

ST. JEROME'S APPRECIATION OF HEBREW¹

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IT is a commonplace that St. Jerome was one of the greatest biblical, linguistic and literary scholars of Christian antiquity, and in particular that his translation of the Bible into Latin was a work of immense importance, one of the major events in the intellectual history of the Latin West.² If his translating activity appeared original and revolutionary in his own time, one of the main reasons was his insistence that the Old Testament should be translated from the *hebraica ueritas*. By putting this into effect, Jerome came near to making obsolete the existing translations of the Latin Church, which had been done from the Greek. This depended entirely on the fact that Jerome, almost uniquely among the principal figures of the ancient Church, had made himself a Hebrew scholar.

There is only one other scholar of the ancient Church who can be compared with Jerome for his service to the biblical text, namely Origen, almost two hundred years earlier. Origen in the *Hexapla* or compendious parallel exposé of biblical versions included in his first column a Hebrew text in Hebrew characters, and in his second column a Hebrew text in Greek characters.³ But it seems that Origen, though he could read Hebrew and transcribe it, had only a superficial knowledge of the language.⁴ His use of the Hebrew text was in large measure a *quantitative* one: the Hebrew served as a norm, by which additional matter in the Greek could be judged to have been intrusive, and by which gaps in the Greek, where the Septuagint had left some Hebrew

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² See Professor W. H. Semple, "St. Jerome as a Biblical Translator", *BULLETIN*, xlviii (1965-6), 227-43.

³ For a recent discussion of the purpose of this transcribed text, see J. A. Emerton, "The Purpose of the Second Column of the *Hexapla*", *Journal of Theological Studies*, N.S., xii (1961), 189-202.

⁴ See the discussion in R. P. C. Hanson, *Allegory and Event* (1959), pp. 167-72.

material untranslated, could be filled up. Jerome followed Origen in this quantitative use of the *hebraica ueritas*; but he added to it a qualitative use of Hebrew as a guide to the right meanings. In this use of Hebrew as a basis for semantic interpretation Jerome stood alone among the great names of the early Church, and Origen contributed very little.

Jerome has had an impact on modern research, however, not only through the importance of his translation as an intellectual achievement; he has also become important in a more technical field, namely the history of Hebrew language and grammar. In his time, and indeed for some centuries later, the Jews did not use the system of points for the marking of vowels in the biblical text. The historical study of Hebrew, seeking to penetrate into pre-Massoretic times, has found material of high importance in Jerome. He had not only translated the Bible from Hebrew, but in his commentaries he had given numerous transcriptions of Hebrew words in Latin script; moreover, he had made certain express statements about the sounds of Hebrew and the difficulties inherent in any attempt to represent them in Latin (or Greek) script.¹ Jerome was not the first to produce transcriptions: the older Greek versions had done it sporadically, and the second column of the *Hexapla* did it systematically, setting out the complete biblical text in Greek script—a monument now extant only in fragments. Though Jerome's transcriptions were not the first, they remain in many ways the most important, partly because of their number² and partly because they can be studied in relation to his express discussions in the commentaries. Thus in the present century there has been a very influential school of Hebrew grammatical study—represented especially by Kahle and Sperber—which has maintained that the transcriptions were a prime indicator of the true state of Hebrew before the Massorettes, and that these latter actually introduced substantial innovations and altered the aspect of Hebrew from

¹ See the writer's "St. Jerome and the Sounds of Hebrew", forthcoming in the *Journal of Semitic Studies*.

² "Numerically considered, the overwhelming majority of transliterated words is taken from St. Jerome", Sperber, *Hebrew Union College Annual*, xii-xiii (1937-8), 109.

what it had been before. This claim, whether right or wrong in itself, shows the importance which is likely to attach to the evidence of St. Jerome.

In view of these facts, firstly the general importance of Jerome as a translator, and secondly the historical value of his transcriptions and statements, it is rather surprising that more study has not been devoted to the subject of this present lecture: what was the nature and quality of his knowledge of Hebrew? How far can it be said that he enjoyed or appreciated Hebrew, as well as having the technical ability to handle it? Difficult as it may be to answer such questions precisely, it is clear that some kind of preliminary answer must be given before the evidence of Jerome is used in other respects. I offer here only a preliminary survey of the subject.

