

BETWEEN SCYLLA AND CHARYBDIS:
JEROME AS INTERPRETER OF THE MINOR PROPHETS¹

Bernhard Klinger²

ABSTRACT This article introduces the way in which Jerome comments on the Minor Prophets. It is clear that his exegesis is characterized by his classical education as well as by very different exegetical schools. This article should be understood as a first step in investigating the contribution of the patristic interpretation of the Bible to a contemporary exegesis.

KEYWORDS Book of the Twelve, Dodekapropheten, Minor Prophets, Jerome, literal sense, spiritual sense, hermeneutics.



ZUSAMMENFASSUNG Dieser Beitrag stellt die Art und Weise vor, wie Hieronymus die Kleinen Propheten kommentiert. Es wird deutlich, dass seine Exegese sowohl von seiner klassischen Bildung als auch von sehr unterschiedlichen Schulen geprägt ist. Dabei darf dieser Artikel verstanden werden als ein erster Schritt, um der Frage nachzugehen, welchen Beitrag die patristische Bibelauslegung für eine zeitgenössische Exegese leisten kann.

SCHLAGWORTE Zwölfprophetenbuch, Dodekapropheten, Kleine Propheten, Hieronymus, Literalsinn, geistiger Sinn, Schrifthermeneutik.

Introduction — The initial question

When Jerome wrote his commentaries on every Minor Prophet at the turn from the 4th to the 5th century C.E., he used a particular approach. He compared two versions of the biblical texts: on the one hand his translation of the Hebrew text to Latin, and on the other hand the text of LXX, but also translated into Latin. Wherever the two versions differed from each other, Jerome commented on both versions separately and the comment was not only historically, but also spiritually and/or allegorically. Furthermore, Jerome uses both Rabbinic and Christian interpreters (e.g. Origen), although he often is accused of arguing in an anti-Semitic way.

1. This article is based on a short paper held at IOSOT at Aberdeen in August 2019.

2. Bernhard Klinger, Dr. theol., lecturer for Old Testament at the Department for Catholic Theology at the University of Passau (Germany) • bernhard-klinger [at] web.de • bernhard.klinger [at] uni-passau.de •  133569942  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1726-5163>.

Nevertheless, Jerome favoured the Hebrew original and the literal sense over a spiritual meaning of the text. He neither denies spiritual nor allegorical meanings in general, but allows for them only in cases without a precise literally interpretation:

“Regula scripturarum est: Ubi manifestissima prophetia de futuris textitur, per incerta allegoriarum non extenuare quae scripta sunt” (Jerome, *Comm. in Malachiam* 1 11).³

The aim of this short paper is to introduce Jerome’s method of commenting biblical texts by the example of his commentaries on the Minor Prophets and to consider, if and to what extent a commentary like Jerome’s might be used among contemporary exegesis.

In considering this question I will give a very short introduction to Jerome’s biography; the second step will deal with Jerome’s exegetical teachers; the third step will try to contextualize Jerome’s way of commenting among the field of different methods that Jerome got to know.

Some biographical remarks

Jerome was born about 347, probably near Emona — in the region of Dalmatia and Pannonia. So, Jerome grew up in the late antiquity: He was sent to Rome by his parents to study grammar. There he studied the Latin authors very intensively, so that they got a strong impact on him.⁴ In addition to that, his involvement with profane literature also had an impact on the way he commented on the biblical texts; this will be discussed later.

That Jerome was very familiar with the Latin authors proves *ep.* 22,30, by which he tells about a dream in which he hears the sentence: “You are a Cicero-nian, not a Christian” (cf. Jerome, *ep.* 22,30). Jerome tells as follows:

“Si quando in memet reuersus prophetam legere coepissem, sermo horrebat incultus et, quia lumen caecis oculis non uidebam, non oculorum putabam culpam esse, sed solis. dum ita me antiquus serpens inluderet, in media ferme quadragesima medullis infusa febris corpus inuasit exhaustum et sine ulla requie — quod dictu quoque incredibile sit — sic infelicia membra

3. All quotes from Jerome’s writings are based on: San Jerónimo, *Obras Completas. Edición bilingüe promovida por la Orden de San Jerónimo* (Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos), Madrid 2003; the Latin text corresponds to the text of *Corpus Christianorum*, Brepols, Turnhout (Belgium).

4. Cf. Schlange-Schöningen, Heinrich, *Hieronymus. Eine historische Biografie*, Darmstadt 2018, 38–55.

depasta est, ut ossibus uix haererem. interim parabantur exsequiae et uitalis animae calor toto frigente iam corpore in solo tantum tepente pectusculo palpitabat, cum subito raptus in spiritu ad tribunal iudicis pertrahor, ubi tantum luminis et tantum erat ex circumstantium claritate fulgoris, ut proiectus in terram sursum aspicere non auderem. interrogatus conditionem christianum me esse respondi. et ille, qui residebat: ‘mentiris’, ait, ‘ciceronianus es, non christianus; ubi thesaurus tuus, ibi et cor tuum’.” (cf. Jerome, *ep.* 22,30).

This dream was a drastic experience for Jerome: He made a turnaround towards the Holy Scripture. After having studied in Rome, later on Jerome stretched his horizon throughout the Ancient world: He went to Trier, to Constantinople and to Palestine, where he lived from 385 to 419/420.

Furthermore, Jerome learned Greek and Hebrew and began to translate exegetical texts, e.g. homilies of Origen and texts of Eusebius. It is not surprising, that Jerome was called a *vir trilinguis* — because of him being highly educated and speaking Latin, Greek and Hebrew. But referring to the latter René Kieffer notes: “There is as suspicion in recent literature, that his knowledge of that language remained rather poor”.⁵

Nevertheless, at the minimum Jerome survived by having created the Vulgate; but his further exegetical work — there are many scriptures which are handed down to us — is of no less importance.

