ST. JEROME AS A BIBLICAL TRANSLATOR¹

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SOME fifteen years ago I read a paper here (since published in the Bulletin) entitled "Some Letters of St. Augustine", which dealt mainly with the correspondence between Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, and Jerome, Presbyter of Bethlehem. In the course of that paper I touched briefly on one important part of their correspondence—firstly, the criticism voiced by Augustine against what he considered to be Jerome's irreverent and unnecessary work of revising the existing Latin Bible, and then Jerome's indignant repudiation of the criticism, and his defence of his new scholarly method and principle. As I have long wished to expand this subject, I greatly welcome the invitation of the Library to give another lecture on it, and I shall devote my time mainly to an account of the problems and difficulties that beset Jerome in making his Latin translation of the canonical Books of the Old Testament, drawing my material chiefly from the Latin Prefaces which he wrote for each section of his translation as it reached completion.

But first I must fill in some of the background. Eusebius Hieronymus, commonly called Jerome, was born about the year A.D. 345 at Stridon a town just across the Adriatic, in Dalmatia (in the modern territory of Jugoslavia). His people were well-to-do burgesses who belonged to the Christian faith; they were able to give him a first-class education, notably at Rome under one of the most famous grammarians and rhetoricians of the age, Aelius Donatus, the Virgilian scholar and commentator. There is little doubt that from him Jerome acquired the knowledge of,

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and love for, Latin literature which remained with him long after
he had abjured Classical studies, and which permeated his
theological writings both in the choice of words, in apt quotations,
and in almost unconscious reminiscences of the Latin poets, and
especially of Virgil. He also acquired a mastery of Latin prose,
rhetorical indeed but clear, vigorous, rapid and effective, which
was to be his most deadly weapon in the many polemics which he
afterwards conducted with much dialectical skill, with a lively
lack of scruple, and with great zest and wit. For it may at once
be admitted that Jerome was not of a patient or meek temper.
He did not readily turn the other cheek. He could be arrogant,
assertive, and abusive towards those who contradicted him, and,
when roused, he had such resources of language and such power
of invective that he seems like the prototype of the Renaissance
divines and scholars.

It is probable that Jerome also learnt Greek at Rome, for
Greek was still taught to some extent in the principal schools of
the West. His older contemporary, the poet Ausonius, had
learnt some Greek at Bordeaux, and his younger contemporary,
Augustine, learnt some Greek at Tagaste in North Africa. But
neither of these had more than the rudiments of the language, and
probably Jerome acquired at Rome only a moderate reading
knowledge of Greek literature. His complete equipment as a
Greek scholar did not come till, at about the age of 30, he left
Rome and Italy (owing to certain quarrels and difficulties the
nature of which he does not specify), and decided to settle and
study in the Greek-speaking East. He travelled by Thrace,
Constantinople and Asia Minor, and in A.D. 374 we find him
living at Antioch in Syria. It was here, if we accept his own
account, that he had the famous dream in which the heavenly
visitant so severely condemned him for being a Ciceroonian rather
than a Christian, with the result that he decided to abandon
Classical literature and devote his life to the study and exposition
of the Scriptures. He had already as a young man in Italy been
baptized into the Church, and had been deeply stirred and
attracted by the appeal of monasticism which was just then begin­
ning to influence the West. Now, in the enthusiasm of his new
resolve and with the ardent impetuosity that marked all his
actions, he determined to put theory into practice and become one of the anchorites who dwelt, near Antioch, in the desert of Chalcis, subjecting himself to all the rigours of ascetic renunciation for which these hermits were world-famous. It was here, then, in the desert, amid much mortification of the flesh and much ill-health caused by excessive (and unaccustomed) fasting, that he gave himself to the study of the Greek Scriptures and to reading the Greek theologians and commentators.

