

Bigamy and the Bible in Ælfric's 'Preface to Genesis'

At the start of his preface to the Old English translation of Genesis, Ælfric expresses to Ealdorman Æþelweard his great fear that those able to read the book for themselves in their own language will conclude that they are free to act now as the patriarchs did then. Even his own teacher, a mass-priest, who told the young Ælfric of the disturbing example of Jacob's polygamy, did not understand the enormous difference between the Old Law and the New:

þa cwæð he be þam heahfædere Iacobe, þæt he hæfde feower wif: twa geswustra and heora twa þinena; ful soð he sæde, ac he nyste, ne ic þa git, hu micel toðal ys betweohx þære ealdan æ and þære niwan.¹

That the aim of the anecdote is to shock, rather than just to illustrate the difference between the two Laws, is clear enough from the fact that Ælfric could, had he so wished, have had his teacher quote the part of the Old Law which licensed bigamy, or have cited the less extreme example of Abraham's bigamy with Hagar.² In the beginning of this world, Ælfric continues, it was necessary for relatives to marry and have children together because there was no one else for them to marry and have children with. Jacob's marriages, then, are an extreme example of behaviour which was pragmatically required for the chosen people to multiply and replenish the earth, although the Bible does not itself give this explanation for his bigamy. At this juncture in the argument, the difference between the Old Law and the New appears to be constituted merely of varying accommodations to different historical conditions, with the Christian now forbidden to follow the licence permitted by the Old Law.³ The preface, however, then moves on: to the problem of married priests, and then more openly to the spiritual meaning of Genesis (in particular to the encoding of the Trinity in the first chapter of the book) and the important role of the priesthood in mediating that symbolic sense to the laity. Ælfric's teacher and Jacob's multiple bigamy are

¹ 'Then he spoke of the patriarch Jacob—that he had four wives: two sisters and their two maidservants; what he said was all true, but he did not know, nor did I then as yet, how great the difference is between the Old Law and the New'. Quotations from the text are taken from R. Marsden (ed.), *The 'Old English Heptateuch' and Ælfric's 'Libellus de Veteri Testamento et Novo'*, Vol. 1 Introduction and Text, EETS o.s. 330 (2008), 3-7, at 3, with occasional changes of punctuation.

² Exodus 21.10: 'if he take another wife for him, he shall provide her a marriage'. The mass-priest's allusion is but a very brief summation of the account of Jacob's marriages in Gen 29.16-30.13.

³ See Marsden, 3-4: '*Gyf hwa wyle nu swa lybban æfter Cristes tocyme swa swa men leofodon ær Moises æ, oþpe under Moises æ, ne byð se man na cristen*'; 'If someone wishes to live in this fashion now after Christ's coming just as men lived before Moses' law, or under Moses' law, that man is certainly no Christian'.

apparently left behind and are not mentioned again. But we surely feel by the end that some questions remain unanswered. Why did his teacher specify that the wives were two sisters and their two maidservants? And what was so significant about this that caused Ælfric to repeat it thus? This is not a Biblical quotation where the words of the original might be respected for the sake of it. The abomination of Jacob lies squarely in his quadrigamy and the added material is surely ancillary to that, whatever the relations were between the various wives? And why does Ælfric not return to this example later, if it was so important to him as to be hard-wired in his memory from youth, and give us the symbolic meaning of these patriarchal scandals, so that the lay reader might understand what his own teacher seemingly did not, that that which shocks and appals at the literal level conceals sublime (but still, for sure, admonitory)⁴ truth? My purpose here is to try to answer these questions.

At the end of the main section of the preface, the author returns to the need for obedience to the Law:

We sceolon awendan urne willan to his gesetnissum and we ne magon gebigean his gesetnissa to urum lustum.⁵

As with almost all of this central part, Ælfric is not inventing his statements: this is not creative writing. The source in this instance is Jerome's *Epistula ad Oceanum: ne tibi soli liceat, non uoluntatem legi, sed legem iungere uoluntati*.⁶ The shared sense and the use of a very similar *chiasmus* in the two injunctions prove the relationship beyond reasonable doubt. Only here in the preface is this source utilised. The substance of this letter certainly brings to mind the preface's earlier subject matter of Jacob: Jerome replies to Oceanus who has asked for his support against Carterius, a Spanish bishop, who has married for a second time! In this section of the letter Jerome describes the views of Paul on Christian

⁴ For an interesting reading of the preface as warning, see M. J. Menzer, 'The Preface as Admonition: Ælfric's Preface to Genesis', *The Old English Hexateuch: Aspects and Approaches*, ed. R. Barnhouse and B. C. Withers, Publications of the Richard Rawlinson Center, Kalamazoo MI (Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan University, 2000), 15-39.

