Differences in Jerome's Translations of the Book of Jeremiah

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ABSTRACT • Jerome translated the Book of Jeremiah twice. The first time was for what would become the "Vulgate". Having started this huge project around 390 CE with the Books of Samuel and Kings, he continued with the three major prophets. The second time was in connection with the commentary on Jeremiah, in the years 414–416. The distance in time of more than 20 years invites for a comparison between both renderings.

Jerome's intention, in both cases, was to translate accurately the Hebrew original, and at large they agree. However, there are also differences between the earlier and the later version. Many of them are formal and have little bearing on the meaning. Others display changes in the sense of a passage. Most surprisingly, the Vulgate translation of Jeremiah is more often closer to the Hebrew text than the rendering in the Jeremiah commentary, in both instances. How can one explain this?

As the high degree of correspondences indicates, Jerome probably used the earlier translation. On the other hand, the alterations show that he did not stick to it, but dealt with it freely. In a similar way, the Jeremian "doublets" (e.g. Jer 23:19–20 // 30:23–24) often receive different renderings. Sometimes this may occur because of concerns for style, but it is also a sign of "continuous" translation technique, influenced by the immediate context, too.

To make up for the minor literalness of the foregoing rendering in the commentary with regard to the Vulgate version, Jerome takes advantage of the different literary genre: He offers further possible translations later in his commenting, when explaining a word or a verse, thus showing a broader specter of meanings for expressions that may be debated. The Church Father, in his old age, displays so in his commentary a still wider horizon than before and an ongoing creativity.

KEYWORDS • Hebrew Bible, Vulgate, Jeremiah, Jerome, commentary, translation

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG • Hieronymus übersetzte das Buch Jeremia zweimal. Das erste Mal war für das, was die „Vulgata" werden sollte. Nachdem er dieses riesige Projekt um 390 n. Chr. mit den Büchern Samuel und Könige begonnen hatte, fuhr er mit den drei großen Propheten fort. Das zweite Mal war im Zusammenhang mit dem Kommentar zu Jeremia in den Jahren 414–416. Der zeitliche Abstand von mehr als 20 Jahren lädt zum Vergleich beider Renderings ein.

Hieronymus' Absicht war es in beiden Fällen, das hebräische Original genau zu übersetzen, und im Großen und Ganzen stimmen sie zu. Es gibt jedoch auch Unterschiede zwischen der früheren und der späteren Version. Viele von ihnen sind formell und haben wenig Einfluss auf die Bedeutung. Andere zeigen Veränderungen im Sinne einer Passage. Am überraschendsten ist, dass die Vulgata-Übersetzung von Jeremia in beiden Fällen häufiger dem hebräischen Text entspricht als die Wiedergabe im Jeremia-Kommentar. Wie ist das zu erklären?

Wie der hohe Grad an Entsprechungen zeigt, verwendete Hieronymus wahrscheinlich die frühere Übersetzung. Andererseits zeigen die Veränderungen, dass er sich nicht daran gehalten hat, sondern frei damit umgegangen ist. In ähnlicher Weise erhalten die „Dubletten" im Jeremiabuch (z.B. Jer 23,19-20 // 30,23-24) oft unterschiedliche Wiedergaben. Manchmal kann dies aus Stilgründen geschehen, aber es ist auch ein Zeichen für eine „kontinuierliche" Übersetzungstechnik, die auch vom unmittelbaren Kontext beeinflusst wird.

Um die geringe Wörtlichkeit der vorstehenden Wiedergabe im Kommentar in Bezug auf die Vulgata-Fassung auszugleichen, nutzt Hieronymus die verschiedenen literarischen Gattungen: Er bietet später in seinem Kommentar weitere mögliche Übersetzungen an, wenn er ein Wort oder einen Vers erklärt, und zeigt so ein breiteres Gespenst von Bedeutungen für Ausdrücke, die diskutiert werden können. Der Kirchenvater zeigt in seinem hohen Alter so in seinem Kommentar einen noch breiteren Horizont als bisher und eine fortwährende Kreativität.

SCHLAGWORTE • Hebräische Bibel, Vulgata, Jeremia, Hieronymus, Kommentar, Übersetzung

Jerome's translation project was outstanding in his time. This is also true for his renderings of Jer. Already in the foreword to Jer for the Vulgate he expresses his desire to "restore the completely confused order in the Greek and Latin versions to the original".[1] In the foreword of his commentary on Jer, he declares to have supplemented many missing passages.[2] As a result, Jerome's latin text of Jer became the first comprehensive rendering of the Hebrew original in Antiquity.

