

Ælfric's Preface to his translation of Genesis,
from Ælfric's Prefaces, ed. Jonathan Wilcox
(Durham, 1994)

Ælfric the monk humbly greets Ealdorman Æthelweard. You bade me, dear sir, that I should turn the book of Genesis for you from Latin into English. Then it seemed difficult to me to grant you that, and you then said that I need not translate more of the book except as far as Isaac, the son of Abraham, because some other person had translated the book for you from Isaac until the end. Now it seems to me, dear sir, that that work is very perilous for me or any man to undertake, because I fear, if some foolish person reads this book or hears it read, that he will think that he may live now in the new law just as the patriarchs lived then in that time before the old law was appointed, or just as men lived under the law of Moses.

Once I knew a certain masspriest, who was my teacher at the time, owned the book of Genesis, and he could understand Latin a little; then he said about the patriarch Jacob, that he had four wives, two sisters and their two handmaidens. What he said was completely true, but he did not know, as did not I at that time, how great a difference there is between the old law and the new. In the beginning of this world, brother took his sister for a wife, and sometimes also a father begot by his own daughter, and many men had multiple wives for the increase of the people, and it was impossible then at the beginning to marry except among relatives. If anyone will live so now after Christ's coming as people lived before the law of Moses or under the law of Moses, such a person is not a Christian at all, nor is he even worthy that any Christian should eat with him.

Unlearned priests, if they understand some small part from Latin books, then it immediately seems to them that they may be glorious teachers; but nevertheless they do not know the spiritual meaning to it and how the old law was symbolic of things to come, or how the new testament after Christ's incarnation was the fulfilment of all those things which the old testament symbolized about the coming of Christ and his chosen ones. They also often talk about Peter—why they may not have a wife, just as Peter the apostle had—and they will not hear or understand that the blessed Peter lived according to the law of Moses until the time of Christ, who first came to humanity at that time and began to preach his holy gospel and chose Peter first to be his companion. Then Peter abandoned his wife right away, and all the twelve apostles, those who had wives, abandoned both wives and possessions, and they followed Christ's teaching to the new law and to that chastity, which he himself then raised up. Priests are set up as teachers for lay people. Now it has become fitting for them that they know to understand the old law spiritually, and what Christ himself taught and his apostles in the new testament, so that they could guide the people properly to God's faith and set an example properly in good deeds.

We also say in advance that the book is very profound to understand spiritually, and we are not writing anything more than the naked narrative. Then it may seem to the unlearned that all the sense is enclosed in the simple narrative, but it is very far from that.

[. . .] [Ælfric goes on to explain spiritually the opening verse of Genesis and selected episodes as distinct from their naked narrative.]

Now the aforesaid book is very narrowly set in many places, and yet very profoundly in the spiritual sense, and it is ordered just as God himself appointed it to the writer Moses, and we do not dare to write more in English than the Latin has, nor change the order, except for that alone, that Latin and English do not have a single way in the ordering of language. Always whoever translates or teaches from Latin into English must ever order it so that the English has its own way, otherwise it is very misleading for those to read who do not know the ways of Latin.

[...]

I now ask in God's name, if anyone wants to copy this book, that he correct it properly against the exemplar, because I do not have control, although someone may bring it to error through false copyists, and then it will be his peril and not mine. The bad copyist does much harm, if he will not correct his error.