⁵ Marsden, 7. 'We must turn our will to his decrees and we may not bend his decrees to our desires'. By the use of the plural, *gesetnissa*, Ælfric must mean, given the context, the Old and the New Law together.

⁶ I. Hilberg (ed.), *Sancti Evsepii Hieronymi: Epistulae*, CSEL 54-6 (Vienna, 1910-18), at 54, 687; 'It is not lawful for you to make the law conform to your will but (for you to conform) your will to the law'. On the sources of the preface, see M. Griffith, 'The Sources of Ælfric's Preface to Genesis (Cameron B.1.7.1)', *Fontes Anglo-Saxonici: World Wide Web Register* (<http://fontes.english.ox.ac.uk/>). This particular source was identified by Ralph Hanna (private correspondence, 25/1/2001). Some further sources not included in *Fontes* are mentioned below.

monogamy, who yet ‘knew that the Law allowed men to have children by several wives and was aware that the example of the patriarchs had made polygamy familiar to the people; even the very priests might at their own discretion enjoy the same licence’.⁷ But Ælfric does not explicitly re-iterate here these topics of polygamy and married priests, although his quotation from the passage shows that he is still deeply engaged with the problem of ancient marriage. *Lust*—given the context in the source, and Ælfric’s decision not to repeat the use of *willa* (despite this diluting Jerome’s *chiasmus*)—must mean more for Ælfric than just ‘will’, ‘wish’: he has in mind particularly the desires of the flesh.⁸ But why does a section explicitly concerned with the divine institution in the world of the two Testaments conclude with an injunction for us to control our desires? What suits the context in Jerome’s letter perfectly appears not wholly transparent in the new context in the preface.

From a modern perspective, Ælfric defends the two-part form of the Bible in an almost comical manner:

Is eac to witanne þæt sume gedwolmen wæron þe woldon awurpan þa ealdan æ, and sume woldon habban þa ealdan and awurpan þa niwan, swa swa þa Iudeiscan doð. Ac Crist self and his apostolas us tæhton ægþer to healdenne, þa ealdan gastlice and þa niwan soplice mid weorcum. God gesceop us twa eagan and twa earan, twa nosþirlu and twegen weleras, twa handa and twegen fet, and he wolde eac habban twa gecyðnissa on þissere worulde geset, þa ealdan and þa niwan...⁹

Yet from a Christian perspective, the shared binary structure of the human body and of the holy book is not an accident, for both were divinely constructed, and so it is not surprising that Ælfric is also borrowing almost all of this from another patristic source: pseudo-Jerome *Breviarum in Psalmos*, psalm 95, verse 2:

Nolite eum tantum laudare in ueteri testamento, ne sitis Iudaei; nolite eum tantum laudare in nouo testamento, ne sitis Manichaei. Laudate illum diem de die, hoc est, in ueteri et in nouo testamento...Quia scriptum est: Adnuntiate diem de die

⁷ See W. H. Fremantle, G. Lewis and W. G. Martley (trsl.), *St. Jerome, Letters and Select Works*, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, vol. 6 (Oxford, 1893), 144.

⁸ Although there is considerable semantic overlap between *willa* and *lust* (so, note B-T *willa*, sense VI, ‘pleasure, delight’), in O.E. translations and glosses *voluntas* is generally rendered by *willa*, where *lust* is more frequently associated with *luxus*, *appetitus*.

⁹ Marsden, 7. ‘It should also be known that there were certain heretics who wished to cast out the Old Law, and some wished to retain the Old and to cast out the New, as the Jews do. But Christ himself and his Apostles taught us to hold both, the Old spiritually and the New truly in our deeds. God gave us two eyes and two ears, two nostrils and two lips, two hands and two feet, and he wanted also to have two testaments placed in this world, the Old and the New’.

salutare eius. Propterea et apostoli bini mittuntur, propterea non habemus unum oculum sed duos, propterea duas habemus aures, propterea duas nares, propterea duo labia, propterea duas manus, duos pedes...et corporis nostri membra duorum testamentorum sacramenta testantur.¹⁰

