

Rebuilding the Tower of Babel: Ælfric and Bible Translation¹

Tristan Major

Ælfric of Eynsham is one of the most paradoxical figures of Old English literature, especially in terms of his theory and practice of translating the Bible. In his frequently quoted preface to Genesis, Ælfric writes, “Nu þincð me, leof, þæt þæt weorc is swiðe pleolic me oððe ænigum men to underbeginne” (Now it seems to me, sir, that that work [of translation] is very dangerous for me or any other person to undertake), and in the same preface he later claims, “ic ne dearr ne ic nelle nane boc æfter ðisre of Ledene on Englisc awendan” (I neither dare nor desire to translate any book after this one from Latin into English).² For Ælfric, translation is dangerous because readers who lack Latin and therefore have no access to the exegeses and commentaries of the Church Fathers may misunderstand Scripture, at the risk of their salvation. Similar statements of reluctance regarding translation appear elsewhere in Ælfric’s corpus. In his Latin preface to the *Lives of Saints*, he asserts with reference to English, “Nec tamen plura promitto me scripturum hac lingua, quia nec conuenit huic sermocinationi plura inseri” (Yet I promise not to write more in this tongue because it is not fitting that more is transplanted into

1 An earlier version of this paper was first read at the annual meeting of the Canadian Society for Medievalists / Société canadienne des médiévistes during the Humanities and Social Sciences Congress in May 2006 at York University, Toronto. I would like to thank Pauline Thompson and Michael Elliot for reading and commenting on earlier drafts of this paper.

2 Ælfric, “Preface to Genesis,” in *The Old English Version of the Heptateuch*, 76.6-7, 80.113-14. Unless otherwise noted, citations in the notes indicate page numbers directly followed by line numbers. All translations are my own.

this language);³ and at the end of the second series of *Catholic Homilies*, he promises, “Ic cweðe nu þæt ic næfre heononforð ne awende godspel. oþþe godspeltrahtas of ledene on englisc” (I say now that I will never henceforth translate the Gospel or homilies on the Gospel from Latin into English).⁴ In many instances, Ælfric seems to struggle with the question whether he has the moral right or authority to translate. Yet such concerns evidently did not prevent Ælfric from producing a large corpus of Old English translations of his ecclesiastical authorities⁵ and of the Latin Bible, including Judges, Kings, Esther, Judith, Maccabees, parts of Genesis, Numbers, Joshua, and Job, and large sections of the New Testament Gospels.⁶ In his letter to Sigeweard “On the Old and New Testament,” Ælfric expresses no anxiety about Bible translation and even explains the benefits of his translations and their place in his corpus.⁷ Although there may seem to be contradictions in Ælfric’s theory and practice of translation, his views concerning the legitimacy and desirability of translation can be harmonized by means of an examination of his use of the biblical narratives of the Tower of Babel, Christ’s sending out the disciples, and Pentecost.⁸

In the letter “On the Old and New Testament,” Ælfric expresses an interesting view on the consequences of linguistic diversity after the fall of the Tower of Babel. He comments that people “ða toferdon to fyrrenum lande on swa manegum gereordum swa þæra manna wæs. On þære ylcan ylde man arærde hæðengild wide geond þas woruld” (then dispersed to distant lands in as many languages as there were people. In that same age people raised up paganism far and wide throughout the world).⁹ The implication is that because different languages created different people, these people then formed different beliefs and even different religions. Of course, this view is by no means original to Ælfric. Isidore of Seville, for example, whose work is a major source for Ælfric, articulates a similar view concerning language: “ex linguis gentes, non ex gentibus linguae exortae sunt” (people arose from languages not languages from people).¹⁰ For Ælfric, this

3 Ælfric, *Ælfric’s Lives of Saints*, vol. 1 (EETS o.s. 76, 82), 2.9-11.

4 Ælfric, *Ælfric’s Catholic Homilies: The Second Series*, 345.5-7.

5 For Ælfric’s sources, see Godden, *Ælfric’s Catholic Homilies: Introduction, Commentary and Glossary*, xxxviii-lxii.

6 Clemons, “The Chronology of Ælfric’s Works,” 218 and 240-41.

7 Ælfric, “On the Old and New Testament,” in *Old English Version of the Heptateuch*, 33.442-34.443, 44.659-61, 48.769-71, 56.921-24.

8 Genesis 11:1-9, Luke 10:1-24, and Acts 2:1-13, respectively.

9 Ælfric, “On the Old and New Testament,” in *Old English Version of the Heptateuch*, 25.224-29.

