

SOME NOTES ABOUT JEROME AND THE HEXAMETERS
IN THE BOOK OF JOB

Widu-Wolfgang Ehlers¹, Michael Fieger,² Wilhelm Tauwinkl³

ABSTRACT In his preface to the Book of Job Jerome states that most of this book is written in hexameters. This idea is not new and can be found at other ancient writers as well. The notes hereunder seek to clarify the meaning of this statement and the intention behind it.

KEYWORDS Vulgate, Jerome, Job, Hexameter, Hebrew Poetry


ZUSAMMENFASSUNG In seinem Vorwort zum Buch Ijob erklärt Hieronymus, dass der grösste Teil dieses Buches in Hexametern verfasst ist. Diese Idee ist nicht neu und findet sich auch bei anderen antiken Autoren. Die unten stehenden Bemerkungen sind ein Versuch die Bedeutung dieser Feststellung und die Absicht, die dahinter steht, zu klären.

SCHLAGWORTE Vulgata, Hieronymus, Ijob, Hexameter, hebräische Poesie

In April 2017 a seminar on Jerome was organised at the Faculty of Theology in Chur, Switzerland. The authors of the present article back then suggested to the students to analyse some particularities in the Vulgate translation of Job 42, in comparison with the Hebrew text and the LXX version. A discussion about a statement in Jerome's Prologue to Job took also place. It determines that Jerome speaks about 'hexameters' in the poetic part of this biblical book. This discussion is presented hereunder with additions and further developments. The text in question is the following:

[...] A principio itaque voluminis usque ad verba Iob apud Hebraeos prosa oratio est. Porro a verbis Iob in quibus ait: *Pereat dies in qua natus sum et nox in qua dictum est: Conceptus est homo* [3:3] usque ad eum locum, ubi ante finem voluminis scriptum est: *Idcirco ipse me*

1. Professor emeritus of Classical Philology, Freie Universität Berlin, Co-editor of the Vulgate in German. Mailing address: [www \[at\] zedat.fu-berlin.de](mailto:www@zedat.fu-berlin.de). GND Nr.: 106811622.

2. Professor of Old Testament and Hebrew within the Faculty of Theology of Chur, Switzerland. Editor of the Vulgate in German. Mailing address: [m.fieger \[at\] bluewin.ch](mailto:m.fieger@bluewin.ch). GND Nr.: 120145340;  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8220-3383>.

3. Associate Professor at the University of Bucharest (Romania), Faculty of Roman Catholic Theology, co-editor of the *Vulgata* in Romanian. Mailing address: [wilhelm.tauwinkl \[at\] g.unibuc.ro](mailto:wilhelm.tauwinkl@unibuc.ro). GND Nr.: 135711487;  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3428-5388>.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25788/vidbor.v2i0.32>

reprehendo et ago paenitentiam in favilla et cinere [42:6], exametri versus sunt, dactilo spondeoque currentes et propter linguae idioma crebro recipientes et alios pedes non earundem syllabarum, sed eorundem temporum. Interdum quoque rithmus ipse dulcis et tinnulus fertur numeris lege solutis, quod metrici magis quam simplex lector intellegunt. A supradicto autem versu usque ad finem libri parvum comma quod remanet prosa oratione contextitur. Quod si cui videtur incredulum, metra scilicet esse apud Hebraeos et in morem nostri Flacci graecique Pindari et Alchei et Saffo vel Psalterium vel Lamentationes Hieremiae vel omnia ferme Scripturarum cantica comprehendere, legat Filonem, Ioseppum, Origenem, caesariensem Eusebium, et eorum testimonio me verum dicere conprobabit [...].

