

WHAT BIBLICAL SCHOLARS CAN LEARN FROM JEROME: SIXTEEN CENTURIES AFTER HIS DEMISE¹

Dominik Markl²

ABSTRACT Jerome of Stridon (ca. 347–420 CE) was, after Origen, one of few Christian scholars of antiquity who engaged in profound studies of the biblical languages Greek and Hebrew. His stylistically accomplished Latin translation was received as the standard Bible of Western Christianity for a millennium — the Vulgate. Besides his intense studies of literature and languages, Jerome’s monumental achievement as a biblical scholar was grounded in monastic enthusiasm, the teaching of a wide range of exegetes of Christian and Jewish provenance, a knowledge of biblical geography, and an academic network that spanned the Mediterranean basin.

KEYWORDS Jerome of Stridon; Biblical Studies; Bible translation; Vulgate; reception; history of scholarship.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG Hieronymus von Stridon (ca. 347–420 n. Chr.) war nach Origenes einer der wenigen christlichen Gelehrten der Antike, die vertiefte Studien der biblischen Sprachen Griechisch und Hebräisch betrieben. Durch seine im Lateinischen stilistisch gelungene Übersetzung schuf er die für ein Jahrtausend maßgebliche Bibel der Westkirche, die Vulgata. Die monumentale bibelwissenschaftliche Leistung des Hieronymus beruhte neben intensiven Studien von Literatur und Sprachen auf asketischem Enthusiasmus, einer breiten Vielfalt exegetischer Lehrer christlicher und jüdischer Herkunft, der Kenntnis der biblischen Geographie und einem den Mittelmeerraum überspannenden akademischen Netzwerk.

SCHLAGWORTE Hieronymus von Stridon; Bibelwissenschaft; Bibelübersetzung; Vulgata; Rezeption; Wissenschaftsgeschichte.

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2. Professor Dr. Dominik Markl, Pontifical Biblical Institute, Rome • markl [at] biblico.it

 133001571  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5202-048X>.

1. Introduction

Jerome was arguably one of the most influential scholars of the Bible in the history of Christianity.³ He was the first scholar to produce translations of most books of the biblical canon, indeed his Latin translation was generally accepted as the “Vulgate” version in the Christian West for more than a millennium. Already during his lifetime, Jerome’s exegetical works were used by towering figures such as Augustine of Hippo. Throughout the Medieval period and Early Modernity, Jerome was portrayed as a prime example of ascetic learning.⁴ Together with Ambrose, Augustine, and Gregory, he has been venerated as one of the great doctors of the Latin church, confirmed by Pope Boniface VIII in 1295. Even today, one of the most widely distributed single-volume commentaries on the Bible is entitled *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*.⁵ What was the key to Jerome’s success? In what follows, I shall explore some aspects of his life and learning that, *mutatis mutandis*, may still serve as a model for contemporary biblical scholars.

2. Studies of Languages and Literature

Born around 347 in the town of Stridon⁶, in a peripheral region of the Roman Empire somewhere in modern day Croatia, Jerome spent his teenage years in Rome studying Latin language and literature with Aelius Donatus, in his day the most respected scholar in the field. Donatus’ books became standard works of

3. On the reception of Jerome see esp. T. Scheck et al., “Jerome”, *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception* 13 (2016) 986–997; A. Cain and J. Lössl (eds.), *Jerome of Stridon: His Life, Writings and Legacy*, Farnham 2009, esp. 175–279.

4. See K. Marsengill, “Jerome. III. Visual Arts”, *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception* 13 (2016) 995–997.

5. The first edition of the *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* (ed. R. E. Brown, J. A. Fitzmyer, and R. E. Murphy) was published in 1968; the same editors were in charge of the revised edition, *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (1990). *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary: Second Revised Edition* (ed. J. J. Collins, G. Hens-Piazza, B. Reid, and D. Senior), is forthcoming with Bloomsbury.