The subject is one of considerable interest, because Jerome is one of the few men in antiquity, and indeed perhaps the only man of substantial historical importance, of whom we know that he learned a language of structure and family quite unlike his own (Romans who learned Greek, and Greeks who learned Latin, hardly count for this purpose) and whose steps and stages in language learning can in part be followed from written remarks of his own.

In his work of language learning, needless to say, Jerome had no previously prepared grammatical aids to assist him. The grammar of Greek and Latin had been carefully analysed, and it is profitable for us that we can study the grammar of Donatus, who was Jerome's own teacher at Rome. The methods of analysis of Latin by the Roman grammarians may at times help us to understand why Jerome expressed himself as he did about phenomena in Hebrew. To give one example, when Jerome says that the Hebrew " 'ayin " is a " uocalis littera ", it is premature to conclude directly that it was therefore a vowel as that term is used in our analysis of Hebrew; we also have first to consider what characteristics may have attached to the term " vowel " within the contemporary analysis of Latin.

In Hebrew, however, there was, so far as we know, no native grammatical tradition before Islamic times. Only about A.D. 900 do systematic studies in the grammar of Hebrew appear, and it

was another century or so thereafter before clear recognition was given to something which we now consider fundamental, namely the triradical nature of the common root. The only language laboratory Jerome had was the remarks of his Jewish informants ; the only audio-visual aid was the (unpointed) Hebrew Bible, along with such other Hebrew books (doubtless even more obscure) as he may have seen,¹ and the previous translations into Greek.

Among these Greek translations, we may reasonably speculate, one was of particular use for the language learner, namely that of Aquila. As a translator, Jerome refused, and entirely rightly, to follow Aquila's methods of rendering a text : with excessive zeal, says Jerome, Aquila renders literally word for word,² and, moreover, he tries to represent in translation not only the words but the very etymologies of the words.³ Jerome's policy was rather to translate *ad sensum*, and in doing this he received literary stimulus from Symmachus, even though Aquila often guided him to the exact sense of the Hebrew. The etymological style of translation, which could produce such oddities as ὀστέωσις for Hebrew " 'oṣmah " " strength " (showing the connection with " 'eṣem " " bone "—something like " bone-ification ", as we might say) or στιλπνότης for " yiṣhar " " oil " (supposedly cognate with a verb meaning " shine "), could never have produced a Bible suitable for use in the universal Church. But for the language learner Aquila provided just what students have so often, to the despair of their teachers, wanted : a painful following of the original like an interlinear crib, with one word of Greek for one of Hebrew, and the rendering itself a forest of etymological associations. The popularity of etymologies in the study of Hebrew, we should remember, has been very often motivated not by dis-

¹ I do not know of evidence that Jerome had read such Jewish texts as the Mishnah ; such extra-biblical texts as he had studied seem to have been apocryphal works, like that from which (" sicuti in quodam Hebraeo uolumine scribitur ") he learned that Cain was killed by Lamech ; see *Ep.* xxxvi. 4. Cf. Sutcliffe, " St. Jerome's Hebrew Manuscripts ", *Biblica*, xxix (1948), 195-204.

² " Studiosius uerbum interpretatur ad uerbum " (*Ep.* xxxvi. 12).

³ " Aquila autem, proselytus et contentiosus interpres, qui non solum uerba, sed etymologias uerborum transferre conatus est, iure proicitur a nobis " (*Ep.* lvii. 11).

passionate interest in historical linguistics, nor by interest in the supposed religious content disclosed by the etymology (this was, of course, the main purpose of etymology in Jerome's time), but by the fact that Hebrew words are hard to remember and that etymological associations act as a mnemonic.¹

In speaking about Aquila in this way as an aid in language learning, I am speculating a little ; Jerome does not say that he used Aquila in this manner. I only suggest that, for one who needed a painstaking and pedantic beginner's guide to the language of the Hebrew Bible, Aquila was the most likely source then in existence. Moreover, it is certain that Jerome knew well of Aquila before he began his own work of translation from the Hebrew. In the year 384 (*Ep.* xxxii) Jerome had already spent time in examining Aquila in order to make sure that his version did not contain deliberate anti-Christian distortions on the part of the Jews ; this was before any substantial part of the Vulgate Old Testament was done from Hebrew. Moreover, it seems probable that in the revision of the Latin Psalter the *hebraica ueritas* had been represented not by the original Hebrew, but by those versions, among which Aquila's was outstanding, which in Greek most exactly conformed to the quantity and sense of the Hebrew.

