Prefaces to the Books of the Vulgate Version of the Old Testament

Jerome (c. AD 347–420)

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This version was not undertaken with ecclesiastical sanction as was the case with the Gospels, but at the request of private friends, or from Jerome's "own sense of the imperious necessity of the work." It was wholly made at Bethlehem, and was begun about a.d. 391, and finished about a.d. 404. The approximate dates of the several books are given before each Preface in the following pages.

Preface to Genesis.

This Preface was addressed to Desiderius, but which of the three correspondents of Jerome who bore this name is uncertain (See Article Desiderius in Smith and Wace's "Dictionary of Christian Biography"). We do not give it because it has been given at length as a specimen of the rest, in Jerome's "Apology," book ii., vol. iii. of this series, pp. 515-516). Jerome in it complains that he is accused of forging a new version. He justifies his undertaking by showing that in the versions then current many passages were left out (though they exist in our copies of the LXX.), such as "Out of Egypt" (Hos. xi. 1); "They shall look on him whom they pierced" (Zech. xii. 10), etc., which are quoted in the New Testament and are found in the Hebrew. He accounts for these omissions by the suggestion that the LXX. were afraid of offending Ptolemy Lagus for whom they worked, and who was a Platonist. He rejects the fable of the LXX. being shut up in separate cells and producing an identical version, and protests against the notion that they were inspired, and he urges his calumniators, by applying to those who knew Hebrew, to test the correctness of his version.

There is no Preface to the other books of the Pentateuch. From the allusion to the work on the Pentateuch as lately finished, in the Preface to Joshua, which was published in 404, it is presumed that the date of the translation of the Pentateuch is 403.

Joshua, Judges, and Ruth.

The Preface to these books was written a.d. 404; Jerome speaks of the death of Paula, which took place in that year, and the work is addressed to Eustochium alone. The Preface

is chiefly occupied with a defence of his translation. He tells those who carp at it that they are not bound to read it, and mentions that the Church had given no final sanction to the LXX., but read the book of Daniel in Theodotion's version. The books of Joshua, Judges, and Ruth, were probably the last of the Vulgate translation; the Preface declares Jerome's intention of devoting himself henceforward to the Commentaries on the Prophets, a work which took up the remainder of his life.

The Books of Samuel and Kings.

This Preface was the first in order of publication. It was set forth as an exposition of the principles adopted by Jerome in all his translations from the Hebrew-the "Helmeted Preface," as he calls it in the beginning of the last paragraph, with which he was prepared to do battle against all who impugn his design and methods. It was addressed to Paula and Eustochium, and published about a.d. 391.That the Hebrews have twenty-two letters is testified by the Syrian and Chaldaaen languages which are nearly related to the Hebrew, for they have twenty-two elementary sounds which are pronounced the same way, but are differently written. The Samaritans also employ just the same number of letters in their copies of the Pentateuch of Moses, and differ only in the shape and outline of the letters. And it is certain that Esdras, the scribe and teacher of the law, after the capture of Jerusalem and the restoration of the temple by Zerubbabel, invented other letters which we now use, although up to that time the Samaritan and Hebrew characters were the same. In the book of Numbers, also, where we have the census of the Levites and priests, the mystic teaching of Scripture conducts us to the same result. And we find the four-lettered name of the Lord in certainGreek books written to this day in the ancient characters.

The thirty-seventh Psalm, moreover, the one hundred and eleventh, the one hundred and twelfth, the one hundred and nineteenth, and the one hundred and forty-fifth, although they are written in different metres,have for their acrostic framework an alphabet of the same number of letters. The Lamentations of Jeremiah, and his Prayer, the Proverbs of Solomon also, towards the end, from the place where we read "Who will find a brave woman? are instances of the same number of letters forming the division into sections. And, again, five are double letters, viz., Caph, Mem, Nun, Phe, Sade, for at the beginning and in the middle of words they are written one way, and at the end another way. Whence it happens that, by most people, five of the books are reckoned as double, viz., Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, Ezra, Jeremiah, with Kinoth, i.e., his Lamentations. As, then, there are twenty-two elementary characters by means of which we write in Hebrew all we say, and the compass of the human voice is contained within their limits, so we reckon twenty-two books, by which, as by the alphabet of the doctrine of God, a righteous man is instructed in tender infancy, and, as it were, while still at the breast.

