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Isidorian Influences in Ælfric's Preface to Genesis*

Brandon W. Hawk

In this article, I propose Isidore of Seville's Etymologiae as a source for three passages in Ælfric's Preface to Genesis. With these source identifications established, I further develop the argument to claim that Isidorian techniques are a key influence on Ælfric's assumptions about biblical language, translation, and interpretation as reflected in the Preface. Such assumptions, in fact, inform the vernacular pedagogical project at the heart of the Preface as an introduction to his translation of Genesis into Old English.

In his Preface to Genesis, Ælfric relied greatly on previous learned traditions in order to address issues of biblical translation and interpretation, especially in reference to the Bible in the vernacular.¹ This is indicated by Mark Griffith's comprehensive study of the sources and analogues for the Preface, in which he has acknowledged the diverse range of patristic influences upon the work.² Building on Griffith's assessments, in the following examination of the Preface I propose another source underlying Ælfric's discussion: the *Etymologiae* of Isidore of Seville.³ Indeed, Isidore's work "served as a major, perhaps *the* major, source for the Latin language and intellectual tradition in early Anglo-Saxon England", and there is widespread use of the

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¹ References to the Preface by line numbers are to Marsden, *Heptateuch*; references to the *Heptateuch* (ibid.) are by chapter and verse numbers. Unless otherwise noted, translations are my own.

² Griffith, "Ælfric's Use"; see also Griffith, "Sources."

³ References are to Lindsay; translations are adapted from Barney, et al. See Dekkers and Gaar, no. 1186.

Etymologiae throughout the corpus of both Anglo-Latin and Old English texts.⁴ Griffith lists Isidore's *Etymologiae* VI.xvii.16 as an analogue to the Preface (10-13, 21-4) in the use of the motif of the three ages of the law;⁵ and Robert Stanton has observed the possible influence of Isidore's notions of style on Ælfric's writing.⁶ Yet in the present study I want to explore a number of further, previously unidentified Isidorian influences that are evident throughout Ælfric's Preface, and propose that Isidorian techniques are fundamental to the foundations of his vernacular pedagogical project.⁷

Three specific passages indicate Ælfric's adoption of Isidorian assumptions in his thinking about biblical language, translation and interpretation. The first instance appears as an etymological explanation in the middle of the Preface, when Ælfric discusses the title of the first book of the Bible: "Seo boc ys gehaten Genesis, þæt ys 'gecyndboc', for þam þe heo ys firmest boca and spricþ be ælcum gecinde" (47-8: The book is called Genesis, that is "the book of species", because it is the first book and speaks about each species). In his examination of the Preface, Griffith has called attention to the common topos of medieval authors to explain the meaning of the name of the work under discussion, but with no reference to this etymology specifically.⁸ The only other witnesses to the word *gecyndboc* in the Old English corpus occur in

⁴ Howe, 58; see also entries for Isidore (Isid.) in *Fontes*; Lapidge, *Library*, esp. 311; and the discussion below for further specifics. On Isidore's influence in Anglo-Saxon England generally, see also the bibliography in Hillgarth, 965-7; and Lapidge, "Isidorian."

⁵ Griffith "Ælfric's Use," 144.

⁶ Stanton, "Rhetoric." Stanton offers the caveat that "Unfortunately, Isidore's treatment [of rhetoric] is extremely brief and can hardly have served as Ælfric's principal source" (138)—yet the possibility of this influence remains plausible. Cf. Stanton, *Culture*, 147-8.

⁷ On Ælfric's views of language and translation in his prefaces, see esp. Nichols, "Ælfric's Prefaces"; Stanton, "Rhetoric"; Wilcox; Griffith, "Ælfric's Preface"; Menzer; Stanton, *Culture*, 144-71; Long, 45-52; and Gretsche, 109-37.

⁸ Griffith "Ælfric's Preface," 222. On etymology in Anglo-Saxon England, both in reference to Ælfric and generally, see Robinson, "Significance"; idem, "Some Uses"; Hill; Frank; Gneuss, "Study," 92-5; and Chapman, 428-31.

the glosses to Aldhelm's *De virginitate* III.⁹ In two instances, Aldhelm cites Genesis with the Greek title *Geneseos*, which in manuscripts of this treatise is glossed by later hands as both Latin *generationis* and Old English *gecyndboca*.¹⁰ There is, however, no evidence to link these glosses with Ælfric. Remarkable for Ælfric's text is that he provides a unique instance of both a calque and his own explanation for his rendering, but he does so without explicitly clarifying the reasoning behind this translation.¹¹ About this passage, Richard Marsden suggests that "Strictly speaking, Ælfric translates Lat. *genus*, 'origin', 'kind' or 'species' ('book of origin'), not *genesis*, which signifies 'generation', 'birth', or 'creation'"¹²—but if this were the case, the Old English would most likely be rendered *cyn(n)*, the word accompanying *genus* (and *generis*) in Ælfric's *Grammar*.¹³ There is, then, more at work in this translation than an idiosyncratic rendering of the Latin into the vernacular.