Jerome's original motive in learning Hebrew was one to which, perhaps, little attention has been given in the modern theory of language learning : he studied Hebrew in order to combat the evil and carnal thoughts which assailed his mind. It was a form of linguistic mortification of the mental flesh ; it belonged to moral or pastoral, rather than to biblical or exegetical, theology. I was young, said Jerome, surrounded by the desert solitudes ; I could not bear the attractions of vice and the heat of natural passion. I broke down the latter with ceaseless fastings ; but still my mind blazed hot in its thoughts. In order to tame it (" *ad quam edomandam* ") I became a pupil of a certain Christian

¹ One could perhaps express the purpose of Aquila's edition as one of providing a guide in Greek to the Hebrew ; in this sense its whole rationale of translation is different from that of stating the meaning conveyed by the Hebrew in another language. As, according to Emerson's view, the text of the Second Column was a guide to the vocalization of Hebrew, so Aquila might be conceived of as a guide in Greek to the character and internal structure of the Hebrew.

of Hebrew descent ("cuidam fratri, qui ex hebraeis crediderat"). Now, after being long familiar with the "acumina" of Quintilian, the "fluvii" of Cicero, the "grauitas" of Fronto and the "lenitas" of Pliny, he had to go back to the alphabet and to words of uncouth sound ("alphabetum et stridentia anhelantiaque uerba").¹

It would be unwise, indeed, to follow Jerome quite literally in this account of his motives in the study of Hebrew. We may well suppose that sinful intellectual curiosity also had a part; and, beyond this, he may well from the beginning have had some perception of the place that the Hebrew text might potentially have in all questions of precision in biblical scholarship within the Church. Nevertheless the account of the matter which I have quoted is that which Jerome himself gave.

The study of Semitic languages, then, did not come easily to one with the polished classical education of Jerome. It was axiomatic that all such languages were "barbaric"; and to this was added the humiliation that, when one already had a fastidious discrimination in polite letters, one had to go back to the beginning and learn the very sounds and characters. Thus, writes Jerome from the early days in the desert of Chalcis, "Your letters [i.e. those of his friends] are something I embrace; they talk with me; here only they know some Latin" ("illas amplexor, illae mecum loquuntur, illae hic tantum Latine sciunt"). For, he goes on, "here the choice is between learning a barbarous language late in life, and saying nothing at all" ("hic enim aut barbarus seni sermo discendus est aut tacendum est").² This barbarous language, indeed, was not Hebrew but, presumably, Syriac; all the more barbarous, perhaps, in that it was not the language of Holy Scripture, but still in general the same sort of thing as Hebrew.

How far did Jerome get with his Syriac in the Chalcis desert? Did he learn the barbarous tongue, or did he adopt the other course of keeping quiet? Since he was a crusty and ill-tempered person, a preference for silence (tempered by the writing of eloquent letters in Latin to distant friends) could have been natural. Writing to the presbyter Marcus, Jerome suggests that

¹ *Ep.* cxxv. 12.

² *Ep.* vii. 2.

his correspondent attributes to him a great linguistic virtuosity which might be instrumental in damaging the churches : " plane times ne eloquentissimus homo in Syro sermone uel Graeco ecclesias circumeam, populos seducam, scisma conficiam ".¹ Quite so ; but Jerome leaves it quite vague whether he really had enough Syriac to undertake an ordinary conversation, much less the seduction of whole churches. Like others reputed to be great linguists, he found it better to acknowledge the existence of the reputation than to define precisely the extent to which it was deserved.

