JEROME ON LETTERS
AND LETTER-WRITING

Introduction

“Jerome’s extensive collection of letters, which are the finest of Christian antiquity, is of the greatest historical importance for his life and times.”¹ A conference on letters and letter-writing of the early Christian and patristic era should therefore include a paper on the contribution of Jerome. He wrote his letters during the second half of the fourth and first decades of the fifth centuries; which falls in the period which Stowers² calls the golden age of Christian letter writing. Many works have recently been published on Jerome’s letters³ and it is impossible to give a detailed account of Jerome’s contribution in this regard in a conference paper — in Jerome’s own words: dies me deficiet.

In order to give a brief overview on “Jerome on Letters and Letter-writing,” I will be looking at Jerome’s Letter 57 in the light of Julius Victor’s⁴ precepts for letter-writing, as stated in his Ars Rhetorica 27.⁵ Julius Victor was the first rhetorician to include letter-writing as part of the ars rhetorica. According to Sykutris⁶ this work of Julius Victor

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⁴ Apart from his handbook on rhetoric, not much is known about this (probably) fourth century author. Trapp mentions that Victor possibly draws on the work of the third century rhetorician, Julius Titianus (M. Trapp, (ed.), Greek and Latin Letters, An Anthology with Translation (Cambridge, 2003) 321).
represents “the best theoretical work on the letter that we possess from antiquity.”

Letter 57, which is also known as the “Liber de optimo genere interpretandi” is one of Jerome’s longer letters and in this letter he defends his approach to translation, but it is more than a treatise on translation. It is in the first place a letter which must be studied with full regard to its historical situation and because of Jerome’s vigorous reaction. According to Bartelink this work only partially shows the characteristics of a letter and it is especially the introductory and concluding paragraphs which correspond to the form of a letter. The letter has a strong rhetorical character and displays the structure of a court speech, to be more specific, that of the “genus iudiciale.” The vocabulary used in the introductory and concluding paragraphs of the letter typically belongs to legal discourse and reminds us more of a court room than a private letter. From the comparison Jerome

(7) Bartelink wrote a comprehensive commentary on this letter: G. J. M. Bartelink, Liber de Optimo Genere Interpretandi (Epistula 57) Ein Kommentar (Leiden, 1980)

(8) Despite the fact that Jerome himself refers to this work as liber or libellus, in the work itself the word epistula is used (Ep. 57. 1. 2 and 57. 13. 1). For Jerome’s letters I used the edition of I. Hilberg (ed.), Sanctus Eusebius Hieronymus Epistulae. Partes I–III (Wiesbaden, 1961) (CSEL, 54–56).

(9) “Not all of the letters are of equal interest or importance. Some are only brief notes, running but a few lines; others amount to pamphlet-length tracts” (C. C. Mierow (trans.), T. C. Lawler, (intr. and notes), The Letters of St. Jerome, vol. 1 (New York, 1963) (ACW, 33) 4).

(10) Cf. “... ist er doch an erster Stelle als ein Gelegenheitsschreiben anlässlich der dem Hieronymus gemachten Vorwürfe zu betrachten ...” (Bartelink, Liber de Optimo Genere..., 1).

(11) These paragraphs are attached as an appendix.

(12) “Ep. 57 hat teilweise einen Briefcharakter ...” (Bartelink, Liber de Optimo Genere..., 26).


(14) “de criminibus responsurus; accusor; sim ... defendendus; iudicis; error; crimen; accusator; argueret; crinimatus est; interrogare and defensio, and from par. 13: falsarius vocor; crimen abluerne, non referre, arbitrio tuo cuncta permitto; accusatorum meorum; iudicii and adversarii” (Ep. 57, par. 1; CSEL, 54).