

Ælfric's Preface to the Old English Prose *Genesis*¹

[trans. Britt Mize]

Ælfric the monk humbly greets alderman Æthelwærd.² You bade me, dear one, that I should translate for you from Latin into English the book *Genesis*. It seemed burdensome to me to grant you that, and you said then that I need translate no more of that book than up to Isaac, Abraham's son, because a certain other man had translated the book for you from Isaac up to the end.

Now it seems to me, dear one, that that work is very dangerous for me or anyone else to undertake, for I fear that if some foolish man reads this book or hears it read, he will think that he could live now, in the age of the new law, just as the old fathers lived in the age before the old law had been established, or as men lived under the law of Moses.³ I once knew that a certain mass-priest, who was my teacher at that time, had the book *Genesis*, and he could understand Latin a little bit; he said concerning the patriarch Jacob that he had four wives, two sisters and their two handmaids. He spoke quite truly, but he did not know—nor did I yet at that time—what a great distinction there is between the old law and the new. In the beginning of this world a brother took his sister as wife, and sometimes too the father reproduced by his own daughter; and many had more wives for the increase of the people, and no one was able in the beginning to marry except among his siblings. If anyone might wish to live now, after Christ's coming, the same as men lived before the law of Moses or under the law of Moses, that man is no Christian, nor is he even worthy that any Christian man should eat with him.

Uneducated priests, if they comprehend some little scrap from the Latin-books, then right away it seems to them that they can be great teachers; however, they are not familiar with the spiritual understanding of it, and how the old law was a prefiguration of things to come, or how the new understanding, after the incarnation of Christ, was the fulfillment by Christ and by his chosen ones of all those things that the old understanding had prefigured as to come. Also, they⁴ speak often of Peter, asking why they cannot have a wife just as Peter the apostle had; and they will not hear or understand that the blessed Peter lived according to Moses' law until Christ, who came to men during that time, began to preach his holy gospel and chose Peter first to accompany him. Then Peter abandoned his wife straightaway, and all those twelve apostles—those who had wives—abandoned both wife and possessions and followed Christ's teaching concerning the new law and cleanness that he himself raised up. Priests are ordained as teachers to the unlearned folk: so it would befit them to know how to understand the old law spiritually, and understand what Christ himself taught (and his twelve apostles) according to the new knowledge, in order that they could well direct the people to God's faith and set them an example in good works.

We say beforehand that this book is spiritually very deep to understand, and we write no more than the naked discourse—it seems, then, to the uneducated that all the meaning may be contained in the simple discourse, but the truth is very far from that. This book is called "Genesis," that is, "Origin-book," because it is the first book and tells of the origin of all things (but it does not tell of the creation of the angels). It begins thus: *In principio creavit Deus celum et terram*, which is in English, "In the beginning God fashioned heaven and earth." It was truly done so, that in the beginning, when he wished to, God Almighty brought about the creation; but moreover, according to the spiritual understanding, that beginning is Christ, just as he

¹ Ælfric worked on his translation in of the biblical book of *Genesis* into Old English prose and wrote this preface to his translation probably sometime during the period 992–998.

² Æthelwærd, a direct descendent of of King Alfred the Great's brother, was a powerful nobleman (which is all the Old English term "alderman" originally meant) in the western part of England.

³ Here and elsewhere in this preface, Ælfric thinks of scriptural history in terms of three "laws" or "understandings": the first was from the Creation up to the time of Moses, before any codified law had been established; the second (which Ælfric refers to as both the "old law" and the "law of Moses") was from the time of Moses—when God established for the Israelites the codified holy law, as told in the Pentateuch—up to the time of Christ; and the third, the "new law," began with the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, interpreted by Christians as the prophesied coming of the Jewish Messiah, which cast all that had gone before in a new light.

⁴ I.e., these "uneducated priests."

himself said to the Jews: “I, who speak to you, am the beginning.” Through this beginning Father God created heaven and earth, because he shaped all creation through the Son, who was ever begotten from him, wisdom from the wise Father. Again, there stands in this book in the opening passage: *Et spiritus Dei ferebatur super aquas*, which is in English, “And the spirit of God was carried across the waters.” The spirit of God is the Holy Spirit, through which the Father vivified all that which he created through the Son. And the Holy Spirit travels through men’s hearts and gives us forgiveness of sins, first through water in the baptism and then through penitence; and if anyone rejects the forgiveness that the Holy Spirit gives, then his sins will be forever unforgivable in eternity.

The Holy Trinity is often signified in this book, such as it is in the words that God spoke: “Let us fashion man to our likeness.” The trinity is betokened with that which he said, “let us fashion,” and the unity is signified with that which he said, “to our likeness.” He did not at all say in the plural, “to our likenesses,” but in the singular, “to our likeness.” Again, three angels came to Abraham and he spoke to all three of them as if to one. How did Abel’s blood cry out to God except just as the misdeeds of each man denounce him to God, without words? By this little set of examples, one can understand how deep this book is in spiritual meaning, though it may be written in easy words.

Again, Joseph, who was sold into the land of the Egyptians—and he delivered that people from the great hunger—prefigured Christ, who was sold for us into death and delivered us from eternal hunger in hell-torment. That great tabernacle which Moses made with wondrous skill in the desert, just as God himself instructed, prefigured God’s church, which he himself established through his apostles with manifold treasures and beautiful customs. That people brought to the labor gold and silver and precious gemstones and various treasures; some also brought goat-hair, just as the law commanded. That gold signified our belief and our good conscience, which we should offer to God; the silver signified the word of God and the holy learning that we should have concerning the works of God; the gemstones signified various good qualities in the people of God; the goat-hair signified the harsh penitence of those men who repent of their sins. Livestock of many kinds were also offered to God as a sacrifice within that tabernacle, by which there is very manifold signification; and it was commanded that the tail should ever remain whole on the beast at the offering, for the signification that God wishes that we always do well until the end of our life: then the tail will be offered among our deeds.

Now the aforesaid book is in many places written very compactly, but nevertheless very deeply in spiritual meaning; and it is organized just as God himself instructed it to the writer Moses, and we dare not write more in English than the Latin has, nor alter the order except in the case that the Latin and the English do not have the same manner in the arrangement of the language: always he who translates or who renders from Latin into English must arrange it so that the English has its own manner, or else it will be very misleading to read for someone who does not know the Latin manner.

It is also to be known that certain ones have been misled who wished to cast away the old law, and certain ones wished to have the old and cast away the new, as the Jews do. But Christ himself and his apostles taught us to hold both: the old spiritually and the new literally in practice. God fashioned for us two eyes and two ears, two nostrils, two lips, two hands, and two feet; and he wished also to have two understandings established in this world, the old and the new, because he does just as it pleases him, and he does not have any advisors. No man needs to say to him, “Why do you do it thus?” We must turn our will to his decree, and we cannot bend his decree to our pleasures.

I say now that after this one, I dare not and will not translate any book from Latin into English, and I bid you, dear alderman, that you no longer request this of me, lest I be either disobedient to you, or else untruthful to my vow if I do it. May God be merciful to you forever into eternity.

I bid now in God’s name, if anyone wishes to copy this book, that he correct it well against the exemplar, for I do not have control if someone should bring it into error through unreliable scribes—and the peril will then be his, not mine. The bad scribe does great harm if he will not correct his writing.