Prefaces to Jerome's Early Works

Jerome (c. AD 347–420)

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Preface to the Chronicle of Eusebius.
The "Chronicle" is a book of universal history, giving the dates from the call of Abraham, and the Olympiads. For an account of it the reader is referred to the article of Dr. Salmon in the "Dictionary of Christian Antiquities." It was translated by Jerome in the years 381-82, at Constantinople, where he was staying for the Council. This Preface shows that Jerome was already becoming aware of the difficulties arising from the various versions of the Old Testament, and of the necessity of going back to the Hebrew. Jerome to his friends Vincentius and Gallienus, Greeting:

1. It has long been the practice of learned men to exercise their minds by rendering into Latin the works of Greek writers, and, what is more difficult, to translate the poems of illustrious authors though trammelled by the farther requirements of verse. It was thus that our Tully literally translated whole books of Plato; and after publishing an edition of Aratus (who may now be considered a Roman) in hexameter verse, he amused himself with the economics of Xenophon. In this latter work the golden river of eloquence again and again meets with obstacles, around which its waters break and foam to such an extent that persons unacquainted with the original would not believe they were reading Cicero's words. And no wonder! It is hard to follow another man's lines and everywhere keep within bounds. It is an arduous task to preserve felicity and grace unimpaired in a translation. Some word has forcibly expressed a given thought; I have no word of my own to convey the meaning; and while I am seeking to satisfy the sense I may go a long way round and accomplish but a small distance of my journey. Then we must take into account the ins and outs of transposition, the variations in cases, the diversity of figures, and, lastly, the peculiar, and, so to speak, the native idiom of the language. A literal translation sounds absurd; if, on the other hand, I am obliged to change either the order or the words themselves, I shall appear to have forsaken the duty of a translator.

2. So, my dear Vincentius, and you, Gallienus, whom I love as my own soul, I beseech you, whatever may be the value of this hurried piece of work, to read it with the feelings of a friend rather than with those of a critic. And I ask this all the more earnestly because, as you know, I dictated with great rapidity to my amanuensis; and how difficult the task is, the sacred records testify; for the old flavour is not preserved in the Greek version by the

Seventy. It was this that stimulated Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotion; and the result of their labors was to impart a totally different character to one and the same work; one strove to give word for word, another the general meaning, while the third desired to avoid any great divergency from the ancients. A fifth, sixth, and seventh edition, though no one knows to what authors they are to be attributed, exhibit so pleasing a variety of their own that, in spite of their being anonymous, they have won an authoritative position. Hence, some go so far as to consider the sacred writings somewhat harsh and grating to the ear; which arises from the fact that the persons of whom I speak are not aware that the writings in question are a translation from the Hebrew, and therefore, looking at the surface not at the substance, they shudder at the squalid dress before they discover the fair body which the language clothes. In fact, what can be more musical than the Psalter?

Like the writings of our own Flaccus and the Grecian Pindar it now trips along in iambics, now flows in sonorous alcaics, now swells into sapphics, now marches in half-foot metre. What can be more lovely than the strains of Deuteronomy and Isaiah? What more grave than Solomon's words? What more finished than Job? All these, as Josephus and Origen tell us, were composed in hexameters and pentameters, and so circulated amongst their own people. When we read these in Greek they have some meaning; when in Latin they are utterly incoherent. But if any one thinks that the grace of language does not suffer through translation, let him render Homer word for word into Latin. I will go farther and say that, if he will translate this author into the prose of his own language, the order of the words will seem ridiculous, and the most eloquent of poets almost dumb.