To achieve this, he had to be well prepared. His intimate knowledge of at least four languages made him unique in his time.[3] When he started to translate Jer for the first time, he had already more than ten years of intensive training in this art[4] and was experienced in textual criticism. This was all the more true for his final work, the commentary on Jer, an apex of his exegetical work.

I will first refer shortly the historical setting of Jerome's translations of Jer (1), then deal with their relationship (2), and finally try to evaluate the findings (3).

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[1] *Praeterea ordinem visionum, qui apud Graecos et Latinos omnino confusus est, ad pristinam fidem correximus* (line 11–12).

[2] Prologus, 2: ... *sed magis Hieremiae ordinem librariorum errore confusum multaque, quae desunt, ex Hebraeis fontibus dirigere ac conplere* ....

[3] Jerome knew very well Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. Only Bishop Epiphanius from Salamis (315–403) was also a *vir trilinguis* in the Western Church in Antiquity, according to Fürst, Hieronymus, 83. Jerome, however, could additionally work with Aramaic, and probably understand some Syriac and Coptic.

[4] Already in 380 CE he had started to translate Origen's Greek homilies to the three Major Prophets into Latin. A few years later, he continued with the Gospels and the Psalms.

1. The settings of the two translations

Jerome translated the Book of Jeremiah *twice*:

First, it was for what would later become the "*Vulgate*".[5] Having started this huge project around 390 CE with the Books of Samuel and Kings, he continued with the three major prophets. Jer was translated in the early 90ies of the 4th century.

With regard to the difficulty, switching from the Former Prophets, mostly in prose, to the three Major Prophets, with large poetic parts, is a display of enormous confidence.[6] The poetry, especially in Isaiah and Jeremiah, has many complicated passages whose exact meaning even now evades sometimes our understanding.

The second translation was in connection with the *commentary on Jeremiah*,[7] in the years 414–416; yet it covers only chapters 1–32. It remained unfinished, because the last period of Jerome's life was replete with various struggles.[8] The distance in time of more than 20 years between the two translations invites for a comparison between both renderings.

2. The relationship between the two translations

Jerome's intention, in both cases,[9] was to translate accurately the Hebrew original, and at large they agree. However, there are also *differences* between the earlier and the later version. Many of them are formal and have little bearing on the meaning (synonyms, orthography, word order); others, on the contrary, affect the sense of the text. In the following I will give some examples for both instances.

a) Variants with little bearing on the meaning

The *orthography*, especially of proper names, differs: Jer 1:1 *Helciae / Helchiae* for Jeremiah's father Hilkijahu; 22:24 *Ioachim / Ioiacin* for King Jehoiakim; 29:3 *Ellasa / Hellasa* for Shapan's son Elasa, …[10]

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[5] I refer to it henceforth with "Vg".

[6] Fischer, Hieronymus, 538.

[7] "JCo" will indicate references to it. A word before " / " renders Vg, after it JCo.

[8] Fischer, Hieronymus, 541 and footnote 32.

[9] See the forewords, in the Vulgate with the wish to "correct", in the commentary with the desire … *ut nouum ex ueteri uerumque pro corrupto atque falsato prophetam teneas*.

[10] Another example is the variation of *dii / di* for gods in 2:10 and more often.

Vg tends to *emphasize the subjects* with pronouns. This is the case e.g. in 1:8 with *ego* "I", also in 21:5, in 32:25 "you" (Sg.), but occasionally JCo does it also, in a similar way, e.g. in 1,9–10.

The *position of words* and the *construction of clauses* may differ. Vg renders well the final clause in 2:13 and has "his name" in 11:19 before the verb. Reversely, JCo brings "like a stranger" correctly after the predicate in 14:8.

Jerome often uses *synonyms* or words that have nearly the same meaning: 8:13 *ait / dicit* "he says"; contrarywise, in 25:15 he chooses *dicit* in the Vg, *ait* in JCo. To render causal כי, he switches between *enim / quia* "because, as, for" in 23:12; 28:16; 31:34, and reversely in 29:16; 31:6; ... For "(of) bronze" we find in 1:18 *aereum / aeneum*; for "others" in 8:10 *exteris / externis* "foreigners".

In Hebrew, phrases may be connected with or without *Waw* "and". Vg frequently is closer than JCo in rendering syndetic or asyndetic linkages, see 13:10; 14:3, 14; 23:16; 25:26 ...