[...] Therefore, from the beginning to the words of Job, among the Hebrews the speech is prose. Next, from the words of Job in which he says, ‘May the day perish in which I was born, and the night in which it was said: A man is conceived’, to that place, where it is written before the end of the scroll: ‘Therefore I accuse myself and make repentance in dust and ashes’, the verses are in hexameter, running in dactyl and spondee and, according to the idiom of the language, also accepting numerous other (poetic) feet not of the same (number of) syllables, but of the same intervals. Sometimes also, by breaking the law of (poetic metrical) numbers, the rhythm itself is found sweet and ringing, which is understood better by prosodists than by a simple reader. And from the verse mentioned above to the end of the book, the small section that remains continues with prose speech. If that seems unbelievable to anyone, namely that among the Hebrews there are meters, and either the Psalter or the Lamentation of Jeremiah or almost all the songs of the Scriptures are to be understood in the manner of our Flaccus and the Greek Pindar and Alkaios and Sappho, let him read Philo, Josephus, Origen, and Eusebius of Caesarea, and by their testimony he will prove me to speak the truth [...].⁴

The fact that most of the book of Job (3:3 – 42:6) is written in verse form is not a novelty. Jerome however goes further than that by saying that it is not only poetry, but the verses are *exametri... dactilo spondeoque currentes*, ‘in hexameter, running in dactyl and spondee’.

Obviously hexameters as such cannot be identified in the book of Job in the way they occur in the poems of classic Greek and Latin literature. Neither the Hebrew text, nor the Latin one display such characteristics. For instance, just by looking at the number of verse syllables one notes, that their number is not within the range of 13 to 17 as it can be expected in the case of the dactylic hexameter. As a consequence the hypothesis according to which Jerome speaks about hexameters as such is excluded. Then what is the meaning he gives to this term?

One simple explanation would be that of a copyist’s error. Thus it can be inferred that in the original text Jerome had spoken about the meter in general, re-

4. Translated by Kevin P. Edgecomb, Berkeley, California, 2006 <http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/jerome_preface_job.htm> retrieved 14.02.2018.

garding the poetry of the book of Job, while a copyist wrote ‘hexameter’ instead of ‘meter’. This however does not seem plausible, taking into account that the following explanation unequivocally specifies *dactilo spondeoque currentes*, ‘running in dactyl and spondee’. Therefore, the problem not only relates to the hexameter but to the dactylic hexameter. This specification also excludes the version of using the term ‘hexameter’ with the broad meaning of ‘senarius’, a verse of six feet which, in principle, can apply to poetry in any language.

Furthermore, the hypothesis must also be excluded, according to which Jerome was not familiar with the cantillation of the Hebrew Bible and with the specific system of the three poetic books, the Psalms, Proverbs and Job. If that were the case, one might think, that Jerome saw that these books were written in verse form and that he associated them with a notion familiar both to him and to his readers. Besides, these are not the only passages, where he did that. He often did in his translation of the Bible render Hebrew biblical notions into specific Latin ones, more familiar to his readers. For instance, in Num 10:10 he renders *rosh ḥodesh* by *kalendae* (cf. also 28:11 and 29:6), although this notion is specific to the Roman calendar.⁵

Adapting notions to the readers’ level of knowledge can be taken into consideration, but Jerome’s lack of knowledge of the Hebrew poetry is harder to accept, as the text adds: *propter linguae idioma crebro recipientes et alios pedes non earundem syllabarum, sed eorundem temporum*, ‘according to the idiom of the language, also accepting numerous other (poetic) feet not of the same (number of) syllables, but of the same intervals’. Therefore, Jerome was aware of the particularities of the Hebrew language and poetry as well as of its devices of making up the rhythm of the verses.

This is not the only passage where Jerome uses terms specific to classic poetry with reference to the poetry of the Old Testament. Moreover, he refers to several ancient writers who share his opinion: *Quod si cui videtur incredulum, metra scilicet esse apud Hebraeos [...], legat Filonem, Iosepphum, Origenem, caesariensem Eusebium, et eorum testimonio me verum dicere conprobabit*, ‘If that seems unbelievable to anyone, namely that among the Hebrews there are meters [...], let him read Philo, Josephus, Origen, and Eusebius of Caesarea, and by their testimony he will prove me to speak the truth’. Why did Jerome

5. The saying *ad kalendas graecas*, which refers to an endless postponing, since the Greek calendar had no *kalendae*, shows that the notion was perceived as being specifically Roman and did not apply to other calendars, even if they were also divided in months and certainly had days at the beginning of the months, but not with the same meaning.

need to justify himself by relying on literary authorities? The explanations concerning the particularities of the Hebrew poetry seem to exclude the hypothesis that Jerome was not familiar with this literature. He may have had in mind his readers who did not possess knowledge about biblical Hebrew or he may have wanted to justify the use of the terminology specific to the classical Greek-Roman poetry in the case of a Semitic language.