6. For biographical information on Jerome, I rely on the monograph by Alfons Fürst, *Hieronymus: Askese und Wissenschaft in der Spätantike* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2016); a concise introduction to his life and work is A. Kamesar, “Jerome”, in: J. C. Paget and J. Schaper (eds.), *The New Cambridge History of the Bible: Volume 1: From the Beginnings to 600* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 653–675.

grammar in the Medieval period. “When it comes to Latin, I have spent my life nearly from the cradle among grammarians, rhetoricians, and philosophers”, Jerome writes in his preface to Job. He seems to have polished up his Greek during his first journey to the East in his late twenties (373–379). Most exceptional, however, was Jerome’s thorough study of the Hebrew language,⁷ which he started during the same period, when he spent two years in the Syrian desert. His knowledge of Hebrew became more and more profound as he translated the books of the Old Testament with the help of Jewish advisors. Jerome learnt some bits and pieces of Aramaic and Syriac but did not reach any depth in these languages.

Unlike modern students of Hebrew, Jerome had no textbooks or grammars of Hebrew at his disposal. He had to acquire his understanding of the unvocalized Hebrew texts through painstaking personal study and the help of his teachers. He boasts about his sufferings in studying the language. Having read great Latin works such as those of Cicero and Pliny, he writes,

“I was now learning the alphabet and studying the Hebrew words with their sibilants and gutturals. The strains I had to endure, the difficulties that were to overcome, how often I despaired, how often I gave over and, full of desire to learn, commenced again, is known to me alone and those who were living together with me. But I thank the Lord that from this seed of learning sown in bitterness I now reap sweet fruits” (Ep. 125,12)

Jerome was not the only Christian in antiquity who became acquainted with the biblical languages. His most prominent predecessor as a Christian student of Hebrew was Origen (ca. 185–254), and while Jerome attests that Epiphanius of Salamis knew Hebrew, Jerome may have been the last Christian author of non-Jewish origin to have acquired a profound knowledge of Hebrew for many centuries to come.⁸ Only with the increased interest of Christians in the Kabbalah during the 15th century, and the humanist interest in the sources of antiquity, did studies of Hebrew start to become a matter of prestige among Christian scholars.⁹ Jerome proudly claimed, for good reasons, to have been called a scholar of

7. On Jerome’s knowledge of Hebrew see D. Brown, *Vir Trilinguis. A Study in the Biblical Exegesis of Saint Jerome*, Kampen 1992, esp. 87–120; Fürst, *Hieronymus*, 79–83.

8. See M. Graves, *Jerome’s Hebrew Philology: A Study Based on his Commentary on Jeremiah* (Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae 90), Leiden 2007, esp. 117–127.

9. On the revival of Hebrew studies among Christians see esp. S. G. Burnett, *Christian Hebraism in the Reformation Era (1500–1660): Authors, Books, and the Transmission of Jewish Learning* (Library of the Written Word 19), Leiden 2012.

“Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, trilingual” (*Contra Rufinum* III 6), and he subsequently was honoured as *vir trilinguis*.

In the course of his life, Jerome moved *ad fontes* of the Bible both geographically and linguistically: studying Latin in Rome, Greek in Constantinople and Antioch, and Hebrew in Syria and Palestine.¹⁰ The quality of Jerome’s engagement with the Bible was based on his willingness to devote much time and energy to studying the biblical languages, which benefited from his early studies of the theory of Latin grammar and literature.

3. Monastic Enthusiasm for the Bible

While we know little about Jerome’s childhood, his classical education seems to have preceded his fervent interest in the Bible. He only received baptism at around the age of twenty, in 367 in Rome. He then travelled to the imperial residence Augusta Treverorum (now Trier in Germany), where he got in contact with the monastic movement and decided to give up any aspirations to a secular career, instead opting for a strictly monastic life.¹¹ Early Christian monasticism involved learning the Psalter and other biblical writings by heart.¹² “To meditate” meant “to ruminate”, that is, to repeat and ‘chew’ each and every word of the Holy Scriptures just as the Shema Yisrael suggests:

“And these words that I am commanding you today shall be in your heart. Recite them to your children, and repeat them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise” (Deut 6:6-7).¹³