He was an anchorite for only two years: by 376 he was back in Antioch. The eremitic life was not the form of monasticism for him. He did not like the other anchorites: he had to meet them at stated times for prayer and to celebrate the Eucharist. They were doubtless saintly in their devotion and austerity, but he thought them uncouth, uncivilized men, having no interest in his studies, speaking a Semitic dialect, and knowing little Greek and no Latin. They on their part had grave doubts about the orthodoxy of this Western outlander, and he haughtily resented their questions. Disillusioned, therefore, he left the desert and returned to Antioch, where he was ordained a priest; and ultimately in 380 we find him at Constantinople in a congenial scholarly atmosphere—attending the lectures of Gregory of Nazianzus on biblical exegesis, and meeting many eminent scholars and theologians of the Eastern Church.

The Bible which Jerome now studied was the Greek, not the Latin—and for the Old Testament this meant the Septuagint, itself a translation from the Hebrew and, in turn, the source of the current Latin versions. In the Christian Church the LXX was at this time widely regarded as a document of supreme and final authority, partly because it was held to be the Bible of the Apostolic Age, the version used by the early Apostles and writers of the New Testament, and therefore invested with peculiar sanctity, partly because it was repudiated by the Jews, and partly because of the miraculous events which were supposed to have attended its creation. Historically it came into being in the course of the third century B.C. as a translation for the Greek-speaking Jews of Alexandria; and the unevenness of its rendering strongly suggests that it was a composite work, made at different times within that century by men of differing ability and
scholarship. But Christian tradition had surrounded it with a myth: it was believed to have been produced by a divinely inspired body of seventy translators who, each working separately and simultaneously on the whole body of the text, had been guided to a supernatural accord in their individual versions; and a text formed by such a marvellous harmony could only be regarded as having a specially divine sanction and as being in Augustine's words, "sancta scriptura in summo et caelesti auctoritatidis culmine collocata". The criticisms of contemporary Jewish scholars, who quite honestly said that it contained many inaccuracies and many mistranslations of the Hebrew, were never put to the test officially; and though an individual scholar like Origen accepted the criticisms and acted on them, the Church as a whole dismissed them as malicious fabrications. In the Western Church the need of some Greek was recognized, if only to check the meaning of the Latin Bible against its original; but the need for Hebrew in order to test the LXX against its original was unimaginable—it seemed like assailing the Word of God. Yet the text was not authentic: a work so indispensable to the Church had multiplied itself beyond count, and the common manuscripts of it, copied and recopied over centuries in different areas, were disfigured both by the usual mistakes of scribes and by omissions and interpolations, the result of accident or design. In the second century A.D. three new Greek translations from the Hebrew had been made successively by Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotion. In the early third century A.D. the great Alexandrine scholar, Origen, had made a new edition of the LXX (in his Hexapla) basing the text on the majorities of manuscripts, and then there followed three editions of Origen by Eusebius of Caesarea, Lucian of Antioch, and Hesychius of Egypt: and all of these translations and editions modified in various ways the text of the LXX as it circulated in different provinces. There was a need for some kind of official revision which would provide the Church with an authoritative and standard text whether in Greek or Latin, if only a man could be found with the knowledge, scholarship, and energy to undertake it.

A scholar, who in the interest of truth and reason, might undertake it was, as we have seen, in process of training.
Jerome was coming to be recognized as the ablest Biblical scholar in the Church: and he had the unique qualification of having learnt Hebrew when he was an anchorite in Chalcis. Quite incidentally, in the Preface to his translation of Daniel, he has left a short account of his struggles with Hebrew. He found it very hard going. "As a young man," he says, "fresh from the reading of Cicero and Quintilian, fresh from the delights of rhetoric, I had involved myself in the drudgery of learning Hebrew, and after much time and toil I was beginning with difficulty to utter the asthmatic and strident sounds of that language, and like a man walking through a crypt I was beginning to see a faint light above me—when I came upon the book of Daniel" (which contains Aramaic), "and then I was overcome with so much weariness that in a sudden despair I was minded to throw away all my previous labour. And so I would have done, but for the encouragement of my Hebrew tutor who kept urging on me the equivalent in his language of Virgil's 'labor omnia vicit improbus'."