The first of these books is called Bresith, to which we give the name Genesis. The second, Elle Smoth, which bears the name Exodus; the third, Vaiecra, that is Leviticus; the fourth, Vaiedabber, which we call Numbers; the fifth, Elle Addabarim, which is entitled Deuteronomy. These are the five books of Moses, which they properly call Thorath, that is law. The

second class is composed of the Prophets, and they begin with Jesus the son of Nave, who among them is called Joshua the son of Nun. Next in the series is Sophtim, that is the book of Judges; and in the same book they include Ruth, because the events narrated occurred in the days of the Judges. Then comes Samuel, which we call First and Second Kings. The fourth is Malachim, that is, Kings, which is contained in the third and fourth volumes of Kings. And it is far better to say Malachim, that is Kings, than Malachoth, that is Kingdoms. For the author does not describe the Kingdoms of many nations, but that of one people, the people of Israel, which is comprised in the twelve tribes. The fifth is Isaiah, the sixth, Jeremiah, the seventh, Ezekiel, the eighth is the book of the Twelve Prophets, which is called among the Jews Thare Asra.

To the third class belong the Hagiographa, of which the first book begins with Job, the second with David, whose writings they divide into five parts and comprise in one volume of Psalms; the third is Solomon, in three books, Proverbs, which they call Parables, that is Masaloth, Ecclesiastes, that is Coeleth, the Song of Songs, which they denote by the title Sir Assirim; the sixth is Daniel; the seventh, Dabre Aiamim, that is, Words of Days, which we may more expressively call a chronicle of the whole of the sacred history, the book that amongst us is called First and Second Chronicles; the eighth, Ezra, which itself is likewise divided amongst Greeks and Latins into two books; the ninth is Esther. And so there are also twenty-two books of the Old Testament; that is, five of Moses, eight of the prophets, nine of the Hagiographa, though some include Ruth and Kinoth (Lamentations) amongst the Hagiographa, and think that these books ought to be reckoned separately; we should thus have twenty-four books of the old law. And these the Apocalypse of John represents by the twenty-four elders, who adore the Lamb, and with downcast looks offer their crowns, while in their presence stand the four living creatures with eyes before and behind, that is, looking to the past and the future, and with unwearied voice crying, Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty, who wast, and art, and art to come.

This preface to the Scriptures may serve as a ”helmeted” introduction to all the books which we turn from Hebrew into Latin, so that we may be assured that what is not found in our list must be placed amongst the Apocryphal writings. Wisdom, therefore, which generally bears the name of Solomon, and the book of Jesus, the Son of Sirach, and Judith, and Tobias, and the Shepherd are not in the canon. The first book of Maccabees I have found to be Hebrew, the second is Greek, as can be proved from the very style. Seeing that all this is so, I beseech you, my reader, not to think that my labours are in any sense intended to disparage the old translators. For the service of the tabernacle of God each one offers what he can; some gold and silver and precious stones, others linen and blue and purple and scarlet; we shall do well if we offer skins and goats' hair. And yet the Apostle pronounces ourmore contemptible parts more necessary than others. Accordingly, the beauty of the tabernacle as a whole and in its several kinds (and the ornaments of the church present and future) was covered with skins and goats'-hair cloths, and the heat of the sun and the injurious rain were warded off by those things which are of less account. First read, then, my Samuel and Kings; mine, I

say, mine. For whatever by diligent translation and by anxious emendation we have learnt and made our own, is ours.

And when you understand that whereof you were before ignorant, either, if you are grateful, reckon me a translator, or, if ungrateful, a para-phraser, albeit I am not in the least conscious of having deviated from the Hebrew original. At all events, if you are incredulous, read the Greek and Latin manuscripts and compare them with these poor efforts of mine, and wherever you see they disagree, ask some Hebrew (though you ought rather to place confidence in me), and if he confirm our view, I suppose you will not think him a soothsayer and suppose that he and I have, in rendering the same passage, divined alike. But I ask you also, the handmaidens of Christ, who anoint the head of your reclining Lord with the most precious ointment of faith, who by no means seek the Saviour in the tomb, for whom Christ has long since ascended to the Father-I beg you to confront with the shields of your prayers the mad dogs who bark and rage against me, and go about the city, and think themselves learned if they disparage others. I, knowing my lowliness, will always remember what we are told. "I said, I will take heed to my ways that I offend not in my tongue. I have set a guard upon my mouth while the sinner standeth against me. I became dumb, and was humbled, and kept silence from good words."