10 Isidore, *Etymologiae*, vol. 1, bk. IX.1.14. For details on Anglo-Saxon and, in particular, Ælfric’s familiarity with Isidore’s *Etymologiae*, see Godden, *Ælfric’s Catholic Homilies: Introduction*, lvi, and Lapidge, *The Anglo-Saxon Library*, 261 and 311. Similar Anglo-Saxon views of the consequences of the Tower

diversity of language and culture, which came into existence with the fall of the Tower of Babel, provides a fundamental reason to be concerned for his Anglo-Saxon audience's religious beliefs, especially since this audience was immersed in a different culture and language than the original audiences of the Bible. Although it is difficult to gauge the exact composition of Ælfric's audience, his writings demonstrate that Ælfric was concerned most about the salvation of those who did not know Latin, whether it be the laity or even sometimes members of the clergy.¹¹ A literal translation of the Bible into Old English potentially allowed for much misunderstanding by those who were not familiar with Latin. Because of the great linguistic and cultural differences between the Jewish society portrayed in the Old Testament and the Anglo-Saxon society of his audience, any attempt to bridge the gap between the two seemed to Ælfric very precarious.

Adding to Ælfric's concerns is his view of Hebrew as the most exalted of all languages — “nán gereord nis swa héalic swa ebreisc” (no language is as exalted as Hebrew)¹² — and any attempt to translate from such a holy language as Hebrew into such a lowly language as Old English must have caused some anxiety. Besides its canonical status as a language of Scripture, this high esteem for Hebrew can be traced to at least two other factors: the general medieval belief that Hebrew was the original language of humankind, and its place on the Cross beside Greek and Latin. Both of these ideas are expressed by Isidore:

una omnium nationum lingua fuit, quae Hebraea vocatur. [...] Tres sunt autem linguae sacrae: Hebraea, Graeca, Latina, quae toto orbe maxime excellunt. His enim tribus linguis super crucem Domini a Pilato fuit causa eius scripta. Vnde et propter obscuritatem sanctorum Scripturarum harum trium linguarum cognitio necessaria est.¹³

of Babel may be found in Ælfric's sermon, “De Falsis Diis,” in *Homilies of Ælfric: A Supplementary Collection*, vol. 2, 680.72-81, and in Wulfstan's “De Falsis Dies,” his adaptation of Ælfric's work, in *Homilies of Wulfstan*, 221.5-16.

- 11 See Ælfric, “Preface to Genesis,” in *Old English Version of the Heptateuch*, 76.8-9, and 80.101, where Ælfric refers to those unlearned in Latin: “sum dysig man þas boc ræt oððe rædan g^ehyrþ” (some foolish man who reads this book or hears it read), and “ðam ðe ðæs Ledenes wise ne can” (those who do not understand the Latin way of things). In the Latin preface to the *Catholic Homilies*, Ælfric also claims that he has composed his homilies for “edificationem simplicium qui hanc norunt tantummodo locutionem” (the edification of simple people who know only their language); see Ælfric, *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: The First Series*, 173.7-8.
- 12 Ælfric, *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: The Second Series*, 51.273-74.
- 13 Isidore, *Etymologiae*, vol. 1, bk. IX.1.1 & 3. For further patristic and medieval beliefs concerning Hebrew as the original language and the three sacred languages see Resnick, “Lingua Dei, Lingua Hominis,” *passim*.

[There was one language for all the nations which is called Hebrew. [...] Yet there are three holy languages: Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, which are the most eminent in the whole world. For in these three languages the claim was written by Pilate on the Cross of the Lord. For this reason and because of the obscurity of the holy Scriptures, knowledge of these three languages is necessary.]

The first of these ideas, the belief that Hebrew was the one original language of the world, also appears in his *Sex aetates mundi*, where Ælfric mentions Hebrew as the sole language in use before Babel:

Hi hæfdon þa gyt ealle þæt ebreisce geréord.
 7 God cóm [þærto] 7 sceawode þone stypell.
 7 forgeaf þam wyrhtum ælcum his gereord.
 þæt heo[ra nan] nyste naht oðres spræce.¹⁴

[They all still had the Hebrew language then, and God came there and gazed at the tower and gave each of the workers his own language so that none of them understood anything of anyone else's language.]

Moreover, Ælfric appears to consider the original language of Hebrew to have remained relatively unchanged. Paraphrasing the early chapters of Genesis, Ælfric comments that the names which Adam gave to the animals have remained unchanged through time: “god gelædde to him. nytenu. 7 deorcynn. 7 fugelcynn ða ða hé hí gesceapene hæfde. 7 adam him eallum naman gesceop. 7 swa swa hé hí þa genamode. swa hí sindon gyt gehatene” (God led to him those beasts and animals and birds when he had created them, and Adam made names for all of them, and just as he then named them, so they are still called).¹⁵ Although Ælfric does not mention in what manner the animals of Eden have retained their prelapsarian names, it is most likely that he believed the patristic and early medieval notion that Adam spoke Hebrew. Ælfric's implication is that since the Hebrew language has remained unchanged until his day,¹⁶ it deserves greater reverence than other languages.