In A.D. 382 he returned to Rome on some ecclesiastical business, and shortly afterwards became secretary to Pope Damasus with whom he had already corresponded very learnedly on problems of biblical interpretation. Damasus from the nature of his high office must have been aware of the urgent need for a revised text of the Latin Scriptures—one which would offer far less scope (through mistakes of copyists, omissions or interpolations, misunderstandings of the Greek, and alterations of earlier revisers) for arbitrary opinion than did the conflicting versions then current, and which would bring order and law, instead of confusion, into this essential document of the Church. So he gave to Jerome the most important commission of his life and one that occupied him for the next twenty years—the task of revising the old Latin version of the Bible against the Greek from which it had been translated about two centuries before, and of clearing away those errors which the original translators had made from an insufficient understanding of Greek and those other errors which in a book, so much in demand and so frequently copied, might be introduced by scribes and become embedded in the text.
He began with the Gospels and revised the Latin against a Greek text which he got by comparing a number of old manuscripts, and (I fear) by relying on the majority verdict in choosing which readings to accept as genuine. He advanced cautiously, making only such alterations as were necessary to bring out the true sense of a passage, and as far as possible keeping the wording to which the Western Church had long been accustomed. He completed this part in 384, and went on in the same way to make a slight but careful revision of the rest of the New Testament. We have the letter in which he dedicated to Pope Damasus his edition of the Gospels; and, as it shows the spirit in which he began his enterprise, it will be interesting to look at it more closely. He apologizes first for what must appear the boldness of his undertaking, for daring to change the phraseology which the Church knew and loved, and for constituting himself a judge to decide which Latin versions were in agreement with the genuine Greek text, "Graeca veritas". He expects that his revised version will provoke a storm of protest and that every reader will burst into fury, "me falsarium, me clamitans esse sacrilegum, qui audeam aliquid in veteribus libris addere, mutare, corrigere". He may be told that there was no need to go to the Greek and that he should have collated a number of the oldest Latin manuscripts and so made a satisfactory composite text. "But", says Jerome, "the Latin manuscripts vary so much between themselves and there is so much confusion caused by the interweaving of the patterns and the criss-crossing of the strains that one must return to the Greek source and correct from the fountain-head all that has been badly rendered by faulty translators, or wrongly corrected by ignorant and presumptuous critics, or added and altered by inattentive and lazy copyists"; and this was exactly the method he followed, only (as he puts it) "controlling my pen so that, while correcting manifest error, I might leave the familiar wording unchanged".

Jerome then proceeded to revise the Latin Old Testament by comparing it with the Greek of the LXX. We must remember that he was commissioned to revise only by the Greek, not by the Hebrew. He seems to have done the Psalms and Job in this way—using, however, Origen's corrected text of the Septuagint.
But it was an unsatisfactory method. The LXX was itself a translation and the resulting Latin version was the Hebrew text "in tertium vas transfusa": and in addition it was now modified by a succession of translations and vitiated by many inaccuracies: and the task of recovering an authentic text of the LXX by a through and systematic recension seemed impossible. So the only way was to go, as before, to the fountain-head and make a new Latin translation direct from the "Hebraica veritas". Besides, there is nothing more confining and thwarting than to repair and reshape what has been written by someone else—especially if one must keep as near as possible to the original words. I appeal to anyone who has ever tried to recast a Latin prose or English essay or an article for the press. It is not merely that one wants to use different words: the approach, the logic, the arrangement, the way of putting things, the emphasis, the whole *ratio* are different—as is natural, if style is the expression of a personality. And the translator requires this freedom, for translation is not the automatic product of a computer: it is an imaginative and creative work by which the full sense of the original is ascertained and understood in the mind and, as it were, fused so as to flow into the moulds and forms and idioms of the new language—still the same material but changed in shape. I believe that Jerome realized this when he decided to break from the leading-strings of the earlier Latin version and make his own translation direct from the Hebrew. It gives point to his passionate claim in the Preface to Kings: "meum est, meum, inquam, meum: quidquid enim, crebrius vertendo, et emendando sollicitius, et didicimus et tenemus, nostrum est." "It is my version, mine, I say, mine: for whatever by repeated renderings and careful corrections I have learnt and comprehended, is my very own."

The reception given to his revised version of the Latin New Testament was on the whole favourable. It was possible for educated readers to satisfy themselves of Jerome's competence and good faith by checking the alterations against the Greek, and the majority of ordinary Christian people liked the retention of the old phraseology. It was otherwise when he began to publish the successive portions of his Old Testament translation. It
was impossible for ordinary readers to check the many alterations against the Hebrew, for few Christians knew Hebrew; and as for consulting the Jews, as Jerome recommends in nearly all his Prefaces as a test of his accuracy, that was no doubt logical, but in practice impolitic because of the religious feuds. Jerome rages in his Prefaces and Epistles against the blindness and intolerance of his critics. Many good people who had no training in scholarship ("sancta rusticitas", "saintly ignorants", he calls them) could not understand the scholarly reasons for the changes of word and meaning and were shocked at his altering the Word of God: and many of his enemies, who in private might read and appreciate his work, could not in public resist the satisfaction of cribbing it and disparaging him.

I wonder if any of you, Ladies and Gentlemen, have ever deviated so far from your devotions as to read in our English Authorized Version the Dedication to the Most High and Mighty Prince James? The translators ask the king's protection against "the calumniations and hard interpretations of other men... since things of this quality have ever been subject to the censures of ill-meaning and discontented persons"; and because they expect to be "maligned by self-conceited Brethren who run their own ways, and give liking unto nothing but what is framed by themselves and hammered on their own anvil", they pray the king to give countenance "to honest and christian endeavours against bitter censures and uncharitable imputations". This is much the tone and theme of Jerome's apologiae—except that he was without a protector to appeal to, his patron Pope Damasus having died in 384 and the new Pope Siricius being much less friendly. But he could fight for himself: he lacked neither cause nor argument nor a sharp edge to his tongue: and he attacks his critics, sometimes in a tone of reproachful acrimony, sometimes in that vein of caustic and satirical wit which runs so delightfully through all Roman literature.

For example: it is a question which has been debated through the whole history of the Church whether unlearned and ignorant men should be allowed to read and interpret Holy Writ for themselves—at the risk of error and schism, or whether it was better to teach and explain doctrine to them. It is not my business to
discuss this here—though I might venture the personal opinion that liberty has done more good than harm. Jerome thought otherwise—and not unnaturally, since the main weight of opposition to his reforms came from the stolid and inert masses of Christian believers, who would often listen more readily to some plausible humbug than to a Doctor of Theology. "Why is it", he asks in the Letter to Paulinus of Nola, "why is it that Holy Scripture is the one field of labour in which men can claim skill without having served an apprenticeship under a competent master?" This would not be tolerated in the professions or among craftsmen; but in the art of interpreting Scripture everyone everywhere claims to be an expert. "Scribimus indocti doctique poemata passim." The talkative old dame, the doting old man, the glib sophist, all take liberties with Scripture, tear it to pieces, and teach it before they have had time to learn it. Then there is the theological quack, wrinkling his brows in thought, balancing huge words on his tongue, and philosophizing about the Scriptures to audiences of silly women. . . . Then we have the quasi-intellectuals who after a literary education take up theology; and if they have once charmed the people’s ears with a stylistic oration, they think their every utterance to be the law of God: not that they have any care about the meaning of Scripture: it is their own meaning they care about, and they support it with passages of Scripture torn from their context and distorted in sense—exactly as do the cento writers who make patchwork poems from lines of Virgil when they prove Virgil to be "Christianus ante Christum" by quoting from the IVth Eclogue—the Messianic Eclogue, so-called:

iam redit et virgo, redeunt Saturnia regna;
iam nova progenies caelo demittitur alto.

