

0345-0410 – Rufinus Aquilensis – Preface to the Translations of Origen’s Books

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ten or twenty or at most thirty of these works would have sufficed for the purpose. But to read six thousand books is no longer wishing to know the man, but giving up almost one's whole life to his teaching and researches. On what ground then can his words be worthy of credit when he blames men who have only read quite a few of these books while their rule of faith is kept sacred and their piety unimpaired.

What has been said may suffice to show what opinion we ought to form of the books of Origen. I think that every one who has at heart the interests of truth, not of controversy, may easily assent to the well-proved statements I have made. But if any man perseveres in his contentiousness, we have no such custom.²⁸⁰² It is a settled custom among us, when we read him, to hold fast that which is good, according to the apostolic injunction. If we find in these books anything discrepant to the Catholic faith, we suspect that it has been inserted by the heretics, and consider it as alien from his opinion as it is from our faith. If, however, this is a mistake of ours, we run, as I think, no danger from such an error; for we ourselves, through God's help, continue unharmed by avoiding what we hold in suspicion and condemn: and further we shall not be accounted accusers of our brethren before God (you will remember that the accusing of the brethren is the special work of the devil, and that he received the name of devil²⁸⁰³ from his being a slanderer). Moreover, we thus escape the sentence pronounced on evil speakers, which separates those who are such from the kingdom of God.

Preface to the Translations of Origen's Books

Addressed to Macarius, at Pinetum, a.d. 397.

The Translation of the two first Books of the *Περὶ Ἀρχῶν* was issued soon after, or contemporaneously with the Apology of Pamphilus. The Preface to them was intended to remove prejudices by showing that Jerome (who though not named is clearly described) had been Rufinus' precursor in translating Origen. The compliments paid to Jerome were no doubt sincere: but the use made of his previous action can hardly be justified. Rufinus knew well that Jerome's view of Origen had to some extent altered, that a disagreeable controversy had sprung up at Jerusalem about him, in which he and Jerome had taken opposite sides: and that the animosity aroused by this had

²⁸⁰² Adapted from 1 Cor. xi. 16

²⁸⁰³ Διάβολος (*diabolus*) from διαβάλλω to slander.

with the greatest difficulty been allayed, and a reconciliation effected at the moment when he had quitted Palestine. This Preface with the Translation of the *Περὶ Ἀρχῶν* was the most immediate cause of the violent controversy and the final estrangement between Rufinus and Jerome.

I am aware that a great many of our brethren were incited by their longing for Scriptural knowledge to demand from various men who were versed in Greek literature that they would give the works of Origen to men who used the Latin tongue, and thus make him a Roman. Among these was that brother and associate of mine to whom this request was made by bishop Damasus, and who when he translated the two homilies on the Song of Songs from Greek into Latin prefixed to the work a preface²⁸⁰⁴ so full of beauty and so magnificent that he awoke in every one the desire of reading Origen and eagerly investigating his works. He said that to the soul of that great man the words might well be applied:²⁸⁰⁵ “The King has brought me into his chamber”: and he declared that Origen in his other books had surpassed all other men, but in this had surpassed himself. What he promises in this Preface is, indeed, that he will give to Roman ears not only these books but many others of Origen. But I find that he is so enamoured of his own style that he pursues a still more ambitious object, namely, that he should be the creator of the book, not merely its translator. I am then following out a task begun by him and commended by his example; but it is out of my power to set forth the words of this great man with a force and an eloquence like his: and I have therefore to fear that it may happen through my fault that the man whom he justly commends as a teacher of the church both in knowledge and in wisdom second only to the Apostles may be thought to have a far lower rank through my poverty of language. When I reflected on this I was inclined to keep silence, and not to assent to the brethren who were constantly adjuring me to make the translation. But your influence is such, my most faithful brother Macarius, that even the consciousness of my unfitness is not sufficient to make me resist. I have therefore yielded to your importunity though it was against my resolution, so that I might no longer be exposed to the demands of a severe taskmaster; but I have done so on this condition and on this understanding, that in making the translation I should follow as far as possible the method of my predecessors, and especially of him of whom I have already made mention. He, after translating into Latin above seventy of the books of Origen which he called Homiletics, and also a certain number of the “Tomes,” proceeded to purge and pare away in his translation all the causes of stumbling which are to be found in the Greek works; and this he did in such a way that the Latin reader will find nothing in them which jars with our faith. In his steps, therefore, I follow, not, indeed, with the power of eloquence which is his, but, as far as may be, in his rules and method, that is, taking care not to promulgate those things which are found in the books of Origen to be discrepant and contradictory to one another. The cause of these variations I have set forth very fully for your information in the Apology which



