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Revising the Vulgate: Jerome and his Jewish Interlocutors¹

The Church Father Jerome is well-known for his translation (or revision) of the Latin Bible which later was named Vulgate. He did not translate from the Greek as was the case with the so-called Vetus Latina but he sought the Hebrew truth (hebraica veritas). However, this raises the question as to how good his understanding of the Hebrew language actually was. Therefore it is asked where Jerome might have learned Hebrew and who his Jewish interlocutors might have been.

Some Remarks on Jerome's Biography

Sophronius Eusebius Hieronymus was born at Stridon around 347.² As a teenager he went to Rome to pursue rhetorical, philological, and philosophical studies. He studied under the grammarian Aelius Donatus, and learned at least the Greek and Latin languages. In Rome he became baptised in about 360 or 366. That means he already was strongly influenced by the “pagan” Roman culture before he became a Christian. In other words, Jerome’s Christianity bears markers of Roman rhetoric et alia. Much later in life this is expressed by Jerome himself when he referred to a voice in a dream which said to him: “*Ciceronianus es, non Christianus.* (You are a Ciceronian. You are not a Christian.)”³

After the years in Rome he travelled to Gaul until he reached Trier where he settled for a while and where he met Rufinus. With Rufinus he moved to Aquileia. In about 373 he travelled through Thrace (Trakia) and Asia Minor to northern Syria. After a serious illness at Antioch he devoted himself to God. One of his teachers at that time was Apollinaris of Laodicea who later in life was called a heretic.

From Antioch Jerome went for a time to the desert of Chalcis (southwest of Antioch, known as the Syrian Thebaid) to join a number of hermits. Here he seems to have found time for study and writing, and, important for our general

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² For Jerome’s biography cf. Georg Grützmacher. *Hieronymus: Eine biographische Studie zur alten Kirchengeschichte*. 3 vols. in 1 (Aalen: Scientia Verlag, 1986 = Leipzig/Berlin 1901-1908); Ferdinand Cavallera. *Saint Jérôme: Sa vie et son œuvre*, 2 vols. (Louvain: Spicilegium Sacrum Lovaniense Bureaux/Paris: Champion, 1922); J. N. D. Kelly. *Jerome: His Life, Writings, and Controversies* (London: Duckworth, 1975); Stefan Rebenich. *Jerome* (London/New York: Routledge, 2002); Alfons Füst. *Hieronymus: Askese und Wissenschaft in der Spätantike* (Freiburg et al.: Herder, 2003); for his early lifetime see also Alan D. Booth “The Date of Jerome’s Birth.” *Phoenix: The Journal of the Classical Association of Canada* 33 (1979): 346-353; id. “The Chronology of Jerome’s Early Years.” *Ibid.* 35 (1981): 237-259; for a survey of most of the contemporaries with whom Jerome had contact see Stefan Rebenich. *Hieronymus und sein Kreis: Prosopographische und sozialgeschichtliche Untersuchungen* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1992).

³ Hieronymus, Ep. 22, 30 (CSEL 54, ed. Hilberg, p. 190).

subject, he made his first attempt to learn Hebrew under the guidance of a converted Jew.⁴ Whether he also learned Aramaic is uncertain.⁵

In 378 or 379, Jerome returned to Antioch where he was ordained a priest by Bishop Paulinus. Soon after, he moved to Constantinople to study with Gregory of Nazianz, one of the so-called Cappadocian Fathers. After about two years in 382, Jerome returned to Rome, where he became the secretary of Pope Damasus I. He stayed in Rome for about three years. These years were important for several reasons. One of them was that Damasus asked Jerome to revise the Latin Bible. During the years in Rome, Jerome was in close contact with a number of well-born and well-educated women, including some from the noblest patrician families, such as the widows Lea, Marcella and Paula, with their daughters Blaesilla and Eustochium. The close contact with these women seems to be the reason why Jerome, after the pope's death, was forced to leave Rome.⁶

In August 385, Jerome returned to Antioch. He was accompanied by a group of young men, among them his brother Paulinianus. A little later, his female patron Paula and her daughter Eustochium also joined him. The two women had decided to end their days in the Holy Land. In the winter of 385, Jerome and the women started a pilgrimage to the Holy Land where they visited Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and the holy places of Galilee, and then went to Egypt.⁷ (Egypt at that time was the home of a number of great ascetics.)

At the Catechetical School of Alexandria, Jerome became a student of Didymus the Blind who later, like Apollinaris, was called an Origenist heretic. Didymus at that time expounded on the Book of Hosea. Later in life, Jerome translated and used it among other great parts from Didymus' commentary on Zachariah.⁸ In Egypt, Jerome spent some time in Nitria, a centre for ascetics in the desert.

In the late summer or early autumn of 388, Jerome moved to the village of Bethlehem where he spent the rest of his life as a hermit. He had a men's monastery and a women's convent built in which, among others, Paula and Eustochium lived. It is not certain which languages he employed in every-day communication. Within the monasteries the language may have been Latin, as most of the inhabitants came from Rome. Later, also Greek-speaking monks became members of the monastery. On the streets of Bethlehem the language

⁴ See Hieronymus (Jerome), Ep. 18A, 10 (CSEL 54, ed. Hilberg, p. 86); Ep. 125, 12 (CSEL 56/1, ed. Hilberg, p. 131).

⁵ See Michael Graves. *Jerome's Hebrew Philology: A Study Based on his Commentary on Jeremiah* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2007), 85-86.

⁶ See, e.g., Yves-Marie Duval. "Sur Trois Lettres Méconnues de Jérôme Concernant Son Séjour à Rome (382-385)." In *Jerome of Stridon: His Life, Writings and Legacy*, edited by Andrew Cain and Josef Lössl, pp. 29-40 (Farnham/Burlington, VT: Ashgate 2009).

⁷ Cf. Hieronymus, Ep. 108 (CSEL 55, ed. Hilberg, p. 306-51); Brouria Bitton-Ashkelony. *Encountering the Sacred: The Debate on Christian Pilgrimage in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 2005), 65-105.

⁸ See Aline Canellis. "L'In Zachariam de Jérôme et la Tradition Alexandrine." In *Jerome of Stridon: His Life, Writings and Legacy*, edited by Andrew Cain and Josef Lössl, pp. 153-162 (Farnham/Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009).