The second notion mentioned above — that Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, the three languages of the Cross, have sacred authority — may also have made Ælfric anxious about translating into Old English any text whose original language was one of these three, since much emphasis was placed on that notion by his patristic authorities. But, despite the

14 Ælfric, “De sex etatibus huius [seculi],” in Tristram, ed., *Sex aetates mundi*, 196.45-48. See also Dekker, “Pentecost and Linguistic Self-Consciousness,” 360.

15 Ælfric, *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: The First Series*, 181.83-86.

16 See Godden, *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: Introduction*, 10.

respect paid to the Fathers elsewhere, there is little evidence that the Anglo-Saxons, including Ælfric, were much concerned with the notion of the three sacred languages. Ælfric scholars tend to agree that Anglo-Saxons did not find specific sacred authority in any one language whether it appeared on the Cross or not.¹⁷ Robert Stanton, for example, argues that for Bede “there was a sacrality in the use of the individual language of each people, and this was no less true of Bede’s own language [Old English] than of any other.”¹⁸ Likewise, in a recent dissertation, Damian Joseph Fleming argues that, contrary to the notion of three sacred languages, Anglo-Saxon views concerning Hebrew were “grounded in a realistic appreciation of Hebrew as a terrestrial language,” while “Old English is joined to them [Hebrew, Greek, and Latin] not necessarily as a sacred language, but as a language which is known and used.”¹⁹ As far as I can tell, there are no explicit references in Ælfric’s corpus to any sacral authority associated with these three languages as a result of their presence on the Cross. In fact, it appears that in the British Isles, the medieval notion of the three sacred languages is limited solely to Irish exegesis.²⁰ For Ælfric, Hebrew is the first and the most exalted language, and he has no lack of respect for Greek and Latin, but not one of these three languages is so sacred that it is to be left untranslated. Indeed, because the Bible itself was composed in more than one language, the presence of several languages on the Cross emphasizes the need to communicate the Gospel in the various languages of the nations.

In the letter “On the Old and New Testament,” Ælfric notes the apostolic authority of each of the Gospels and the original languages of all but Mark’s:

Feower Cristes bec sindon be Criste sylfum awriten. An ðæra awrat Matheus, þe mid þam Hælende wæs, his agen leorningniht on þisum life farende. 7 he his wundra geseah 7 awrat hi on þære bec, þe him to gemynde þa mihton becuman, on Ebreiscum ge-reorde æfter Cristes þrowunge on Iudea lande, þam þe gelyfdon on God; 7 he ys se forma godspellere on ðære gesetnisse. Marcus se godspellere, þe wæs mid Petre on lare, his agen godsunu on Godes lare gepogen, wrat þa oðre boc be Petres bodunge be ðam þe he geleornode of his larspellum on Romana byrig, swa swa he gebeden wæs þurh ða geleafullan, þe gelyfdon on God of þære burhware þurh Petres bodunge. Lucas se godspellere awrat ða þriðdan boc, se ðe fram cildhade folgode þam apostolum 7 mid Paule siþþan siðode on his fare, 7 æt him leornode ða godspellican lare on clænisse lybbende,

17 An exception, however, may be found in the controversial works of David Howlett, for example, in his “Tres Linguae Sacrae.”

18 Stanton, *The Culture of Translation*, 70.

19 Fleming, “The Most Exalted Language,” 7 and 9.

20 For the notion of the three languages in Irish exegesis, see McNally, “The ‘Tres Linguae Sacrae’ in Early Irish Bible Exegesis.”

7 *awrat* þa Cristes boc on Achaian lande mid Greciscum gereorde, swa he of Paules lare 7 þæra apostola lare leornode. Iohannes se apostol on Asian lande, swa swa þa biscopas bædon, began þa feorðan boc be Cristes godcundnyse, on Greciscum gereorde, 7 be ðære deopnyse, þe him Drihten awreah þa þa he hlinode on his luflicum breoste, on þam ðe wæs behydd se heofonlica goldhord.²¹