JCo tends to render in plural singular expressions used in a collective sense, e.g. *mala* for רעה "evil, disaster", or בעל "Baal" with *Bahalim*, "Baal (-gods)". Vg remains in these cases mostly in the singular, with *malum* respectively *Baal*, cf. 1:14; 7:9; 11:13, 17 ...

All this leads to an astonishing result: Vg, in many instances, renders the Hebrew text *formally more accurately* than JCo.

b) Variants affecting the sense

In several instances, however, the differences *touch the meaning* of a passage. Some passages for Vg being closer to the original are:

In 2:28 it uses *quippe* for כי in an adversative sense;[11] the particle has no equivalent in JCo. In 4:19 Vg renders correctly *in me* for לי "in me". The plural *audiant* in 6:10 "that *they* may listen" corresponds to the Hebrew text. Vg is precise at the beginning of 10:12, whereas JCo follows the LXX with *dominus* "the Lord" there. In 10:25 it has to "devour him", referring to Jacob mentioned before.[12]

In the other direction, JCo is also more precise several times: In 2:34 *in omnibus istis* is a good rendering for על־כל־אלה "(because of) all these" in JCo.[13] In the same way, 5:31 "you (plural) will make" is correct; Vg has "it will happen" instead. JCo understands the rhetorical question in 7:11 and is accurate in 14:3 with "*their* eminent ones".

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[11] It is difficult to grasp the exact meaning; in German it might be "freilich, ja", in English "of course, though".

[12] JCo interprets by bringing "his place" as the object of the verb.

[13] In this case, Vg deviates by changing and adding: *in omnibus tuis quae supra memoravi*, "in all your (things?) which I remembered above".

There are more examples in both directions. However, there is a change regarding the *proportions* for correct translations. Within the first chapters, Vg has approximately twice as much better renderings than JCo and is *often closer* to the original. This changes around Jer 14; from there onwards, regarding the meaning, the relation is balanced, both having a similar number of cases closer to the Hebrew text. This indicates that Jerome, going on with commenting, tended to become more accurate. In any case, Jerome's Latin translations of Jer were by far the best in his time.

3. Evaluation

We can detect two contrasting features:

As the high degree of correspondences (more than 90%), even in difficult passages, indicates, Jerome probably *used the earlier translation*, or he had it still in mind. On the other hand, the alterations show that he *did not always stick to it* rigorously, but dealt with it freely.

In a similar way, the Jeremian "*doublets*" (e.g. Jer 23:19–20 // 30:23–24) often receive different renderings, even *within* both translations. This may occur because of concerns for style,[14] but there is more about it: Jerome seems to have applied a 'continuous' translation technique, letting himself become influenced by the immediate context, too.

Vg as well as JCo render the (probable) Hebrew original *very exactly*, far better than any translation before. Jerome, having access to Hebrew manuscripts, surpasses even the Greek translation of the Septuagint, and corrects it often in JCo.

The difficulties he had to struggle with were enormous: These texts were not vocalized; there were no dictionaries, grammars, concordances at his time.[15] His philological sensitivity and his intimate knowledge of all biblical languages were outstanding for his time.[16]

To make up for the minor literalness of the rendering in the commentary with regard to the Vulgate version, Jerome takes advantage of the different literary genre: When explaining a word or a verse, he offers *further possible translations* later in his commenting, often introduced by *sive*, sometimes with *vel*, thus showing a broader range of meanings for expressions that may be debated. For מגור מסביב "terror around", he offers six different renderings in 20:3, with LXX and Θ; Aq; Sym: *migrantem, peregrinum, circumspicientem, ablatum, congregatum, coactum*; the rendering in the Vg is *pavorem undique*.

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[14] Jerome normally tried to avoid repeating words within short distance: A good example is 4:23–26: *aspexi, vidi, intuitus sum, aspexi*, for four times identical ראיתי at the beginning of consecutive verses.

[15] However, there might have been some tools helping him, as e.g. Origen's hexapla, with various renderings showing the specter of possible meanings or interpretations.

[16] Graves, Philology, 193, further highlights that Jerome's interpretation of the Old Testament on the basis of the Hebrew text was then unique.

The Church Father, in his old age, displays so in his commentary a still wider horizon than before and an ongoing creativity. His enormous, long-lasting effort has become an immense gift for the Church and all those interested in the Bible.

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