One of the most dramatic moments in the reception history of 4 Ezra was the publication in 1875 by Robert Bensly of a “missing fragment” of the Latin version, comprising the verses now numbered 36 to 106 of chapter 7, that he had discovered in a ninth-century codex containing five books of Ezra in Latin, in the Bibliothèque Communale of Amiens. These verses, though not entirely unknown in the West, since they had been translated in the 18th century from the Arabic version, were thought to be completely missing from the Vulgate version. The source of the lacuna had been identified a decade earlier by a Professor Gildermeister, who discovered that a page had been excised from the Codex Sangermanensis, a Vulgate manuscript from the Benedictine monastery of St. Germain des Prés that is dated to “the eighth year of Louis le Débonnaire,” i.e., 821/2 CE. “The inevitable conclusion,” Gildermeister had written to Bensly, “is that all known MSS [of 4 Ezra], since none have been found without this lacuna, were derived from the Codex Sangermanensis.” Since Bensly’s discovery of the Codex Ambianensis, several Vulgate manuscripts that include the so-called missing fragment of 4 Ezra have come to light, mostly of Spanish provenance. Still, the fact that a single manuscript with a page excised could have had such an impact on the transmission of 4 Ezra in the West implies that the Latin version of 4 Ezra was not very widely distributed in Europe prior to the ninth century.
This obvious inference from the history of the “missing fragment” clashes with a claim on the very first page of Alastair Hamilton’s otherwise excellent history of the reception of 2 Esdras from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment, that Jerome had “included the book in his Latin version of the Bible but ... pronounced it apocryphal.” Hamilton does not claim that Jerome was the translator of 4 Ezra from Greek into Latin, so what does he mean by saying that Jerome “included” it in the Vulgate? Jerome did not produce “the Vulgate,” he produced, over a period of at least 14 years (ca. 391–405), new Latin translations from Hebrew of all the books of the Old Testament accepted as authoritative by the Jews. Prior to undertaking that daunting task, he had revised the Latin translations of the Gospels, and later he also revised the Latin translations of some books of the Septuagint that were not accepted by the Jews. “By a gradual process extending from the sixth to the ninth century [Jerome’s translations were] to become accepted (with the rest of the New Testament revised by an unknown hand or hands) as the standard, or ‘Vulgate,’ Latin text of the Bible.”

One of the purposes of this paper is to put to rest the notion that Jerome contributed in any positive way to the preservation or dissemination of 4 Ezra in the western Church. I will show that Jerome expressed nothing but contempt for 4 Ezra, a feeling which is explicable within the context of his views on the canon of the Old Testament and also his ambivalence toward Judaism and especially Jewish eschatology. No single factor explains 4 Ezra’s eventual appearance, supplemented by Christian additions referred to as 5 and 6 Ezra, in several Vulgate manuscripts of the ninth to thirteenth

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5 Alastair Hamilton, The Apocryphal Apocalypse: The Reception of the Second Book of Esdras (4 Ezra) from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment (Oxford-Warburg Studies; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 1. He clarifies this claim on subsequent pages: “The main part of the book at least, chapters 3 to 14, was to be the basis of the text included by Jerome in the Vulgate. When the other two sections [i.e., chapters 1–2 (5 Ezra) and 15–16 (6 Ezra)] were added, is not clear, but the most likely hypothesis is that it was in the course of the fifth century” (16); “Although [Jerome] included in the Vulgate a Latin translation of the main part of 2 Esdras made from the Greek, he stated from the outset that the Jews had excluded it from the canon and that it was apocryphal. Nor, in contrast to the other Old Testament apocrypha, did he see much good in it. He considered it unworthy of a preface and, in his preface to the canonical book of Ezra, pronounced the apocryphal works attributed to the same author to be full of dreams” (25).


7 Kelly, Jerome, 162. This is something of an oversimplification, since the Old Latin Bible was still widely in use in the ninth century.