If Jerome became thoroughly proficient in Syriac, it is difficult to understand how he found the Aramaic of Daniel so difficult. The study of Daniel produced a double shock, both aesthetic and linguistic ; after the study of Quintilian and Cicero Jerome had forced himself to the drudgery of learning Hebrew with its " asthmatic and strident sounds " ² and now, just when he was beginning to see some distant light, he came upon the book of Daniel and, finding that it was written in yet another language, he practically despaired. Any colloquial Syriac picked up in the desert of Chalcis would, one might suppose, have alleviated the strain of meeting with biblical Aramaic. Similarly, when Jerome attempted the translation of Tobit, he had to work from an Aramaic text, and, rather than handle this himself, he got hold of a person bilingual in Aramaic and Hebrew, and translated from the Hebrew rendering into Latin.³ The passage does not make it quite clear that the reason for this procedure was that Jerome could not understand the Aramaic⁴ ; but at any rate it does not suggest that Syriac from his early days in Chalcis had proved much of a help.

In the end, it is certain, Jerome had some knowledge of the vocabulary of some kind of Aramaic, whether the Jewish Aramaic which used to be called Chaldee (and is so called sometimes by Jerome) and is now called simply Aramaic, or the Christian dialect which is usually called Syriac. In etymologies he is well

¹ *Ep.* xvii. 2.

² Professor Semple's translation, *op. cit.* p. 231 ; text in *PL (Patrologia Latina)*, xxviii. 1357-60.

³ *PL.* xxix. 23-26.

⁴ Cf. F. Stummer, *Einführung in die Lateinische Bibel* (Paderborn, 1928), p. 94.

able to perceive where the explanation depends on Aramaic : for instance, “ Acheldemach ager sanguinis. Syrum est, non hebraeum.” Of “ Bariona filius columbae ” he tells us that it is equally Aramaic and Hebrew. “ Bar ” is “ son ” in Aramaic, and “ iona ” is “ dove ” in both languages. This ability to perceive Aramaic lexical items, however, does not decide very much in itself ; it does not make clear how far Jerome could have put together a sentence in any form of Aramaic.¹

Our subject, however, is not Jerome’s command of Aramaic, but his appreciation of Hebrew. In the end, it is likely, Jerome could control Aramaic vocabulary in much the same way as he could control that of Hebrew ; but there is no definite evidence to suggest that previous experience with Syriac greatly eased his approach to Hebrew in the first place. It sounded outlandish ; its script was hard on the eyes² ; and, as all teachers and students of Hebrew in all ages have discovered, it was very easy to forget.

In *Ep.* xxx Jerome is answering his correspondent Paula, who had written to ask for something which to many modern readers may be unknown : an explanation of the mystical sense of the order of letters in the Hebrew alphabet. Well, said Jerome, never able to suppress a rebuke, I’ve told you that already ; nevertheless, he goes on, “ propter barbariem linguae memoria elabitur omne quod diximus”, the barbarous nature of the language is such that everything slips away from the memory, and so he repeats this esoteric information for Paula’s benefit.

For the curious, I shall cite a sample of the interpretation Jerome gives. The first five letters make a sentence : “ aleph ” is “ doctrina ”, “ beth ” is “ domus ”, “ gimel ” is “ plenitudo ”, “ deleth ” is “ tabularum ”, and “ he ” is “ ista ”. The meaning therefore is that the “ doctrina ecclesiae, quae domus dei est ”,

¹ I leave aside the question of the translation of the *Evangelium iuxta Hebraeos*, since it is not clear whether the text known to Jerome was really in Hebrew or in Aramaic ; for a sceptical judgement, see G. Bardy, *La Question des langues dans l’église ancienne* (Paris, 1948), p. 266 n.

² *Comm.* on Ezek., Book vii, preface. It is true that this was written when Jerome was about seventy and his eyes had become worse ; it was especially at night that Hebrew was hard to read, and even for Greek he depended on friends who read aloud. But the small size of the letters in Hebrew, there mentioned, had probably troubled him earlier.

is found "in librorum plenitudine divinorum", in the fullness of the divine books. Though the Christian application may come from Jerome, one may be fairly sure that this mystical interpretation of the alphabet reached him, in its general principles, from Jewish sources.¹