"This is puerile"; says Jerome in high indignation, "it is on a level with the lectures of the strolling quacks—to teach what you don’t know, or rather, not even to know that you don’t know."

He remained in Rome for only a year after the death of his patron, Pope Damasus. He had been busy, not only with his translation, but with fervently crusading for monasticism (the coenobitic kind now, not the eremetic!); and he had fired with
his own enthusiasm a group of aristocratic ladies, rich, cultured, and independent, who now decided to take vows of virginity, give up their property, and go with him and some of his friends to the Holy Land where they would establish two convents, one for men and one for women, and would spend their lives, under rule, in the study of the Scriptures and the languages in which the Scriptures were written. It was done as they planned. Jerome and his followers left Rome in 385 and founded two communities at Bethlehem. Here he remained till his death in 419, carrying on his work as translator, commentator, and controversialist, a distant force whose voice carried to every part of the Latin Church. In particular, he pressed on with his translation of the Old Testament from the Hebrew, completing Samuel and Kings by 391, the Psalms, Job, and the Prophets by 393, Ezra in 394, Chronicles in 396, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon by 398, the Pentateuch by 401, and Joshua, Judges, Ruth and Esther by 405. He did not translate or revise the apocryphal books because they had no place in the current Hebrew Canon, though they did appear in the LXX. He was indeed persuaded to make a hurried translation of Judith and Tobit (he tells how he translated Tobit in a day); but otherwise the text of the Apocrypha now found in the Vulgate is the Old Latin version—an interesting and important fact since it enables one to form an estimate of the language, style, and character of that superseded version.

It is not, however, my purpose in this paper to examine Jerome's translation philologically or to compare it in point of language and style with its predecessor. I wish on this occasion to give some idea of the man and of how he met the problems that arose from the critics as his work passed into circulation; and as he discusses these problems vigorously in the Prefaces, it seemed to me worth while, within the limits of my time, to let you hear him speaking for himself and let you form some idea of his mind, his style, and his method. The main things for which he was criticized were—his use of the Hebrew text instead of the Greek and the implied slight to the LXX; his seemingly arbitrary omission or inclusion of passages; and, of course, his alteration of the familiar wording. His replies are often long
and involved; but perhaps I could summarize the points thus: his reasons for by-passing the LXX, he says, come from scholarship, not prejudice, firstly, because it is not as it left the translators' hands, that is, the authentic text is almost impossible to recover: only vulgate texts are available and these have suffered mutilation and alteration from copyists, and have been modified by the influence of later versions; secondly, if one had the authentic LXX text, it still remains a translation: why not go direct to the Hebrew source? thirdly, because the New Testament writers have at least five quotations from the Old Testament which are not in the LXX but are in the Hebrew and this certainly suggests some element of fallibility in the LXX; fourthly, because some of the respect in which it is held depends on demonstrable fable; and fifthly, because the principle of direct translation from the Hebrew had already been accepted by the Church when it allowed Theodotion's translation to replace the LXX in parts of Job and Daniel. Let me read you how he puts it in a letter to his friend Bishop Chromatius, who had urged him to undertake a translation of Chronicles from the Hebrew:

If the LXX had remained uncontaminated and exactly as it was turned into Greek by the original translators, there would be no point in your urging me, Chromatius, to render the Hebrew scrolls into Latin for you: for it would be right for me to support by silent as well as spoken approval the version that had once gained men's ears and had strengthened the faith of the early Church. But as it is, since different versions of it are used in different areas, and since the genuine ancient translation has been corrupted and mutilated, you think it appropriate for me either by comparing a number of mss. to decide on a genuine text, or to make an entirely new translation. . . . If other scholars have been allowed to reject parts of the LXX which they had once accepted, and if other translators later than the Seventy (about whose paradoxical unison much arrant nonsense is talked!) have made their individual versions, and if as a consequence in the churches there are now read passages of which the Seventy knew nothing, why should not my own Latins accept me who, without damaging their old version, have made a new version of such a kind that I can establish its truth by the testimony of the Hebrews and (more important) of the Apostles? . . . All this I say without disrespect to the old translators. I am only answering my opponents who attack me with their snarling criticisms. They abuse me in public: they read me in private: and, inconsistently, they are at once on both sides of the court, being both accusers and defenders since they approve in others what they condemn in me—as if good and bad were not inherent in things themselves but changed character with the author. . . . And as for my motive in now translating Chronicles, I have done it
because I wished to sort out and arrange in orderly sections, per versuum cola, the maze of difficulties in the Book, and the tangle of proper names so confused by the errors of scribes, and the barbarous unintelligibility of the meaning. But like the flute-player Ismenias, I make music for myself and my friends if other people's ears are stopped.