[There are four books of Christ written about Christ himself. Matthew wrote one of them; he was with the Saviour travelling in this life as [Christ's] very own disciple, and he saw his miracles and wrote them in that book, when they were able to come to his mind, in the Hebrew language after Christ's suffering in the land of Judea for those who believed in God. He is the first evangelist in the order [of the Gospels]. Mark the evangelist, who followed Peter in learning and was his own godson begotten in the learning of God, wrote the second Gospel according to Peter's preaching concerning things which he learned from [Peter's] teachings in Rome, just as he was asked by the faithful of the citizens who believed in God through Peter's preaching. Luke the evangelist wrote the third book — he who from childhood followed the apostles and afterwards travelled with Paul on his journeys, and learned from him the teaching of the Gospel, living in chastity. He wrote the book of Christ in the land of Achaea in the Greek language just as he was taught from the teaching of Paul and the teaching of the apostles. John the apostle began the fourth book in the Greek language in the land of Asia, just as the bishops asked, on Christ's divinity and on the profound mysteries which the Lord revealed to him when he leaned on his lovely breast, in which was hidden the divine treasure.]

While Ælfric connects the Gospels of Matthew and John to Christ himself, the ultimate authority, he takes care to note that Mark and Luke can also make authoritative claims due to their associations with the apostles. Mark, Luke, and John, therefore, are all privileged with apostolic authority, despite the fact that they wrote in Greek and not Hebrew. But perhaps the more interesting issue in this passage is Ælfric's claim that the Gospel of Matthew was written in Hebrew. The same sentiment is again expressed in his *Life of Saint Mark*, where Ælfric notes that Matthew "awrat hi [his Gospel] on ebreisc þam ebreiscum mannum" (wrote his Gospel in Hebrew for the Hebrew people).²² It is most likely that Ælfric learned of the language of Matthew's Gospel from Jerome, who mentions the language of Matthew in a letter to Pope Damasus: "De Novo nunc loquor Testamento, quod graecum esse non dubium est, excepto Apostolo Mattheo qui primus in Iudaea evangelium Christi hebraeis litteris edidit" (I speak now of the New Testament,

21 Ælfric, "On the Old and New Testament," in *Old English Version of the Heptateuch*, 52.862-53.880.

22 Ælfric, *Ælfric's Lives of Saints*, vol. 1 (EETS o.s. 76, 82), 328.133.

which without doubt was written in Greek, with the exception of the apostle Matthew who first produced in Judea the Gospel of Christ in Hebrew letters).²³ What Jerome thought was the original Gospel of Matthew is actually the apocryphal Gospel of the Hebrews or the Gospel of the Nazaraeans,²⁴ but Ælfric could not have known better than his immediate source, nor would he have been willing to diverge from such an authority. In the Life of Saint Mark, Ælfric refers to Jerome's preface as the immediate source of his knowledge of the gospel languages:

se halga hieronimus
 be ðam feower godspellerum . ðe gode gecorene synd .
 awrat on ðære fore-spræce þaða he awende cristes bóc
 of ebreiscum gereorde . and sume of greciscum .
 to læden-spræce on þære ðe we leorniað .²⁵

[In the preface to the Gospels, Saint Jerome wrote about the four evangelists, who were chosen by God, when he translated the Gospel from the Hebrew language, and some of it from the Greek, into the Latin language in which we study.]

Thus, Ælfric follows Jerome and patristic tradition when he mistakenly emphasizes, in his letter “On the Old and New Testament,” that the Gospel of Matthew was written in Hebrew. But again, the fact that the Gospels themselves are linguistically diverse — in their original composition and in their later Latin translation — refutes any notion of one single language being suitable for Scripture. Ælfric must have known that the apostles and early evangelists were Jewish and spoke Hebrew, especially considering Jerome's statement about the language of Matthew's Gospel, but despite their knowledge of Hebrew, all but Matthew wrote in Greek. For Ælfric, all four of the Gospels contain one sacred authority, despite the belief that they were written in more than one language.

Along with the linguistic diversity of the Bible, the New Testament also grants theological license to communicate the gospel in the languages of the nations. In Luke 10:1, for example, Christ sends out seventy-two disciples, “designavit Dominus et alios septuaginta duos et misit illos binos ante faciem suam in omnem civitatem et locum quo erat ipse venturus” (the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them in pairs before his face into every city and place where he himself was to come).²⁶ Ælfric equates the number of the books of the Bible typologically with these seventy-two disciples of Christ who

²³ Weber, ed., *Biblia Sacra*, 1515.20-21.

²⁴ Bardy, “Saint Jérôme”; and Vielhauer, “Jewish-Christian Gospels.”

²⁵ Ælfric, *Ælfric's Lives of Saints*, vol. 1 (EETS o.s. 76, 82), 326.106-328.110.

