

Luther's Chapter Divisions

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In his first complete Bible, published 1534, Martin Luther deviates from expected chapter divisions 47 times. Here we consider each of these examples, working from largest to smallest.

One of Luther's unexpected chapter divisions is at Dan 12, which he places at 11:36 rather than 12:1. Luther's 1534 Bible does not have verse numbers, but it is a simple matter to find which verse corresponds to his wording. Dividing at 11:36 brings ten additional verses into Dan 12. In what follows, I will call any variance of 10 or more verses a large variance, and anything smaller than this a small variance.

Large Variances

Verses: 20

Under these definitions, there are four large variances in the corpus. The largest occurs in 1 Chr 4, which Luther divides into two chapters. His chap. 4 consists of our 4:1-4:23 (23 verses) and his chap. 5 consists of our 4:24-4:43 (20 verses). All subsequent chapters of 1 Chronicles are numbered one digit higher than most modern Bibles. Thus, our chap. 5 is his chap. 6, and so on, with the result that 1 Chronicles has 30 chapters, rather than 29, in his 1534 Bible. This analysis is retained in Luther's 1545 Bible. The difference between a modern analysis of 1 Chr 4 and Luther's is 20 verses.

Verses: 16

The next most ambitious realignment of chapter divisions in Luther's 1534 Bible is at Hab 3, which for him starts at 2:5. Here again, Luther adds a chapter to a book. His chap. 4 consists of our 3:1-19. In this case 16 verses are involved in the reanalysis.

Verses: 13

Our next example concerns Isa 64, which for Luther begins at 63:7. The effect of this change is to add 13 verses to Isa 64. Isa 65 begins at 65:1.

Verses: 10

The last example in the present category is Dan 12, which Luther begins at 11:36. The effect of doing this is that Dan 12, in Luther's 1534 Bible, has 23 verses. This is 10 more than expected.

Subsequent German editions retained Luther's analysis, in 1545, 1741, and 1784, as did a number of versions in other Germanic languages (Danish 1550; Dutch 1542, 1560, 1648; Icelandic 1584, 1644; Swedish 1541). Finnish is not Germanic, but is spoken in Scandinavia. The first Finnish Bible (1552) includes Luther's chapter division at Dan 12.

Equally interesting to the way Luther's analysis was carried forward through time, is the way it was gradually set aside. See table 1.

Table 1
History of Luther's Analysis of Dan 12

German	Danish	Dutch	Finnish	Icelandic	Swedish
1534	1550	1542	1552	1584	1541
1545	[1607]	[1548]	[1642]	1644	[1703]
1741		1560	[1776]	[1728]	
1784		[1562]			
		[1637]			
		1648			

In this table, year designations for translations that are not in square brackets exhibit Luther's analysis of Dan 12, while those in square brackets do not. Notice in particular that Dutch translators struggled with the idea of following, or not following, Luther's example at Dan 12. Over the next century Dutch translators included (1542, 1560, 1648), or did not include (1548, 1562, 1637), the above analysis. From the first Bible to incorporate it (1534), to the last that I can document (1784), is 250 years – the fourth part of a millennium. The idea Luther put forward was a tenacious one.

Small Variances

All remaining examples of deviations from expected chapter divisions in Luther's 1534 German Bible involve fewer than 10 verses.

Verses: 9

In 1534 Luther begins Ezek 3 at 3:10, which is nine verses later than what our modern versions would lead us to expect.

Verses: 8

Luther begins Lev 6 at 6:9 and Isa 8: and 8:9. In both cases, this is eight verses later than expected.

Verses: 7

For the next case there is only one example. Luther begins 1 Kgs 16 seven verses later than expected, at 16:8.

Verses: 6

In the case of Hos 6, Luther begins six verses earlier than expected, at 5:10.

Verses: 5

Luther begins Deut 17; Isa 15; and Ezek 21 five verses early (at Deut 16:18; Isa 14:28; and Ezek 20:45, respectively). He begins both Job 40 and Jer 3 five verses late (at Job 40:6 and Jer 3:6, respectively).

Verses: 4

In Eccl 10, Luther begins chap. 10 at 10:5.

Verses: 3

Luther begins Isa 53 three verses earlier than expected, at 52:13. He begins Jer 2, 8; and Amos 2 three verses later than expected (at Jer 2:4, 8:4; and Amos 2:4, respectively).

Verses: 2

Here there are nine examples to consider. Luther begins Gen 27; Eccl 12; Isa 47; and Hos 2 four verses early (at Gen 26:34; Eccl 11:9; Isa 46:12, and Hos 1:10, respectively). He begins Gen 32; Lev 26; Isa 14, 46, and 57 two verses late (at Gen 32:3; Lev 26:3; Isa 14:3; 46:3, and 57:3, respectively).

