1. Introduction

In letter 28 of 394 or 395 C.E. Augustine pleads with Jerome not to make a new translation of the Old Testament from the Hebrew and in letter 71 of 403 C.E. he again expresses the wish that Jerome should rather make a new translation of the Septuagint.1 The academic quarrel between Augustine and Jerome, documented in their correspondence of the turn of the 4th century, constitutes a fascinating piece of reading especially for the insights it affords into their characters and weaknesses. Their differences of opinion not only about the new translation, but also about whether Paul was lying (in Galatians) or whether Jonah sat under an ivy plant or a gourd are all familiar, as is the embarrassing incident of Augustine’s letter to Jerome (Ep. 40), circulating in Rome and Italy long before it reached its addressee. This article presents a content analysis of the section of the correspondence concerning the difference of opinion about the translation of the Old Testament from the Hebrew, which is read against the background of Augustine’s remarks in three other works: the Confessions, Christian Instruction and The City of God.

The central problem prompting Jerome’s new translation was the numerous discrepancies between the various Latin translations in circulation at this stage. Augustine himself complains that “whenever in the early days of the faith a Greek codex came into anybody’s hands, and he felt that he had the slightest familiarity with each language, he rushed in with a translation.”2 This is probably an exaggeration, but the fact of the matter is that the translation into Latin did not take place in a coordinated fashion; the names of the translators are not known; they may have made oral translations during church services which were

---


2 Doctr. chr. 2.11.16 ut enim cuique primis fidel temporibus in manus unuit codex Graecus et aliquantum facultatis sibi utriusque linguae habere uidebatur, ausus est interpretari. The text of Doctr. chr. used here is that published in the Corpus Augustinianum Gissense 2 (ed. Cornelius Mayer; Basel: Schwabe, 2004). All translations from Doctr. chr. are by Edmund Hill, trans., Teaching Christianity (New York: New City Press, 1996), unless otherwise indicated.
written down later. Moreover, the Latin was not learned or elegant, to say the least.\(^3\) However, the divergence of the different versions had the potential of seriously undermining the authority of scripture and of the preacher, as Augustine puts it in letter 71:

> The variations found in the different codices of the Latin text are intolerably numerous; and it is so justly open to suspicion as possibly different from what is to be found in the Greek, that one has no confidence in either quoting it or proving anything by its help.\(^4\)

It is clear that this is a problem that warrants urgent attention. But the two church fathers envisage radically different solutions, which Hennings argues is to an important extent determined by the dominating tradition within which each works:\(^5\) Augustine follows the general trend amongst Latin-speaking Western Church Fathers to see the Septuagint as normative, while Jerome, influenced by the Eastern Church, shows a preference for the Hebrew text, without completely denying the authority of the Septuagint.\(^6\) However, in the correspondence, neither Augustine nor Jerome refers to these traditions as motivation for their respective points of view. Augustine initiates the debate and offers a number of arguments of a logical or practical nature for his resistance to Jerome’s translation to which the latter eventually responds.

In my examination of the differences of opinion on the translation articulated in the correspondence between the two, I detect in Augustine’s arguments some inconsistencies and internal contradictions. This may be attributed to an emotional attachment to the Septuagint which he does not succeed in supporting with logical arguments. In order to illustrate this, section 1 of the article examines some aspects of Augustine’s general approach to the interpretation of Scripture, and section 2 his attitude to the Septuagint; section 3 considers his obvious

---

3 Negative reaction to the style of scripture is documented in Augustine’s disappointment with the lowly style of Scriptures at his first attempt to find truth there (Conf. 3.5.9) and Jerome’s dream that his yearning for Cicero’s elegant Latin would be held against him in the day of judgment when the iudex would say to him: *Ciceronianus es, non Christianus* (Ep. 22.30).

4 Ep. 71.6 *Latinae veritati … quae in diversis codicibus ita uaria est, ut tolerari uix possit, et ita suspecta, ne in Graeco aliud ueniatur, ut inde aliquid proferre aut probare dubitemus.* The Latin text for the letters used here is that of the *Corpus Augustinianum*. The translation of the letters used here is by Wilfrid Parsons, *Saint Augustine: Letters* (Vol. 1; Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1951).


6 See also Carolinne White, *The Correspondence (394-419) Between Jerome and Augustine of Hippo* (Lewiston, Queenston, Lampeter: Edwin Mellen, 1990), 37.