²⁶ Weber, ed., *Biblia Sacra*, 1627.

were sent out to preach to the seventy-two nations that arose after the fall of the Tower of Babel.²⁷ Again in the letter “On the Old and New Testament,” Ælfric writes,

Twa 7 hundseofontig boca sind on bibliothecan [...]. 7 swa fela þeoda wurdon todælede æt þære wundorlican byrig, þe þa entas woldon wircean mid gebeote æfter Noes flode, ær þan ðe hi toferdon. And swa fela leorningcnihta asende ure Hælend mancinne to bodienne þæra boca lare mid þam cristendome, þe þa com on þas woruld þurh ðone Hælend sylfne 7 þurh his bydelas.²⁸

[There are seventy-two books in the Bible [...] and into as many were the nations divided at that wondrous city [Babel] that the giants, with their boasting, desired to build after Noah’s flood before they dispersed. And our Saviour sent just as many disciples to preach to mankind the teachings of those books with the Christian faith, which came into this world through the Saviour himself and through his appointed disciples.]

The typological connections are all clear for Ælfric: there are seventy-two nations after the Tower of Babel, seventy-two disciples whom Christ sent out, and seventy-two books of the Bible. As Thomas N. Hall has shown, Ælfric even includes the apocryphal “Letter to the Laodiceans” in the biblical canon in order to complete the number seventy-two as required for typological purposes.²⁹ For Ælfric, the Bible consists of seventy-two components mediating between God and humanity and revealing the path to salvation, much like Christ’s seventy-two disciples mediate between Christ and the nations insofar as they teach what Christ has revealed to them. But in order to preach to the linguistically diverse nations, the language barrier must be dealt with, and a translation of at least parts of the Bible, if not the whole, performs the role of the seventy-two disciples by mediating between the original languages of the Bible and the language of each particular nation.

Ælfric is, therefore, justified in his vernacular translations of parts of the Bible because, through them, he fulfils the commandment given to the seventy-two disciples: his translations mediate between the words of Christ and a language that exists because of the dispersal of the seventy-two nations and languages after the destruction of the Tower of Babel. As a Bible translator, Ælfric mediates between humanity and God through

27 For this typology in Anglo-Saxon England, see Sauer, “Die 72 Völker und Sprachen der Welt: Ein mittelalterlicher Topos in der englischen Literatur,” and his supplement “Die 72 Völker und Sprachen der Welt: Einige Ergänzungen.”

28 Ælfric, “On the Old and New Testament,” in *The Old English Version of the Heptateuch*, 69.1176-70.1183.

29 Hall, “Ælfric and the Epistle to the Laodiceans,” 73-74.

an accessible language, just as each of the seventy-two components of the Bible mediate between God and humans and as the seventy-two disciples mediate between Christ and the nations. On the basis of these typological correspondences, it is not only permissible but necessary to translate portions of the Bible, because the translator fulfils the task of the disciple by proclaiming the gospel to a new nation in that nation's language. In effect, Ælfric's Old English translations of the Bible thus counteract the pagan elements of the dispersal after the destruction of the Tower of Babel in that they offer a legitimate linguistic medium to the Anglo-Saxon nation by which that nation may be saved through Christ.

As mentioned above, Ælfric believes the Gospel of Matthew to have been originally written in Hebrew and the Gospels of Luke and John to have been written in Greek, but he is silent concerning the language of Mark's Gospel given its apparent discrepancy between language and geographical location. Along with the language of the gospels, Ælfric includes the locations where each Evangelist composed his work: Matthew wrote a Hebrew Gospel "on Iudea lande" (in Judea),³⁰ Luke wrote a Greek Gospel "on Achaian lande" (in Achaea),³¹ and John wrote a Greek Gospel "on Asian lande" (in Asia).³² Adding that Mark wrote his Gospel "on Romana byrig" (in Rome),³³ where Ælfric knows Latin to be spoken, and knowing that the Gospel of Mark was not written in Latin but in Greek, Ælfric elides this apparent inconsistency: a Greek gospel being incomprehensible to speakers of Latin, Ælfric cannot account for Mark's role as a disciple who wrote a Gospel for the people in Rome in a language that fails to provide the appropriate medium for that people. In contrast, Ælfric has no problem explaining why Luke and John wrote in Greek and not in their native Hebrew. While the Gospel of Matthew communicates through Hebrew to speakers of Hebrew in Israel, the Gospels of Luke and John communicate through Greek, a language that is comprehensible to the pagan nations that formed their audiences.

Moreover, in translations of non-biblical material, which allows for interpolation and commentary by the author that would not be permissible in a translation of the Bible, Ælfric often notes the original language of the text prior to its translation into Latin. Even though it appears that he had no practical knowledge of Greek or Hebrew but only knew fragments of these languages from his sources,³⁴ Ælfric takes care to mention the

30 Ælfric, "On the Old and New Testament," in *The Old English Version of the Heptateuch*, 53.866.

