

Jerome between Hexapla and Hebraica Veritas

cum carbonibus iuniperorum/desolatoriis – Psalm 120:4 (Vg 119:4)

Michael Fieger

Professor of Old Testament and Hebrew at the Theological Faculty of Chur, Switzerland.
Editor of the German Tusculum Vulgate and Co-director of the Vulgate Institute.

michael.fieger@thchur.ch  120145340  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8220-3383>

ABSTRACT • This paper analyzes the expressions *sagittae ... cum carbonibus iuniperorum* – arrows with juniper charcoal (Ps Vg 119:4 iuxta Hebraeos) and *sagittae ... cum carbonibus desolatoriis* – arrows with devastating charcoal (Ps Vg 119:4 iuxta LXX) in comparison with the Masoretic Text, the Septuagint, the Hexapla, and the Vetus Latina. Special attention is given to the linguistic and interpretative nuances of the Latin terms.

KEYWORDS • Psalm 120:4 (Vg 119:4), charcoal, juniper

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG • Dieser Artikel analysiert die Ausdrücke *sagittae ... cum carbonibus iuniperorum* – Pfeile mit Wacholderkohle (Ps Vg 119,4 iuxta Hebraeos) und *sagittae ... cum carbonibus desolatoriis* – Pfeile mit verheerender Holzkohle (Ps Vg 119,4 iuxta LXX) im Vergleich zum masoretischen Text, der Septuaginta, der Hexapla und der Vetus Latina. Besonderes Augenmerk wird auf die sprachlichen und interpretativen Nuancen der lateinischen Begriffe gelegt.

STICHWORTE • Psalm 120,4 (Vg 119,4) – Holzkohle – Wacholder

Introduction

We have, as is well known, two Psalm translations of Jerome, the one made on the basis of the Septuagint, and one that seeks to follow the Hebrew text as closely as possible. The two versions are synoptically and admirably presented in Weber's standard edition. Sometimes, Jerome's two versions are very similar in style and wording. In some cases, however, they are significantly different, and therefore, all the more interesting for the modern scholar. The variants produced in verse 4 – *cum carbonibus desolatoriis* in the Septuagint-based version, and *cum carbonibus iuniperorum* in the Hebrew-based Psalter – immediately raise the question of what criteria Jerome used in each case and what theological or exegetical implications this may have.



This study investigates whether Jerome's decision to use different terms such as *desolatoriis* and *iuniperorum* can be attributed to textual, botanical, or theological considerations – and what this reveals about his translation methodology in the tension between the Septuagint and Hebraica Veritas. The following table indicates the ancient sources considered in this paper.

Synoptic comparison of the translations of Psalm 120:4

Version	Text	Comment
Masoretic Text (MT)	דִּמְדַּחַי לִי־הָאֵשׁ דָּשַׁן	with charoal from broom bushes
Septuagint (LXX)	σὺν τοῖς ἄνθραξι τοῖς ἐρημικοῖς	with (unspecified) charcoal from the desert
Aquila (Hexapla)	σὺν ἀνθρακιάς ἀρκευθίναις	charcoal from juniper – specific, but probably erroneous
Symmachus (Hexapla)	μετὰ ἀνθράκων ἐστοιβασμένων	without plant specification
Psalterium Romanum	cum carbonibus desolatoriis	with destroying charcoal – destructive effect emphasised
Vulgata iuxta hebraeos	cum carbonibus iuniperorum	with charcoal of junipers – botanically questionable, but Hebrew-oriented
Peshitta	like glowing oak charcoal	comparison with charcoal from oak – a different association

(1) The Hebrew text

Let us begin with a brief look at the Hebrew text. Psalm 120 is characterised by the contrast between peace and war (v. 6–7). The psalmist looks back on a time of oppression he experienced among the nomads in Mesheh and Kedar; see especially the phrase “the tents of Kedar”. The psalmist asks YHWH to deliver his soul from the lips of lies, from the tongue of deceit (2). The tongue of deceit, i.e., the tongues of the nomads, shall be severely punished by YHWH with the arrows of a warrior, sharpened with the coals of broom. The psalmist curses his enemies who once oppressed him.