Alluding to the opening verse of the Psalter — “Happy are those... whose delight is in the Torah of Yhwh”, Jerome writes,

“Can there be a different life, one without knowledge of the Bible, through which Christ is known, who is the life of the believers?... Others may possess treasures, drink from jewelled

10. Cf. M. Gilbert, « Saint Jérôme, traducteur de la Bible », in: *Il a parlé par les prophètes: Thèmes et figures bibliques* (Collection « Connaître et croire » 1), Namur: Lessius, 1998, 9–28 [*Annales* 1986, Jerusalem, Notre Dame Center, 1986, 81–105], esp. 10–13.

11. On the development of monasticism in Jerome’s time see Fürst, *Hieronymus*, 45–54.

12. Cf. E. von Severus and A. Solignac, « Méditation. I. De l’Écriture aux auteurs médiévaux », *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité* 10 (1980) 907–914; H. Bacht, „‘Meditatio’ in den ältesten Mönchsquellen“, *Geist und Leben* 28 (1955) 360–373.

13. G. Fischer and N. Lohfink, „‘Diese Worte sollst du summen’. Dtn 6,7 *w^edibbartā bām* – ein verlorener Schlüssel zur meditativen Kultur in Israel“, *Theologie und Philosophie* 62 (1987) 59–72.

goblets, dress in shining silk, enjoy the applause of the people and be so rich that no luxury would diminish their wealth! Our enjoyment it is to consider the law of the Lord by day and by night!” (Ep. 30,7.13).

Memorization was a basic ingredient of classical education,¹⁴ and in the same line, Jerome recommended the memorization of entire biblical books (Ep. 107.12). “By constant reading and long-continued meditation”, an accomplished Christian makes “his breast a library of Christ” (Ep. 60.10).¹⁵ Jerome perceived the Bible essentially as “Sacred Scripture”.¹⁶ He was living with the Bible as a monk and a regular preacher.¹⁷ A spiritual attitude directs his work as a translator as well. In his preface to the Pentateuch, Jerome asks Desiderius for his prayers “so that I can translate these books into the Latin language in the same spirit in which they were written.” Jerome’s enthusiasm with the Bible grew stronger over the decades and provided him with energy to carry through his impressive oeuvre of translations, commentaries, and tractates.

Of Origen, Jerome wrote,

“he knew the Scriptures by heart, and toiled day and night in the study of their meaning... Who should not admire his spirit that was burning for the Scriptures?” (Ep. 84,8).

Similarly, a certain Postumianus praised Jerome’s dedication to his work:

“He is reading all the time. He is dedicated exclusively to his books, does not give himself a break, neither by day nor by night. All the time he is reading or writing”.¹⁸

Jerome’s work ethos was inspired by a profound intellectual fervour that was, at the same time a spiritual desire: to know the biblical writings in depth to ex-

14. D. Robertson, *Lectio Divina: The Medieval Experience of Reading* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2011), 75–76.

15. Robertson, *Lectio Divina*, 79.

16. R. Kieffer, “Jerome: His Exegesis and Hermeneutics”, in: M. Sæbø (ed.), *Hebrew Bible / Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation. Volume I: From the Beginnings to the Middle Ages (Until 1300). Part 1: Antiquity*, Göttingen 1996, 662–681, here 671, lists the following expressions used by Jerome: *scriptura sancta, scriptura sacra, libri sancti, volumina sancta, historia sacra, litterae sacrae, volumina sacra, scriptura divina, scriptura Dei, scripturae dominicae, sermo Dei, sermo divinus, sermo Domini, sermo dominicus, verbum Dei, verba divina, codices divini, libri divini, volumina divina, volumina divinarum litterarum, scripturae caelestes, caelestis scripturarum panis*.

17. Cf. Gilbert, « Saint Jérôme », 13–14: « Il y a ainsi, entre la Bible et lui, une sorte de connaturalité, de connivence ».