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²⁸⁰⁴ Translated among Jerome's works in this Series.

²⁸⁰⁵ Cant. i. 4

Pamphilus wrote for the books of Origen, to which I have appended a very short treatise²⁸⁰⁶ showing by proofs which seem to me quite clear that his books have been in very many cases falsified by heretical and ill-disposed persons. This is especially the case with the books which you now require me to translate, namely, the Περὶ Ἀρχῶν, which may be rendered either Concerning First Principles or Concerning Principalities. These books are in truth, apart from these questions, exceedingly obscure and difficult; for in them he discusses matters over which the philosophers have spent their whole lives without any result. But our Christian thinker has done all that lay in his power to turn to purposes of sound religion the belief in a creator and the order of the created world which they had made subservient to their false religion. Wherever therefore I have found in his books anything contrary to the truth concerning the Trinity which he has in other places spoken of in a strictly orthodox sense, I have either omitted it as a foreign and not genuine expression or set it down in terms agreeing with the rule of faith which we find him constantly assenting to. There are things, no doubt, which he has developed in somewhat obscure language, wishing to pass rapidly over them, and as addressing those who have experience and knowledge of such matters; in these cases I have made the passage plain by adding words which I had read in other books of his where the matter was more fully treated. I have done this in the interest of clearness: but I have put in nothing of my own; I have only given him back his own words, though taken from other passages. I have explained this in the Preface, so that those who calumniate us should not think that they had found in this fresh material for their charges. But let them take heed what they are about in their perversity and contentiousness. As for me, I have not undertaken this laborious task (in which I trust that God will be my helper in answer to your prayers) for the sake of shutting the mouths of calumnious men, but with the view of supplying material for the increase of real knowledge to those who desired it. This only I require of every man who undertakes to copy out these books or to read them, in the sight of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, and adjure him by our faith in the coming kingdom, by the assurance of the resurrection of the dead, by the eternal fire which is prepared for the devil and his angels (even as he trusts that he shall not possess as his eternal inheritance that place where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth, and where their fire will not be quenched and their worm will not die) that he should neither add nor take away, that he should neither insert nor change, anything in that which is written but that he should compare his copy with that from which it is copied and correct it critically letter for letter, and that he should not keep by him a copy which has not received correction or criticism, lest, if his copy is not thus distinct, the difficulty of the meaning may beget a still greater obscurity in the mind of the readers.

²⁸⁰⁶ See the Translation in this Volume.



Preface to Book III. of the

Rufinus had now come to Rome. The translation of B. III. and IV. had been made probably at Pinetum early in 398. He was already aware of the strong feelings aroused by his Translation of B. I. and II., and he complains that parts of his work were obtained by Jerome's friends while still uncorrected, and used to his discredit (Apol. i, 18–21, ii, 44); but he continued the work, prefixing to it the following Preface as his justification.