In the Masoretic Text (MT), verse 3 contains the rhetorical question ‘What shall he (YHWH) give you, and what shall he add to you, O deceitful tongue?’ In verse 4, the question is followed by a metaphorical answer: He shall give you ‘the arrows of a warrior, sharp with coals of broom.’

We will now look at how Jerome renders this passage. We begin with the traditional Vulgate rendering.

(2) The Vulgate Psalm 119:4 (LXX)

In Jerome's first, Septuagint-based translation, verse 4 is rendered as follows:

sagittae potentis acutae cum carbonibus desolatoriis

Jerome literally reproduces the translation from the Psalterium Romanum (see below) and the translation from the Septuagint (see below). The adjective (masc. plur.) *desolatoriis* occurs only once in the Vulgate.

In the so-called Psalterium Romanum,¹ Psalm 119:4 reads as follows:

sagittae potentis acutae cum carbonibus desolatoriis.

This is based on the Septuagint Psalm 119:4 (LXX):

τὰ βέλη τοῦ δυνατοῦ ἡκονημένα
σὺν τοῖς ἄνθραξιν τοῖς ἐρημικοῖς.

The arrows of the powerful one are sharp
together (σὺν) with desert coals!

This Greek passage may be translated as follows:

The arrows of the powerful one are sharp,
together (σὺν) with desert coals (τοῖς ἄνθραξιν τοῖς ἐρημικοῖς).²

The statement in the Septuagint (Psalm 119:4) is kept general. It speaks of a “powerful one” who has sharp arrows. How the “desert coals” in the second half of the verse relate to the first half is not stated, so that no clear scenario emerges before the reader’s eyes. And even the “desert coals” have not consistently imposed themselves on vernacular translators. The English Douay-Rheims Bible has, enigmatically, ‘with coals that lay waste’:

The sharp arrows of the mighty, with coals that lay waste.
(Douay-Rheims Bible, 1609)

In the Septuagint, the phrase is ‘σὺν τοῖς ἄνθραξι τοῖς ἐρημικοῖς’ – cannot but mean ‘with coals from the desert’. The reference may be to particular plant – the so-called desert broom (*Retama raetam*, in German: Ginster), valued by Bedouins for making high-quality charcoal with an exceptionally intense and long-lasting glow. The characterization of the ‘coals’ – or charcoals – as being ‘from the desert’ seems to suggest the plant’s place of origin, because the desert broom, as its modern name indicates, actually grows in desert-like regions. The Latin rendering ‘*desolatoriis*’, derived from *desolare*, “to devastate,” may, by semantic extension, refer to the specific burning power of charcoal made from the desert broom. The term ‘*desolatorii*’ would therefore be not just a free translation of ‘from the desert’, but also allude to the devastating, destroying effect of the charcoal – both in a physical and a metaphorical sense.

(3) Vulgate Psalm 119:4 (iuxta hebraeos)

In his later translation of the Psalms based on the Hebrew (iuxta hebraeos), Jerome renders verse 4 as follows:

sagittae potentis acutae cum carbonibus iuniperorum

¹ Robert Weber, *Le Psautier Romain et les autres anciens Psautiers Latins* (Collectanea Biblica Latina 10), Rome 1953, 313.

² *A New English Translation of the Septuagint*. Ed. A. Pietersma – B.G. Wright, 2nd ed. Oxford 2009.

Why has '*cum carbonibus desolatoriis*' become '*cum carbonibus iuniperorum*'? How did Jerome come to render the Hebrew plural דִּמְקָתִיךָ with the plural *iuniperorum*? To answer this botanical question, it is worth looking at both Origen's Hexapla and the Hebrew tradition.