18. Sulpicius Severus, *dial.* I 9,5 (CSEL 1, 161), quoted in Fürst, *Hieronymus*, 59.

perience their gift of spiritual life. Intellectual passion and spiritual desire nourished together his scholarly enterprise.¹⁹

4. *A Wide Range of Exegetical Teachers*

Having studied the classical literature in Rome, Jerome went to the centres of Christian learning in the East — Constantinople, Antioch and Alexandria. Thus he writes to Pammachius and Oceanus, “an eager desire to learn obsessed me. But I was not so foolish as to try and teach myself. At Antioch I regularly attended the lectures of Apollinaris of Laodicea”, and in his typically biting tone, he emphasizes that he was a critical student: “while I learned much from him about the Bible, I would never accept his doubtful teaching about its interpretation” (Ep. 84.3). In Constantinople (380–382), he attended lectures of Gregory of Nazianzus and met Gregory of Nyssa. Four years later (386), nearing his fortieth birthday, he travelled to Egypt and studied for four weeks with the famous exegete Didymus the Blind in Alexandria. Besides visiting the grand exegetical teachers of his time, Jerome owed much knowledge and hermeneutical skill to his reading of earlier authors, especially Origen and Eusebius of Caesarea (ca. 260–340). Although engaging in polemics against Origen later in his life, Jerome’s commentaries show just how much he owed to this most prolific biblical scholar.²⁰

Jerome not only attempted to engage with the towering teachers of the Bible past and present and to visit the most famous centres of learning, he also explored atypical paths of research. He frequently interacted with Jews, not only to study Hebrew, but also to benefit from their knowledge of the Rabbinic tradition of biblical interpretation.²¹ Although once in a while he pretended to have consulted Jewish teachers while plagiarising Christian authors, he personally engaged with Jews and their learning, which is especially visible in his *Hebraicae quaestiones in libro Geneseos*, a quite erratic work composed of philological studies on Genesis in the context of ancient Christian learning.²² Jerome even consulted the Samaritan Pentateuch (*Samaritanorum Hebraea volumina*).²³ He accessed

19. Cf. the considerations on *l’objectivité d’un passionné* in Gilbert, « Saint Jérôme », 23–24.

20. See Fürst, *Hieronymus*, 134.

21. On Jerome’s relationships with Jews see Brown, *Vir Trilinguis*, 167–193.

22. Fürst, *Hieronymus*, 137–144. A. Kamesar, *Jerome, Greek Scholarship, and the Hebrew Bible: A Study of the Quaestiones Hebraicae in Genesim* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).

23. Fürst, *Hieronymus*, 73: in Gal. II 3,10 (CChr.SL 77A, 84); prologue to Kings.

whatever resources were at his disposal and engaged with knowledgeable persons of diverse backgrounds to gain deeper knowledge and understanding.

5. *A Centre of Studies in the Holy Land*

Having studied and travelled during the first four decades of his life, Jerome finally settled in the Holy Land to build up his own centre of monastic life and academic work. With the financial help of wealthy women from Rome — especially Paula —, who accompanied him in living a monastic life, he founded a female and a male monastery near Bethlehem, where he spent the last three decades of his life (389–419).

A millennium before the spread of book printing in Europe, building up his library was an enormous organizational task and extremely costly. Professional scribes had to be sent across the Mediterranean world to bring back copies of the required manuscripts from wherever they were held. Jerome had developed a love for books even during his youth. He acquired many classical works at the age of 20, and already during his second stay in Rome (382–385), he copied many writings in Hebrew, even *Jubilees*²⁴, whose Hebrew version was to be lost until fragments were discovered in the caves of Qumran.²⁵ Besides acquisition, the exchange of manuscript was a common strategy among lovers of books. When travelling, Jerome had always taken his entire collection of writings with him; the library he built up in Bethlehem was one of the most extensive of its kind.²⁶ He also consulted the library in Caesarea that held Origen's collection and had been expanded by Eusebius of Caesarea.²⁷ Collecting and comparing biblical manuscripts, Jerome engaged intensely in what has become known in biblical studies as textual criticism.²⁸

The choice of the location was by no means a coincidence. Bethlehem provided the necessary tranquillity far from any centre of politics and economy to concentrate on academic work. At the same time, the environment of the Holy Land facilitated the study of the Bible's geographical and natural environ-

24. Fürst, *Hieronymus*, 70; E. F. Sutcliffe, "St Jerome's Hebrew Manuscripts", *Biblica* 29 (1948) 195–204, esp. 204.

25. Cf. J. C. Vanderkam, *The Book of Jubilees* (Guides to Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha), Sheffield 2001, 13–17.