This kind of interpretation, in which characteristics, or supposed characteristics, of the Hebrew language are exploited for literary and religious effect, brings us back to our main question. Granted that the initial entry into Hebrew study was a traumatic aesthetic experience for Jerome, did he ever come to find compensation and to perceive in Hebrew literary qualities which, even if not equal to those of Cicero or Vergil, nevertheless provided something worthy of attention from one trained in the Roman rhetorical schools? In that same passage (*Ep.* cxxv. 12) in which he tells of the desperations and difficulties of his first studies in Hebrew, Jerome ends up with the confession: "I give thanks to the Lord, that from that bitter seed of study I now pluck the sweet fruits." What were these sweet fruits? Undoubtedly, the principal among them was his ability to translate from the Hebrew, and the inward assurance and authority with which this provided him in the face of critics and enemies. The *hebraica ueritas* was a norm for quantitative accuracy and a means to the correction of wild, paraphrastic and ignorant translations. But did the "dulces fructus" include anything of a more literary or aesthetic kind?

The question of literary appreciation depends, however, on the quality (and not just the extent) of Jerome's command of Hebrew. For instance, could he speak Hebrew, or could he only read the sacred biblical text, guided by the information given by his teachers? When he discussed difficulties with his Jewish informants, did the discussions themselves take place in Hebrew, or, as we may consider more likely, in Greek or Latin? I do not know of evidence which makes this entirely clear. In theory it is quite possible that Jerome's knowledge was of the same type which has often been found among scholars of ancient

¹ The interpretation is interesting in its ignoring of radical consonants, e.g. "teth" is "bonum" (Hebr. "ṭob"), "sade" is "iustitia" ("š-d-q") and "coph" is "uocatio" ("q-r-").

languages : a thorough acquaintance with the given text, along with a total lack of conversational experience in the language, used as a current mode of communication.

Here are some arguments which may be relevant :

Firstly, it may be supposed that the mere production of so great a translation, at a time when no lexica or other aids existed, is a sign in itself of a great mastery of Hebrew, such as would most naturally also imply a speaking knowledge. The same may conceivably be argued also from the speed with which the translation was done, if Jerome's own statements can be trusted. Though the time for the total completion of the Vulgate was a long one, this has to be attributed partly to interruptions ; some individual sections were done very quickly. The " Books of Solomon " (Proverbs, Song of Songs, and Ecclesiastes) were no more than a " tridui opus ", three days' work, for a man harassed by a long recent illness and a " frequens turba poscentium ". Since the Vulgate is by no means a wild and careless version, comparing very favourably in this respect with at least some books in the Septuagint (such as Isaiah), this speed of work is impressive. Against this, however, should be set the substantial assistance afforded by the earlier translations. Moreover, it is right to remember that much of Jerome's other work seems to have been written with great rapidity. His biblical commentaries were written fast, that on St. Matthew in fifteen days at the end of a long illness, that on the Pauline letters at an average speed of a thousand lines a day.¹ The translations of works of the Greek Fathers seem also to have been done rapidly. The modern requirement of " publish or perish " has scarcely succeeded in stimulating so fast a literary output.

Secondly, more striking than the general speed of Jerome's work is the special case of the Tobit translation. According to the most natural sense of the words,² Jerome's bilingual helper translated orally from Aramaic to Hebrew, and Jerome simul-

¹ See Bardy, *op. cit.*, p. 272.

² " Et quia uicina est Chaldaeorum lingua sermoni hebraico, utriusque linguae peritissimum loquacem reperiens, unius diei laborem arripui et, quidquid ille mihi hebraicis uerbis expressit, hoc ego accito notario sermonibus Latinis exposui."

taneously dictated a Latin rendering to a scribe. The whole work was done in one day. This is, one would think, not the work of a man who pored only over traditional texts, but the work of one who could perceive the distinctions and usages of the living speech and rephrase them instantly in another language. This account, if it is true (and I do not see why we should doubt it), suggests a very lively and flexible command not only of the ancient biblical texts but of fresh composition in Hebrew.

Thirdly, however, the evidence of Jerome's detailed arguments on linguistic grounds stands on the whole against the impression created by the preface to Tobit. Comparatively seldom, so far as I have found, do these give the impression of being observations on the basis of actual usage. The impression much more often is that Jerome, meeting a difficulty, asked one of his informants for an opinion *ad hoc* and then wrote this opinion down. Sometimes, again, he knows of, and reports to us, discussions in which the Jewish authorities themselves differ; for instance, on the obscure form MT "hayyemim" at Gen. xxxvi. 24, Jerome records that considerable controversy existed among the Jews, while Greek and Latin Christians had nothing to say about the matter at all. Again, there are times at which he appears to cite the same piece of information which he has cited elsewhere, rather in the fashion of one who, knowing a few significant facts, brings them forward at every opportunity.