31 Ælfric, "On the Old and New Testament," in *The Old English Version of the Heptateuch*, 53.875.

32 Ælfric, "On the Old and New Testament," in *The Old English Version of the Heptateuch*, 53.877.

33 Ælfric, "On the Old and New Testament," in *The Old English Version of the Heptateuch*, 53.870.

34 For the lack of knowledge of Greek and Hebrew in Anglo-Saxon England, see Bodden, "Evidence," *passim*, and Fleming, "The Most Exalted Language" 2-4, 131-33, and 164.

original authority of the text, despite the linguistic diversity of the tradition, in order to make his own text more authoritative. For example, in his second series of the *Catholic Homilies*, Ælfric concludes the thirty-third homily, on the Passion of SS. Simon and Jude, as follows:

þas race awrát se biscop Abdías. se ðe þam apostolum folgode fram Iudea lande; He awrat hí on ebreiscum gereorde. and his leorningcniht eutropus hí awende eft on greciscum gereorde. and africanus hí awrát eft on tyn bocum. ac ús genihtsumað on urum gereorde þas scortan race to getrymminge urum geleafan.³⁵

[The bishop Abdias, who followed the apostles from the land of Judea, wrote this narrative. He wrote it in the Hebrew language and his disciple Eutropus afterwards translated it into the Greek language, and Africanus wrote it afterwards in ten books, but this short narrative is sufficient for us in our language for supporting our faith.]

For the most part, Ælfric translated these lines from an anonymous *Passio Simonis et Iudae*, but the final clause, “ac ús genihtsumað on urum gereorde þas scortan race to getrymminge urum geleafan,” is original.³⁶ It is in this final sentence that Ælfric reveals his intention to carry over a two-fold chain of authority — one based on authorship and the other on language — into his Old English text. First, following his Latin source, he carefully points out that what he is translating ultimately derives from the Hebrew of Abdias, bishop of Babylon, who followed the apostles and is thereby associated with apostolic authority. Ælfric’s translation continues with the explanation that the text was then transmitted to the Greek by Abdias’s disciple Eutropus before being translated into Latin by Africanus. It is only after Africanus’s Latin version that the text enters Old English by means of the further translation produced by Ælfric, who takes care to mention the present textual stage. By claiming that his Old English version is derived from a text that has passed from the original Hebrew of Abdias and the apostles and thence to the Greek of Eutropus and the Latin of Africanus, Ælfric not only draws attention to his own knowledge of and participation in a patristic textual tradition that originates in apostolic authority, but also to the fact that in this textual tradition the original text moves from language to language without any loss of apostolic authority. The very fact that Ælfric is using the Latin text as an authoritative source, despite its prior transmission through two other languages, justifies Ælfric’s Old English translation. If it is granted to Eutropus and Africanus to translate the Hebrew text into *their* languages, it must also be granted

35 Ælfric, *Ælfric’s Catholic Homilies: The Second Series*, 287.275-80. See Fleming for a slightly different interpretation of this passage; Fleming, “The Most Exalted Language,” 168-69.

36 Godden, *Ælfric’s Catholic Homilies: Introduction*, 613-14.

to Ælfric to translate it into *his*; even though Ælfric is an Anglo-Saxon writing in Old English, he still has licence to convey the initial power of a text outside of its original language since other languages have successfully accomplished the same textual transmission.

In addition to the license given by the biblical narrative of Luke 10 to preach the gospel message in any of the languages of the world, Ælfric realizes that Old English and all other vernacular languages have been sanctioned through the miracle of Pentecost when all the languages of the nations were heard and understood due to the descent of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:3-4, 6):

et apparuerunt illis dispartitae linguae tamquam ignis seditque supra singulos eorum et repleti sunt omnes Spiritu Sancto et coeperunt loqui aliis linguis prout Spiritus Sanctus dabat eloqui illis [...] facta autem hac voce convenit multitudo et mente confusa est quoniam audiebat unusquisque lingua sua illos loquentes.³⁷

[and forked tongues as if of fire appeared to them and the flame sat upon each of them and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and they began to speak in other languages just as the Holy Spirit gave them to speak. [...] and when this noise was heard, a crowd gathered and was confused in its mind because each one heard them speaking in his own language.]

