

**0345-0410 – Rufinus Aquilensis – Prefaces to the De Benedictionibus Patriarcharum Libri Duo**

**Preface to the Commentary on the Benedictions of the Twelve Patriarchs**

**Preface to Book II**

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## Preface to the Commentary on the Benedictions of the Twelve Patriarchs.

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Rufinus had arrived with Melania, in Italy, in the spring of 397, after a stay in the East of some 25 years. They had visited Paulinus at Nola, and had been entertained by him with the highest honours. Melania probably remained in Campania, where she had property, engaged in family affairs; but Rufinus set out for Rome. He stopped, however, for some months at the monastery of Pinetum near Terracina, with his friend Urseius the Abbot.

His work on Jacob's Benedictions on his sons in Gen. xlix was occasioned by the following letter from Paulinus, who alludes to it in writing to Sulpicius Severus (Ep. xxviii). "I have written a short note to the Presbyter Rufinus, the companion of the saintly Melania in her spiritual journey, a truly holy and truly learned man, and one united with me on this account in the closest affection." The work itself, being an Exposition of Scripture, is not given, but only the Preface.

*Paulinus to his brother Rufinus, all best wishes.*<sup>2772</sup>

1. Even a short letter from one so likeminded as yourself is a great refreshment, like the dew which revives a thirsty field when the rivers are low. But while I confess that I have been refreshed by this letter which, though short, is still from you, and is sent by the servant of our common children, yet I have been troubled at hearing that all at once through the disquiet of your anxiety and the uncertainty caused by delay, you have determined that you must go to Rome. May the Lord grant you to receive joy in the Lord from what we are doing: so that, as now we share in your anxiety, so we may rejoice in your joy, and that we may still have some beginnings of hope that we may enjoy your presence, when you begin to see clearly your way and the will of the Lord concerning you.

2. You are kind enough, with that affection which makes you love me as yourself, to desire that I should take up more seriously the study of Greek literature. I acknowledge the kindness which dictates this wish; but I am unable to give it effect, unless, through God's blessing on my earnest desires, I should have the happiness of your company for a longer time. How can I gain any proficiency in a foreign tongue in the absence of him who might teach me what I do not know? I

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<sup>2772</sup> *Salutem*, a word implying well-being generally as well as health.

think that, in the matter of the translation of St. Clement,<sup>2773</sup> besides the other defects of my abilities, you noticed this especially as showing the weakness caused by my want of practice, that where I had been unable to understand the words or to express them accurately, I have translated them according to my idea of their drift, or, to speak more truly, set down what I thought ought to be there. All the more therefore do I need that, through God's mercy, I may have your company in fuller measure; for that will be like wealth to the poor or like gathering the crumbs which fall from the rich man's table with the eager appetite of the bondman's heart.

3. At the moment when I was writing these words my eye fell upon a passage of Scripture, occurring in a portion which I had set down for reading, namely that in which Judah is blessed by Jacob; and I determined after a time to knock at the door of your mind, for which the Lord had given me this most timely occasion. I beg you, if you love me, or rather because you love me so greatly, to write and say how you understand this blessing of the Patriarchs; and, if there are some things in it which are worth knowing but hard to understand, impart to me also the knowledge of them; especially of that passage which says: "Binding his colt to the vine and his ass's<sup>2774</sup> colt to the haircloth."<sup>2775</sup> Tell me what is the colt and the ass's colt, and why his colt is to be bound to the vine, but the ass's colt to the hair cloth.



*The answer of Rufinus forms the Preface to his Exposition of the Benedictions.*

1. The more I excuse myself to you, and the more I assert that I am unable to respond to your inquiries, the more instant you become in your requests, and the harder become your demands: you treat me as you would an ox whose laziness you have discovered, and prick his flanks and back as he stops and turns back with goads of ever increasing sharpness. I must point out to you, therefore, that, even if I am able to bow my neck low so as just to drag the heavy yoke which you lay upon me, yet I have no chance of bursting at a rapid pace into the open and wide-spreading plains through a form of speech which flows at large and pours itself forth over far-extending space. Bear with me therefore if my resolution has been but tardily fulfilled, and if I come up only at a feeble pace to the point to which you call me.