The calque of *gecyndboc* for *Genesis* is better understood in light of Isidore's explanation for the book's title in the *Etymologiae*: "Genesis liber inde appellatur, eo quod exordium mundi et generatio saeculi in eo contineatur" (VI.ii.3: The book of Genesis is so called because the beginning of the world and the begetting [*generatio*] of race [*saeculi*] are contained in it).¹⁴ Notably, in Ælfric's *Glossary*, Latin *generatio* is glossed with Old English *cynryn* (*cynren*),

⁹ Instances found by searching the web corpus portion of Healey, *Dictionary*. I have also cross-checked the glosses with references to Genesis in the "Index locorum S. Scripturae" in Gwara, 2:361-3. On these glosses, their dates, and their manuscript contexts, see Gwara, 1:74-308. References to glosses in Gwara are by chapter and line numbers.

¹⁰ Gwara, 3.10 and 16.29. See Healey, *Dictionary*, s.v. *gecyndboc*; the definition in the context of these glosses is given as: "Genesis, literally understood as the book of creation or begetting".

¹¹ On Ælfric's techniques for rendering Latin terms into Old English (esp. in relation to his *Grammar*), see Chapman. On Latin-Old English gloss formations more generally, see Kornexl.

¹² *Old English Reader*, 126, n. 43.

¹³ Zupitza, 59, line 3. See also Chapman, 439. See also Healey, *Dictionary*, s.v. *cynn*.

¹⁴ See Maltby, 255. Notably, this explanation also occurs verbatim in the first Pentateuch commentary in Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana M.79 sup., associated with the Canterbury School of Theodore and Hadrian in the seventh and eighth centuries; see Bischoff and Lapidge, 302, though this quotation is not identified by Bischoff and Lapidge (see 204-5).

indicating a close relationship between the two root-words in his thinking.¹⁵ It is significant that the *Glossary* (along with the accompanying *Grammar*) was compiled at an early stage of Ælfric's career, around the same time that he was composing his Preface to Genesis (c.992-1002).¹⁶ Moreover, the structure and some of the content of the *Glossary* are derived from the *Etymologiae*, with Ælfric's subjects listed in the same order as Isidore's—forging a close association between Ælfric's thoughts on language and the earlier compendium.¹⁷ The explanation given in the Preface, along with this other evidence, suggests that Ælfric worked from Isidore's etymology and used similar reasoning both to render *Genesis* into English and to clarify the etymological justification to his readers. Don Chapman has demonstrated that, in another context, Ælfric's renderings of Latin terms into Old English “would have been extending to the bilingual sphere a technique that had already become popular in the monolingual sphere, namely etymological explanation”.¹⁸ This practice is precisely the case of Ælfric's translation and explanation: the meaning of *Genesis* is rooted in the begetting (*generatio*) of species (*geni*), and he chooses to carry this meaning over into English using the vernacular *cynd* paired with *boc* to signify a calque for “the book of species”.

Acknowledging the Isidorian techniques at the heart of Ælfric's wordplay also allows for an analysis of one of his renderings of the Latin Vulgate into English:¹⁹ “Eft stynt on þære bec on þam forman ferse: ‘Et spiritus Dei ferebatur super aquas.’ Þæt is on Englisc, ‘and Godes gast

¹⁵ Zupitza, 300, line 10. Healey, *Dictionary*, s.v. *cynren*, 2.d.: “rendering *generatio* in specific sense ‘special class or group’”. Following the paronomastic implications, it is also relevant to note the respective parallel relationships depicted in the *Glossary* and *Grammar* between Latin *genus* and *generatio*, and Old English *cynn* and *cynren*.

¹⁶ See Clemons, 244.

¹⁷ See Healey, “Old English Glossaries.” On Isidorian influences on Ælfric's glossing, see Meyer.

¹⁸ Chapman, 429.

