

0347-0420 – Hieronymus – Preface to the Book of Hebrew Questions

Preface to the Book of Hebrew Questions

this file has been downloaded from <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf206.html>

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 a⁵³⁷⁷Luscius 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 embezzlement⁵³⁷⁸ 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):

“The⁵³⁷⁹ 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,

“If⁵³⁸⁰ one there be, if one,

⁵³⁷⁷ Terence’s rival, to whom he makes allusions in the Prologi to the Eunuchus, Heoutontimoroumenos and Phormio.

⁵³⁷⁸ *Repetundarum*. Properly an action to compel one who has left office to restore public money which he had embezzled.

⁵³⁷⁹ Hor. Odes II., x. 19, 20.

⁵³⁸⁰ Virgil, Ec., vi. 10.

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 true⁵³⁸¹ reading itself, as I am now able to do, and then, by bringing the later readings into comparison with it, to⁵³⁸² 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.⁵³⁸³

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

487

⁵³⁸¹ *Ipsa testimonia.* This is what he calls in other places *Hebraica veritas*. Jerome was right in the main in correcting the LXX, and other Greek versions by the Hebrew. He was not aware (as has been since made clear) that there are various readings in the Hebrew itself, and that these may sometimes be corrected by the LXX., which was made from older mss.

⁵³⁸² That is, by the obeli (†), to show what has been left out, and the asterisk (*), to show what has been inserted.

⁵³⁸³ That is, from the copies of the LXX. commonly used in the fourth century.

common version in his Homilies, which were spoken to common people, yet, in his Tomes,⁵³⁸⁴ 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,⁵³⁸⁵ 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.

Prefaces to the Vulgate Version of the New Testament.

This version was made at Rome between the years 382 and 385. The only Preface remaining is that to the translation of the Gospels, but Jerome speaks of, and quotes from, his version of the other parts also. The work was undertaken at the request and under the sanction of Pope Damasus, who had consulted Jerome in a.d. 383 on certain points of Scriptural criticism, and apparently in

⁵³⁸⁴ Larger Commentaries.

⁵³⁸⁵ Daughter of Paula. See Letter XXXIX.