

**0347-0420 – Hieronymus – Preface to the Vulgate Version of the New Testament**

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common version in his Homilies, which were spoken to common people, yet, in his Tomes,<sup>5384</sup> 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,<sup>5385</sup> 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 She was withdrawn from us by her sudden death, while girding herself for our work; we were not counted worthy to have such an one as the partner of our life; and, therefore,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

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<sup>5384</sup> Larger Commentaries.

<sup>5385</sup> Daughter of Paula. See Letter XXXIX.

the same year urged him to revise the current Latin version by help of the Greek original. It is to be observed that Jerome's aim was "to revise the old Latin, and not to make a new version. When Augustin expressed to him his gratitude for 'his *translation* of the Gospels,' he tacitly corrected him by substituting for this phrase 'the *correction* of the New Testament.' Yet, although he proposed to himself this limited object, the various forms of corruption which had been introduced were, as he describes, so numerous that the difference of the old and revised (Hieronymian) text is throughout clear and striking." See article by Westcott in "Dictionary of Bible," on the Vulgate, and Fremantle's article on Jerome in "Dictionary of Christian Biography."

### The Four Gospels.

*Addressed to Pope<sup>5386</sup> Damasus, a.d. 383.*

You urge me to revise the old Latin version, and, as it were, to sit in judgment on the copies of the Scriptures which are now scattered throughout the whole world; and, inasmuch as they differ from one another, you would have me decide which of them agree with the Greek original. The labour is one of love, but at the same time both perilous and presumptuous; for in judging others I must be content to be judged by all; and how can I dare to change the language of the world in its hoary old age, and carry it back to the early days of its infancy? Is there a man, learned or unlearned, who will not, when he takes the volume into his hands, and perceives that what he reads does not suit his settled tastes, break out immediately into violent language, and call me a forger and a profane person for having the audacity to add anything to the ancient books, or to make any changes or corrections therein? Now there are two consoling reflections which enable me to bear the odium—in the first place, the command is given by you who are the supreme bishop; and secondly, even on the showing of those who revile us, readings at variance with the early copies cannot be right. For if we are to pin our faith to the Latin texts, it is for our opponents to tell us *which*; for there are almost as many forms of texts as there are copies. If, on the other hand, we are to glean the truth from a comparison of *many*, why not go back to the original Greek and correct the mistakes introduced by inaccurate translators, and the blundering alterations of confident but ignorant critics, and, further, all that has been inserted or changed by copyists more asleep than awake? I am not discussing the Old Testament, which was turned into Greek by the Seventy elders, and<sup>5387</sup> has



<sup>5386</sup> Made pope 366, died 384. Jerome had been his secretary at the Council held at Rome in 382, and continued his literary services till the pope's death, in 385.

<sup>5387</sup> That is, after being translated from Hebrew into Greek, and from Greek into Latin.