Verses: 1

The category for which we have the most example is that containing variations of a single verse. Luther begins Exod 16; Num 23; Eccl 7; Dan 6, and Hos 12 one verse early (at Exod 15:27; Num 22:41; Eccl 6:12; Dan 5:31; and Hos 11:12, respectively). He begins Gen 50; Num 22; Judg 5; Ruth 2; 2 Chr 14; Isa 4, 9; Dan 11, and Mic 5 one verse late (at Gen 50:2; Num 22:2; Judg 5:2; Ruth 2:2; 2 Chr 14:2; Isa 4:2; 9:2; Dan 11:2, and Mic 5:2, respectively).

As an aside, in Dan 11:2 Luther is exactly on course. Dan 11 begins at 11:2. In Dan 12 he is on less secure ground, since structurally that chapter begins at 12:5.

Verses: 0.5

In Song 5, Luther begins half a verse early (at 4:16b). In Josh 4; Eccl 8, and Jer 24 he began half a verse late (at Josh 4:1b; Eccl 8:1b, and Jer 24:1b, respectively).

Data Summary

The following table summarizes the information given narratively above. See table 2.

Table 2
Summary of Chapter Division Data

Abbr	ESV	Luther	Var
Verses: 0.5			
Song	5:1	4:16b	-0.5
Josh	4:1	4:1b	+0.5
Eccl	8:1	8:1b	+0.5
Jer	24:1	24:1b	+0.5
Verses: 1			
Exod	16:1	15:27	-1
Num	23:1	22:41	-1
Eccl	7:1	6:12	-1
Dan	6:1	5:31	-1
Hos	12:1	11:12	-1
Gen	50:1	50:2	+1
Num	22:1	22:2	+1
Judg	5:1	5:2	+1
Ruth	2:1	2:2	+1
2 Chr	14:1	14:2	+1
Isa	4:1	4:2	+1
Isa	9:1	9:2	+1
Dan	11:1	11:2	+1
Mic	5:1	5:2	+1
Verses: 2			
Gen	27:1	26:34	-2
Eccl	12:1	11:9	-2
Isa	47:1	46:12	-2
Hos	2:1	1:10	-2

Abbr	ESV	Luther	Var
Gen	32:1	32:3	+2
Lev	26:1	26:3	+2
Isa	14:1	14:3	+2
Isa	46:1	46:3	+2
Isa	57:1	57:3	+2
Verses: 3			
Isa	53:1	52:13	-3
Jer	2:1	2:4	+3
Jer	8:1	8:4	+3
Amos	2:1	2:4	+3
Verses: 4			
Eccl	10:1	10:5	+4
Verses: 5			
Deut	17:1	16:18	-5
Isa	15:1	14:28	-5
Ezek	21:1	20:45	-5
Job	40:1	40:6	+5
Jer	3:1	3:6	+5
Verses: 6			
Hos	6:1	5:10	-6
Verses: 7			
1 Kgs	16:1	16:8	+7
Verses: 8			
Isa	16:1	15:1	-8
Lev	6:1	6:9	+8
Isa	8:1	8:9	+8
Verses: 9			
Ezek	3:1	3:10	+9
Large Variances			
Dan	12:1	11:36	-10
Isa	64	63:7	-13
Hab	3:1	2:5	-16
1 Chr	5:1	4:24	-20

How Many of Luther's Chapter Divisions Can MT Account For?

In 14 cases a difference between Luther's chapter division and ours co-occurs with a difference between the number of verses in MT and the number of verses and ESV, and other modern Bibles. This is a little more than one fourth of all examples, so there is a question whether MT was a significant factor in leading Luther to make the decisions he did.

In eight cases Luther's chapter division differs from ESV in chapter length because ESV differs from MT in chapter length. These chapter divisions correspond to that in MT in contrast with ESV. Examples are Lev 6:1 as 6:8; 2 Chr 14:1 as 14:2; Isa 9:1 as 9:2; Ezek 21:1 as 20:45; Dan 6:1 as 5:31; Hos 2:1 as 1:10; Hos 12:1 as 11:12, and Mic 5:1 as 5:2.

In six other cases the difference between MT and ESV in chapter length does not account for the difference between ESV and Luther in regard to where chapters begin. Here Luther's chapter divisions differ from both MT and ESV. Examples are Gen 32:1 as 32:3; Isa 64:1 as 63:7; 1 Chr 5:1 as 4:24; Job 40:1 as 40:6, and Isa 8:1 as 8:9, and Jer 8:1 as 8:4.

For a summary of both sets of examples, see table 4. Fourteen times ESV differs from MT, and eight of these correspond to Luther's chapter divisions. In the remaining 33 cases the chapter divisions of ESV differ from those of Luther, but there is no difference between MT and ESV, so MT cannot be a causal factor for the differences between ESV and Luther in these cases. See table 3.