The diversity with which Jerome works as a writer makes him, alongside Augustine, one of the most important Christian authors of the late antiquity: Hardly any other author writes so voluntarily and thoroughly about himself and his writings, not only in his letters, but also in speeches, magazines and even in Bible commentaries.⁶ Already at a young age Jerome was regarded as a specialist, who often was asked for information. His standing grew and already in his lifetime he was considered as a very great authority.⁷ Elisabeth Birnbaum, who edited and commented Jerome’s commentary on Qohelet, stresses Jerome’s meaning: Through his wide reception of Jewish, Greek and Latin interpretations of the Bible interpretations in his commentaries, he also translates the most im-

5. Kieffer, René, “Jerome: His Exegesis and Hermeneutics”, in: Saebo, Mayne, *Hebrew Bible / Old Testament. the History of Its interpretation*, Vol. I. *From the Beginning to the Middle Ages (Until 1300)*, Göttingen 1996, 663–681; see: 665 fn. 11.

6. Cf. Hagedahl, Harald / Waszink, Jan, Art. “Hieronymus”, in: RAC 15 117–139; here: 118.

7. Cf. Reventlow, Henning Graf, *Epochen der Bibelauslegung*. Bd. 2 *Von der Spätantike bis zum ausgehenden Mittelalter*, Munich, 1994, 42.

portant findings of biblical exegesis into a rhetorically trained, stylish, easy-to-read Latin.⁸

Jerome and his commentaries on the Minor Prophets

If there are any commentaries on Old Testament scriptures, than in most cases they are commentaries on the prophets.⁹ What is true for the commentaries on the books of Old Testament Prophets is true for sermons about prophetic texts, too.¹⁰ The reason is that there are some facts that brought the interpretation of Prophetic books forward.¹¹

Some of the OT prophetic texts have a typological character and therefore they give a *testimonium* for Christ. In addition to that, some prophetic texts show theological-dogmatic usefulness: For prophetic texts, especially collections of testimoniums and the messianic-christological texts were estimated as *loci classici* for some doctrines.¹² For there are two sides which correspond to each other: On the one hand there are christological themes, on the other hand there is a dogmatic development, a dogmatic evolution that is related to prophetic texts, like Micah 5:1–3; Zach 9:9; Mal 3:1–3.

Furthermore, the prophetic texts are characterised through moral persuasiveness because of their soteriological importance: The Early Church considered itself as the continuation of Israel as the People of God. Therefore, it was important to take the instructions of the prophets and their moral claim seriously. At last there is the specific prophetic language that has a high memorability due to the powerful and pictorial language.

These thoughts are also followed by Jerome in his comments. For referring to Patristic and medieval commentaries on the Prophets — both Major and Minor

8. Birnbaum, Elisabeth, *Der Kohelet-Kommentar des Hieronymus* (CSEL. Extra Seriem), Berlin–Boston 2014, 2.

9. Cf. Dassmann, „Umfang, Kriterien und Methoden frühchristlicher Prophetentexte“: JBTh 14 (1999) 117–143; Geerlings, Wilhelm, „Die lateinisch-patristischen Kommentare“, in: *Id. / Schulze Christian, Der Kommentar in Antike und Mittelalter: Beiträge zu seiner Erforschung* (Clavis commentariorum Antiquitatis et Medii Aevi), Vol. 1, Leiden–Boston–Köln 2002, 1–14.

10. Cf. Dassmann, „Umfang“ (fn. 9) 121f.

11. Cf. Dassmann, „Umfang“ (fn. 9) 141–143; Studer, Basil, „Delectare et prodesse. Zu einem Schlüsselwort der patristischen Exegese“, in: *Id., Dominus Salvator. Studien zur Christologie und Exegese der Kirchenväter* (StudAnselm 107), Rome 1992, 431–461.

12. Cf. Dassmann, „Umfang“ (fn. 9) 123.142f.

Prophets — Jerome stands out prominently: He is the only Christian exegete who commented all of the prophetic books of the Bible. Jerome commented them between 393 and 416:

- 393 Commentaries on the books of Nahum, Micah, Zephaniah, Haggai and Habakkuk
- 396 Commentaries on the books Jonah and Obadiah
- 406 Commentaries on the books of Zechariah, Malachi, Hosea, Joel and Amos
- 407 Commentary on the book of Daniel
- 408–410 Commentary on the book of Isaiah
- 410–414 Commentary on the book of Ezekiel
- 414–416 Commentary on the book of Jeremiah

Between 396 and 406, after having commented the books of Jonah and Obadiah, there was a gap of ten years, until Jerome began to continue commenting on the Book of the Twelve Prophets. Maybe one reason is that Jerome began a new life as founder and head of a cloister at Bethlehem.¹³

The fact that Jerome commented the prophetic books independent of their order, he explains in the Prologue of his commentary on Amos:¹⁴

“Non enim a primo usque ad nouissimum, iuxta ordinem quo leguntur, sed ut potuimus, et ut rogati sumus, ita eos disseruimus. Naum, Michaeam, Sophoniam, et Aggaeum, primo φιλοποννοτάταις Paulae eiusque filiae Eustochio προσεφώνησα; secundo in Abacuc duos libros Chromatio Aquileiensi episcopo delegavi; tertio post longi temporis silentium, Abdiam et Ionam tibi imperanti edisserui; praesenti anno qui sexti consulatus Arcadii Augusti, et Anitii Probi fastis nomen imposuit, Exsuperio Tolosanae Ecclesiae pontifici Zachariam, et eiusdem urbis Mineruio et Alexandro monachis Malachiam prophetam interpretatus sum. Statimque recurrens ad principium uoluminis, Osee et Ioel, et Amos, tibi negare non potui.