In Origen's Hexapla³, we find the following versions of Psalm 119:4 (Hebr. 120:4):

Hebrew	דִּמְקָתִיךָ לִי דִּמְקָתִיךָ עִם דִּמְקָתִיךָ גִּבּוֹר גִּבּוֹר גִּבּוֹר
LXX	τὰ βέλη τοῦ δυνατοῦ ἡκονημένα σὺν τοῖς ἀνθραξι τοῖς ἐρημικοῖς.
ʾA.	... σὺν ἀνθρακιάς ἀρκευθίναις. (Aquila)
Σ.	(τὰ) βέλη τοῦ δυνατοῦ ἡκόνηται μετὰ ἀνθράκων ἐστοιβασμένων. (Symmachus)

In the Hexapla, the Hebrew text and the Septuagint text are identical with the Masoretic Text and the standard text of the Septuagint. Aquila translates the second half of the verse strikingly with ἀνθρακιάς ἀρκευθίναις⁴, charcoal from juniper (*iuniperus*), and not from broom as in the Hebrew text. The physician and polymath Galen of Pergamon (Galenos, c. 129 – 210 CE), may have influenced his contemporary Aquila in identifying the plant species. Nevertheless, Aquila probably made a translation error here due to his lack of knowledge of the exact botanical identification of דִּמְקָתִיךָ. Symmachus, on the other hand, does not commit himself and translates with ἀνθράκων ἐστοιβασμένων, 'heaped with coals', without specifying the plant species from which the charcoal originates.

Jerome no doubt adopted Aquila's translation – *iuniperus*.

(4) Syriac Hexapla (SyrHex) Psalm 119:4⁵

The Syriac Hexapla has a reading that is close to the Greek text (with the preposition 'with'), but with an unknown word for the plant from which the charcoal was made. Meant may be a type of bdellium resin⁶.

(5) Peshitta Psalm 119:4

In the Peshitta, the burning coals come from oak (holm oak)⁷. A warrior's sharp arrows are compared to burning charcoal made from oakwood:

'Sharp arrows of a warrior, like burning oak coals.'

³ Frederick Field, *Origenis Hexaplorum quae supersunt ... fragmenta*. Oxford 1875, vol. 2, 279.

⁴ Wilhelm Pape, *Handwörterbuch der griechischen Sprache*. Braunschweig 1914, Vol. 1, 353: 'made from juniper'.

⁵ Field, *Origenis Hexaplorum*, vol. 2, 279, note 7. I would like to thank Dr. J. Lucas Brum Teixeira (University of Würzburg, Faculty of Catholic Theology, Research Assistant, Junior Research Group 'Herrschaft') for the information regarding Syriac.

⁶ Carl Brockelmann, *Lexicon Syriacum*. Halle 1928, 192.

⁷ Michael Sokoloff, *A Syriac Lexicon. A Translation from Latin, Correction, Expansion and Update of C. Brockelmann's Lexicon Syriacum*. Winona Lake, Ind. 2009, 154.

(6) Psalm 120:4 (MT)

Finally, we can come back to the Masoretic Text. What can be said about our verse 4 in Hebrew?

חֲצִי גִבּוֹר שְׁנוּנִים לֹעַם גִּחְלִי רִתְּחִים

Arrows of a warrior sharpened (together) with coals of gorse (or, broom [bushes]).

First of all, the Hebrew text raises the question of what exactly this aggressive act refers to: is it one or two actions? Was charcoal made from gorse bushes placed on the tips of the arrows and then shot, or was charcoal used to increase the brutality of the aggressive act? In his commentary on Psalm 120 (HThKAT, 409), Erich Zenger opts for an additional use of charcoal, and justifies this with reference to an Assyrian palace relief that shows how an Assyrian warrior puts fire to a nomad tent with what must be a piece of charcoal (HThKAT, 418f.). See excerpts!

For our question, the masculine plural noun, absolutus רִתְּחִים, which is derived from the root רתח, is significant. In the context of the Israelites' encampments in the desert, Numbers 33:18f. mentions a place called Ritma רִתְּמָה without further explanation, a name associated with the root רתח. According to First Kings, the disappointed and weary prophet Elijah wants to die in the desert and lies down under a broom bush רִתְּחִי (participle of רתח) (1 Kgs 19:4f.).