For Ælfric, linguistic and cultural diversity is at the root of not knowing the truths presented in the Bible, but, as the miracle of Pentecost demonstrates, all languages are divinely sanctioned for communicating the message of the Gospel. In his sermon on Pentecost in the first series of *Catholic Homilies*, for example, Ælfric preaches not on the unification of language but rather on the comprehension of all languages, despite their diversity, in the descent of the Holy Spirit:

se halga gast com ofer þam ápostolon on fyrenum tungum. 7 him forgeaf ingehíd ealra gereorda: [...] Nu eft on þysum dæge þurh ðæs halgan gastes tocyme wurdon ealle gereord geanlæhte 7 geþwære: for þan ðe eall se halga heap cristes hiredes wæs sprecede mid eallum gereordum 7 eac þæt wunderlicor wæs: þa ða heora án bodode mid anre spræce. ælcum wæs geþuht þe ða bodunge gehyrde swilce he spræce mid his gereorde: wæron hi ebreisce oððe grecisce oððe romanisce. oððe egyptisce. oððe swa hwilcere þeode swa hi wæron þe ða lare gehyrdon.³⁸

[the Holy Ghost came over the apostles in fiery tongues and gave to them the understanding of all languages [...]. Now later on this day, all languages became unified and united by the coming of the Holy Spirit, for all the holy gathering of Christ's company

37 Weber, ed. *Biblia Sacra*, 1699; see also Dekker, "Pentecost," *passim*.

38 Ælfric, *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: The First Series*, 358.109-111, 358.119-359.126.

was speaking in all languages and also, what was more marvellous, when one of them preached in one language, it seemed to each who heard the sermon as if he were speaking in his language, whether he was Hebrew or Greek or Roman or Egyptian or whatever nationality they were who heard that teaching.]

A similar connection between the diversity of languages at Babel and the linguistic harmony created by the miracle of Pentecost is evident in Ælfric's homily on the feast day of Saint Matthew, where he has Matthew himself say,

eal middaneard hæfde ane spræce ær ðan þe seo dyrstignys asprang æfter Noes flode. þæt men woldon him aræran swa heahne stypel þæt his hrof astige to heofenum. ac se ælmihtiga towearp heora anginn. swa þæt hé forgeaf ælcum ðæra wyrhtena synderlic gereord. and heora nán nyste hwæt oðer gecwæð; Eft syððan þæs ælmihtigan godes sunu þa ða hé wolde com to middanearde. and tæhte mid hwilcere getimbrunge we sceolon to heofonum astigan. and asende us his apostolum þone halgan gast of heofenum on fyres hiwe. se ús onælde swa swa fyr deð isen. and us forgeaf ingehyd ealles wisdomes. and ealra gereorda. þyssere worulde; And to swa hwilcere leode swa we cumað we cunnon ðære gereord na medemlice. ac fulfremedlice.³⁹

[all the earth had one language before the arrogance arose after Noah's flood, so that people desired to raise for themselves a tower so high that its roof would ascend to heaven, but the Almighty destroyed their enterprise, giving different languages to all the workers, and none of them knew what the other said. Later the Son of the almighty God, when he wished, came to earth and taught with what building we should arise to heaven, and he sent us, his apostles, the Holy Spirit from heaven in the appearance of fire, who heated us just as fire [heats] iron, and he gave us understanding of all wisdom and of all languages of this world. And to whichever people we come, we know their language not moderately but perfectly.]

In these passages, Pentecost again becomes the solution to the problem created by the linguistic diversity after the destruction of the Tower of Babel. It is not that the world is again restored to a unilingual state, but that the apostles of Christ are granted the ability to communicate perfectly in all languages, no matter how holy or base any particular language may be. For Ælfric, English is a suitable language to translate portions of Scripture into, because as a priest he has been charged, like Matthew, to preach to people who are ignorant of Hebrew, Greek, or Latin and to use their own language, not the languages of Scripture, to do so. With Pentecost, the linguistic role of the evangelist

39 Ælfric, *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: The Second Series*, 275.93-105; for Ælfric's source, an anonymous *Passio Matthaei*, see Godden, *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: Introduction*, 608-609.

is brought to the forefront. Because linguistic diversity is a serious obstacle to salvation, the disciple of Christ must communicate with his audience in the appropriate language. The miracle of Pentecost simply ensures that there is no language for this communication that is so lowly that it will thwart the message of salvation.

In Ælfric's view, the dispersal after the Tower of Babel literally happened, and the resulting linguistic and cultural diversity creates barriers to salvation. However, Ælfric's treatment of other events described in the Bible, such as the sending out of disciples in Luke 10 and Pentecost in Acts 2, emphasizes that Scripture itself has sanctified the use of diverse languages to communicate the gospel message to the pagan nations. Thus, for the clergy, who act as Christ's disciples, translation is an essential tool that acts as a medium between the word of God and the diverse languages of the nations.