Et post grauissimam corporis aegrotationem, dictandi celeritate ostendi temeritatem meam, ut quod alii stilum saepe uertendo non audent scribere, ego committerem casui, qui semper dictantes sequitur, et de ingenio atque doctrina, audaciae periculum facit; quoniam, ut saepe testatus sum, laborem propria scribendi manu ferre non ualeo et in explanatione sanctorum scripturarum, non uerba composita, et oratoriis floribus adornata, sed eruditio et simplicitas quaeritur ueritatis.” (Jerome, *Comm. in Amos*, liber III, prologus).

13. Cf. Birnbaum, *Hieronymus* (fn. 8) 5.

14. Cf. Staub, Adelrich, *Die exegetische Methode des Hieronymus im Kommentar zum Zwölfprophetenbuch. Eruditio saeculi und scientia scripturarum* (Dissertatio ad lauream), Pontificium Athenaeum Anselmianum (Facultas theologiae), Rome 1977 (unpublished script of the doctor thesis provided to the author by Father Adelrich Staub OSB), here: 54–62.

In fact, in *ep.* 53 Jerome speaks first of the twelve Minor Prophets; then of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel:

“Duodecim prophetae in unius uoluminis angustias coartati, multo aliud quam sonant in littera praefigurant... Malachias aperte et in fine omnium prophetarum de abiectioe Israhel et uocatione gentium... Esaiam, Hieremiam, Ezechiel, Danihel quis possit uel intellegere uel exponere?” (Jerome, *ep.* 53,8).

The decisive criterion for this order is probably the theological closeness to Jesus Christ.

Anyway: It becomes clear that Jerome commented on the prophets not only for scientific reasons, but he also wanted to take into account specific needs, i.e. he dedicated his writings to others or because he had gotten the job.

By whom has Jerome been taught? Who influenced him exegetically?

About Jerome’s commentaries René Kieffer judges generally:

“In his commentaries Jerome relies much on his predecessors, especially the Greek exegetes from the school of Alexandria, Antioch and Cappadocia, who were not as well known by Latin exegetes. Some commentaries are almost simple translations of Origen’s Greek originals. Jerome often seems impatient to finish his works quickly, without caring too much about making a fresh analysis of the structure of the biblical text. But he frequently has interesting philological remarks on some details in the original language.”¹⁵

So: Who are these predecessors? How and in how far has Jerome been influenced exegetically?

Jerome was taught mainly by Apollinaris of Laodicaea and Gregory of Nazianzus (*~329 †390):

Apollinaris of Laodicaea: “Apollinarem Laodicenum audiui Antiochiae frequenter, et colui; et cum me in sanctis scripturis erudiret, nunquam illius contentiosum super sensu dogma suscepi.” (Jerome, *ep.* 84,3)

Gregory of Nazianzus: “Praeceptor quondam meus Gregorius Nazianzenus rogatus a me ut exponeret quid ...” (Jerome, *ep.* 52,8)

15. Kieffer, “Jerome” (fn. 5) 667. Henning Graf Reventlow judges Jerome’s commentaries very cautiously, not to say derogatorily: Reventlow, *Epochen* (fn. 7) 43.

But besides his teachers Jerome was very interested in Origen (*185 †~254): He studied his writings very well. Dennis Brown registers:

“In the last 17 years of his life, he was to produce his most mature exegetical work, with major commentaries in several of the prophetic books of the O.T. In almost all of these works, it is still possible to see the influence of Origen.”¹⁶

There is no doubt that Jerome was influenced additionally by rabbinic interpretation of the Old Testament also and that he used rabbinic methods and read rabbinic scriptures; but the question is how far this influence expands respectively how intensive the contact was. According to Günter Stemberger there are some scholars, who worked on the relationship between the Church Fathers’ exegesis and rabbinic exegesis.¹⁷ Günter Stemberger notes:

“As may easily be understood, the enthusiasm of discovery and the double apologetic of the early period of research led to highly excessive claims regarding the dependence of the Church Fathers on the Rabbis.”¹⁸

But at the same time Stemberger admonishes to be careful:

“One has to be cautious even in cases where a Church Father explicitly refers to a Jewish source: too frequently such references are copied from earlier Christian texts, as is well known in the case of Jerome, but also elsewhere”.¹⁹

It is very remarkable that

“on the Christian side, the prophetic books attracted the special interest of the interpreters already before the earliest full-scale commentaries were written.”²⁰ “Starting with Origen, a long series of commentaries on Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel and the Minor Prophets were written, whereas in Jewish tradition, none of these books received a Midrash.”²¹

Therefore, Stemberger is very careful and reluctant and writes:

16. Brown, Dennis, *Vir Trilinguis: A Study in the Biblical Exegesis of Saint Jerome*, Kampen, 1992, 161.

17. Cf. Stemberger, Günter, “Exegetical Contacts between Christians and Jews in the Roman Empire”: Id., *Judaica Minora I*, Tübingen 2010, 413–45; here: 414. Stemberger mentions H. Graetz, M. Rahmer and S. Krauss.