3. What is the drift of all this? I would not have you think it strange if here and there we stumble; if the language lag; if it bristle with consonants or present gaping chasms of vowels; or be cramped by condensation of the narrative. The most learned among men have toiled at the same task; and in addition to the difficulty which all experience, and which we have alleged to attend all translation, it must not be forgotten that a peculiar difficulty besets us, inasmuch as the history is manifold, is full of barbarous names, circumstances of which the Latins know nothing, dates which are tangled knots, critical marks blended alike with the events and the numbers, so that it is almost harder to discern the sequence of the words than to come to a knowledge of what is related. [Here follows a long passage showing an arrange merit according to which the dates are distinguished by certain colours as belonging to one or another of the kingdoms, the history of which is dealt with. This passage seems unintelligible in the absence of the coloured figures, and would be of no use unless the book with its original arrangement were being studied.]

I am well aware that there will be many who, with their customary fondness for universal detraction (from which the only escape is by writing nothing at all), will drive their fangs into this volume. They will cavil at the dates, change the order, impugn the accuracy of events, winnow the syllables, and, as is very frequently the case, will impute the negligence of copyists to the authors. I should be within my right if I were to rebut them by saying that they need not read unless they choose; but I would rather send them away in a calm

state of mind, so that they may attribute to the Greek author the credit which is his due, and may recognize that any insertions for which we are responsible have been taken from other men of the highest repute. The truth is that I have partly discharged the office of a translator and partly that of a writer. I have with the utmost fidelity rendered the Greek portion, and at the same thee have added certain things which appeared to me to have been allowed to slip, particularly in the Roman history, which Eusebius, the author of this book, as it seems to me, only glanced at; not so much because of ignorance, for he was a learned man, as because, writing in Greek, he thought them of slight importance to his countrymen. So again from Ninus and Abraham, right up to the captivity of Troy, the translation is from the Greek only.

From Troy to the twentieth year of Constantine there is much, at one thee separately added, at another intermingled, which I have gleaned with great diligence from Tranquillus and other famous historians. Moreover, the portion from the aforesaid year of Constantine to the sixth consulship of the Emperor Valens and the second of Valentinianus is entirely my own. Content to end here, I have reserved the remaining period, that of Gratianus and Theodosius, for a wider historical survey; not that I am afraid to discuss the living freely and truthfully, for the fear of God banishes the fear of man; but because while our country is still exposed to the fury of the barbarians everything is in confusion.

Preface to the Translation of Origen's Two Homilies on the Song of Songs.
Written at Rome, a.d. 383. Jerome to the most holy Pope Damasus: Origen, whilst in his other books he has surpassed all others, has in the Song of Songs surpassed himself. He wrote ten volumes upon it, which amount to almost twenty thousand lines, and in these he discussed, first the version of the Seventy Translators, then those of Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotion, and lastly, a fifth version which he states that he found on the coast of Atrium, with such magnificence and fulness, that he appears to me to have realized what is said in the poem: "The king brought the into his chamber." I have left that work on one side, since it would require almost boundless leisure and labour and money to translate so great a work into Latin, even if it could be worthily done; and I have translated these two short treatises, which he composed in the form of daily lectures for those who were still like babes and sucklings, and I have studied faithfulness rather than elegance. You can conceive how great a value the larger work possesses, when the smaller gives you such satisfaction.

Preface to the Book on Hebrew Names.
The origin and scope of this book is described Preface itself. It was written in the year 388, two years after Jerome had settled at Bethlehem. He had, immediately on arriving in Palestine, three years previously, set to work to improve his knowledge of Hebrew, with a view to his translation of the Old Testament, which was begun in 391. This book, therefore, and the two which follow, may be taken as records of studies preparatory to the Vulgate. Philo, the most erudite man among the Jews, is declared by Origen to have done what I am now doing; he set forth a book of Hebrew Names, classing them under their initial letters, and placing the etymology of each at the side. This work I originally proposed to translate

into Latin. It is well known in the Greek world, and is to be found in all libraries. But I found that the copies were so discordant to one another, and the order so I confused, that I judged it to be better to say nothing, rather than to write what would justly be condemned. A work of this kind, however, appeared likely to be of use; and my friends Lupulianus and Valerianus urged me to attempt it, because, as they thought, I had made some progress in the knowledge of Hebrew. I, therefore, went through all the books of Scripture in order, and in the restoration which I have now made of the ancient fabric, I think that I have produced a work which may be found valuable by Greeks as well as Latins.