You will have noticed that phrase "my own Latins", "Latini mei". Though a voluntary exile from the West, and destined never to return, Jerome has a strong affection for, and pride in, the country of his origin, its Church, its tradition, its achievements, and even its literature. He is a true Roman; and I can detect, under the hard defensive shell of these Prefaces, a strong desire to be appreciated and liked by his own Western people. It was for their benefit that all his work was intended—the massive commentaries on the Scriptures that he produced in Latin from his reading of the Greek theologians, his translation and enlargement of Eusebius' Chronicles, his history of Christian literature (Viri Illustres), and, above all, his new version of the Scriptures. In particular, by his new translation of the Old Testament he wished (as he tells us) to give the Latin Church a text so indisputably sound that even the Jews would acknowledge its excellence and it would become, for the whole Christian Church, the standard version against which the Septuagint and all other versions could be tested for correctness. I have sometimes thought that Jerome, living in Bethlehem, must have been greatly impressed by the extraordinary care taken by the great Jewish Schools to secure perfect accuracy in the transmission of the sacred books, and I have wondered whether he may have contemplated some similar centre of Christian Biblical learning which would maintain and guarantee the accurate transcription of the text he had now provided. But that is speculation—though some of the directions he gives in these Prefaces for the guidance and control of scribes copying his version look that way, or look like an anticipation of Cassiodorus more than a century later. One thing, however, is certain: no scholar could take much pride in the Vetus Latina or believe that it was a satisfactory document on which to base the doctrine and teaching of the Western Church. So I propose here to read a few passages from the Prefaces which will show the state in which he found parts
of the Old Latin version, and which at the same time will (I hope) be interesting and perhaps even entertaining.

This passage comes from the Preface to the first revision of Job on the basis of the LXX, which he made before he left Rome in 385.

If I were a monk weaving baskets from rushes or plaiting together palm-leaves to make mats so as to eat my bread by the sweat of my brow and carefully provide for my physical sustenance, no man would criticize or blame me. But in fact, because (in our Saviour's words) I wish " to labour not for the meat that perisheth but for the meat that endureth unto life ", and because I wish to clear the thorns and scrub from the ancient road of the Holy Scriptures, I am accused of going doubly wrong: when I correct mistakes, I am said to falsify; and instead of removing errors I am said to introduce them. For people are so accustomed to the old version that even its admitted faults are pleasing, the general desire being to have handsome rather than correct Bibles. . . . But the book of Job, which until now in its Latin form lay (like Job himself) among the dust and ashes and was covered with the vermin of error, now appears whole and spotless. For, just as to Job, after his temptation and victory, there was given twice as much as he had before, so (to speak boldly) I have caused him to have in Latin all that he had lost.

My next passage is from the Preface to his second version of Job based this time on the Hebrew and published some eight or nine years after the first. The passage is specially interesting for the information about his own method and principles of translation and for what he tells us of his difficulty in understanding the book of Job. Incidentally, he expands that reference to "handsome Bibles" which came in my first passage.