A good example of this is the Hebrew word for "sea". The modern reader might think this to be a simple matter: "sea" is "yam", or "iam" as Jerome wrote it. Not at all, says Jerome; on the contrary, and he says this emphatically and applies it several times, the proper word for "sea" in Hebrew is "tharsis", or "taršiš" by a modern transliteration; "iam" is "sea" in Aramaic, but not in Hebrew.¹

As a statement of Hebrew linguistic usage for any period at all, this is complete nonsense; no Jewish speaker in actual usage ever said "taršiš" meaning "sea". But Jerome is following a Jewish tradition, which for MT "ships of Tarshish" at Isaiah

¹ *Comm.* on Isa. ii. 16: "Hebraei putant, lingua proprie sua mare *tharsis* appellari, quando autem dicitur *iam*, non hebraico sermone appellari, sed syriaco."

ii. 16 wrote "ships of the sea" in both LXX and Targum. The idea, as Jerome exploits it, rests on a number of exegetical observations :

(1) "Yam" is not exactly coincident with the semantic field of "mare" "sea", in particular in that it could apply to smaller receptacles, or so it was thought.

(2) The prophet Jonah, whose travels were a centre of the keenest interest in antiquity, had set out by ship from Jaffa to "tharsis". Josephus had identified this with Tarsus in Cilicia (*Ant.* i. vi. 1, 127), later the home of that other inspired navigator, St. Paul; but, by Jerome's mode of transliteration, the "t" of Tarsus does not fit the "th" appropriate for "tharsis" (Hebr. "tau"). Others opined that Tharsis was in India, but you cannot sail to India from Jaffa. The difficulty disappears when we realize that the ship was simply putting out to sea ("simpliciter ire in pelagus").

(3) There was the influence of the other Hebrew word, also "tharsis", the name of a precious stone. Modern dictionaries say that it was a yellow stone, doubtless on the grounds of the Greek rendering χρυσόλιθος. But Jerome understood it to be a blue stone, so that the sea took its name from the colour of the stone. It is this fact that makes "tharsis" the "proper" word for "sea".

We need not pursue this example farther; but it is a good illustration of at least some of the linguistic facts cited by Jerome: this kind rests not on observation but on scholarly legend, and it is full of harmonizations, etymologizations, and exegetical special pleading.

An aspect in which Jerome's use of Hebrew was much more accurate and positive was his appreciation of assonance in certain passages, where much of the point was lost in translation. In the famous passage of the call of Jeremiah (Jer. i. 11 f.) he was able to enjoy and explain the word-play of "saced" "nux" ("nut-tree") and "soced" "vigilia" ("watch"). At Isaiah v. 7-8 he explains to Latin ears what he has learned from the Hebrews, that a word-play between "mesphat" and "mesphaa", and between "sadaca" and "saaca" (judgement and bloodshed, justice and shouting), has produced what he calls an "elegans

structura sonusque uerborum". Jerome displays a real rhetorical admiration for what can be done with Hebrew. The sense for word-plays is related, however, to the etymological instinct which found its chief outlet in the interpretation of personal names.

Another kind of linguistic information was that conveyed by the vocalization. Though this was not marked by written signs, Jerome's transcriptions rest on a firm tradition of pronunciation, and here we come close to the living knowledge of Hebrew which he must have had, for it was certainly by oral communication, even if only with his teachers, that Jerome learned the discriminations in meaning implied by different vocalizations of the same consonantal framework.

A famous passage in the commentary on Jeremiah ix. 21 says :

The Hebrew word, which is written with the three letters "d-b-r" (it has no vowels between them), according to the context and the choice of the reader ("pro consequentia et legentis arbitrio"), if it is read as "dabar" means "word"; if "deber" it means "death"; and if "dabber" it means "speak".