I have commented elsewhere on some of Ælfric's changes to this passage.¹¹ Of interest here is a further alteration that at first glance seems of little significance—where the Latin merely lists separate binaries in the body, Ælfric pairs up these pairs: 'two eyes and two ears, two nostrils and two lips, two hands and two feet'. The list of the body parts follows the same order as the original, but the syntax has been changed to add a further level of doubling. Why does Ælfric make this change? It is not necessary to the correlation he wishes to draw (between the doubleness of the body and that of the Bible), indeed it detracts from the more appropriate, simple equivalence given in his source by adding another level of pairing not obviously evidenced in the structure of the Bible. The reiterated wording of these phrases, 'two of these and two of those', however, calls to mind—just as the context of the quotation from the Letter to Oceanus reminds us of the earlier treatment of polygamy—that earlier, unexplained phrasing about Jacob's wives, *twa geswustra and heora twa þinena*, 'two sisters and their two maidservants', another pair of pairs, these two twos being bound to the patriarch, as the others are bound to the body. Nowhere else in the preface is there phrasing like it, and it is Ælfric's changes to his source text which have produced this verbal and semantic echo. He must, surely, therefore, have intended something by this revision.

If so much of the preface can be sourced directly in patristics, is there a source for the remark by the *magister* about Jacob's four wives, brief though it is? The closest phrasing in the Vulgate Genesis is chapter 32.22: *duas uxores et totidem famulas*, 'two wives and as many maidservants', but this verse does not mention the total number of wives, nor that the first two wives were sisters, nor

¹⁰ *Sancti Hieronymi Presbyteri Opera*, CCSL 78, Pars II Opera Homiletica (Turnholt, 1958), 151-2 *Annuntiate de die in diem salutare ejus*; 'Do not praise Him only with the Old Testament, you are not Jews; do not praise him only with the New Testament, you are not Manichæans. Praise Him from day to day, that is, in the Old and in the New Testament...Because it is written: *Shew forth His salvation from day to day*. For this reason, moreover, the apostles are sent two by two. For this reason, we do not have one eye but two, for this reason, we have two ears, for this reason, two nostrils, for this reason, two lips, for this reason, two hands, two feet... And the parts of our body testify to the mysteries of the two Testaments'.

¹¹ See M. Griffith 'Ælfric's Use of his Sources in the Preface to Genesis, together with a Conspectus of Biblical and Patristic Sources and Analogues', *Florilegium* 17 (2000), 127-54, at 129-31.

(explicitly) that the two others were their servants.¹² The broader context of the verse is also far removed from that of the preface. Closer is Augustine's phrasing in Book XXII of *Contra Faustum Manichaeum*, which, as we shall see, gives the standard patristic interpretation of the symbolic significance of these wives: *quattuor istae uxores Iacob, quarum duae liberae, duae ancillae fuerunt*, 'the four wives of Jacob, of whom two were free, two maidservants', but this, as well, does not specify that the first two wives were sisters, nor that the servants were their servants.¹³ The only phrasing in patristics which matches that of Ælfric comes earlier in the same book of this text: *duas germanas sorores, earumque singulas famulas, quattuor uxorum maritus*, 'the husband of four wives, two full sisters and their separate maidservants',¹⁴ although Ælfric has edited out *germanas*, and replaced *singulas* by *twa* in order, presumably, to achieve as close a match as possible with *twa eagan and twa earan*, etc (but he retains the genitive pronoun, presumably to indicate both the freedom of the sisters—as only the free may have servants—and the sisters' relation to the servants). Taking this attribution to be correct,¹⁵ then the context of the quotation from Augustine's work is significant. Faustus, the representative of the Manichaeans in this dialogue, attacks the shenanigans of the patriarchs:

'The narrative is not ours which tells how Lot, Abraham's brother, after his escape from Sodom lay with his two daughters...or how Isaac imitated his father's conduct and called his wife Rebecca his sister, that he might gain a shameful livelihood by her, or how his son Jacob, husband of four wives—two full sisters, Rachel and Leah, and their handmaids—led the life of a goat...or, again, how his son Judah slept with his daughter-in-law, Tamar, after she had been married to two of his sons...or how David, after having a number of wives, seduced the wife of his soldier Uria...'16

Though this is an aggregation of particulars, parts of it are not dissimilar to Ælfric's ensuing generalised remarks about how in the beginning of the world *nam se broðer hys swuster to wife, and hwilum eac se fæder tymde be his agenre*

¹² The O.E. Genesis here even omits the maidservants.