18. Stemberger, “Exegetical Contacts” (fn. 17) 434.

19. Stemberger, “Exegetical Contacts” (fn. 17) 434f.

20. Stemberger, “Exegetical Contacts” (fn. 17) 435.

21. Stemberger, “Exegetical Contacts” (fn. 17) 435.

“We must not overestimate the concern of Judaism with Christianity. [...] Christians in the Jerusalem area could live without seeing a Jew.”²²

Furthermore, Stemberger considers what kind of Jews could have encountered Christians²³ and “whether Rabbis ever had the chance to read a Christian book.”²⁴

“This is not to suggest a splendid isolation of the rabbinic establishment; but high-level interreligious contacts and direct disputations with Christians about dogmatic questions and the interpretation of certain biblical texts were certainly not the norm.”²⁵

If there were contacts, it is to be assumed, “that it was mainly, if not exclusively, the Christian side which learned from and reacted to the Jewish one.”²⁶ This is true for the Christian and Jews communities in Alexandria too. Perhaps in Alexandria “there seems to be hardly any exegetical contact with living Jews.”²⁷

Finally Günter Stemberger concludes:

“There is no doubt that Jerome was very well acquainted with Jewish exegetical traditions; we know much less about the exact sources of his knowledge. The role of Jewish of Judaizing Christians may have been greater than that of educated Jews, not to speak of Rabbis with whom Jerome probably had no contacts at all. In spite of a vast literature on Jerome and the Jews, an in-depth analysis of Jerome’s Jewish traditions still remains a desideratum.”²⁸

Therefore, Jerome got to know the Antiochene way of reading the Holy Scripture as well as the Alexandrian way. So he got to know both: the way preferring the literal sense and the way asking for the allegorical meaning. By this way in Jerome’s exegetical work two Christian traditions and Jewish tradition flow together:

22. Stemberger, “Exegetical Contacts” (fn. 17) 438.

23. Stemberger, “Exegetical Contacts” (fn. 17) 438.

24. Stemberger, “Exegetical Contacts” (fn. 17) 438.

25. Stemberger, “Exegetical Contacts” (fn. 17) 438.

26. Stemberger, “Exegetical Contacts” (fn. 17) 440.

27. Stemberger, “Exegetical Contacts” (fn. 17) 441.

28. Stemberger, “Exegetical Contacts” (fn. 17) 448.

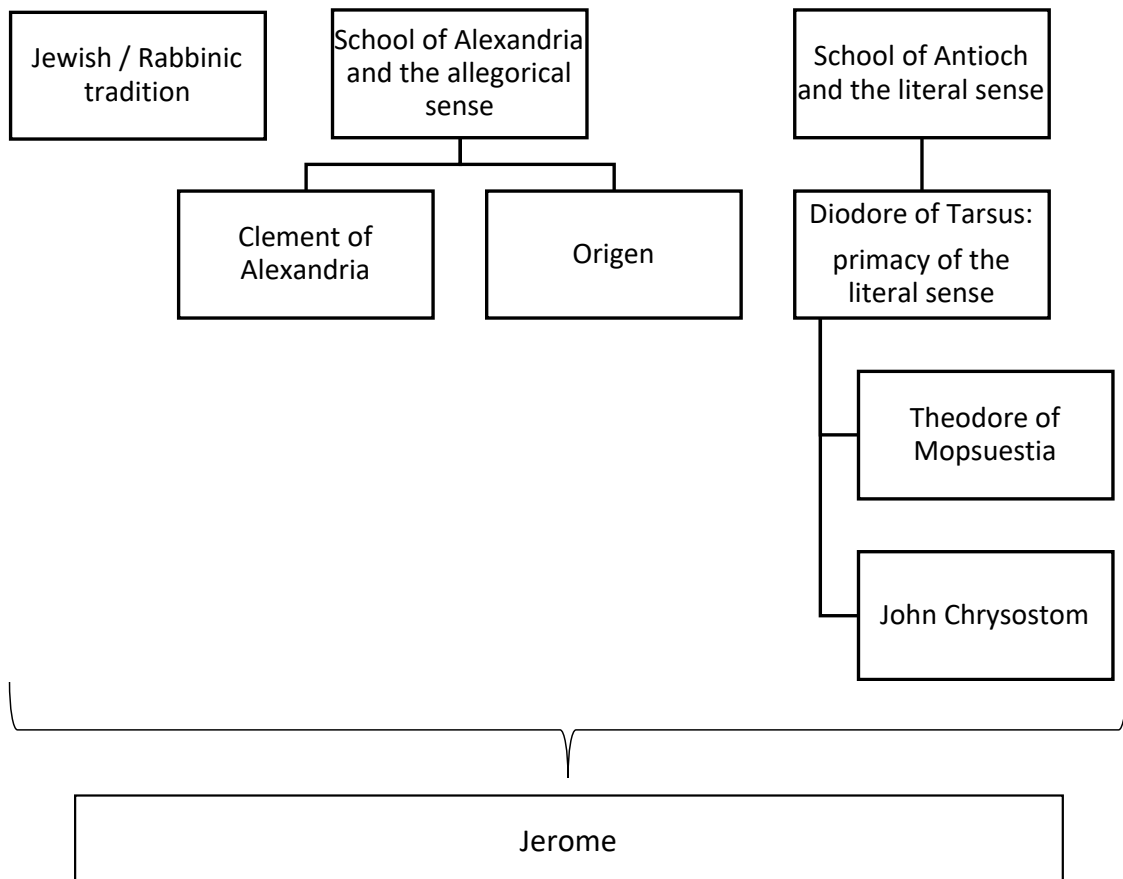


Illustration 1: Jerome and his exegetical teachers

Jerome as rhetorically educated interpreter of biblical texts

In the following section some outlines shall be given about main components that characterize Jerome's interpretation of biblical texts: First, Jerome respects the *scientia scripturarum* as well as the *eruditio saeculi*, i.e. he respects Jewish tradition and his Christian predecessors (*scientia scripturarum*); second Jerome draws on his rhetorical education and his familiarity with profane antique literature (*eruditio saeculi*) to enhance the literary style of the biblical texts.