Reader, remember me in your sacred moments of prayer, that I may be a worthy follower of the Spirit. It was you, Macarius, by whose instigation, I might say by whose compulsion, I translated the two first books of the Περὶ Ἀρχῶν. I did it during Lent; and at that time your near presence, my Christian brother, and your fuller leisure, forced me also into fuller diligence. But now that you are living at the opposite end of Rome from me, and my taskmaster pays his visits more seldom, I have taken longer in unfolding the sense of the two last books. You will remember that in my former preface I gave you warning that some people would be full of indignation when they found that I had no harm to say of Origen: and this, as I think you have found, has not been long in coming to pass. But if those demons who excite men's tongues to evil speaking, have been already set on fire by that first part of the work, though in it the author had not yet fully laid bare their devices, what will be the effect of this second part, in which he is going to disclose all the secret labyrinths through which they creep into the hearts of men and deceive the hearts of the weak and the frail? You will see disorder springing up on all sides, and party spirit will be raised, and an outcry will spread all through the town, and Origen will be summoned to the bar and condemned for his attempt to dispel the darkness of ignorance by the light of the Gospel's lamp. But all this will matter very little to those who are endeavouring to hold fast the sound form of the catholic faith while exercising their minds in the study of divine things.

I think it necessary, however, to remind you of the principle which I acted upon in reference to the former books, and which I have observed in the present case also, namely, not to set down in my translation things evidently contradictory to our belief and to the author's opinions as elsewhere expressed, but to pass them over as not genuine but inserted by others. On the other hand I have not, either in the former books or in these, omitted the novel opinions which he has expressed about the formation of the reasonable creation, considering that it is not in such things that the faith mainly consists, but that what he is aiming at is merely knowledge and the exercise of the faculties, and that possibly there may be certain heresies which may have to be answered in this way. Only, in cases where he may have chosen to repeat in these later books what he had said before in the earlier, I have thought it expedient to cut out certain portions for the sake of brevity.

Those whose object in reading these books is to gain knowledge, not to disparage their author, would do well to seek the aid of men more skilled than themselves in interpreting them. For it is an absurd thing to get grammarians to explain to us the fictions of the poets' writings and the laughable stories of the comedians, and yet to think that books which speak of God and the celestial powers, and the whole universe, and which discuss all the errors of pagan philosophy and of heretical pravity are things which any one can understand without a teacher to explain them. In this way it comes to pass that men prefer to remain in ignorance and to pronounce rash judgments on things which are difficult and obscure rather than to gain an understanding of them by diligent study.



Rufinus' Apology in Defence of Himself.

Sent to Anastasius, Bishop of the City of Rome.

This document was called forth by accusations against Rufinus made, soon after his accession, to Anastasius, who held the Roman see from 498 to 503. The authority of the Roman Popes at this time was not what it afterwards became, and it is improbable that Anastasius should have summoned Rufinus, as some suppose him to have done, from Aquileia, where he was living on confidential terms with the Bishop Chromatius, to come to Rome to answer a formal accusation or to be judged by him. But since Rome was the centre of information, a Christian would not wish to be ill-thought of by its Bishop. Those who accused Rufinus were the friends of Jerome at Rome, especially the noble widow Marcella and the Senator Pammachius. They had endeavoured to gain some condemnation of Rufinus from Siricius before his death in November 398; but Siricius befriended Rufinus ("his simplicity was imposed on," according to Jerome).²⁸⁰⁷ On the election of Anastasius, however, in 399, they accused Rufinus of having, by his translation of Origen's Περὶ Ἀρχῶν introduced heresy into the Roman church. Jerome thus speaks of Marcella, Ep. cxxvii. 10. "She was the cause of the condemnation of the heretics: she brought witnesses who had been at a former time under their instruction, and thus imbued with error and heresy; she showed how many there were who had been deceived; she had the volumes of the Περὶ Ἀρχῶν brought in, and pointed out the alterations which the Scorpion²⁸⁰⁸ had made in them: till at last letters were written, and that

²⁸⁰⁷ Jerome Letter cxxvii. 9.

²⁸⁰⁸ The Scorpion is Jerome's name for Rufinus, especially after his death. He means that Rufinus had altered the too palpable expressions of heresy, so that the more subtle expressions of it might gain acceptance.