

Preface to the Pastoral Care

Alfred the Great

Imperial · Early Medieval · Essay

STROMATA 23

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INTRODUCTION

Composed around 890 by the West Saxon king who had only recently driven back the Danish invasions, this letter accompanied his own translation of Gregory the Great's *Regula Pastoralis*, sent to each bishopric in his realm. Alfred surveys a kingdom whose monasteries stood full of Latin books no one could read, and announces the program that would follow: the translation of those works "most needful for all men to know" into the vernacular. It marks the beginning of English prose as a vehicle for serious thought, and stands at the head of a tradition that runs through Wycliffe and Tyndale to the King James translators. Read it for the voice of a king grieving lost learning and resolving, in plain speech, to rebuild it.

This book shall to Worcester.

King Alfred bids greet bishop Wærferth lovingly and friendly in his words; and I bid thee to make it known that it hath very often come into my mind what wise men formerly were throughout the English race, both of the spiritual and of the secular condition, and how happy the times then were through the English race, and how the kings who then had the government of this fólk obeyed God and His messengers, and how they held both their peace, their customs, and their government at home, and also increased their country abroad, and how then they sped, both in war and in wisdom ; and also the religious orders, how earnest they were both about their doctrine and about their learning, and about all the services they should do to God ; and how men from abroad sought wisdom and instruction in this land, and how we must now get them from without if we would have them ; so clean was it [learning) now fallen off among the English race that there were very few on this side of the Humber that were able to understand their service in English, or even to turn a sent writing [an epistle) from Latin into English ; and I think that there were not many beyond the Humber. So few there were of them that I cannot think of even one on the South of the Thames, when I first took to the kingdom.

To God Almighty be thanks that we now have any teacher in the state, and therefore I have commanded thee that thou do as I believe thou wilt – that thou, who from the things of this world art at leisure for this, as thou often mayest, that thou bestow the wisdom that God has given thee wherever thou mayest bestow it. Think what punishment shall come upon us for this world when we have not ourselves loved it in the least degree, and also have not left it to other men to do so . We have had the name alone that

we were Christians, and very few the virtues. When I the called to mind all this, then I remembered how I saw ere that all in them was laid waste and burnt up, how the churches throughout all the English race stood filled with treasures and books, and also a great multitude of God's servants ; but they knew very little use of those books, for that they could not understand anything of them, for that they were not written in their own language, such as they our elders spoke, who ere- while held these places ; they loved wisdom and through that got wealth, and left it to us. Here men may yet see their path, but we know not how to tread in their footsteps, inasmuch as we have both lost that wealth and wisdom, for that we would not with our minds stoop to their tracks.

When I then called to mind all this, I then wondered greatly about those good and wise men that had been of old among the English race, and who had fully learned all the books, that they have not been willing to turn any part of them into their own language. But then I soon again answered myself, and said, " they did not think that men would ever become so reckless, and that learning should fall off in such a way. Of set purpose, then, they let it alone, and wished that there should be more wisdom in this land ; the more languages we knew ." Then I remembered how the law was first found in the Hebrew tongue, and again when the Greeks learnt it, then they turned the whole of it into their own language, and also all the other books. And again the Latins also in the same way, when they had learn tit, turned it all through wise interpreters into their own language, and likewise all other Christian nations have translated some part into their own speech.

Wherefore I think it better, if it also appears so to you, that we, too, should translate some books which are the most necessary for most men to understand that we should turn these into that tongue which we all can know ; and so bring it about, as we very easily may, with God's help, if we have rest, that all the youth that now is among the English race, of free men that have property, so that they can apply themselves to these things, may be committed to others for the sake of instruction, so long as they have no power for any other employments, until the time that they may know well how to read English writing. Let men afterwards further teach them Latin, those whom they are willing further to teach, and whom they wish to advance to a higher state. When I then called to mind how the learning of the Latin tongue before this was fallen away throughout the English race, though many knew how to read writing in English – then began I, among other unlike and manifold businesses of this kingdom . to turn into English the book that is named in Latin Pastoral is, and in English The Hind's Book, one while word for word, another while meaning for meaning, so far as I learnt it with Plegmund, my Arch bishop, and with Asser, my Bishop, and with Grimbold, my mass priest, and with John my mass priest. After I had then learned them, so that I understood them, and so that I might read them with the fullest comprehension, I turned them into English, and to each bishop's see in my kingdom will send one, and on each is an æstel (I think a small stand for the book] that is of the value of 50 mancuses ; and I bid in God's name that no man undo the æstel from the books, nor the books from the minster. It is unknown how long there may be so learned bishops as now, thank God, are everywhere. For this I would that they always should be at their place, unless the Bishop will have them with him, or they be anywhere lent, or some one write others by them.

Source: https://www.google.com/books/edition/King_Alfred_s_work_in_Church_and_State_L/Ka9sIZ33XEAC?hl=en&gbpv=0

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