Chronicles.
This Preface is almost wholly a repetition of the arguments adduced in the Preface to Genesis. It is addressed to Chromatius, bishop of Aquileia, who took great interest in the work and provided funds for its continuance. The date is a.d. 395.

Ezra and Nehemiah.
This Preface is addressed to Domnio (a Roman presbyter. See Letters L., and XLVII. 3, Paulinus, Ep. 3) and Rogatianus, of whom nothing is known. It was written a.d. 394. It is a repetition of his constant ground of self-defence, and contains a noble expression of his determination to carry the work through. "The serpent may hiss, and "'Victorious Sinon hurl his brand of fire,' but never shall my mouth be closed. Cut off my tongue; it will still stammer out something.

Esther.
To Paula and Eustochium, early in 404. Merely assures them that he is acting as a faithful translator, adding nothing of his own; whereas in the version then in common use (vulgata), "the book is drawn out into all kinds of perplexing entanglements of language."

Job.
This was put into circulation about the same time as the sixteen prophets, that is, about the year 393. It was written in 392. It has no dedication, but is full of personal interest, and shows the deplorable state in which the text of many parts of Scripture was before his time, thus justifying his boast, "I have rescued Job from the dunghill."

I am compelled at every step in my treatment of the books of Holy Scripture to reply to the abuse of my opponents, who charge my translation with being a censure of the Seventy; as

though Aquila among Greek authors, and Symmachus and Theodotion, had not rendered word for word, or paraphrased, or combined the two methods in a sort of translation which is neither the one nor the other; and as though Origen had not marked all the books of the Old Testament with obeli and asterisks, which he either introduced or adopted from Theodotion, and inserted in the old translation, thus showing that what he added was deficient in the older version. My detractors must therefore learn either to receive altogether what they have in part admitted, or they must erase my translation and at the same time their own asterisks. For they must allow that those translators who it is clear have left out numerous details, have erred in some points; especially in the book of Job, where, if you withdraw such passages as have been added and marked with asterisks, the greater part of the book will be cut away. This, at all events, will be so in Greek. On the other hand, previous to the publication of our recent translation with asterisks and obeli, about seven or eight hundred lines were missing in the Latin, so that the book, mutilated, torn, and disintegrated, exhibits its deformity to those who publicly read it.

The present translation follows no ancient translator, but will be found to reproduce now the exact words, now the meaning, now both together of the original Hebrew, Arabic, and occasionally the Syriac. For an indirectness and a slipperiness attaches to the whole book, even in the Hebrew; and, as orators say in Greek, it is tricked out with figures of speech, and while it says one thing, it does another; just as if you close your hand to hold an eel or a little muraena, the more you squeeze it, the sooner it escapes. I remember that in order to understand this volume, I paid a not inconsiderable sum for the services of a teacher, a native of Lydda, who was amongst the Hebrews reckoned to be in the front rank; whether I profiled at all by his teaching, I do not know; of this one thing I am sure, that I could translate only that which I previously understood. Well, then, from the beginning of the book to the words of Job, the Hebrew version is in prose. Further, from the words of Job where he says, "May the day perish wherein I was born, and the night in which it was said, a man-child is conceived," to the place where before the close of the book it is written "Therefore I blame myself and repent in dust and ashes," we have hexameter verses running in dactyl and spondee:

and owing to the idiom of the language other feet are frequently introduced not containing the same number of syllables, but the same quantities. Sometimes, also, a sweet and musical rhythm is produced by the breaking up of the verses in accordance with the laws of metre, a fact better known to prosodists than to the ordinary reader. But from the aforesaid verse to the end of the book the small remaining section is a prose composition. And if It seem incredible to any one that the Hebrews really have metres, and that, whether we consider the Psalter or the Lamentations of Jeremiah, or almost all the songs of Scripture, they bear a resemblance to our Flaccus, and the Greek Pindar, and Alcaeus, and Sappho, let him read Philo, Josephus, Origen, Eusebius of Caesarea, and with the aid of their testimony he will find that I speak the truth. Wherefore, let my barking critics listen as I tell them that my motive in toiling at this book was not to censure the ancient translation, but that those passages in it which are obscure, or those which have been omitted, or at all events,

through the fault of copyists have been corrupted, might have light thrown upon them by our translation; for we have some slight knowledge of Hebrew, and, as regards Latin, my life, almost from the cradle, has been spent in the company of grammarians, rhetoricians, and philosophers.