¹⁹ Biblical references are to the Latin Vulgate in Weber; translations are from the Douay-Rheims version in *Holy Bible*.

wæs gefeod ofer wæteru” (58-60: Then again in the book in the first verse: “And the spirit of God moved over the waters” [Gen. 1:2]. That is in English, “and the spirit of God was moved over the waters”).²⁰ Of all the words that Ælfric could have chosen to translate the Latin *ferebatur* (*fero*), the Old English *gefeod* (*geferian*) is peculiar for its quality as an aural analogue.²¹ It stands to reason that Ælfric also recognized this relationship and subsequently imagined an etymological connection between the meanings of the two words. After all, the medieval means of understanding etymologies were not founded on the same principles as modern linguistic methods, but on the seemingly comparable attributes of words.²²

Although this association is not mediated by any specific passage in the *Etymologiae*, Ælfric’s paronomastic translation does portray affinities with the reasoning given by Isidore for etymologies. In his section “De etymologia”, Isidore relates: “Sunt autem etymologiae nominum aut ex causa datae... aut ex origine... aut ex contrariis.... Quaedam etiam facta sunt ex nominum derivatione... quaedam etiam ex vocibus... quaedam ex Graeca etymologia orta et declinata sunt in Latinum” (I.xxix.3-4: Etymologies of words are furnished either from their given cause... or from their origin... or from the contrary.... Some are created by derivation from other words... some from sound... some are derived from Greek etymology and have a Latin declension). For Ælfric, following Isidore’s justification for etymologies, the sound (*vocibus*) between *ferebatur* and *gefeod* seems to be the connection. Through an Isidorian understanding of words and their

²⁰ In the Old English translation of Gen. 1:2 in the *Heptateuch*, the rendering is the same; the variant *gefered* is given in Cambridge, University Library, Ii.1.33; see Marsden, *Heptateuch*, 8. Cf. Ælfric’s rendering of this passage in *Dominica prima post Pentecosten* in Pope, 1:483, lines 100-1: “þa wæs Godes sylfes Gast, swa swa seo boc us secgð, gefeod ofer wæterum” (then the Spirit of God himself, about which the book tells us, was moved over the waters).

²¹ For this instance in the Old English corpus, see Healey, *Dictionary*, s.v. *gefered*, 1.e.: “of the spirit of God (at Gn 1:2): borne (so as to move / hover over the waters)”.

²² On ancient and medieval etymological techniques generally, see esp. Amsler, “Classical Etymology”; idem, *Etymology*; Maltby; and Del Bello.

meanings, it is reasonable that Ælfric recognized this similarity, understood it via a cognate relationship, and utilized it for his translation.

A third connection between Ælfric's discussion and the *Etymologiae* directly follows this translation in the Preface. Emphasizing typological exegesis of the Old Testament, Ælfric offers a reading of the Holy Spirit in Genesis 1:2 in terms of Christian baptism: "Godes gast ys se halga gast.... And se halga gast færþ geond manna heortan and silp us synna forgifnisse, ærest þurh wæter on þam fulluhte and siþþan þurh dætbote" (60-4: The spirit of God is the Holy Spirit... And the Holy Spirit passes through the hearts of men and gives us the forgiveness of sins, first through water in baptism and afterward through penance). Isidore also offers a similar typological reading of this same verse that links both the Holy Spirit at creation and the sacrament of baptism:

Quod autem per aquam baptismum datur, haec ratio est. Voluit enim Dominus ut res illa invisibilis per congruentem, sed profecto contrectabilem et visibilem inpenderetur elementum, super quem etiam in principio ferebatur Spiritus sanctus. Nam sicut aqua purgatur exterius corpus, ita latenter eius mysterio per Spiritum sanctum purificatur et animus.

(VI.xix.47-8: This is the reason why baptism is enacted by water: the Lord desired that invisible thing to be granted through the congruent but definitely tangible and visible element over which in the beginning the Holy Spirit moved [Gen. 1:2]. For just as the outer body is washed by water, so the spirit is also purified by the Holy Spirit in a hidden way through the mystery of baptism.)

What is striking about Isidore's and Ælfric's explanations is that both include explicit references to the dual nature of baptism—the physical and spiritual. Thus, by mentioning the *dætbote* of the

believer, Ælfric brings into further accentuation the outward sign of the *mysterio* of which Isidore writes. The association of the Holy Spirit in Genesis 1:2 with baptism was a commonplace in patristic and medieval exegesis; but the parallel here is notable, since the etymology of the title of Genesis discussed above and this typological exegesis are both found in Book VI of Isidore's *Etymologiae*, and Ælfric utilizes both explanations in his discussion of the Bible in the Preface.²³