I here in the Preface beg the reader to take notice that, if he finds anything omitted in this work, it is reserved for mention in another. I have at this moment on hand a book of Hebrew Questions, an undertaking of a new kind such as has never until now been heard of amongst either the Greeks or the Latins. I say this, not with a view of arrogantly puffing up my own work, but because I know how much labour I have spent on it, and wish to provoke those whose knowledge is deficient to read it. I recommend all those who wish to possess both that work and the presentone, and also the book of Hebrew Places, which I am about to publish, to make no account of the Jews and all their ebullitions of vexation. Moreover, I have added the meaning of the words and names in the New Testament, so that the fabric might receive its last touch and might stand complete. I wished also in this to imitate Origen, whom all but the ignorant acknowledge as the greatest teacher of the Churches next to the Apostles; for in this work, which stands among the noblest monuments of his genius, he endeavoured as a Christian to supply what Philo, as a Jew, had omitted.

Preface to the Book on the Sites and Names of Hebrew Places.
For the scope and value of this book see Prolegomena. It was written a.d. 388.

Eusebius, who took his second name from the blessed Martyr Pamphilus, after he had written the ten books of his "Ecclesiastical History," the Chronicle of Dates, of which I published a Latin version, the book in which he set forth the names of the different nations and those given to them of old by the Jews and by those of the present day, the topography of the and of Judaea and the portions allotted to the tribes, together with a representation of Jerusalem itself and its temple, which he accompanied with a very short explanation, bestowed his about at the end of his life upon this little work, of which the design is to gather for us out of the Holy Scriptures the names of almost ill the cities, mountains, rivers, hamlets, and other places, whether they remain the same or have since been changed or in some degree corrupted. I have taken up the work of this admirable man, and have translated it, following the arrangement of the Greeks, and taking the words in the order of their initial letters, but leaving out those names which did not seem worthy of mention, and making a considerable number of alterations. I have explained my method once for all in the Preface to my translation of the Chronicle, where I said that I might be called at once a translator and the composer of a new work; but I repeat this especially because one who had hardly the first tincture of letters has ventured upon a translation of this very book into Latin, though his language is hardly to be called Latin. His lack of scholarship will be seen by the observant

reader as soon as he compares it with my translation. i do not pretend to a style which soars to the skies; but I hope that I can rise above one which grovels on the earth.

Preface to the Book of Hebrew Questions.

Written a.d. 388. For the scope and character of this work, see Prolegomena. The object of the Preface to a book is to set forth the argument of the work which follows; but I am compelled to begin by answering what has been said against me. My case is somewhat like that of Terence, who turned the scenic prologues of his plays into a defence of himself. We have a Luscius Lanuvinus, like the one who worried him, and who brought charges against the poet as if he had been a plunderer of the treasury. The bard of Mantua suffered in the same way; he had translated a few verses of Homer very exactly, and they said that he was nothing but a plagiarist from the ancients. But he answered them that it was no small proof of strength to wrest the club of Hercules from his hands. Why, even Tully, who stands on the pinnacle of Roman eloquence, that king of orators and glory of the Latin tongue, has actions for embezzlement brought against him by the Greeks. I cannot, therefore, be surprised if a poor little fellow like me is exposed to the gruntings of vile swine who trample our pearls under their feet, when some of the most learned of men, men whose glory ought to have hushed the voice of ill will, have felt the flames of envy. It is true, this happened by a kind of justice to men whose eloquence had filled with its resonance the theatres and the senate, the public assembly and the rostra; hardihood always courts detraction, and (as Horace says):