But if, since the version of the Seventy was published, and even now, when the Gospel of Christ is beaming forth, the Jewish Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotion, judaising heretics, have been welcomed amongst the Greeks -heretics, who, by their deceitful translation, have concealed many mysteries of salvation, and yet, in the Hexapla are found in the Churches and are expounded by churchmen; ought not I, a Christian, born of Christian parents, and who carry the standard of the cross on my brow, and am zealous to recover what is lost, to correct what is corrupt, and to disclose in pure and faithful language the mysteries of the Church, ought not I, let me, ask, much more to escape the reprobation of fastidious or malicious readers? Let those who will keep the old books with their gold and silver letters on purple skins, or, to follow the ordinary phrase, in "uncial characters," loads of writing rather than manuscripts, if only they will leave for me and mine, our poor pages and copies which are less remarkable for beauty than for accuracy. I have toiled to translate both the Greek versions of the Seventy, and the Hebrew which is the basis of my own, into Latin. Let every one choose which he likes, and he will find out that what he objects to in me, is the result of sound learning, not of malice.

Psalms.

Dedicated to Sophronius about the year 392. Jerome had, while at Rome, made a translation of the Psalms from the LXX., which he had afterwards corrected by collation with the Hebrew text see the Preface addressed to Paula and Eustochium, infra). His friend Sophronius, in quoting the Psalms to the Jews, was constantly met with the reply, "It does not so stand in the Hebrew." He, therefore, urged Jerome to translate them direct from the original. Jerome, in presenting the translation to his friend, records the intention which he had expressed of translating the new Latin version into Greek. This we know was done by Sophronius, not only for the Psalms, but also for the rest of the Vulgate, and was valued by the Greeks (Apol. ii. 24, vol. iii. of this series, p. 515).

Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs.

Dedicated to Chromatius and Heliodorus, a.d. 393. The Preface is important as showing the help given to Jerome by his friends, the rapidity of his work, and his view of the Apocrypha. We give the two chief passages. It is well that my letter should couple those who are coupled in the episcopate; and that I should not separate on paper those who are bound in one by the law of Christ. I would have written the commentaries on Hosea, Amos, Zechariah, and the Kings, which you ask of me, if I had not been prevented by illness. You give me comfort by the supplies you send me; you support my secretaries and copyists, so that the efforts of all my powers may be given to you. And then all at once comes a thick crowd of people with all sorts of demands, as if it was just that I should neglect your hunger and work for others, or as if, in the matter of giving and receiving, I had a debt to any one but you. And

so, though I am broken by a long illness, yet, not to be altogether silent and dumb amongst you this year, I have dedicated to you three days' work, that is to say, the translation of the three books of Solomon.

After speaking of the books of the Wisdom of Solomon and Ecclesiasticus, which were sent at the same time, the Preface continues: As, then, the Church reads Judith, Tobit, and the books of Maccabees, but does not admit them among the canonical Scriptures, so let it read these two volumes for the edification of the people, not to give authority to doctrines of the Church. If any one is better pleased with the edition of the Seventy, there it is, long since corrected by me. For it is not our aim in producing the new to destroy the old. And yet if our friend reads carefully, he will find that our version is the more intelligible, for it has not turned sour by being poured three times over into different vessels, but has been drawn straight from the press, and stored in a clean jar, and has thus preserved its own flavour.

Isaiah.
Addressed to Paula and Eustochium, about a.d. 393. This Preface speaks of Isaiah as using the polished diction natural to a man of rank and refinement, as an Evangelist more than a prophet, and a poet rather than a prose writer. He then reiterates his defence of his translation, saying that now, "The Jews can no longer scoff at our Churches because of the falsity of our Scriptures."

Jeremiah and Ezekiel.
Short Prefaces without dedication, but probably addressed to Paula and Eustochium, about a.d. 393.

Daniel.
The Preface is interesting as showing the difficulties caused by the incorporation of apocryphal matter into this book, the fact that Theodotion's version, not the LXX., was read in the Churches, and that the book was reckoned by the Jews not among the prophets but among the Hagiographa. It was addressed to Paula and Eustochium about a.d. 392.