¹³ J. Zycha (ed.), *Sancti Avreli Avgvstini Operum*, Sectionis VI, pars I, *Contra Faustum Manichæum libri XXXIII*, CSEL 25.1 (Vienna, 1891), 251-797, at 645.

¹⁴ Zycha, 594.

¹⁵ In another kind of text, coincidence might be a plausible explanation for this identity of wording over a short space, but the absence of other exact parallels in patristics, together with the fact that *Contra Faustum Manichaeum* is the source text for the symbolic significance of Ælfric's topic here, and the fact that so little of this main part of the preface is original to Ælfric speak strongly against this possibility.

¹⁶ R. Stothert (trsl), *Writings in Connection with the Manichaean Heresy* (Edinburgh, 1872), 402-3. For the Manichaeans the Old Testament was spurious.

*dehter, and manega hæfdon ma wifa...*¹⁷ Common to both is a sense of the shocking nature, viewed literally, of the incestuous and polygamous misdeeds of the patriarchs, although Ælfric then adds a pragmatic defence which is not, of course, found in Faustus's remarks. Ælfric, therefore, is not straightforwardly relaying to the reader any actual remarks made by his teacher, for, if that teacher were indeed quoting from the *Contra Faustum Manichaeum*, then he would have known also Augustine's view of the symbolic significance of the wives of Jacob and so would have understood the greatness of the difference between the two Testaments. Ælfric is putting words into his master's mouth, just as, one suspects, Augustine is giving Faustus more words than he need say in order later to expose the shallowness of his position. Perhaps we might go so far as to suggest that the teacher is a straw man, a fictional figure constructed by Ælfric for the sake of his argument; he certainly fits very neatly into it. It is, anyway, clear, whether real or not, that Ælfric's teacher is a Christian version of Faustus, a literal reader of Genesis,¹⁸ and, accordingly, by implication, Ælfric aligns his own voice with that of Augustine.

What then does Augustine say of the spiritual meaning of the wives of Jacob? The general tenor of his response to Faustus is that Faustus does not understand that the Old Testament must be read through the lens of the New. This basic principle of exegesis is evidenced throughout Ælfric's preface.¹⁹ Book XXII, chapters 51-5 of *Contra Faustum Manichaeum* outline his views on the complexity of the meaning of Jacob's quadrigamy, which, in brief, is as follows:

We see that in the wife and bond-slaves of Abraham, the Apostle [Paul] understands the two Testaments. But there one represents each; here the application does not suit so well, as there are two and two. There, also, the son of the bond-slave is disinherited, but here the sons of the slaves receive the land of promise along with the sons of the free women, so that this type must have a different meaning. Supposing that the two free wives point to the New Testament, by which we are called to liberty, what is the meaning of there being two? Perhaps because in Scripture, as the attentive reader will find, we are said to have two

¹⁷ '...a brother took his sister to wife and at times also a father begat by his own daughter, and many men had more than one wife...'. A more precise source for the first clause is found elsewhere in Augustine: *uiri sorores suas coniuges acceperunt*, *De Civitate Dei*, CCSL 48, Book XV, chap. 16, *De iure coniugiorum*, 477.

¹⁸ On the incorrectness of the view that Ælfric's *magister* did not understand Genesis because he could not properly understand Latin, see M. Griffith, 'How Much Latin did Ælfric's *magister* Know?', *N&Q* 46 (1999), 176-81.

¹⁹ Note, for example, that Gen 1.1 is read using John 8.25; in a more submerged way, the tabernacle of Moses from Exodus is interpreted via I Corinthians 3.12 and commentary on that verse (see Haymo, *Expositio*, *In Epistolam I Ad Corinthios*, PL 117, col. 525CD).

lives in the body of Christ, one temporal in which we suffer pain, and one eternal in which we shall behold the blessedness of God... The names of the women point to this meaning: it is said that Leah means Suffering and Rachel the First Principle made visible... Bilhah, the name of [Rachel's] handmaid, is said to mean old, and so, even when we speak of the spiritual and unchangeable nature of God, ideas are suggested relating to the old life of the bodily senses... Zilpah, [Leah's] handmaid is, interpreted, an open mouth [and] represents those who are spoken of in Scripture as engaging in the preaching of the gospel with open mouth, but not with open heart. Thus it is written of some: 'This people honour me with their lips, but their heart is far from me' [Isaiah 29.13]. To such the Apostle says: 'Thou that preaches that a man should not steal, dost thou steal? Thou that sayest that a man should not commit adultery, dost thou commit adultery?' [Romans 2.21-2].²⁰