26. Cf. Fürst, *Hieronymus*, 72–73.

27. Fürst, *Hieronymus*, 74.

28. Fürst, *Hieronymus*, 73 and 125–127.

ment, which is seen, for example, in his revision of a Greek work on Hebrew place names (*De situ et nominibus locorum hebraicorum*, around 390). The bulk of Jerome's oeuvre was produced in Bethlehem. While he had revised the translations of the gospels during his second period in Rome (382–385), his new translation of the Hebrew Bible was produced during his first two decades in Bethlehem (ca. 390–410). Not just as a translator, but also as a theoretician of translation, Jerome became a pre-eminent figure.²⁹ He produced one of the most influential translations of the Bible, which became a significant monument in the landscape of the cultural history of western Christianity. Most of his commentaries as well as his philological works were written in Bethlehem. While he commented on large portions of the Bible, his commentaries on the prophets are of special significance.³⁰ Jerome's exegetical writings were widely known and held in great esteem in the subsequent centuries.

6. *The Academic Network and Political Reality*

Although Jerome is known as a difficult character, he was certainly a gifted communicator — otherwise he would not have been able to realise projects that involved complex organizational tasks. Building up his monasteries and library in Bethlehem presupposed a substantial fundraising strategy, which can still be reconstructed from the corpus of letters that has come down to us, and the dedications of his works to wealthy donors. His network was spread over the entire Mediterranean from as far away as Bethlehem to what is now Egypt, Tunisia, Turkey, Germany, Italy, France and Spain.³¹ Jerome's art of communication, however, was not limited to diplomatic writing, but was rooted in personal encounters. He engaged in theological discussion groups, especially with women on the Aventine in Rome, some of whom he was able to convince to join him in

29. Cf. Graves, "Vulgate", in A. Lange and E. Tov (eds.), *Textual History of the Bible. Volume IA: Overview Articles*, Leiden 2016, 278–289, esp. 283–284; Kieffer, "Jerome", 670–675; G. Bartelink, *Liber de optimo genere interpretandi (Epistula 57). Ein Kommentar (Mn.S 61)*, Leiden 1980. On theory of translation in antiquity see A. Seele, *Römische Übersetzer: Nöte, Freiheiten, Absichten. Verfahren des literarischen Übersetzens in der griechisch-römischen Antike*, Darmstadt 1995; H. Marti, *Übersetzer der Augustin-Zeit. Interpretation von Selbstzeugnissen (STA 14)*, München 1974.

30. Kamesar, "Jerome", 670–674; Kieffer, "Jerome", 675–680; Fürst, *Hieronymus*, 122–125.

31. On Jerome's network of "friendships" (*amicitiae*) see Fürst, *Hieronymus*, 75–79, the prosopography *ibid.* 157–252, and the map in the book's back cover.

the monastic life in the Holy Land.³² How much friendship meant for him is revealed by his suffering from Paula's death in 404; for two years he could not accomplish any major work.³³

Moreover, Jerome needed communicative strength to defend his innovative work against resistance and direct opposition. This especially concerned his revision of the biblical translations, as the Old Latin translations, notwithstanding their diversity, had become set in stone for many. In his preface to the gospels, he anticipates that anybody who perceived the changes in his re-translation would "call me a forger, proclaiming me now to be a sacrilegious man, that I might dare to add, to change, or to correct anything in the old books". Translating the Old Testament from the Hebrew, he had to argue against many who considered the Septuagint as inspired.³⁴ Having translated much of the Greek version of the Bible, he argued for his enterprise to convey the "Hebrew truth" (*hebraica veritas*).³⁵

The tension between monastic self-seclusion and the impossibility of withdrawing from the major social developments of his time marked the last period of Jerome's life. The conquest and destruction of Rome by the Visigoths on 24th of August 410 disturbed Jerome so much that

"I, as the saying goes, did not remember my own name; and so I was silent for a long time, knowing that this was a time for tears" (Ep. 126,2; cf. Eccl 3,4).