"The highest peaks invoke The lightning's stroke." But I am in a corner, remote from the city and the forum, and the wranglings of crowded courts; yet, even so (as Quintilian says) ill-will has sought me out. Therefore, I beseech the reader, "If one there be, if one, Who, rapt by strong desire, these lines shall read,"

not to expect eloquence or oratorical grace in those Books of Hebrew Questions, which I propose to write on all the sacred books; but rather, that he should himself answer my detractors for me, and tell them that a work of a new kind can claim some indulgence. I am poor and of low estate; I neither possess riches nor do I think it right to accept them if they are offered me; and, similarly, let me tell them that it is impossible for them to have the riches of Christ, that is, the knowledge of the Scriptures, and the world's riches as well. It will be my simple aim, therefore, first, to point out the mistakes of those who suspect some fault in the Hebrew Scriptures, and, secondly, to correct the faults, which evidently teem in the Greek and Latin copies, by a reference to the original authority; and, further, to explain the etymology of things, names, and countries, when it is not apparent from the sound of the Latin words, by giving a paraphrase in the vulgar tongue. To enable the student more easily to take note of these emendations, I propose, in the first place, to set out the true reading itself, as I am now able to do, and then, by bringing the later readings into comparison with it, to indicate what has been omitted or added or altered. It is not my purpose, as snarling ill-will pretends, to convict the LXX.

of error, nor do I look upon my own labour as a disparagement of theirs. The fact is that they, since their work was undertaken for King Ptolemy of Alexandria, did not choose to bring to light all the mysteries which the sacred writings contain, and especially those which give the promise of the advent of Christ, for fear that he who held the Jews in esteem because they were believed to worship one God, would come to think that they worshipped a second. But we find that the Evangelists, and even our Lord and Saviour, and the Apostle Paul, also, bring forward many citations as coming from the Old Testament which are not contained in our copies; and on these I shall dilate more fully in their proper places. But it is clear from this fact that those are the best mss. which most correspond with the authoritative words of the New Testament. Add to this that Josephus, who gives the story of the Seventy Translators, reports them as translating only the five books of Moses; and we also acknowledge that these are more in harmony with the Hebrew than the rest. And, further, those who afterward came into the field as translators-I mean Aquila and Symmachus and Theodotion-give a version very different from that which we use. I have but one word more to say, and it may calm my detractors. Foreign goods are to be imported only to the regions where there is a demand for them.

Country people are not obliged to buy balsam, pepper, and dates. As to Origen, I say nothing. His name (if I may compare small things with great) is even more than my own the object of ill-will, because, though following the common version in his Homilies, which were spoken to common people, yet, in his Tomes, that is, in his fuller discussion of Scripture, he yields to the Hebrew as the truth, and, though surrounded by his own forces, occasionally seeks the foreign tongue as his ally. I will only say this about him: that I should gladly have his knowledge of the Scriptures, even if accompanied with all the ill-will which clings. to his name, and that I do not care a straw for these shades and spectral ghosts, whose nature is said to be to chatter in dark corners and be a terror to babies.

Preface to the Commentary on Ecclesiastes.

Addressed to Paula and Eustochium, Bethlehem, a.d. 388. I remember that, about five years ago, when I was still living at Rome, I read Ecclesiastes to the saintly Blesilla, so that I might provoke her to the contempt of this earthly scene, and to count as nothing all that she saw in the world; and that she asked me to throw my remarks upon all the more obscure passages into the form of a short commentary, so that, when I was absent, she might still understand what she read. She was withdrawn from us by her sudden death, while girding herself for our work; we were not counted worthy to have such an one as the partner of our life; and, therefore, Paula and Eustochium, I kept silence under the stroke of such a wound. But now, living as I do in the smaller community of Bethlehem, I pay what I owe to her memory and to you. I would only point out this, that I have followed no one's authority. I have translated direct from the Hebrew, adapting my words as much as possible to the form of the Septuagint, but only in those places in which they did not diverge far from the Hebrew. I have occasionally referred also to the versions of Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotion, but so as not to alarm the zealous student by too many novelties, nor yet to let my commentary

follow the side streams of opinion, turning aside, against my conscientious conviction, from the fountainhead of truth.

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.