Augustine begins with Paul's statement in Galatians 4.22-4 that Abraham's bigamy is an allegory of the two Testaments, the free wife representing the New, the bondwoman the Old. But seeing that there are four wives here, not two, and that the sons of the maidservants are not disinherited, Augustine sees that this interpretation is insufficient and moves on to an onomastic reading which borrows from, and develops, the first view.²¹ The two sisters who are free women still indicate the New Testament, but further represent the Christian's two lives in Christ, corporeal and eternal. The 'inveterate' [*inveterata*] Bilhah stands for the temptation which the Christian has to interpret the new, spiritual Law in terms of the flesh, that is, to return to the Old Law. Zilpah on the other hand represents those who in Christ's view reject the commandments of God in their deeds (but not their words), that is, those who reject the Old Law. Augustine's discussion is borrowed nearly verbatim by various other authors: Isidore, pseudo-Bede and Hrabanus.²² Of these, Isidore's *Quæstiones in Vetus Testamentum* is used frequently by Ælfric.²³ In the passage from *Breviarum in Psalmos* cited above these contrasting impulses are seen as embodied, respectively, but more extremely, in the Jews and the Manichaeans. Bede in his *Commentary on Genesis*,

²⁰ Stothert, 443-7.

²¹ There are no explicit uses of the onomastics of personal names in the preface, but note Ælfric's use of Isidore's etymology of the name of Genesis and see B. W. Hawk, 'Isidorean Influences in Ælfric's Preface to Genesis', *ES* 94 (2014), 357-66.

²² Isidore, *Quæstiones in Vetus Testamentum: In Genesim*, PL 83, chap. 25, col. 259B ff.; pseudo-Bede *Quaestionum super Genesim*, PL 93, col. 335D ff.; Hrabanus Maurus, *Commentarius in Genesim*, PL 107, col. 598C ff., and elsewhere in Hrabanus.

²³ See *Fontes Anglo-Saxonici: World Wide Web Register* (<http://fontes.english.ox.ac.uk/>). *Contra Faustum Manichaeum* is also attested in MS Oxford, Bodley 135, a manuscript of possible Anglo-Saxon origin: see M. Lapidge, *The Anglo-Saxon Library* (Oxford, 2006), 282 and 375.

a work also known to Ælfric and used by him quite frequently,²⁴ gives the same interpretation as the *Breviarum*:

The Apostle [Paul in Galatians 4] does not condemn the Old Covenant, as though it were contrary to the New, lest he support the mad doctrine of Manichaeus, God forbid, by his authority...But with good reason he censures those who interpret the Law which is spiritual according to the flesh and who seek temporal benefit from the Lord and a temporal kingdom from the observance of the Law but not the eternal good in heaven...He reproves those who trust that the letter of the Law is sufficient for their salvation without the aid of grace, which is characteristic of the Jews.²⁵

The priests to whom Ælfric alludes in the early part of the preface exemplify the first steps in two contrasting departures from orthodoxy. His mass-priest, although he certainly does not explicitly ‘condemn the Old Covenant’, clearly believes that Jacob’s behaviour (and by implication that of many of the patriarchs) is ‘contrary to the New’. And the unlearned priests who want to be married, as Peter the Apostle was before he was called, obviously wish to interpret the New Covenant ‘according to the flesh’. This is why in the preface the four wives are analysed into two pairs of pairs: their symbolic meaning, as outlined by Augustine, is implied, but this sense is available at this point only to the well-read *cognoscenti* who might then understand the allegorical link between Jacob’s two maidservants and the two types of priest with whom they are immediately juxtaposed. This meaning becomes much clearer in the later section of the preface with the remarks on the need for the two Testaments and the discarding of the one or other of the two by the different groups of heretics: the two binaries are here simultaneously and now openly in play. Hence the re-emergence of the image of double doubleness. The paired parts of the body (eyes, ears, etc) are fleshly witnesses to the two Testaments, but Ælfric’s ‘application does not suit so well, as there are two and two’. The added meaning introduced by his pairing of the pairs exactly mimics the superfluity of symbolic meaning seen by Augustine in Jacob’s paired pair of wives (beside Abraham’s singular bigamy), and gestures towards the dangers represented by the maidservants. As

²⁴ In *Interrogationes Sigewulfi in Genesim*, and *De temporibus anni*, but also in the preface: see *Fontes Anglo-Saxonici: World Wide Web Register* (<http://fontes.english.ox.ac.uk/>) and Griffith (2000), 132-3.

