Ezra. (Tr. Mark DelCogliano)

Jerome (c. AD 347–420)

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[Translated by Mark DelCogliano]

The Prologue of Eusebius Hieronymus on the Book of Ezra
Whether it is more difficult to do what you ask or to say no, I have still not decided. For, on the one hand, it is impossible to refuse you when you are requesting something of significance. But, on the other hand, the weight of the burden imposed presses down upon my neck so hard that it would be necessary to lighten it before rushing into it thus encumbered. In addition to this, there is the hostility of my detractors. They think everything I write ought to be refuted and rip apart in public what they read in private, even though their conscience accuses them. They do this to such an extent that I am compelled to cry out and say, "Lord, free my soul from wicked lips and from the deceitful tongue!" For three years now you have been continually writing and rewriting to me, asking that I translate the book of Ezra for you from Hebrew, making your request as if you did not already have Greek and Latin editions, or as if everyone would not immediately spit upon whatever I translate. As someone said, "To strive in vain and not to seek anything in your weariness except hatred is the pinnacle of insanity."

And so, I beseech you, my most dear Domnio and Rogatianus: do not make the book known to the public and be content to read it privately. Do not toss food to those who disdain it and thus avoid the snobbery of those who know only how to judge others but not how to do anything themselves. But if there are some of the brothers who are not displeased with my work, you may give them the master-copy. Advise them to copy the Hebrew names, of which there is a great abundance in this book, with distinct spaces between them. For it will be of no benefit to have corrected the book unless the corrections are diligently preserved by the copyists.

No one ought to be bothered by the fact that my edition consists of only one book, nor ought anyone take delight in the dreams found in the apocryphal third and fourth books. For among the Hebrews the texts of Ezra and Nehemiah comprise a single book, and those texts which are not used by them and are not concerned with the twenty-four elders ought to be rejected outright. But if anyone should oppose you on the basis of the Septuagint translation (whose very variety of texts indicates that its copies are corrupt and damaged, nor can it by any means be claimed that what is diverse is true), have him take a look at the

gospels. There are many passages in them which are said to be from the Old Testament but which are not found in the Septuagint translation. Examples include: ”He shall be called a Nazarene,” ”Out of Egypt I have called my son,” ”They shall look upon him whom they have pierced,” and many others that I shall reserve for a more extensive work. And so, have him attempt to locate where these passages are written in the Septuagint. When he cannot locate them, you should read aloud from the editions I recently did, which are continually denigrated by the tongues of those who have nothing good to say.

Though I intend to keep things brief, what I am about to say by way of introduction certainly makes the most sense. In my version I translated whatever was not contained in the Greek version or was there in a variant form. What translator do they butcher with their criticism? Let them ask the Hebrews and judge the fidelity of my translation on the basis of their authority. It is quite a different matter, if with eyes shut (as the saying goes), they want to speak ill of me and not follow the example of the Greeks in their application to study and goodwill. When the Gospel of Christ was already shining brightly, after they had read the Septuagint translators, the Greeks attentively read the Jewish and Ebonite translators of the old Law, that is, Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotion. Through the labors of Origen in his Hexapla, the Greeks caused these three to be used for ecclesiastical purposes. How much more ought speakers of Latin be grateful for having discovered that Greece in her exultation borrows something from herself!

First of all, it is very expensive and infinitely difficult to procure possession of all the versions. Secondly, even those who own them but are ignorant of the Hebrew language will make all the more mistakes, being unable to determine which reading out of the many is more correct. In fact this is what happened recently among the Greeks to a certain one of their wisest men. The result was that in some instances he disregarded the sense of Scripture and followed the mistake of some translator. However, as I have at least a little bit of knowledge about the Hebrew language and am not at all without facility in Latin, I am better able than others to make decisions and render things as I myself understand them in our language. And so, even though the serpent hisses ”and victorious Sinon is scattering firebrands,” with the help of Christ my voice shall never be silenced; even with a severed tongue I shall manage to stammer out something. Those who want to read my edition should do so; those who do not should put it aside. If they pick apart the writing, if they find fault with the letters, by your charity I shall be more provoked to apply myself to study than be discouraged by their detraction and hatred.

1 Translated by Mark DelCogliano from B. Fischer, et al., eds., Biblia Sacra iuxta vulgatam versionem, 4 ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994), 638-639. Jerome’s preface to his translation of Ezra was written c. 394 to Domnio, a Roman presbyter (see Jerome, Eps. 47.3 and 50), and Rogatianus, of whom nothing is known. 2 Jerome generally speaks in the first person singular (”I, me”). He exceptionally uses the first person plural (”we, us”), which instances are nevertheless rendered in the first person singular for the sake of consistency. These exceptions are, however, footnoted. 3 Lit. ”we write.” 4 Ps 119:2. 5 Lit.

"whatever is translated by us." 6 Sallust, Iug. 3. 7 Lit. "the book edited by us." 8 There were several different books which circulated in antiquity under the name of Ezra (or Esdras). The books which the RSV calls Ezra and Nehemiah were originally one book in Hebrew, called Ezra. The division of the original Ezra into two books was a later development. The Latin and Greek traditions, however, each have four Ezra books, called Esdras A-D (Greek) and I-IV Esdras (Latin). The RSV Ezra corresponds to Esdras B and I Esdras, while RSV Nehemiah to Esdras C and II Esdras. Jerome's Ezra contained both I and II Esdras in a single book, in imitation of the Hebrew. Esdras A and III Esdras corresponds to what the RSV calls 1 Esdras; it sequentially consists of (1) 2 Chronicles 35:1-36:23 (summarized), (2) Ezra 1:1-4:24, (3), additions, (4) Ezra 5:1-10:44, and (5) Nehemiah 7:38-9:12. The RSV's 2 Esdras, which is an apocryphal apocalypse from the Christian period, corresponds to Esdras D and IV Esdras. Jerome here explicitly denies canonicity to III and IV Esdras.

9 Jerome's project of translating the scriptures from the Hebrew was continually challenged by those who appealed to the authority of the Septuagint as the basis for deciding questions of canonicity. Jerome is here attempting to convince his readers to follow the Hebrew tradition by undercutting the reliability of the Septuagint text in two ways: (1) its variety, and (2) its lack of Old Testament passages quoted as such in the New Testament. 10 Mt 2:23; cf. Jg 13:5. 11 Mt 2:15; cf. Hos 11:1. 12 Jn 19:37; cf. Zech 12:10. 13 Lit. "we shall reserve." 14 Lit. "the editions we recently did." 15 N.b. Jerome is about to defend his methodology. 16 I.e. whatever in the Greek text varied from the Hebrew text. 17 I.e. the Greeks were not content with the older Septuagint translation, but produced newer translations from the Hebrew original in the manner of the Septuagint translators. Latin speakers should be inspired by their scholarly example.

18 I.e. the Greek versions which differ from each other. 19 Lit. "as we have." 20 Lit. "we are better able." 21 I.e. about the correct reading from among the variants. 22 Lit. "as we ourselves understand." 23 Vergil, Aen. 2.329

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