Two years later, Palestine and Egypt suffered from barbarian invasions, and in 416, when Jerome's monastery was raided, plundered and set on fire, he was able to save himself with most of his companions in the monastery's fortified tower. This disaster seems to have brought his scholarly writing to an end — the commentary on Jeremiah, on which he was working at the time, remained unfinished. Although his own library may have been destroyed during these upheavals or was lost not long after his death, his works had already spread across the Mediterranean and have been preserved, to a large extent, until today. Prosper of Aquitaine (ca. 390–455) relates in his Chronicle that Jerome died on the 30th of September of 420, but historians now consider the fall of 419 a more likely date. Jerome's bones were first buried in the grotto of Bethlehem, but

32. See Fürst, *Hieronymus*, 54–58, 211 and 225–226.

33. Fürst, *Hieronymus*, 226.

34. Fürst, *Hieronymus*, 112–119.

35. See Fürst, *Hieronymus*, 107–111.

transferred to Rome's Basilica Santa Maria Maggiore in the 13th century,³⁶ where they are venerated to the present day.

7. In Jerome's Footsteps

Jerome was a role model for monastic learning in the Middle Ages, and Erasmus of Rotterdam considered him an example of humanist erudition. Martin Luther, however, had a less enthusiastic opinion of Jerome's use of allegory, and the authorization of the Vulgate at the Council of Trent, in contrast to the propagation of vernacular translations by the reformers, helped "Catholicise" the image of Jerome in subsequent centuries.

Commemorating the 1500th anniversary of his death in 1920, Pope Benedict XV dedicated the Encyclical *Spiritus Paraclitus* to Jerome, praising him as Doctor Maximus, given by God to the Church "for the understanding of the Bible". The encyclical invited the bishops to remind their priests of the importance of studying the Bible, and particularly recommended its study at the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome, which had been founded by Pius X in 1909. The editors of the Institute's newly founded journal *Biblica* happily celebrated Jerome as a point of reference for Roman Catholic exegesis.³⁷ While Jerome served, at this point, as an example of traditional exegesis in apologetic defence against Protestant and modernist historical criticism, the Institute's role has greatly changed — and Jerome is seen in a different light. Today, as 350 students from all around the globe engage in thorough philological and exegetical studies at the Pontifical Biblical Institute with its two houses in Rome and Jerusalem and learn from Christian and Jewish exegetes of different schools, they may be considered to be walking in the biographical footsteps of Jerome.

Jerome was one of the most agile spirits in Christianity's first millennium, one who travelled, and studied languages with unparalleled rigour and ascetic passion. A versatile communicator, he engaged with the great traditions of exegesis in his time, as well as in dialogue with Jews, notwithstanding the notorious animosities between themselves and Christians. He advocated for the *Hebraica veritas*, reconnecting the Latin world of Christianity more closely with the roots of its Hebrew and Jewish origins. The Reformation, indeed, followed in

36. I. Ivić, "«Recubo praesepis ad antrum»: The Cult of Saint Jerome in the Church of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome at the End of the 13th Century", *Il capitale culturale* 21 (2020) 87–119.

37. *Biblica* 1 (1920), esp. 431–517.

his footsteps by advocating for the translation of the Bible from the original languages into the vernacular, and the Roman Catholic Church has been following the same path since the Second Vatican Council. Today, Jerome is an example for exegetes of how to approach our task with an open mind — to use all means at our disposal and to communicate with any person of profound learning to understand the Scriptures in greater depth for our times. Moreover, the study of languages and cultures should enable exegetes, like Jerome, to become translators and mediators, people of integration between cultures.