²⁵ See C. B. Kendall (trsl.), *On Genesis: Bede*, Translated Texts for Historians 48 (Liverpool, 2008), 319 and B. W. Hawk, ‘Ælfric’s Genesis and Bede’s *Commentarius in Genesim*, *MÆ* 85 (2016), 208-16; Hawk does not speak of this particular passage. Book XXII of Augustine’s *Contra Faustum Manichaeum* is used quite frequently by Bede in *Commentarius in Genesim*: see *Fontes Anglo-Saxonici: World Wide Web Register* (<http://fontes.english.ox.ac.uk/>).

both of the heresies—perhaps, paradoxically—lead to sins of the flesh (the ‘old life of the bodily senses’ as seen in Bilhah, and hypocritical illicit indulgence, as seen in Zilpah), Ælfric’s disruption of Jerome’s neat *chiasmus* and change from *willā* to *lust* now makes sense when read alongside the earlier allusions to polygamy and to priests who want to marry; it is indeed lust that concerns him. That Jerome’s *chiasmus* initially strikes us as having been weakened by Ælfric, that the words of his teacher seem at first mainly supererogatory, that Ælfric’s added pairing of paired body parts appears erosive of the obvious simple equivalence with the two Testaments—all features that might otherwise be characteristic of poor writing—is important: they are all instead (as with the divine use of *anacoluthon* in Genesis 1.26, shifting from grammatical singular to plural in the same sentence, as Ælfric has reported earlier)²⁶ shadowy signs at the literal surface of the deeper spiritual meaning and of a higher kind of writing. Retrospectively, therefore, the irony of the words of Ælfric’s teacher appears much stronger: if only he had known the spiritual meaning of his allusion, then he would have known, too, the solution to his own difficulty. That this ironic meaning becomes clearer analeptically is, of course, highly appropriate to the argument of the preface, indeed, it is mimetic of it: a later part of the text helps to reveal the true meaning of the earlier part, which at that moment was only suggested in the most elliptical fashion. And so the text comes full circle and explains itself—just as, for Ælfric, the Bible does.

It follows that, although the preface is addressed to Ealdorman Æpelweard, Ælfric cannot conceivably have thought that this would all be comprehensible to lay readers. After all, the unlearned priests, and even his mass-priest, are struggling. The main English works of Ælfric, The First Series of *Catholic Homilies*, The Second Series of *Catholic Homilies*, *The Lives of the Saints*—and even *The Grammar*—all have their Latin and English prefaces. Alone amongst the major works is the translation of Genesis which has only an English preface. The absence of a Latin preface indicates that this English one does duty for both; it is, therefore, best read, at least in some parts and aspects,²⁷ as a Latin text which happens to be in English—just like the text that follows it. It may be written *mid leohtlicum wordum*, but its meaning is very far from that: it is both letter and preface, for both laity and priesthood—two forms and two styles, *twa geswustra*

²⁶ See Marsden, 5. Another example, perhaps, is the *bathos* of the movement, in the treatment of the gifts brought to the temple (Marsden, 6), from gold, silver and gemstones...to goat-hair.

²⁷ On its classicising epistolary use of the five-part structure of the Ciceronian oration (which was, presumably, more discernible to a readership versed in Latin), see M. Griffith, ‘Aelfric’s Preface to Genesis: genre, rhetoric and the origins of the *ars dictaminis*’, *ASE* 29 (2000), 215–34.

and heora twa þinena. Ælfric's preface to Genesis challenges our understanding of the aesthetics of late Old English prose.²⁸

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²⁸ Ælfric characterises the style of his pre-rhythmical prose as brief and simple: see the section 'Ælfric's comments on His Style' in J. Wilcox (ed.), *Ælfric's Prefaces*, Durham Medieval Texts 9 (Durham, 1994), 60-3, and that on 'Ælfric's "Ordinary Prose"' in J. Hurt, *Ælfric*, Twayne's English Author Series 131 (New York, 1972), 121-5. As Hurt observes (121), such remarks by this author need not be taken entirely at face value: the style of the preface is not just brief, but, also, dense, and though its diction is simple enough, its rhetoric is complex, deliberately playing with an indecorum which is scripturally inspired. Some parts of the nature and history of this mixed or Augustinian style are sketched out by E. Auerbach, 'Sermo Humilis' in *Literary Language and its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and in the Middle Ages*, trsl. R. Manheim (London, 1965), 27-66.