It is not surprising that the Preface portrays Ælfric's knowledge and use of Isidore's *Etymologiae*. Material evidence for the circulation of this encyclopedia is found in the fact that twenty extant manuscripts containing parts of the *Etymologiae* survive from Anglo-Saxon England, the earliest dated to the end of the seventh and beginning of the eighth centuries.²⁴ Besides manuscripts, the encyclopedia also recorded in the eleventh-century Exeter inventory of books associated with Bishop Leofric.²⁵ More specific to Ælfric, Joyce Hill has argued that, in his *Catholic Homilies*, he "regarded etymologies as a matter of serious scholarly concern",²⁶ and paronomastic wordplay is found elsewhere throughout his corpus (and, indeed, throughout the whole corpus of Old English); Isidore's work was a likely resource for this inclination.²⁷ There is, in fact, no doubt that Ælfric was directly influenced by the *Etymologiae*, which served as a source for various passages in his *Interrogationes Sigewulfi*,²⁸ as well as in his homilies on

²³ On another similar use of patristic exegesis, possibly mediated through Isidore's *Etymologiae*, in Ælfric's Old English *Letter to Sigeward* (*Libellus de ueteri testamento et nouo*), see Robinson "Significance," 33-34; for this passage in the *Letter*, see Marsden, *Heptateuch*, 205, lines 127-31.

²⁴ See Gneuss, *Handlist*, nos. 154.5, 173, 176, 185, 188.8, 311, 442.4, 460, 469, 497.2, 498.1, 524.4, 561, 682, 690, 784.5, 821, 885, 889 and 919.3; and idem, "Addenda and Corrigenda," no. 173.

²⁵ Lapidge, "Surviving Booklists," no. 10; cf. Lapidge, *Library*, 139-40.

²⁶ Hill, 37.

²⁷ For examples, see esp. Pope, 1:105-36; and references given above, n. 8.

²⁸ MacLean.

Nativitas Domini,²⁹ *In dedicatione ecclesiae*,³⁰ *Nativitas Domini*,³¹ *De falsis diis*,³² and *Passio Sanctorum Machabeorum*.³³

Along with the specific examples of Ælfric's reliance on Isidorian techniques, there are also more general associations to consider within the pedagogical project of the Preface. On the most basic thematic level, two major concerns for both Isidore and Ælfric are their close attention to language and the transmission of learning from previous authorities. First, concerning language, it is apparent to modern scholarship that "Isidore's overriding interest, the fundamental principle of the *Etymologies*, falls under the discipline Isidore would call grammar, the 'origin and foundation of liberal letters' (I.v.1), and what we would call philology—the art of correctly producing words and texts".³⁴ This same interest, expressed most explicitly in apprehensions about biblical language and translation into English, also pervades Ælfric's Preface, especially in relation to correct interpretation. For example, toward the beginning, Ælfric writes to his primary audience, Æðelweard, "Nu þincð me, leof, þæt þæt weorc is swiðe pleolic me oððe ænigum men to underbeginne" (8-9: Now it seems to me, friend, that that work [i.e. translation] is very dangerous for me or for any men to undertake). Again, toward the end of the Preface, he also expresses the problem of erroneous (102: *gedwolsum*) translations, chiefly for "þam þe þæs Ledenes wisan ne can" (103: him who does not know Latin). Thus, the Preface is framed by a thematic envelope pattern with explicit statements about his concerns that hold the rest of the content together within it. Throughout this content, Ælfric's close attention to

²⁹ Clemons, *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: The First Series*, 190-7.

³⁰ Godden, *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: The Second Series*, 335-45.

³¹ Pope, 1:191-225.

³² Pope, 2:667-724.

³³ Skeat, 2:66-124. For details on these source references, see introductions to individual homilies in Pope; and Godden, *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: Introduction*; as well as entries in *Fontes*; and Lapidge, *Library*, 261.

³⁴ "Introduction," in Barney, et al., 21.

language is further manifested in his approach to particular words and phrases, as demonstrated in the preceding examples.

The second thematic parallel is that both authors depict fundamental concerns for the transmission of learning, an integral part of the *translatio studii* carried over from antiquity through the Middle Ages. The encyclopedic nature of Isidore's work attests to this, as does the prolific incorporation of information gathered from previous authorities: throughout the *Etymologiae*, although Isidore explicitly names only a handful of authorities, he includes hundreds of uncited appropriations.³⁵ Similarly, Ælfric's appropriations of sources work in much the same way in the Preface. As previously noted, Griffith's identification of sources and analogues—and the present examination—bears out Ælfric's indebtedness, like Isidore's, to a wide array of biblical and patristic texts.³⁶ The authorities behind the learning preserved and transmitted in the two works integrally inform the thinking of the authors at hand and are central to the discussions each author offers in their texts.