For Jerome, who follows Aquila, רִתְּחִי is to be translated as *iuniperus*, juniper. Jerome notes: '*Rathem, pro qua Aquila interpretatur ἄρκευθον, i.e., iuniperum, Symmachus umbraculum (Σ. σκέπη).*'⁸ Symmachus does not commit himself to the name of the plant this time either. Interestingly, in First Kings 19:4, the Septuagint renders the Hebrew רִתְּחִי with the Greek letters ραθμ^{9,10}.

In the book of Job, those who mock the suffering hero warm themselves (לְחַמּוֹם + לְ; לְחַמּוֹם)¹¹ with roots from broom (שִׁשְׁרִי רִתְּחִים) (Job 30:4). These roots were probably used as fuel for cooking. It is unlikely that broom roots were also used for food, as broom is considered a rather poisonous plant from a botanical point of view, i.e., it is inedible. But *Genista retama*, to use the botanical term, does not contain alkaloids in lethal doses, and the intoxicating effect is limited. When the Hexapla and the Vulgate (and most of its vernacular derivatives) refer to broom roots as 'food', we must take this¹² metaphorically rather than literally.¹³

A final relevant text in which the root רתח appears is in a prophetic text in Micah (Micah 1:13). Here, it is used in the imperative (רִתְּחִי), with the striking command: 'Harness the chariot with

⁸ Field, *Origenis Hexaplorum*, vol. 1, 636, note 5 on III Regum 19:4f.

⁹ This Hebraism occurs only once in the LXX.

¹⁰ According to Origen's Hexapla, רִתְּחִי is also translated elsewhere as κυπαρίσσου / cypress grove. Field, *Origenis Hexaplorum*, vol. 1, 636 on III Regum 19:4.

¹¹ This form is a hapax legomenon.

¹² For detailed information on *Genista retama*, I would like to thank Fr. Victor Lossau OSB M.A. (Technical University, Dresden).

¹³ Field, *Origenis Hexaplorum*, Vol. 2, 53.

the horse’— apparently a reference the rod-like broomsticks used to harness the cart to the horse. Thus, in this context, the verb בָּרַךְ takes on the meaning of ‘to bind’. The statement could therefore be translated somewhat boldly as follows: ‘Bind the cart to the horse’. But this is Hebrew! The Septuagint paraphrases the verse and omits the imperative. Jerome translates this verse as in the Septuagint and not as it appears in his Hebrew source. Because of the apparently unclear Hebrew imperative בָּרַךְ , this verse was probably paraphrased in the Septuagint, and subsequently also in the Vulgate:

‘tumultus quadrigae stuporis habitanti Lachis principium peccati est filiae Sion quia in te inventa sunt scelera Israhel’ (Vg Micah 1:13).

‘A tumult of chariots hath astonished the inhabitants of Lachis: it is the beginning of sin to the daughter of Sion for in thee were found the crimes of Israel.’ (Douay-Rheims Micah 1:13).

In other words: for Jerome, the Micah passage has no bearing whatsoever on the verse that we have been discussing in this paper.

Conclusion

Jerome has no trouble translating Psalm 120:4 (Vg 119:4) once as *‘cum carbonibus desolatoriis’* and another time as *‘cum carbonibus iuniperorum’*, even though he seems to have made a mistake in the exact botanical classification of the plant used for producing charcoal. In his translation, he sometimes follows the Psalterium Romanum or the Septuagint, which was then considered a divinely-inspired text, and at other times he follows Aquila from Origen’s Hexapla. While the word *desolatoriis* emphasises the motif of divine judgement, *iuniperorum* also evokes associations with fire, purification or even refuge (cf. Elijah under the בָּרַךְ bush). Accordingly, the difference is not purely botanical, but has hermeneutical significance. Via the Vulgate, Jerome’s translation with *‘cum carbonibus iuniperorum’* has had a decisive influence on subsequent translations. See Martin’s Luther Bible of 1545, ‘sie ist wie scharffe Pfeile eines Starcken, wie fewer in Wachholdern’ – ‘they are like sharp arrows of a mighty man, like fire in juniper trees’.