2. You ask me how the passage in Genesis is to be understood in which Israel the father of the patriarchs is represented as predicting what he saw would happen to each of his sons, and says of Judah, amongst other things: "Binding his colt to the vine, and his ass's colt to the tendril of the vine." You write it "and his ass's colt to the haircloth" (cilicium); but in the Greek it stands: καὶ τῆ ἑλικί τὸν πῶλον τῆς ὄνου αὐτοῦ. The Greeks call by the name ἑλικί (twist) not the sprigs of

<sup>2773</sup> That is, the Recognitions. See the Preface to Rufinus' Translation in this volume, with the explanatory note prefixed to it.

<sup>2774</sup> Gen. xlix. ii

<sup>2775</sup> This is a mistaken reading (though said by Vallarsi to be accepted by both Ambrose and Augustin), Cilicium for ἑλικί. Rufinus adopts the latter. "Binding his ass's colt to the tendril of the vine."

the vine (as our copies have it) but those sickle-like shoots<sup>2776</sup> by which it supports itself on branches of trees or poles or the supports of the kind which I think the farmers call goatikins;<sup>2777</sup> so that the vine is made safe by these clinging shoots from all danger of falling, and the tendril can either become loaded with grapes or grow out in unfettered length. I think therefore that this very word (*helici*), like some others, must have been set down a long time ago in the Latin versions, and that it was afterwards supposed by unintelligent copyists that by *helici*, hair-cloth (*cilicium*) must be meant.

3. It is easy in this way to emend the mistakes of the translation; but it is not so easy to find out the meaning of the expression itself unless we take into consideration the whole passage. But the treatment of this passage would be placed in a fuller and clearer light if we could go back to the beginning of the whole of these Benedictions. But this implies no small amount of leisure and of time; or, to speak in a more Christian sense, it demands a mind illuminated by the Holy Spirit. My talent is but slight, and there are many demands on my time; and my friends are urging me to comply with their requests about Origen.<sup>2778</sup> But, so far as these circumstances admit, and so great a matter can be treated with brevity, I will state at once what appears to me the true meaning of this passage, for the love with which you bid me trust you in everything, and without prejudice to the judgment of others, who may have something better to say about it.

## Preface to Book II.

Rufinus, as we see by his Preface to the former book, considered it unsatisfactory to expound the Blessing upon Judah apart from those on his brethren. Paulinus therefore, taking the occasion of their common friend Cerealis' journey to Rome, sends the following letter to induce Rufinus to expound the remaining Benedictions.

*Paulinus to his brother Rufinus, all good wishes.*

1. Although our son Cerealis declared to me that it was uncertain whether, in returning as he now does to St. Peter,<sup>2779</sup> he would be able to visit you, yet it appears to me that it would be blamable

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<sup>2776</sup> The word in the text *rucinnulos* is unknown in Latin. The most likely conjecture as to the right reading is *ruscarias quibus* (that is *ruscarias falculas*—sickles for weeding out butcher's broom, as mentioned by Cato and Varro).

<sup>2777</sup> Capreolos. Properly little goats, thus used for the props, the fork of which resembled the horns of the goat. The word is also used for the tendrils of the vine, and is by some derived from *capio*.

<sup>2778</sup> That is about the translation of the Περὶ Ἀρχῶν. See the Preface to this further on.

<sup>2779</sup> That is to Rome.

in me and vexatious to you were I not to write to you by him in whom you have a part as well as I. It seems to me preferable to lose some letter paper by his not visiting you rather than to lose credit with you as I think I should do by his visiting you without it: and therefore I have entrusted this letter, I will not say to chance, but to faith: for I believe that the Lord will direct to you the way both of our son and of my letter; since to those who long for good all will turn to good; and indeed he longs for you as you ought to be longed for by one who understands the good he may gain from your society. I believe that this longing of his in a good matter will not be lost, according to his faith and piety: and therefore I have confidence that he will reach you and abide with you, and that I shall see the saving help of the Lord doubled towards you, since in him you will have the accession of a good son and pupil and assistant, and he will find in you a father and teacher of all good things given to him from the Lord, who will add to the efficacy and power of his prayers the strength of spiritual grace. As to myself, though I have the assurance that when you return to the East you will be unwilling to depart without visiting me, yet my sins make me fear that the daughter of Babylon, may turn you away from me. I pray therefore with earnest longings to the Lord that he would give me not according to my deserts but according to my desire and may direct your course to me in the way of peace; for such as do not walk in that way are reprobate and condemned and incapable of truly longing for your presence.