The Septuagint version of Daniel the prophet is not read by the Churches of our Lord and Saviour. They use Theodotion's version, but how this came to pass I cannot tell. Whether it be that the language is Chaldee, which differs in certain peculiarities from our speech, and the Seventy were unwilling to follow those deviations in a translation; or that the book was published in the name of the Seventy, by some one or other not familiar with Chaldee, or if there be some other reason, I know not; this one thing I can affirm-that it differs widely from the original, and is rightly rejected. For we must bear in mind that Daniel and Ezra, the former especially, were written in Hebrew letters, but in the Chaldee language, as was one section of Jeremiah; and, further, that Job has much affinity with Arabic. As for myself, when, in lily youth, after reading the flowery rhetoric of Quintilian and Tully, I entered on the vigorous study of this language, the expenditure of much time and energy barely enabled me to utter the puffing and hissing words; I seemed to be walking in a sort of underground chamber with a few scattered rays of light shining down upon me; and when at last I met

with Daniel, such a sense of weariness came over me that, in a fit of despair, I could have counted all my former toil as useless.

But there was a certain Hebrew who encouraged me, and was for ever quoting for my benefit the saying that "Persistent labour conquers all things"; and so, conscious that among Hebrews I was only a smatterer, I once more began to study Chaldee. And, to confess the truth, to this day I can read and understand Chaldee better than I can pronounce it. I say this to show you how hard it is to master the book of Daniel, which in Hebrew contains neither the history of Susanna, nor the hymn of the three youths, nor the fables of Bel and the Dragon; because, however, they are to be found everywhere, we have formed them into an appendix, prefixing to them an obelus, and thus making an end of them, so as not to seem to the uninformed to have cut off a large portion of the volume. I heard a certain Jewish teacher, when mocking at the history of Susanna, and saying that it was the fiction of some Greek or other, raise the same objection which Africanus brought against Origen-that these etymologies of sxisai from sxinoj, and prisai from prinoj, are to be traced to the Greek. To make the point clear to Latin readers: It is as if he were to say, playing upon the word ilex, illico pereas;

or upon lentiscus, may the angel make a lentil of you, or may you perish nan lente, or may you lentus (that is pliant or compliant) be led to death, or anything else suiting the name of the tree. Then he would captiously maintain that the three youths in the furnace of raging fire had leisure enough to amuse themselves with making poetry, and to summon all the elements in turn to praise God. Or what was there miraculous, he would say, or what indication of divine inspiration, in the slaying of the dragon with a lump of pitch, or in frustrating the schemes of the priests of Bel? Such deeds were more the results of an able man's forethought than of a prophetic spirit. But when he came to Habakkuk and read that he was carried from Judaea into Chaldaea to bring a dish of food to Daniel, he asked where we found an instance in the whole of the Old Testament of any saint with an ordinary body flying through the air, and in a quarter of an hour traversing vast tracts of country. And when one of us who was rather too ready to speak adduced the instance of Ezekiel, and said that he was transported from Chaldaea into Judaea, he derided the man and proved from the book itself that Ezekiel, in spirit, saw himself carried over.

And he argued that even our own Apostle, being an accomplished man and one who had been taught the law by Hebrews, had not dared to affirm that be was bodily rapt away, but had said: "Whether in the body, or out of the body, I know not; God knoweth. By these and similar arguments he used to refute the apocryphal fables in the Church's book. Leaving this for the reader to pronounce upon as he may think fit, I give warning that Daniel in Hebrew is not found among the prophets, but amongst the writers of the Hagiographa; for all Scripture is by them divided into three parts:the law, the Prophets, and the Hagiographa, which have respectively five, eight, and eleven books, a point which we cannot now discuss. But as to the objections which Porphyry raises against this prophet, or rather brings against the book, Methodius, Eusebius, and Apollinaris may be cited as witnesses, for they replied

to his folly in many thousand lines of writing, whether with satisfaction to the curious reader I know not. Therefore, I beseech you, Paula and Eustochium, to pour out your supplications for me to the Lord, that so long as I am in this poor body, I may write something pleasing to you, useful to the Church, worthy of posterity. As for my contemporaries, I am indifferent to their opinions, for they pass from side to side as they are moved by love or hatred.

The Twelve Minor Prophets.
This Preface, dedicated to Paula and Eustochium in a.d. 392, contains nothing of importance, merely mentioning the dates of a few of the prophets. and the fact that the Twelve Prophets were counted by the Hebrews as forming a single book.

Source. English translation: an older public-domain translation as collected in the Writings-Database (HistoricalChristianFaith), mostly from the Ante-Nicene, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers and similar nineteenth-century editions. SermonIndex has only divided it into chapters and short sections; the wording is the translator's own. Square brackets, Greek or Latin words and footnote-free text are as the source file prints them, and a transcription error may remain. No Greek or Latin text is shown beside it yet, and no modern English version has been made.