SAINT JEROME AND PAGAN GREEK LITERATURE

BY

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Sanctus Hieronymus was introduced to an intensive study of the Latin pagan authors by the grammaticus Aelius Donatus and by a rhetor who cannot be identified. Among the poets Virgil exercised the greatest influence, but also Terence, the Younger Seneca, and even Ovid. With his rhetor such authorities on oratory as the Elder Seneca and Quintilian loomed large, but he also read in the pagan orators whose orations are no longer extant. Above all he read the multifarious works of Cicero, including essays and speeches no longer preserved. He was deeply stirred by his dream (vision or nightmare) in Mid-Lent in 374 in which he appeared before the Throne of God and was reproached as Ciceronianus rather than as Christianus. He vowed to refrain from pagan literature and kept his vow for at least a decade or even longer (ca. 374-389).3

It has often been assumed that Jerome's knowledge of Greek was extremely limited during his early years in the West. It was not until his first trip to the East in 372/3 that he was able to improve his knowledge of Greek by living in the home of Evagrius in Antioch where Greek was regularly spoken. But lack of fluency in speaking Greek in earlier times does not preclude earlier ability to read Greek, whether the Septuagint version of Scriptura sancta or the epics of Homer. Surely Donatus' teaching and Jerome's attested ability in languages would have led Jerome to the veritas Graeca before this eastern trip when he was probably in his early forties. I suspect that already his library included not only Christian but also pagan works in Greek.

A stumbling block in ascertaining what Jerome had read and in which language is that Jerome's mention of authors and their works is not always too scrupulous. At times in his Biblical commentaries and elsewhere he used works without giving credit to the earlier author, and at times he mentioned works and gave the impression of having read them when he clearly had not. These faults were shared by many of his
contemporaries and were more evident in his earlier works. Although he was the most learned man of his day, he was vain enough to wish to appear more learned than he was. Thus modern critics, who may themselves be guilty of the same cardinal sin of pride, are too sceptical in assessing the saint who labored under harsh conditions. In many cases I blame the lack of adequate books of reference and lapsus memoriae. Thus I would give greater credence to statements of Jerome that in his mention of works by pagan Greek writers he had actually read them in the original language, especially after he had settled in the monastery in Bethlehem in 385/386. I suggest that his library collected in the West contained works in Greek and that in the East he added pagan as well as Christian writers.5

In this short essay I will deal in detail with the strange chapter in one of Jerome’s most unpleasant works: a polemical outburst Contra Joan-nem Hierosolymitanum ad Pammachium. Jerome had already based some of his Biblical exegesis on the commentaries of Origen which stressed allegorical interpretation, and had translated Peri archôn which was one of the bases of the controversy about the orthodoxy of Origen. He had admired the scholarship of Origen and had defended him. In 393 under the influence of Saint Epiphanius, metropolitan bishop of Salamis on Cyprus, Jerome changed sides. The rigid opposition to suspected heresies, including that of the Origenists, led Epiphanius to excess.4 In his quarrels with John, bishop of Jerusalem, he enlisted Jerome in hostile confrontation in the 390’s. The details of this quarrel which spread over a decade and alienated Jerome and friends of earlier days does not concern the point of this essay.

In 397 Jerome wrote this defense of Epiphanius and the virulent attack upon John. Most of it is buttressed by Biblical citations, but the 12th chapter is a lanx satura of citations from pagan sources. This libellus lacks the polish of his letters and of many of his essays. The last chapter (44) has the hint that it was never finished. Perhaps Jerome did not circulate it widely. It is ironic that it is dedicated to Saint Pam-machius, a Roman senator and father of Saint Paula, since he disapproved of the violence of Jerome’s attacks on the followers of Origen. Perhaps friends of Epiphanius circulated it.7

Since the text of this libellus is not readily available it is appropriate to quote chapter 12 extensively: