

King Alfred's Prose Preface
to his Translation of Gregory the Great's *Cura pastoralis*,
From Dorothy Whitelock (ed.), Sweet's Anglo-Saxon Reader

King Alfred commands Bishop Wærferth to be greeted with his words in a loving and friendly manner; and I command it to be made known to you that it has come very often into my mind what wise men there were formerly throughout England, both in religious orders and in secular; and how happy the times then were throughout England; and how the kings who had power over the people were obedient to God and his messengers; and how they kept both their peace and their morals and their authority at home, and also extended their territory abroad; and how they then succeeded both in warfare and in wisdom; and also how eager the religious orders were both about teaching and learning and all those services which they should do for God; and how wisdom and learning were sought from abroad here in this land, and how we now must obtain them from abroad, if we were to have them. It had declined so thoroughly in England that there were very few this side of the Humber who could understand their offices in English or even translate a single letter from Latin into English; and I think that there were not many beyond the Humber! There were so few of them that I cannot think of even a single one south of the Thames when I succeeded to the kingdom. Thanks be to God Almighty that we now have any supply of teachers. Therefore I command you to do as I believe that you want to, that you free yourself of these worldly cares as much as you most often can, so that you may apply that wisdom which God gave you wherever you can apply it. Think what torments came to us in this world then, when we neither loved it ourselves, nor also granted it to other people; we had the name alone that we were Christians, and very few had the practices.

When I recalled all this, then I recalled also how I saw, before it was all plundered and burnt up, how churches throughout all England stood filled with treasures and books, and also a great multitude of God's servants; and then they knew very little benefit of those books, because they could not understand anything of them, because they were not written in their own language. As if they were to have said: 'Our elders, those who kept these places before, they loved wisdom, and through it they obtained riches and left them to us. Here their track may yet be seen, but we cannot follow after it.' And so we have now abandoned both riches and wisdom, because we would not bend down to that trace with our mind.

When I recalled all this, then I wondered very much at the good counsellors who were there before throughout England, and who had studied all those books completely, that they would not turn any portion of them into their own language. But then I immediately answered myself again, and said: 'They did not think that men should ever be so careless and learning so fallen off: they

left it undone on purpose, and intended that there would be the more wisdom here in the land, the more we would know languages.’

Then I recalled how the law was first found in the Hebrew language, and afterwards, when the Greeks learned it, then they turned it completely into their own language, and also all other books. And again the Romans did the same, after they learned them, they turned them all through wise translators into their own language. And also all other Christian nations turned some portion of them into their own language. Therefore it seems better to me, if it seems so to you, that we also translate certain books, those which are most needful for all people to know, that we turn those into that language which we can all understand, and bring it about, as we very easily may with God’s help, if we have the peace, that all the youth of free men who now are in England, those who have the means that they may apply themselves to it, be set to learning, while they may not be set to any other use, until the time when they can well read English writings. Those may afterwards be taught further in Latin who one wishes to teach further and who are to be placed in higher orders.

When I recalled how the knowledge of Latin had declined before this throughout England, and yet many could read English writings, then I began among various and manifold cares of this kingdom to turn into English that book which is called in Latin *Pastoralis*, and in English ‘Shepherd-Book’, sometimes word for word, sometimes sense for sense, just as I learned it from Plegmund my archbishop, and from Asser my bishop, and from Grimbold my mass-priest, and from John my mass-priest. After I had learned it, just as I understood it, and as I might most intelligently relate it, I turned it into English; and I intend to send one to each bishopric in my kingdom; and in each is an æstel*, which is worth fifty mancuses. And I command in God’s name that no-one take the æstel from the book, nor the book from the cathedral—it being unknown how long there may be such learned bishops as there are now, thanks be to God, almost everywhere.

Therefore I intend that it may always be at that place, unless the bishop may have it with him, or it may be on loan anywhere, or anyone may be making a copy from it.

*The æstel which accompanied copies of the book, is a unique word of unknown meaning: it is thought to be a book-pointer.