The problem of the diversity of languages can now be overcome. Despite all the reluctance that he expresses, Ælfric's practical approach to translation is positive. Ælfric understands that his audience is largely unable to understand or even learn Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, and he is truly concerned that they may face damnation due to an ignorance of the truth of the Bible, which they cannot understand except in their own language. It is precisely because of this concern that Ælfric translates biblical texts and thereby makes them accessible in a medium comprehensible to Anglo-Saxons. His comments nod towards the biblical events of Christ's commission of the seventy-two disciples and celebrate the triumph of Pentecost rather than lament the Tower of Babel.

Centre for Medieval Studies, University of Toronto

Bibliography

- Ælfric. *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: The First Series – Text*. Edited by Peter Clemoes. EETS s.s. 17. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1997.
- . *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: The Second Series – Text*. Edited by Malcolm Godden. EETS s.s. 5. London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1979.
- . *Ælfric's Lives of Saints*. 4 vols. Edited by Walter W. Skeat. EETS o.s. 76, 82, 94, 114. London: Trübner, 1881-1900. (Reprinted in 2 vols., London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1966.)
- . *Homilies of Ælfric: A Supplementary Collection*. 2 vols. Edited by John C. Pope. EETS o.s. 259, 260. London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967-68.
- . *The Old English Version of the Heptateuch, Ælfric's Treatise on the Old and New Testament and His Preface to Genesis*. Edited by S. J. Crawford. EETS o.s. 160. London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1922. (Reprinted 1969.)

- Bardy, Gustave. "Saint Jérôme et l'évangile selon les Hébreux." *Mélanges de science religieuse* 3 (1946): 5-36.
- Bodden, Mary Catherine. "Evidence for Knowledge of Greek in Anglo-Saxon England." *Anglo-Saxon England* 17 (1988): 217-46.
- Clemons, Peter. "The Chronology of Ælfric's Works." In *The Anglo-Saxons: Studies in Some Aspects of Their History and Culture, Presented to Bruce Dickins*, edited by Peter Clemons, 212-47. London: Bowes & Bowes, 1959.
- Dekker, Kees. "Pentecost and Linguistic Self-Consciousness in Anglo-Saxon England: Bede and Ælfric." *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 104 (2005): 345-72.
- Fleming, Damian Joseph. "'The Most Exalted Language': Anglo-Saxon Perceptions of Hebrew." PhD diss., Univ. of Toronto, 2006.
- Godden, Malcolm, *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: Introduction, Commentary and Glossary*. EETS s.s.18. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000.
- Hall, Thomas N. "Ælfric and the Epistle to the Laodiceans." In *Apocryphal Texts and Traditions in Anglo-Saxon England*, edited by Kathryn Powell and Donald Scragg, 65-83. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2003.
- Howlett, David. "'Tres Linguae Sacrae' and Threefold Play in Insular Latin." *Peritia* 16 (2002): 94-115.
- Isidore of Seville. *Isidori Hispalensis Episcopi Etymologiarum sive Originum Libri XX*. 2 vols. Edited by W. M. Lindsay. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1911. (Reprinted London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1966.)
- Lapidge, Michael. *The Anglo-Saxon Library*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2006.
- McNally, Robert E. "The 'Tres Linguae Sacrae' in Early Irish Bible Exegesis." *Theological Studies* 19 (1958): 395-403.
- Resnick, Irven M. "Lingua Dei, Lingua Hominis: Sacred Language and Medieval Texts." *Viator* 21 (1990): 51-74.
- Sauer, Hans. "Die 72 Völker und Sprachen der Welt: Einige Ergänzungen." *Anglia* 107 (1989): 61-64.
- . "Die 72 Völker und Sprachen der Welt: Ein mittelalterlicher Topos in der englischen Literatur." *Anglia* 101 (1983): 29-48.
- Stanton, Robert. *The Culture of Translation in Anglo-Saxon England*. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2002.
- Tristram, Hildegard L. C., ed. *Sex aetates mundi: Die Weltzeitalter bei den Angelsachsen und den Iren – Untersuchungen und Texte*. Anglistische Forschungen 165. Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1985.
- Vielhauer, P. "Jewish-Christian Gospels." In *New Testament Apocrypha*, edited by Wilhelm Schneemelcher, Edgar Hennecke, and R. McL. Wilson. Vol. 1, *Gospels and Related Writings*, 117-65. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963. First publ. in German, Tübingen: Mohr, 1959.
- Weber, Robert, ed. *Biblia Sacra iuxta Vulgatam Versionem*. 4th ed. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994.
- Wulfstan. *The Homilies of Wulfstan*. Edited by Dorothy Bethurum. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957.