The ”Helmeted” introduction to Kings

Jerome (c. AD 347–420)

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[Translated by Kevin P. Edgecomb] BEGINNING OF THE PROLOGUE OF SAINT JEROME TO THE BOOK OF KINGS

There are twenty-two letters among the Hebrews, as is also witnessed by the language of the Syrians and Chaldeans, which is for the most part similar to the Hebrew; for these twenty-two elements also have the same sound, but different characters. The Samaritans still write the Pentateuch of Moses in the same number of letters, only they differ in shapes and points (or ”endings” apicibus). And Ezra, the scribe and doctor of the Law, after the capture of Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the Temple under Zerubbabel, is certain to have found (or ”invented” repperisse) other letters, which we now use, when up to that time the characters of the Samaritans and the Hebrews were the same. In the book of Numbers this same total is also mystically shown by the census of the Levites and the priests. And we find in certain Greek scrolls to this day the four-lettered Name of God written in the ancient letters. But also the thirty-sixth Psalm, and the one hundred tenth, and the one hundred eleventh, and the one hundred eighteenth, and the one hundred forty-fourth, although written in different meter, are nevertheless woven with an alphabet of the same number. And in the Lamentations of Jeremiah, and his prayer, also at the end of the Proverbs of Solomon from that place in which he says ”Who can find a strong woman? are counted the same alphabet or sections. Furthermore, five of the letters among them are double: chaph, mem, nun, phe, sade.

For they write with these one way at the beginning and in the middle of words, another at the end. From which also five are considered double books by most: Samuel, Malachim, Dabreiamin, Ezra, Jeremiah with Cinoth, that is, his Lamentantion. Therefore, just as there are twenty-two elements, by which we write in Hebrew all that we say, and the human voice is understood by their beginnings (or ”parts” initiis), thus twenty-two scrolls are counted, by which letters and writings a just man is instructed in the doctrine of God, as though in tender infancy and still nursing.

The first book is called among them Bresith, which we call Genesis; the second, Hellesmoth, which is named Exodus; the third, Vaiecra, that is Leviticus; the fourth Vaiedabber, which

we call Numbers; the fifth, Addebarim, which is designated Deuteronomy. These are the five books of Moses, which they appropropriately call Thorat, that is, the Law. The second order is made of the Prophets, and begins with Jesus son of Nave, which is called among them Joshua benNum. Then they append Sopthim, that is the book of Judges; and they attach Ruth to the same, because the history narrated happened in the days of the Judges. Samuel follows third, which we call First and Second Kingdoms. Fourth is Malachim, that is Kings, which book contains Third and Fourth Kingdoms; and it is much better to say Malachim, that is Kings, rather than Malachoth, that is Kingdoms, for it does not describe the kingdoms of many nations, but only that of the Israelite people which contains twelve tribes. Fifth is Isaiah, sixth Jeremiah, seventh Ezekiel, eighth the book of the Twelve Prophets, which is called Thareasra among them.

The third order holds the Hagiographa, and begins with Job, the first book, the second by David, which is also one book of Psalms comprising five sections. The third is Solomon, having three books: Proverbs, which they call Parables, that is Masaloth, and Ecclesiastes, that is Accoeleth, and The Song of Songs, which they denote with the title Sirassirim. Sixth is Daniel, seventh Dabreiamin, that is Words of the Days, which we may call more clearly a chronicle (Gk here: χρονικον) of all of Divine history, which book is written among us as First and Second Paralipomenon; eighth is Ezra, which is also in the same manner among Greeks and Latins divided into two books; ninth is Esther. And thus there are likewise twenty-two books in the Old (Testament), that is five of Moses, eight of the Prophets, nine of the Hagiographa. Although some may write Ruth and Cinoth among the Hagiographa, and think of counting these books among their number, and then by this to have twenty-four books of the Old Law, which the Apocalypse of John introduces with the number of twenty-four elders worshipping the Lamb and offering their crowns, prostrated on their faces, and crying out with unwearying voice: "Holy, holy, holy Lord God almighty, Who was and Who is, and Who will be."

This prologue to the Scriptures may be appropriate as a helmeted introduction to all the books which we turn from Hebrew into Latin, so we may be able to know whatever is outside of these is set aside among the apocrypha. Therefore, Wisdom, which is commonly ascribed to Solomon, and the book of Jesus son of Sirach, and Judith and Tobias, and The Shepherd are not in the canon. I have found the First Book of the Maccabees (is) Hebrew, the Second is Greek, which may also be proven by their styles.

While these things may be so, I implore you, reader, that you might not consider my work a rebuke of the ancients. Each one offers to the Tabernacle of God what he is able. Some offer gold and silver and precious stones; others, linen and purple, scarlet and blue. It will go well with us, if we offer the skins and hair of goats. For the Apostle still judges our more contemptible parts more necessary. From which both the whole of the beauty of the Tabernacle and each individual kind, a distinction of the present and future Church, is covered with skins and goat-hair coverings, and the heat of the sun and the harmful rain are kept off by those things which are of lesser value. Therefore, first read my Samuel and

Kings; mine, I say, mine. For whatever we have learned and know by often translating and carefully correcting is ours. And when you come to understand what you did not know before, either consider me a translator, if you are grateful, or a paraphraser, if ungrateful, although I am truly not at all aware of anything of the Hebrew to have been changed by me. Certainly, if you are incredulous, read the Greek and Latin books and compare (them) with these little works, and wherever you will see among them to differ, ask any one of the Hebrews, in whom you might place better faith, and if he confirms us, I think that you will not consider him a diviner, as he has similarly divined in the very same place with me.

But I also ask you, handmaidens of Christ, who have anointed the head of your reclining Lord with the most precious myrrh of faith, who have in no way sought the Savior in the tomb, for whom Christ has now ascended to the Father, that you might oppose the shields of your prayers against the barking dogs which rage against me with rabid mouth and go around the city, and in it they are considered educated if slandering others. I, knowing my humility, will always remember these sentences: "I will guard my ways, so I will not offend with my tongue; I have placed a guard on my mouth, while the sinner stands against me; I was mute, and humiliated, and silent because of good things." END OF THE PROLOGUE

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