Genesis

Jerome (c. AD 347–420)

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Genesis

[Translated by Kevin P. Edgecomb] BEGINNING OF THE PROLOGUE OF SAINT JEROME THE PRESBYTER ON THE PENTATEUCH I have received the desired letters of my Desiderius, who in a foretelling of things to happen has obtained with Daniel a certain name [see Vulgate Daniel 9.23: quia vir desideriorum es tu, ”for you are a man of desires”], beseeching that I might hand over to our hearers a translation of the Pentateuch in the Latin tongue from the Hebrew words. Certainly a dangerous work, open to the barkings of detractors, who accuse me of insult to the Seventy to prepare a new interpretation from the old ones, thus approving ability (or ”genius”) like wine. As has very often been testified by me, I, for my part, am able to offer a portion in the Tabernacle of God, without the riches (or ”abilities”) of one being damaged by the poverties of others.

But that I may have dared, the effort of Origen provoked me, who mixed the translation of Theodotion to the ancient edition, with asterisk and obelus, that is, star and spit, a work distinguishing everything, while he either makes to shine those things which were previously lacking, or he slays and pierces through everything superfluous. And especially by the authority of the Evangelists and the Apostles, in which we read many things from the Old Testament which are not found in our books, as it is (with): ”Out of Egypt I have called My Son,” and ”For He shall be called a Nazarene,” and ”They will look on Him Whom they have pierced,” and ”Rivers of living waters shall flow from his belly,” and ”Things which no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor has arisen in the heart of man, which God has prepared for those loving Him,” and many others which are desiring a proper context (or ”book” [Jerome uses a Greek word here: συνταγμα]).

Therefore let us ask them where these are written, and when they are unable to say, we may produce them from the Hebrew books. The first witness is in Hosea, the second in Isaiah, the third in Zechariah, the fourth in Proverbs, the fifth is also in Isaiah, of which many are ignorant, the follies of apocrypha being followed, preferring Iberian dirges to authentic books. The cause of the error is not for me to explain. The Jews say it was done wisely in deliberation, so Ptolemy, the worshipper of one god, might not yet discover a double divinity with the Hebrews;

he made them (do so) chiefly for this reason, because he was seen to fall into the dogma of Plato. Accordingly, wherever anything sacred in Scripture is witnessed of the Father and Son and Holy Spirit, they are either translated otherwise, or they have passed over all in silence, so they might both satisfy the king, and might not divulge the secret of the Faith.

And I don't know who was the first author to construct with his lying the seventy cells in Alexandria, into which were divided those who wrote, with Aristeas the champion [another Greek word: υπερασπιστης] of the same Ptolemy, and many after the time of Josephus having reported no such thing, but rather (for them) to have gathered in groups, writing in one basilica, (and) not to have prophesied. For it is one thing to be a seer, another to be an interpreter. In that one the Spirit predicts things to come; in this one by his learning and abundance of words he translates those things he has understood. Unless Tullius (Cicero) is understood to have translated, by inspiration of the spirit of rhetoric, the Economics of Xenophon, the Protagoras of Plato, and the For Ctesiphon by Demosthenes. Or the Holy Spirit wove together the witnesses of these books one way through the Seventy interpreters and another way through the Apostles, so that what they passed over in silence, what was written by these was invented [? - obscure].

Therefore, what? We condemn the ancients? By no means! But after those earlier in the House of God, we work at what we can. They are interpreted before the coming of Christ and what they didn't know, they tranlated in ambiguous (or "uncertain") sentences. We write after His Passion and Resurrection, not so much prophecy as history. For in the one are told what things were heard, in the other what were seen. What we understand better, we also translate better. Hear, therefore, O rival; listen, O detractor! I do not condemn, I do not censure the Seventy, but I confidently prefer the Apostles to all of them. Christ speaks to me through their mouth, who I read were placed before the prophets among the Spiritual gifts, among which interpreters hold almost the last place. Why are you tortured by spite? Why do you incite ignorant souls against me? If anywhere in the translation I have been seen by you to err, ask the Hebrews. Consult the teachers of the many different cities. What theirs have of Christ, yours do not have. It is another matter if they have afterward removed the testimonies used by the Apostles against them, and the Latin copies are more correct than the Greek, (and) the Greek than the Hebrew! Truth is against these enviers.

Now I pray you, dearest Desiderius, so that in such a great work which you have made me undertake and take up a beginning from Genesis, you might help in (your) prayers, how I might, by the same Spirit by Whom the books were written, be able to translate them into Latin words. END OF THE PROLOGUE

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