Furthermore, in both Isidore's *Etymologiae* and Ælfric's Preface, the concerns for both language and transmission of learning are intertwined, neither theme distinct from the other. This is explicitly the case for Ælfric, who sought a balance between conceptions of Latin and English, previous authorities and his own expressions of learning, as well as translation and interpretation—none of which he viewed as strict binaries, but all of which he believed needed to be synthesized in his works. As Stanton argues, Ælfric participated in an Anglo-Saxon “culture of translation” in order to create “an academic culture that would be able both to teach Latin in a

³⁵ See esp. Fontaine; the discussion of Isidore's sources in Barney, et al., 10-17 (see also 29-31 for further bibliography); and, on Isidore's library, Lapidge, *Library*, 21-2, and references there.

³⁶ See references above, n. 2.

rigorous way and to pass on the interpretive tools of the grammatical and exegetical tradition”.³⁷

As the preceding examples suggest, adopting Isidorian techniques enabled Ælfric to achieve these goals in his Preface, as he transferred Latin theoretical and rhetorical ideals into the vernacular.³⁸ For Ælfric, Isidore was both a key collector of previous learning and an essential authority to be appropriated into his own practices of *translatio studii*. The *Etymologiae*, therefore, serves as a source on which Ælfric relied even to the extent that it gave him a model for composing his own vernacular repository of knowledge about the translation and interpretation of Genesis.

How Ælfric’s etymologizing supports the more general pedagogical project of the Preface, then, is inherent in the Isidorian techniques already observed. As Mark Amsler observes, “Etymological discourse constitutes the pedagogical authority whereby the grammarian stands before the literary text and delivers its meaning through the application of a professional expertise”.³⁹ Indeed, “pedagogical authority” and “professional expertise” are precisely the ways in which Ælfric projects himself in his Preface, and adopting an etymological approach helps to maintain such an endeavor. Even more, the etymological approach further solidifies this project through what Mary Carruthers and Carin Ruff have observed as the techniques of mnemonics serving as a pedagogical tool for medieval authors⁴⁰—ideas closely aligned with the explanatory bases of renderings into Old English that Lucia Kornexl has demonstrated.⁴¹ In this manner, Ælfric incorporates etymological techniques into his Preface as a way both to explain and to solidify his teaching on Genesis in the minds of his audience.

³⁷ *Culture*, 2; on Ælfric and translation, see 144-71.

³⁸ Cf. Nichols, “Ælfric and the Middle Style”; and Stanton, “Rhetoric.”

³⁹ Amsler, “Classical Etymology,” 72.

⁴⁰ Carruthers; and Ruff.

⁴¹ Kornexl, 202-5.

Significantly, his subject and his pedagogical manner exemplify the power of etymology for allegorical explanations of the spiritual, reinforced by the mnemonic aids of paronomasia.⁴² By appropriating Isidore's etymological techniques, Ælfric is thus able to focus his discussion of Genesis on illuminating the divine matters foremost in the minds of an audience concerned with the Bible in the vernacular.

By way of implications, one final point should be emphasized: that the Preface is an important work in the long history of English discussions about the translation and interpretation of the Bible. The Preface as a project revolving around vernacular biblical translation, as the present study suggests, further aligns with Griffith's claims that the "closest generic antecedents are, accordingly, the various prefaces by Jerome to the Vulgate translations of the Old Testament... and those of his letters which deal with the translation of Scripture".⁴³ In light of these issues, Ælfric's own work should be acknowledged as a cornerstone of both the Bible in English and the Bible as literature.⁴⁴ After all, etymology and allegory were intimately linked in the medieval period, and both widely applied to explicating the Bible.⁴⁵ Ælfric's role is often underappreciated in discussions of these subjects;⁴⁶ yet, by understanding Ælfric's Latin authorities—Jerome and Isidore, for example—we may also acknowledge his role in the English tradition, as a scholar committed to bringing the Bible into the sphere of the vernacular.

⁴² Carruthers; Ruff; and Del Bello, 95-115.

⁴³ Griffith, "Ælfric's Use," 127.

⁴⁴ This point is further borne out by Ælfric's role in translating parts of the *Heptateuch*, as well as numerous translations, paraphrases and discussions of the Bible in Old English throughout his works. Systematic treatment of Ælfric's translations of the Bible into Old English has yet to be published.

⁴⁵ See esp. Del Bello, 95-115.

⁴⁶ See, for example, Shepherd; Norton; Daniell; and Barnes. Two recent exceptions (of varying quality) are Stanton, *Culture*, esp. 101-43; and Long, esp. 37-52.

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