Before my first revision of Job [he says], some 700 or 800 lines of the book had never appeared in any Latin version, and a shamefully deformed appearance it presented when publicly read in churches—curtailed, mutilated, and decayed. This new edition of mine is not based on any previous translation: it is made directly from the Semitic text, and is sometimes a closely literal rendering, sometimes a free paraphrase of the sense, and sometimes an ad sensum translation which is yet fairly literal. The reason for this variation of method is that Job is admitted even by the Hebrews to be a particularly indirect and elusive book—it is what the Greek rhetoricians call ευχρηματισμένος, i.e. it uses a highly figured style of expression, in which words do not have their obvious meaning. It is like trying to grip an eel or sea-urchin in the hand: the tighter you press, the sooner it slips from your grasp. I remember that, in order to master the sense of this book, I hired at a considerable fee a Hebrew scholar from Lydias, a man reputed to be of the highest standing for learning among the Jews. Whether his learning took me any further, I don't know: but one thing I do know—that not till I had mastered the sense could I bring myself to translate. . . .

Wherefore let my snarling critics, canes mei, be informed that I have toiled at the Book of Job, not to disparage the old Latin version, but in order to clarify by
my new translation whatever in the old is obscure, or omitted, or corrupted by the error of copyists. (And this I am qualified to do), for I have some knowledge of the Semitic languages. And in Latin I have had practice almost from my cradle among grammarians, rhetoricians, and philosophers.

And now he returns with vehemence to a point on which he feels strongly—that if the translations of a Jew like Aquila (c. A.D. 130) or of “Judaising heretics” like Symmachus and Theodotion are accepted and are not regarded as a disparagement of the LXX, how much more should his be accepted—the work of a man “who is a Christian, born of Christian parents, and baptized with the sign of the Cross, and whose only interest has been to restore passages omitted, to correct passages corrupted, and to publish the holy writings of the Church in a true and reliable version” . . . “But if any desire to keep their Old Latin Bibles, written on vellum stained with purple in letters of gold or silver, well, let them keep those massive tomes written in what they call uncial letters, provided they allow me and my friends pauperes habere schedulas and keep our manuscripts not decorated but correct.”

And here is a passage from the Preface to Esther which shows how expositors and scribes sometimes added to a book by inserting explanatory matter which then became embodied permanently in the text.

It is indisputable that the book of Esther has been corrupted by its various translators: but I have brought it out from the archives of the Hebrews and have made a clear translation word for word. The commonly received Latin version branches off into redundant digressions by adding matter on this side or that, which might plausibly have been expressed or heard in the circumstances—exactly as in the schools of rhetoric, when the subject for a controversia has been set, the custom is to think out what words the offending party and the offended party might reasonably use. But you, Paula and Eustochium, since you have studied in the libraries of the Hebrews, and have experienced for yourselves the differences between translators, take in your hands the Hebrew text of Esther and examine my translation word by word. You will acknowledge that I have not expanded a single passage by adding extra material, but that I have faithfully and straightforwardly translated this Hebrew history into Latin exactly as it stands in the Hebrew text.

In making his translation of Chronicles he felt the necessity of knowing the exact topography of the places and districts mentioned in this historical book—just as a visit to Greece is necessary to understand Greek history and a voyage from the Troad to Italy for the understanding of Aeneid III.
Just as those who have looked on Athens are better able to understand the histories of the Greeks; and just as travellers, who have sailed from the Troad by way of Leucas and Acrocorintha to Sicily and on to the mouth of the Tiber, have a better understanding of Aeneid III: so he will have a clearer sight of Holy Scripture who has gazed on Judaea with his eyes and has investigated the records of ancient cities and the names of places whether the names have been changed or remain the same.

Consequently it was my concern—to undertake this labour with the most learned of the Hebrews, viz.—to make a tour of this province which all the Christian Churches speak of. For I confess that in dealing with the sacred volumes I have never trusted in my own resources nor held to my own unsupported judgment: but it was my custom, even in matters where I felt I knew, to ask questions—and how much more in subjects where I felt doubtful!

So when you recently asked me to translate for you the Book of Chronicles into Latin, I took as my colleague a certain Doctor of the Law from Tiberias, a man greatly esteemed among the Hebrews, and with him I discussed the whole project from head to foot, as they say [a vertice, ut aiunt, usque ad extremum unguem]. Thus strengthened, I have ventured to do as you request.

