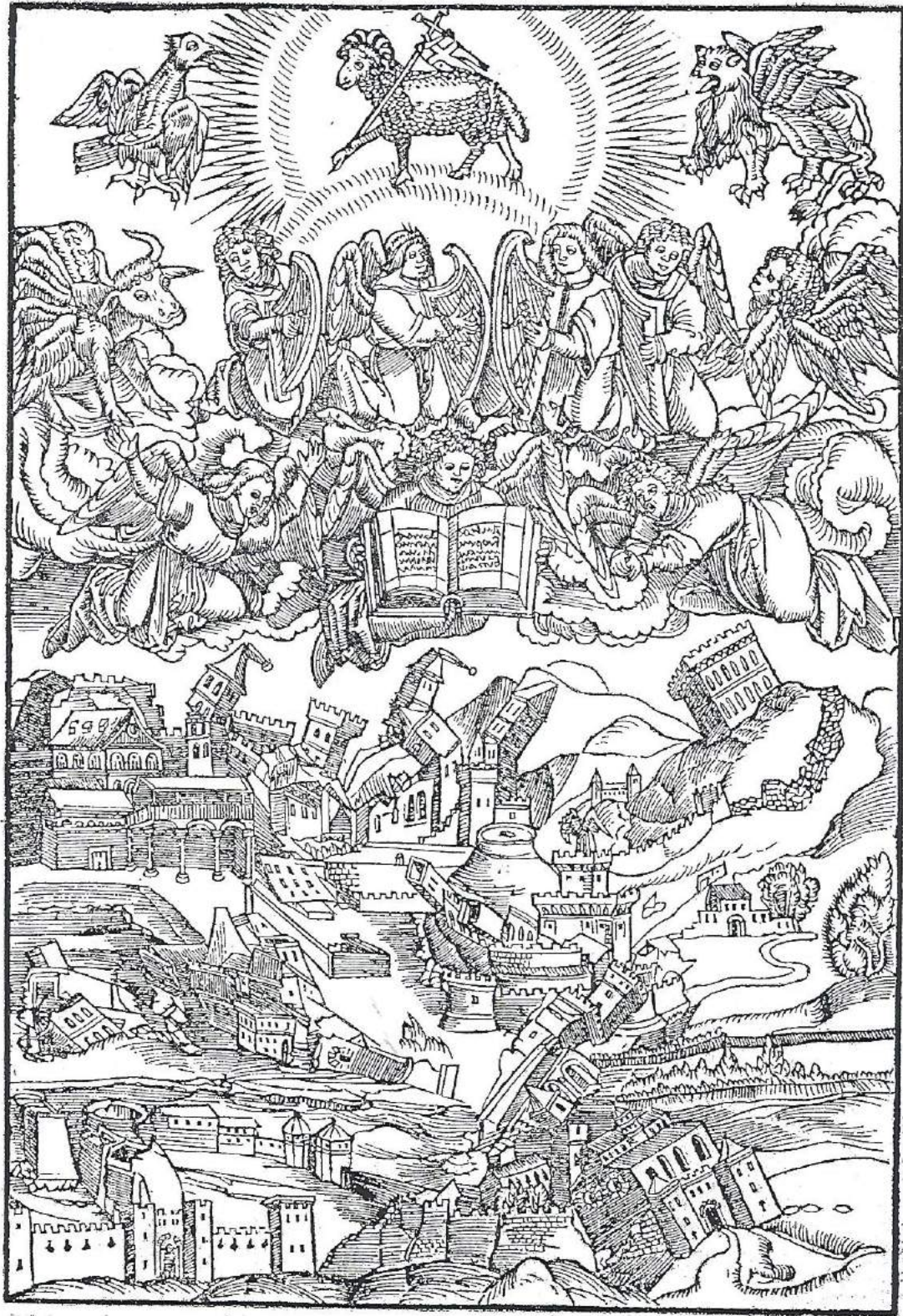












### Revelation 14:8

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, and the hold of every foul spirit, and a cage of every unclean and hateful bird.

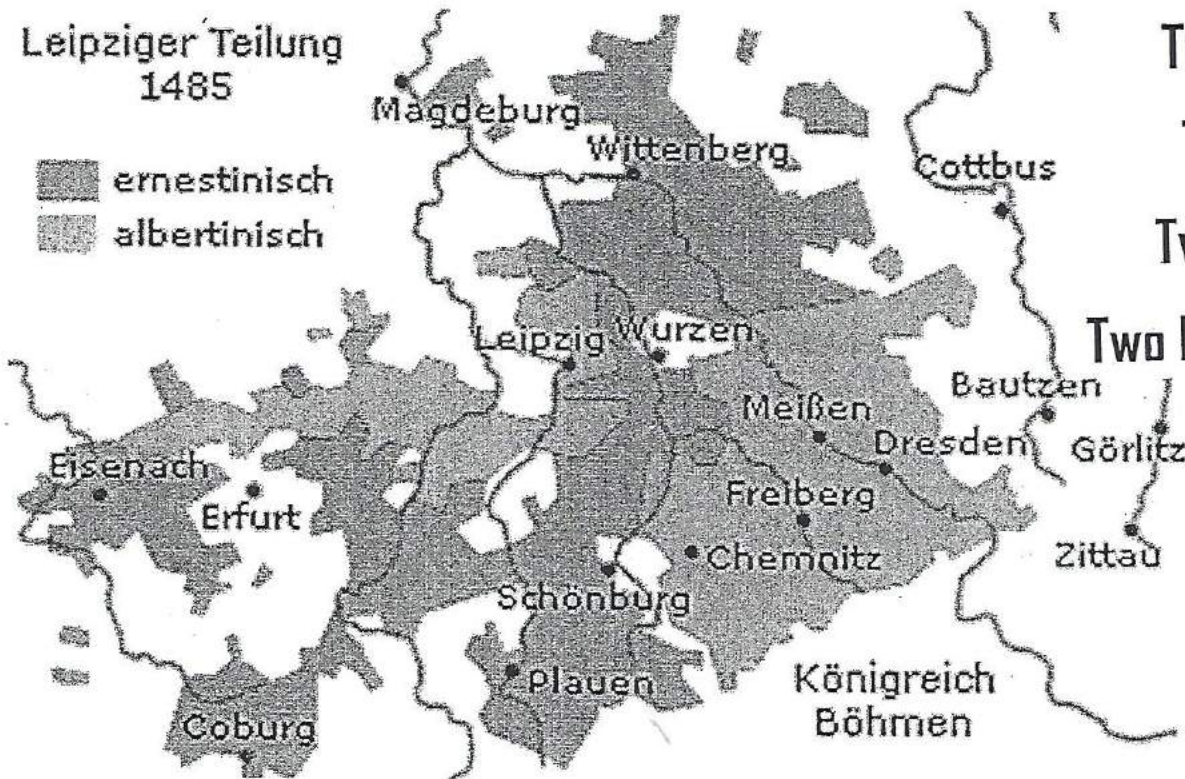




Herzog Georg der Bärtige. 1500 – 1539.

Leipziger Teilung  
1485

ernestinisch  
albertinisch



Two Cousins,

Two Faiths,

Two Scholars,

Two New Testaments



Martin Luther

1483-1546



Hieronimus Emser

1477-1527