*Jerome's respect for scientia scripturarum and eruditio saeculi*²⁹

Jerome takes into account the Jewish tradition, sometimes speaking of one³⁰, sometimes of several³¹ teachers. In doing so he takes a stand from a Christian point of view and calls the testimonials of the Jewish tradition *fabulae* — not necessarily a flattering term. Despite the predominantly negative evaluation, Jerome concedes a positive function to the Jewish traditions: They are helpful to find a positive interpretation.³² Jerome follows the Jewish tradition, where the literal sense is at the centre, whereas the limits of Jewish tradition are to be found where the fulfilment of the Messianic promises has already taken place.³³

Similarly to Jerome's taking into account the Jewish tradition, he also chooses from the Christian tradition what seems appropriate to him.³⁴ Sometimes he also gives a verdict on the opinion quoted by him: In *Comm. in Osee* III 10,5–6 Jerome refers to a Christian tradition according to which King Jarib/Jareb might represent Christ. But Jerome rejects this opinion totally:

“Quidam et supra et in praesenti loco in commentariis suis scriptum reliquit, regem Iarib, id est ultorem, Christum intelligendum. Quod nobis omnino displicet. Impium enim est quod iuxta historiam intellegitur de rege Assyro, iuxta tropologiam ad Christum referri.“

But nevertheless: Jerome sees it as his task as commentator to pass on the opinions of other exegetes and not to write something his own.

Jerome's respect to *eruditio saeculi* and his high rhetorical education becomes obvious when he quotes Latin authors or mentions their thoughts. This kind of use of ancient literature is a sign that Jerome is primarily concerned not with words, but with meaning and with illustrating his own thoughts.³⁵ Furthermore

29. Cf. Staub, *Exegetische Methode* (fn. 14) 69–126.

30. Cf. Staub, *Exegetische Methode* (fn. 14) 73 with reference to: Jerome, *Comm. in Aggeo* 2,16–18: „*Hebraeus totam loci huius continentiam ab eo quod scriptum est...*“

31. Cf. Staub, 73 with reference to: Jerome, *Comm. in Naum* 2,1–2: „*Testis est mihi Dominus, me omnia quae secundum Hebraicum dissero, non de proprio sensu loqui, quod arguitur in pseudoprophetis, sed Hebraeorum sequi expositionem, a quibus non modico tempore eruditus, debeo meis simpliciter indicare quae didici.*“

32. Cf. Staub, *Exegetische Methode* (fn. 14) 75.

33. Cf. Staub, *Exegetische Methode* (fn. 14) 77.

34. Cf. Staub, *Exegetische Methode* (fn. 14) 85.

35. Cf. Staub, *Exegetische Methode* (fn. 14) 99–126.

referring to Latin or to profane authors Jerome is able to outline the literal quality of the prophetic texts:³⁶ Jerome uses the classical texts for this purpose.

Jerome's respect for the different senses to interpret biblical texts

As we have seen, Jerome has been influenced by the Antiochian School and by the Alexandrian School so that he reads and interprets biblical texts according to a historical or literal sense as well as to a spiritual or allegorical sense. Although Jerome differs between these different senses,³⁷ he does not know a more subtly differentiated distinction yet — how it is the case in the Middle Ages where it is distinguished between historical, literal, spiritual, allegorical and tropological sense. But he uses different expressions that shall be outlined in the following section. The relationship between the two different ways to read biblical texts — on the one hand as *sensus literalis*, on the other hand as *sensus spiritualis* — can be seen in *Comm. in Abacuc* I 1,6–11: “*Haec iuxta Hebraicum. Nunc ueniamus ad LXX, ut propositis singulis sententiis, interpretationem allegoricam coaptemus.*” This passage also makes it clear that Jerome’s speaking of different senses, refers to different texts, too: the Hebrew text if referring to the *sensus literalis* and the LXX if referring to the *sensus spiritualis*.

Jeromes’s respect for the literal sense and his terminology

The fact that representatives of the Antiochian school influenced Jerome can be pursued because he emphasizes the importance of the Hebrew text throughout his interpretations by preferring the Hebrew text to the Septuagint, although the Greek texts were presented in the liturgy. Therefore, Jerome uses the term *Hebraica veritas*: “*Hoc iuxta litteram et Hebraicam ueritatem.*” (*Comm. in Sophoniam* 2,3–4). Or prefers the Hebrew text distinctly: “*proponens uerba Malachi, primum iuxta Hebraicam ueritatem, deinde iuxta LXX interpretes*” (*Comm. in Malachiam, prol.*). The reason might be that Jerome considered only the Hebrew text to be inspired.³⁸

36. Cf. Staub, *Exegetische Methode* (fn. 14) 99–126.

37. Cf. Birnbaum, *Hieronymus* (fn. 8) 11.

38. Cf. Staub, *Exegetische Methode* (fn. 14) 129; Schade, Ludwig, *Die Inspirationslehre des Heiligen Hieronymus* (Biblische Studien XV 4.5) Freiburg 1910.

