1. The Prologues of the Complutensian Polyglot Bible

When we wish to know the internal dynamics of a work, we look at the introduction, to identify what the author or authors want to present or the orientation they intend to give to their work.

For this reason, the Complutensian Polyglot Bible offers ten prologues; but for our purpose we shall pay special attention to the four Prologues closest to our argument. They are the following: (1) Cardinal Jiménez de Cisneros’s Prologue to Pope Leo X; (2) the Prologue to the reader related to the Old Testament printed in four languages; (3) the way to find the primitive roots in Hebrew words: this is a chapter from Alphonso de Zamora’s Hebrew Grammar; (4) the Prologue on the Hebrew-Aramaic Dictionary. The rest of the Prologues are not related to the main argument we intend to expound here.

Our concern now is with the information about the Aramaic part which is offered in these Prologues. Aramaic studies at that time had been supported by ecclesiastical directions which aimed to strengthen them. One of the decrees of the Council of Vienne (1311) was in favour of Hebrew and Aramaic studies in the universities. The same law was supported by the Council of Basel: in these decrees it was stated that chairs of the Hebrew, Chaldaic (= Aramaic) and Arabic languages should be created in the main universities (Rome, Paris, Salamanca, Oxford and Bologna).

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1 The Polyglot was begun in 1502; in 1518 it was already published, but its circulation started only after its approval by Pope Leo X (22 March, 1520). Cardinal Cisneros died in 1517.

2 J. Harduin (J. Harduini), Conciliorum Collectio regia maxima (Labbei et Cossartii), sive: Acta Conciliorum et Epistolae Decretales ac Constitutiones Summorum Pontificum (Paris, 1715) VIII, p. 1191.
1.1. Cardinal Cisneros’s Prologue

Francisco Jiménez de Cisneros (1436–1517) had already learned Hebrew and Aramaic from a Jewish Rabbi when he was Provisor and Vicar General of the Sigüenza Bishopric. Cisneros himself seems to have known Greek, because in a discussion with Antonio de Nebrija the Cardinal showed him a Greek Codex which offered a different reading from that firmly proposed by Nebrija.

In the Complutensian Polyglot Prologue signed by Cardinal Cisneros, we are given four items of information related to the Cardinal’s work: (a) he selected those men who had an outstanding knowledge of oriental languages; (b) he looked for the most select and ancient manuscripts (“castigatissima omni ex parte vetustissimaque exemplaria pro archetypis haberemus”); we are told that many Hebrew and Greek and Latin manuscripts were employed, but nothing is said about their origins and identity; (c) we are told that many of the Greek manuscripts came from the Vatican Library, but no reference is made to the Aramaic manuscripts. The Greek apographs from the New and Old Testament were sent back to the Vatican Library; one may suppose that the rest of the manuscripts were treasured in the Spanish University Libraries (Alcalá, Salamanca); (d) the Complutensian Polyglot project was conceived in order to revive studies in the divine letters, which had been forgotten until then (“vt incipient divinarum litterarum studia hactenus intermortua nunc tandem reviviscere”).

Cisneros established a movement to renew theology in Spain, and this was acknowledged by Erasmus of Rotterdam: “Spain, in a few years, has improved so much in the career of sciences, that not only is it admired by the civilized peoples of Europe, but it can also serve them as a model to follow.” The same ideas were expounded by the Bachelor Diego López de Zúñiga, one of the collaborators in the Polyglot.