Table 3
Cases Where ESV Differs from MT

Abbr	ESV	MT/Luther	Var
MT Can Account for Luther			
Lev	6:1	6:8	+7
2 Chr	14:1	14:2	+1
Isa	9:1	9:2	+1
Ezek	21:1	20:45	-5
Dan	6:1	5:31	-1
Hos	2:1	1:10	-2
Hos	12:1	11:12	-1
Mic	5:1	5:2	+1
MT Cannot Account for Luther			
Gen	32:1	32:3	+2
1 Chr	5:1	4:24; 5:1	-20
Job	40:1	40:6	+5
Isa	8:1	8:9	+8
Isa	64:1	63:7	-13
Jer	8:1	8:4	+3

How Many of Luther's Chapter Divisions Can the Vulgate Account For?

ESV only differs from the Vulgate three times within the present corpus. See table 4.

Table 4
Cases Where ESV Differs from Vulgate

Abbr	ESV	Vul/Luther	Var
Vul Can Account for Luther			
Eccl	7:1	6:12	-1
Eccl	8:1	8:1b	+0.5
Vul Cannot Account for Luther			
Hos	6:1	5:15b	-0.5

In two cases the Vulgate and Luther correspond, in contrast with ESV (Eccl 7:1 as 6:12; Eccl 8:1 as 8:1b). In the remaining one case all three are different from each in some way (Hos 6:1 as 5:15b), so the Vulgate cannot be a causal factor. Luther was

certainly aware of the Vulgate, but it exerted a vanishingly small influence on his work. His Old Testament text in his 1534 German Bible was the MT.

What Accounts for Luther's Other Chapter Divisions?

When I say other, the reference is to the 39 cases that remain after the eight that MT can account for, and the two that the Vulgate can account for. The rest are unexplained. So the total number of unexplained examples is 37 out of 47, or 78.7%. The question now is, In these remaining 37 examples, can Luther's chapter divisions be explained on purely mechanical grounds, i.e., on the basis of chapter length alone? I suggest not.

One case where my understanding of Luther's analysis could be reasonably challenged is at Dan 12. Dan 11 is a long chapter, with 45 verses as commonly numbered. Luther begins Dan 11 late (11:2) and ends it early (11:36). Just as Dan 11 is a long chapter, Dan 12 is a short chapter, with 13 verses in the common numbering system. So one could assume that Luther had nothing more in mind than wanting to even out the lengths of the chapters. In the absence of any further information, this would be a reasonable conclusion to draw.

Allowing Isa 64 to start at 63:7 would initially appear to strengthen the above hypothesis. Isa 63 (at 19 verses) is longer than Isa 64 (at 12 verses in ESV, 11 in MT). By taking 13 verses from the longer chapter, Luther could be understood as simply evening out Isaiah's chapter lengths, i.e., making short chapters longer and long chapters shorter. But changing the number of verses from 19 and 12 (11) to 6 and 18 (17), respectively, has the opposite effect. It compounds the problem rather than solving it. Instead of the 31 (30) total verses in these two chapters having the proportions 61.3% v. 38.7% (for Isa 63 and 64), they now have the proportions 19.4% v. 80.6% under Luther's analysis. The one ratio is 2/3:1/3; the other, 1/5:4/5.

We find the same result in Hab 3. In Luther's analysis, Hab 2 retains only four verses. So whereas formerly we had chapter lengths of 17, 20, and 19 verses (for Hab 1, 2, and 3); under Luther's analysis we have 17, 4, and 35. Whereas, the ratio was roughly 1:1:1 previously, for Luther it becomes 4:1:8. This, again, represents a loss of symmetry, an increase of inequality.

The final example has to do with dividing 1 Chr 4 into two chapters, of 23 and 20 verses, respectively. These are substantially similar numbers, which could be understood as an increase of symmetry in the immediate context, but more broadly the hypothesis breaks down, going from 24:43 (for our 1 Chr 3 and 4) to 24:23:20 (for Luther's 1 Chr 3, 4, and 5). See table 5.

Table 5
Modern Chapter Lengths for 1 Chr 1-11

Chs.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Vss.	54	55	24	43	41	66	40	40	44	14	47

Conclusion

Regardless how we divide the chapters, there is a total of 468 verses in what I am here calling 1 Chr 1-11. If the total number of chapters is divided into this number of verses, the average length of a chapter is 42.5. In modern Bibles 1 Chr 4 has 43 verses. We note that 42.5 rounds up to 43 – the average number of verses across the eleven chapters used in this comparison. Changing this number to some other cannot provide a reason for dividing 1 Chr 4 as he does based on symmetry. The existing chapter divisions are already symmetrical. A mechanical explanation is one hypothesis.

Eight times Luther's chapter divisions in his 1534 Bible can be explained on the basis of MT, and two times on the basis of the Vulgate, but the remaining 37 times remain unexplained under this second hypothesis that Luther was responding to other text traditions.

If a mechanical explanation based on symmetry is unavailable for the majority of cases, and the hypothesis that Luther was responding to other text traditions is also not widely available, a third hypothesis is that Luther's chapter divisions are intended to convey something about his understanding of the text. In this model his chapter divisions are a form of exegesis. So taking one example among many, what understanding of Dan 11:36-45 led Luther to begin Dan 12 at 11:36? That is a question for a separate paper.