2. But now for the business part of my letter. I charge you, with the importunity, with which I am in the habit of knocking at your door even in the middle of the night, being driven by fear of a refusal to the modest attitude of a suppliant, to show me kindness once more, and to expound the Benedictions on the twelve Patriarchs. You have already made a beginning with the prophecy relating to Judah, and have given, according to the precept, a threefold interpretation of it. I now beg you to expound the prophecy as it relates to each of the sons of Judah: so that I may myself become possessed of the truth by your means, and may also gain through your help the favor and the praise which will accrue to me; for I shall thus be able to make answer to those who have thought well to consult me on the difficulties of this passage of Scripture not with foolish words drawn from my own understanding but with divine truth flowing from your inspiration.

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Rufinus, though at this time busy with his larger works, the translations of Pamphilus' defence of Origen, and Origen's *Περὶ Ἀρχῶν*, and, though about to set out for Rome, lost no time in composing the work which Paulinus demanded, and sent it him with the following letter.

*Rufinus to His Brother Paulinus, the Man of God, with All Good Wishes.*

1. Though our common son Cerealis did not visit me, he felt what pain he would cause me if he delayed my reception of your letter, and forwarded it to me. In reading it I felt, as usual, a continual increase in my yearning towards you: but I found towards its close a request from which I have frequently begged you to excuse me—I mean the request which you make that I should write

something in answer to your questions as to the interpretation of passages of Scripture. I thought that I should lead you to desist from these questions by the writings I have once and again sent you, which have given evidence of my ignorance and of the roughness of my speech.

2. But since you still are not weary of commanding me, I have at once, to the best of my powers, added to what I had written at your desire on the Benediction of Judah the comments on the remaining eleven patriarchs. I acted like the man in the parable of the two sons. I thought that I should thus best fulfil the father's will: and though when he ordered me to go into the vineyard I had said I will not go, yet after a while I went. If, as I grant, there is some rashness in the fact that with so little capacity we attempt such a great task, I would say, with submission to you, that this must be most justly imputed to you, since, through your excessive love for me you do not see that my measure of knowledge, as of other virtues, is but slight. I wrote this work in the days of Lent, while I was staying in the monastery of Pinetum, and I wrote it for you. But I found it impossible to conceal this poor work from the brethren who were there: and they, considering that a thing which had been honoured by your approval must be of great importance, extorted from me the permission to copy it for themselves. Thus, while you demand from me food for yourself you give refreshment to others also. Farewell, and be in peace, my most loving brother, most true worshipper of God, and an Israelite in whom there is no guile. I entreat you who are so full of the grace of God to hold me still in remembrance.



## Translation of Pamphilus' Defence of Origen.

*Written at Pinetum a.d. 397.*

While Rufinus was staying at Pinetum, a Christian named Macarius<sup>2780</sup> sought his advice and assistance. He was engaged in a controversy with the *Mathematici*, a class of men who had deserted the scientific studies from which they took their name, and had turned to astrology and a belief in Fatalism. Macarius, having heard of Origen's greatness in the region of Christian speculation, earnestly desired some knowledge of his writings: but was unable to attain it through ignorance of Greek. He declared to Rufinus that he had had a dream in which he saw a ship laden with Eastern merchandize arriving in Italy, and that it was declared to him that this ship would contain the means of attaining the knowledge he desired. The coming of Rufinus seemed to him the fulfilment of his dream, and he earnestly besought him to impart to him some of the treasures of his Greek learning, and especially to translate for him Origen's great speculative work, the *Περὶ Ἀρχῶν*, that is On

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<sup>2780</sup> See the account in Rufinus' Apology I. 11.