There are older studies that have compiled those passages in which Jerome speaks about this specific poetic subject, and about the ancient authors he refers to, such as the volume of Johannes Döllner.⁶ Jerome himself uses this terminology with reference to the victory song after the crossing of the Red Sea, songs of Isaiah, some Psalms and Lamentations. Certain passages of the Proverbs are also characterised, using the terminology applied to classical poetry: some were written in hexameters, in pentameters, iambic trimeters and tetrameters, or in sapphic meter. G. B. Gray, who systematised these passages⁷, notices that Jerome's manner of speaking indicates that he was not using these terms in the narrow sense, but he was trying to make an analogy.

Of the ancient writers Jerome mentions, Philo does not explicitly talk about hexameters or other types of classical verses, but he asserts that Moses would have acquired the theory of rhythm and prosody in Egypt (*De vita Mosis* I, 5). The other authors however explicitly speak about hexameters to be found, for instance in the Song of Moses (Josephus, *Ant.* II, 16, 4), an idea taken over by Origen, who adds that the Psalms are trimetrical (*Scholion in Ps.* 118, 1). Eusebius further points out that the Song of Moses and Ps 118 are written in hexameters, with verses of 16 syllables, while other biblical poetic compositions would be in trimeter and tetrameter (*Praep. Ev.* XI, 5, 5).⁸

One of the reasons why both, Jerome and other authors he cites, speak in such terms about biblical poetry, as Gray notices about Josephus, could be their desire to paint aspects of biblical literature in bright colours for the Greek and Ro-

6. Johannes Döllner, *Rhythmus, Metrik und Strophik in der biblisch-hebräischen Poesie*, F. Schönningh, Paderborn 1899, 18–35, quoted by George Buchanan Gray, *The Forms of Hebrew Poetry Considered with Special Reference to the Criticism and Interpretation of the Old Testament*, Hodder and Stoughton, London / New York / Toronto 1915, 11; cf. 9–17.

7. Gray, *The Forms of Hebrew Poetry*, 13–14. The highlighted passages in Jerome, except for the Preface to Job, are: *Praef. in Chron. Eusebii* (PL 27, 36); *Ep.* 30 (ad Paulam) (PL 22, 442); *Praef. in Isaiam* (PL 28, 771).

8. All these passages are discussed in Döllner, *Rhythmus*, 18–35 and Gray, *The Forms of Hebrew Poetry*, 10–13.

man readers.⁹ Behind this way of speaking an ill intent can also be discovered, such as Dr. Israel Baroway¹⁰ with his very critical opinion does: ‘in attempting to translate the forms of Hebrew prosody into terms calculated to impress their readers, these repudiated Jews misled the Church, which accepted them as Fathers, into believing that biblical verse was classical in structure’.¹¹

It is not known if Philo and Josephus can be judged by these terms, but Jerome’s preface to Job betrays no such ill intention. Rather the hypothesis of painting the Bible in bright colours, emphasizing its literary qualities would seem more plausible. Especially given the fact that the Bible would baffle the Greek and Roman intellectuals, who would be disappointed by its literary standard in comparison with the great classical writings. Some Latin writers tried indeed somehow to ‘rehabilitate’ the biblical literature, by re-writing the history of salvation as an epic poem in hexameter, such as, for instance, *De spiritualis historiae gestis* of Avitus of Vienne.¹²

Most probably Jerome’s statements also elaborate in the same direction. Certainly, the translation of the book of Job is not in hexameters, but if the Latin text is examined attentively, certain turns of phrase proper to Latin poetry may be noticed. It is therefore possible that his intention was to convey, to a certain degree, to the reader the same impression made by reading a classical epic poem.

9. Cf. Gray, *The Forms of Hebrew Poetry*, 16.

10. Israel Baroway (1899–1975) was a specialist in English Renaissance literature and the Bible as literature and taught at Queens College, New York (1937–1966).

11. Israel Baroway, „The Hebrew Hexameter: A Study in Renaissance Sources and Interpretation“, *English Literary History* 2 (1935) 66–91, here 67.

12. Alcimus Ecdicius Avitus (c. 470 – 517 / 519), Latin poet and bishop of Vienne (Gaul).