I freely admit to you that in the Greek and Latin MSS. this book of names is mutilated—so mutilated that it must be regarded as a mass not of Hebrew names, but of barbarous Sarmatian names. This is not the fault of the original LXX translators who, inspired by the Holy Spirit, had produced a version that was true and correct: it is the fault of the copyists who from a correct original produce incorrect copies: often they telescope three names into one word by removing the centre syllables, or contrariwise they divide one name because of its length into two or three words: and the proper names do not indicate, as most scribes imagine, the names of persons, but cities, districts, woodlands, and provinces....

I have therefore sent a book which will please my friendly readers, but I dare say will displease my enemies. For the best, as Pliny says, is something that many would rather mock at than follow. If any man should wish to condemn any part of this translation, let him first consult the Jews, examine his own conscience, see the order and structure of the narrative—and then let him carp at my work if he can.

In the end Jerome's version prevailed, but not in his lifetime and not easily, not till the time of Gregory the Great, some 200 years later. One of its strongest opponents was St. Augustine who actually wrote to Jerome at Bethlehem to dissuade him from making the new translation, and there developed a rather acid exchange of letters in which Augustine stated the reasons for his faith in the LXX and Jerome the reasons for his distrust of it. A kind of reconciliation took place; but Augustine firmly held to his own view, and the great weight of his authority must have retarded for at least his lifetime the general acceptance of the new version. If you want to know Augustine's opinion and the
grounds on which he based it, and to assess the almost superstitious opposition against which our reformer had to fight for his view of the truth, I can do no better than read you a short extract from the City of God, XVIII, 43, written after Jerome's death.

The Church [says Augustine] has received the translation of the Seventy as if there were no other. . . . Our Latin translation is derived from this also—although one Jerome, a learned priest and a great linguist, has translated the same scriptures from Hebrew into Latin. But though the Jews affirm his learned labour to be all truth and aver that the Seventy often erred, yet the Churches of Christ hold that no one man should be preferred before so many. Even though the concord of the Seventy had not come from unity of spirit but from the collation of their versions, yet no one man ought to be held more sufficient than all of them. But since there was such a divine demonstration of their unity, any man who translates the Scriptures from the Hebrew or any other language either must agree with the Seventy or, if he disagree, we must reject him and hold to them because of their prophetical inspiration. . . . If therefore we look for the Spirit of God and nothing else, as is right, then whatever is in the LXX and not in the Hebrew, it pleased God to speak by the Seventy prophets and not by the Hebrew prophets; and contrariwise of what is in the Hebrew and not in the LXX. . . . But what we find in both, the Spirit spoke by both, by the first as prophets, by the latter as prophetical translations.

That is what Augustine says. When one grasps the implication of these utterances spoken by so eminent a man, one need not wonder at the vehemence with which Jerome fights for recognition of his revolutionary method and scholarly single-mindedness. For he was a very great scholar, the greatest that the Western Church produced until the Renaissance. We with our more scientific knowledge of critical method may feel that he too readily accepted age in manuscripts as the sole criterion of excellence and that he may have (in the New Testament) trusted too much in the majority-vote by making an appeal to the consensus of the majority of his selected manuscripts. We may feel that his criticisms of the LXX are to be regretted in a sense far different from Augustine's—because textually it is by far the most important of all ancient translations, and because the differences between the LXX and the Hebrew text current in Jerome's age might, sometimes though not always, point to the existence of a different Hebrew text in the third century B.C. when the LXX was translated. All this may be said with truth: but one must also say that he was far in advance of his age in
scholarship and critical method, and that his achievement was the result of an idea carried into effect with labour, courage, and conviction. And therefore, perhaps, we ought to deny (as far as he is concerned) his own apologetic dictum that, of all the gifts or graces conferred by Heaven, that of the *interpres* or translator is the lowest in the scale of importance.