In addition to the importance of the Hebrew text Jerome uses many expressions to delineate the literal sense. Some of these expressions are to be named here:³⁹ *littera, historia, secundum intellegentiam corporalem, carnaliter intellegere, iuxta litteram, secundum litteram intellegere.*

However, the problem is, as Dennis Brown notes: “No one term suffices for Jerome in his discussion of the literal sense.”⁴⁰ Therefore the question is what Jerome means with the category *historia*:

“It needs to be noted, however, in connection with Jerome’s use of the term *historia*, that, although, as Kelly says, it was a technical term in the exegetical school of Antioch, it was also in widespread use by Alexandrian writers and other Latin exegetes.”⁴¹

In the context of Jerome’s writings the term *historia* — or synonymously *ordo historiae* — indicates the literal sense as well as the historical fact. This becomes clear in *Comm. in Amos* I 2,9–11, where the term *historiae ordo* is used:

“Neque uero ubi de laudibus dicitur Dei, historiae ordo seruandus est, sed frequenter euenit ut quae prima facta sunt, extrema dicantur, et quae nouissima, referantur ad prima.”

In addition to this problem, that representatives of both schools use the term *historia*, Jerome uses the expression *carnaliter interpretationem*, combines it with the expression *Iudaicae fabulae* and distinguishes these two terms polemically from the spiritual sense (*spiritaliter*):

“De Henoch autem et Helia, quos uenturos, Apocalypsis refert et esse morituros, non est istius temporis disputatio, cum omnis ille liber aut spiritualiter intellegendus sit, ut nos aestimamus, aut, si carnalem interpretationem sequimur, Iudaicis fabulis adquiescendum sit, ut rursum aedificetur Hierusalem et hostiae offerantur in templo, et spiritali cultu inminuto carnales obtineant caeremoniae.” (Jerome, *ep.* 59,3).

It is obvious that in this letter Jerome argues in favour of a spiritual sense. On the one hand this is astonishing and seems to be paradox; but on the other hand Jerome delimits himself with it and defines himself against a literal sense that Jewish exegetes used for understanding the biblical texts.

39. Cf. Staub, *Exegetische Methode* (fn. 14) 127–199; Brown, *Vir Trilinguis* (fn. 16) 124f.

40. Brown, *Vir Trilinguis* (fn. 16) 125.

41. Brown, *Vir Trilinguis* (fn. 16) 126–127.

In principle Jerome has “a great respect for the literal sense of scripture”⁴². This can be understood also because of Jerome’s statement in *Comm. in Zacariam* III 11,4: “*Vbi manifestissima prophetia est, et per translationem historiae uerus ordo narratur, superflua est tropologiae interpretatio*”. This is also similar and true in Jerome, *Comm. in Malachiam* 1,11:

“Scripsit in hunc librum Origenes tria uolumina, sed historiam omnino non tetigit, et more suo totus in allegoriae interpretatione uersatus est, nullam Ezrae faciens mentionem sed angelum putans fuisse qui scripsit, secundum illud quod de Ioanne legimus: Ecce ego mitto angelum meum ante faciem tuam. Quod nos omnino non recipimus, ne animarum de caelo ruinas suscipere compellamur.”

And this can be seen also in Jerome, *Comm. in Ioelem, prol.*: Jerome mentions the order of the Minor Prophets in LXX and MT and explains the etymological meaning.⁴³ Even if Jerome translates the name Malachias as “ἄγγελός μου, *id est nuntius meus*” (*Comm. in Ioelem, prol.*), in *Comm. in Malachiam, prol.* he identifies the prophet Malachi with Esdras:

“Jerome identifies the prophet Malachi with Esdras, rejecting the view that Malachi was an angel who assumed a human body and appeared to humans, rightly noting that Malachi prophesied at the same time as Haggai and Zachariah.”⁴⁴

Whether Jerome is on the right, can be doubted very often; nevertheless Jerome tries to explain the text referring to events in biblical history: “He does not normally dwell on these historical facts, but often considers it necessary”⁴⁵. In addition to biblical history Jerome considers biblical topography to be necessary, too.⁴⁶

In respecting the literal sense, Jerome criticises Origen’s focusing the spiritual sense; this critical attitude even leads to a total rejection, as Dennis Brown notes:

“In the latter part of 406, Jerome finished a group of five commentaries on Zechariah, Malachi, Hosea, Joel and Amos, thus bringing to completion his work on all twelve Minor Prophets, begun some fifteen years previously. One or two statements in these commentaries are very interesting for the purpose of showing Jerome’s respect for the literal sense of scripture.

42. Brown, *Vir Trilinguis* (fn. 16) 131. Cf. also Jerome, *ep.* 18.

43. Brown, *Vir Trilinguis* (fn. 16) 133.

44. Brown, *Vir Trilinguis* (fn. 16) 134.

45. Brown, *Vir Trilinguis* (fn. 16) 134.

46. Cf. Brown, *Vir Trilinguis* (fn. 16) 137.

After the end of the Origenist controversy, in which Jerome had played a leading part, he became rather more critical of the famous Alexandrian theologian than he had been previously. In the *comm. Mal.*, Jerome criticises Origen's almost total neglect of the literal sense."⁴⁷

Again: Jerome shows great respect for the literal sense and — especially in his later years — he distanced himself from his teacher Origen and calls him “that allegorist”⁴⁸. This respect for the literal respectively the historical sense Jerome learned from Apollinaris of Laodicea.⁴⁹ But in addition, Dennis Brown gives to consider: “But he [= Jerome, BK] foolishly does not touch entirely on history, for he is very skilled in his own allegorical interpretation.”⁵⁰

Jerome's respect for the spiritual sense and his terminology⁵¹

Jerome supplemented the literal sense with the allegorical method: “In order to arrive at an adequate exegesis of scripture, Jerome utilised another method of interpreting, which had its origins at Alexandria — the allegorical method.”⁵² This method “was not itself a Christian invention”⁵³. Greek philosophers also used it to interpret the writings of Homer and Hesiod; furthermore also “the Stoa developed the method of finding more — than — literal meaning in specific passages.”⁵⁴ Allegory became a part of Jewish exegetical tradition too.

Among Christian authors Origen was the most important representative of this method:

“For Origen, as for all the Fathers, the Holy Spirit was the real author of scripture, the human »authors« being mere instruments in the process. It followed from this view of inspiration that not only the general meaning of the biblical books was true, but also that every detail had to be true. Not even the smallest particle is empty of meaning.”⁵⁵

47. Brown, *Vir Trilinguis* (fn. 16) 131.

48. Brown, *Vir Trilinguis* (fn. 16) 131; Brown refers to Jerome, *Comm. in Hieremiam* 24,1–10.

49. Cf. Brown, *Vir Trilinguis* (fn. 16) 133.

50. Brown, *Vir Trilinguis* (fn. 16) 131.

51. Cf. Staub, *Exegetische Methode* (fn. 14) 200–277.

52. Brown, *Vir Trilinguis* (fn. 16) 139.

53. Brown, *Vir Trilinguis* (fn. 16) 139.

54. Brown, *Vir Trilinguis* (fn. 16) 139.

55. Brown, *Vir Trilinguis* (fn. 16) 140.

Therefore, obviously according to the trichotomy in Platonic philosophy and Platonism, perhaps also according to 1 Thess 5:23, Origen divided the interpretation of biblical texts into three senses:

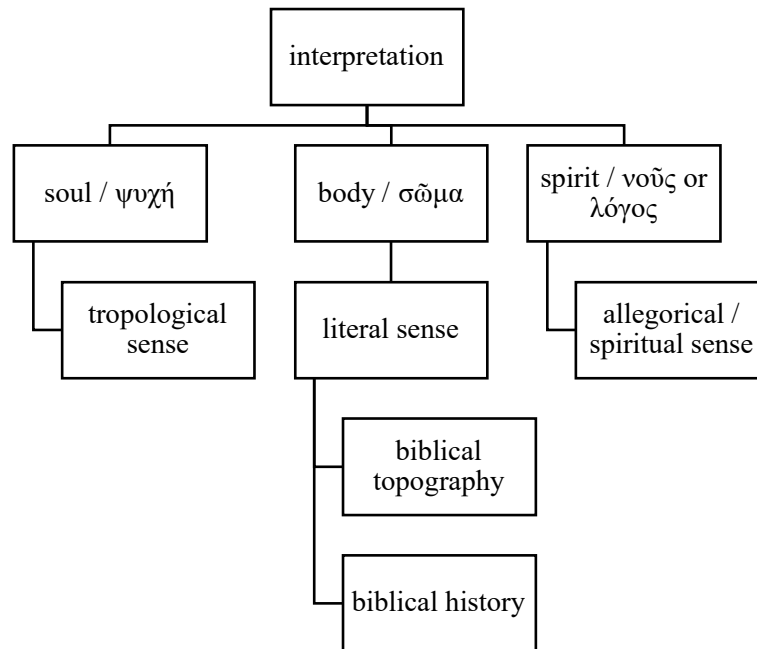


Illustration 2: Senses of interpretation and terminology

As Jerome became familiar with Origen’s scriptures, he began to appreciate the spiritual sense. Jerome estimates the spiritual sense: For him “the spiritual sense was superior, and to be preferred to the literal sense.”⁵⁶

Similarly to the literal sense, Jerome used several different expressions to describe the spiritual sense, for example: *intelligentia spiritualis* (e.g. *Comm. in Oseam* 7,5–7; *Comm. in Abdiam* 2–4), *sensus spiritualis* (e.g. *Comm. in Sophoniam* 2,5–7), *secundum mysticos intellectum* (e.g. *Comm. in Amos* 7,14ff; *Comm. in Abacuc* 1,16ff; *Comm. in Ioelem* 2,18), *tropologia*, *allegoria*, *anagogia*, *intelligentia spiritualis*, *aliter intelligentia*, *sacramentum Spiritus Sancti*.

Jerome uses these different expressions in a similar way; they differ only very slightly so that there is some blurredness in meaning. On the other hand: But by using these expressions Jerome distinguishes himself from the other fath-

56. Brown, *Vir Trilinguis* (fn. 16) 153.

ers who entirely represent the allegorical way, the Alexandrian school, and use terms like *typus*, *allegoria*, *aenigma* or *theoria* to make a certain statement.⁵⁷

Jerome uses these expressions too, but in a more or less different way: The word τύπος can be found in Jerome's writings just a few times: e.g. *Comm. in Oseam* 11,1; *Comm. in Ionam, prol*; *Comm. in Micham* 4,1–4; *Comm. in Amos* 3,12. And regarding the term *allegoria* Dennis Brown states: "As far as Jerome is concerned, therefore, allegory is merely another word for the spiritual interpretation of scripture" and serves to „contrast with the literal sense"⁵⁸. This becomes clear in Jerome, *Comm. in Amos* 4,4–6 and *Comm. in Ep. ad Galatas* 4,24.

The use of the term *aenigma* is somehow difficult, because αἴνιγμα is „a figure of speech which is obscure both in expression and in meaning"⁵⁹. And Origen defines αἴνιγμα as "a narrative which reports things as having happened, even though they have not happened, since they are impossible."⁶⁰ Jerome does not use αἴνιγμα very often; if he does use it, it is associated with parabola: "For him, an *aenigma* is a »dark saying« in the bible, rather like a parabola. Both must be interpreted with skill, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit."⁶¹

The same applies to the terms *theoria*/θεωρία and *allegoria*/ἀλληγορία: For the Alexandrian school θεωρία and ἀλληγορία are synonyms, whereas the Antiochene School differs between ἀλληγορία and θεωρία. John Chrysostom, for example, "divided biblical statements into those which have only a literal sense, those which have a higher sense as well as a literal one and those which have only a higher sense."⁶² The Antiochene School teaches: "θεωρία is a *via media* which respects the literal sense and yet does not introduce comments which are not already in the context of the passage."⁶³ Therefore θεωρία (a) presupposes the literal sense, (b) is an addition to the literal sense, (c) stands in relation to the spiritual sense and (d) supports attaining both senses at the same time.⁶⁴

Hence, the Antiochene School was able

57. Cf. Bate, Herbert Newell, "Some technical terms of Greek exegesis": JTS 24 (1922) 59–66.

58. Brown, *Vir Trilinguis* (fn. 16) 146; cf. Penna, Angelo, *Principi e carattere dell'esegesi di S. Gerolamo* (Pontificio Istituto Biblico, Scripta 102), Rome 1950, 123.

59. Brown, *Vir Trilinguis* (fn. 16) 147.

60. Brown, *Vir Trilinguis* (fn. 16) 147.

61. Brown, *Vir Trilinguis* (fn. 16) 148.

62. Brown, *Vir Trilinguis* (fn. 16) 124.

63. Brown, *Vir Trilinguis* (fn. 16) 149.

64. Cf. Vaccari, Alberto, "La θεωρία nella scuola esegetica di Antiochia": Bib 1 (1920) 3–36.

“to interpret the messianic prophecies of the O.T. according to Christian tradition, without having to refute the historical context and without seeming to impose an interpretation on those passages from the outside.”⁶⁵

In so far Jerome follows the Antiochene School and uses the term *θεωρία* only in concern with prophecy.⁶⁶ He explains the prophecy in its historical context and describes the literal sense. Then Jerome claims that a prediction concerning Christ is connected inextricably — following the rule of interpreting: “*Regula scripturarum est: Ubi manifestissima prophetia de futuris textitur, per incerta allegoriae non extenuare quae scripta sunt.*” (*Comm. in Malachiam* I 11).

So the technical vocabulary — *ἀνιγμα*, *θεωρία* and *ἀλληγορία* — was used both by Alexandrian and by Antiochene Fathers, but they differ in significance and meaning: “It is legitimate to ask whether Jerome was influenced more by one of these schools than by the other in the meaning he gave to his technical vocabulary.”⁶⁷

One consequence which Dennis Brown holds on record is, that it is manifestly false, to assume, that Jerome used Origen’s technical vocabulary and the meaning that Origen attached to it!⁶⁸ Because although Jerome read and translated Origen’s exegetical scriptures and used and quoted them, he distinguished between Origen the exegete and Origen the theologian: “Jerome rejects categorically those doctrines of Origen, which diverge from those of the Church.”⁶⁹

For although Jerome considers the *sensus literalis* to be fundamental, his interpretation is aimed at the *sensus spiritualis*: The actual purpose of the interpretation of biblical texts is the *intelligentia Salvatoris*⁷⁰, i.e.: The *sensus literalis* (or *historia*) calls for the discovery of the secrets that lie within the biblical texts. However, these secrets (or *sensus spiritualis*) can only be recorded within the Church, for Jerome considers Jesus Christ as the true centre and purpose of the Holy Scripture.

65. Brown, *Vir Trilinguis* (fn. 16) 149.

66. Cf. e.g. *Comm. Mal.* 1,11–13.

67. Brown, *Vir Trilinguis* (fn. 16) 150.

68. Cf. Brown, *Vir Trilinguis* (fn. 16) 150. One example to see the parallels between Origen and Jerome is their interpretation of Matt. 13:44f; further examples to consider in how far Jerome and Origen differ from each other substantially: Jerome, *ep.* 18A,2; *ep.* 108,26; *ep.* 124.

69. Brown, *Vir Trilinguis* (fn. 16) 159.

70. Cf. Staub, *Exegetische Methode* (fn. 14) 219.

In order to achieve this centre or purpose, the interpreter must also be exposed to risks. This becomes clear by reading Jerome's *Comm. in Nahum* 2,1–2, where Jerome even quotes Virgil (from Virgil, *Aeneid* III 420f.):

“Necessitate compellor quasi inter saxa et scopulos, imminente naufragio, sic inter historiam et allegoriam orationis meae cursum flectere, et ne subito impingat attendere. Siquidem iuxta fabulas poetarum: Dextrum Scylla latus, laeuum implacata Charybdis / Obsidet”.

To continue Jerome's metaphor: Despite the dangers, it remains the role of the interpreter to keep the ship at sea between Scylla and Charybdis and thus to be on the way.

Where further reflections might be necessary

This article can be understood as one first step to answer the question, whether and to what extent a commentary like Jerome's might be used among contemporary exegesis.

It is possible to read and interpret the Book of Malachi exclusively from a historical point of view: might it be the history of culture, of religion or prophecy. But as the Book of Malachi is part of the Holy Scripture, part of the canon of the Christian bible, a further question might be: How does Jerome's commentary promote or obstruct a theological reading of the Book of Malachi? Another subsequent question is, in how far we have to consider the relationship between Old and New Testament. To put it straight: Is it possible to read and interpret the Book of Malachi with a Christological point of view? And how can we then get along with Jerome's anti-Jewish trends?

Therefore, it remains exciting to deal with Jerome, his writings and the Vulgate: to keep the ship of exegesis at sea between Scylla and Charybdis — between different senses.