It would be a mistake to generalize this and suppose that in reading the unvocalized text every man could do what was right in his own eyes. Normally, Jerome cites vocalized forms without hesitation; he gives no suggestion in his usual procedure that the reader had to consider all vocalizations conceivable for a consonantal sequence. The passage is explained by two other considerations. Firstly, previous translations had indeed rendered in different ways, which implied different vocalizations. The LXX had missed the word out altogether; the *Hexapla* added θανάτω "by death", from Theodotion; Aquila and Symmachus had λάλησον. The same was the case at Habakkuk iii. 5. One may also wonder whether this instance, with the familiar root "d-b-r", was not Jerome's classroom example for the effect of varying vocalizations, remembered from his own days of learning.

Secondly, I think Jerome was influenced by the kind of interpretation called "al-tiqre", "do not read". He actually mentions a familiar example, used also in the Talmud (B. *Baba Bathra*, 21a-b), of how the law of annihilation against Amalek

can be read as "thou shalt cut off every male" ("z^ekar") or "thou shalt cut off all remembrance" ("zeker"). Confusion in this respect is said to have led to the downfall of Saul.¹

The "al-tiqre" interpretation did not mean that either the text or the vocalization were really in doubt. It was a device of the "derash", which enabled multiple meanings to be obtained from a text. Thus when in *B. Ber.* 64a the text of Isaiah liv. 13 is quoted, "all your children are taught of the Lord", and it is said that one should not read "children" ("baneka") but "builders" ("boneka"), this is of no importance for textual criticism; it is a means of making connections with all sorts of other biblical texts concerning houses and building. The fact that Jerome could say that the text can be vocalized in several different ways, alongside the fact that he normally vocalizes without hesitation, is parallel to the questioning of the normal reading in the "al-tiqre", alongside the fact that the text and vocalization were already fixed.

Now the "al-tiqre" interpretation, or at least methods similar to it, provide Jerome with a certain literary satisfaction. Commenting on Jeremiah vi. 3, he says that the same word (MT "ro'im"), if read as "reim", will mean "lovers", while read as "roim" it will mean "shepherds". There is no uncertainty of text or vocalization in fact; it is a literary and exegetical development of a double meaning. Zion has just been compared to a beautiful woman who attracts lovers (vi. 2), while now (vi. 3) we hear of the gathering of "shepherds" for an attack upon the city. Thus it is a matter of considerable elegance, says Jerome ("satis eleganter"), that in Hebrew the same word can mean both. He knew perfectly well that the word was "roim" and meant "shepherds"; this was left beyond doubt by the following "their flocks", and the versions, including Jerome's own Vulgate, took it so. It is quite likely that this fancy is Jerome's own, and if so it shows how his literary imagination could be stimulated by features of Hebrew.

Another passage with literary associations, where a similar

¹ See *Comm.* on Isa. xxvi. 14: "et hac uerbi ambiguitate deceptum arbitrantur Saul. . . . Deo enim praecipiente, ut deleteret omnem memoriam Amalech, ille pro memoria . . . masculos interpretatus est."

procedure may be suspected, is Jeremiah v. 8. The Vulgate read: "equi amatores et admissarii facti sunt, unusquisque ad uxorem proximi sui hinniebat." ("Admissarius" means "stallion"). It has long been noticed that the combination of this word with the verb "hinnio" entered Jerome's mind from a passage in the *In Pisonem* of Cicero.¹ How, however, was this meaning reached from the Hebrew, which is quoted by Jerome as "mosechim", and, following Aquila's ἔλκοντες (contrast MT "maškim"), understood as "trahentes genitalia", with the purpose "ut ostendatur magnitudo genitalium"? One wonders if there was in mind, as an "al-tigre" interpretation, the same possibility "ma'ašikim" ("testiculati") which modern scholars have suggested. This is, however, only a suggestion, and one of which I am not sure. The major critical problem is the explanation of the strange MT "maškim".

Jerome, then, did not merely translate Hebrew mechanically, but sometimes found in it a catalyst to his literary and interpretative imagination. At times he appreciates in it a lexical variety lacking (or so he thought) in Greek and Latin. At Isaiah xl. 15 there is a word "doc", which Symmachus and Theodotion had left in transcription, instead of translating it. The Hebrews, however, say that it means the most minute particles imaginable—something, Jerome thinks, like what Democritus and Epicurus called atoms. Many words, he goes on, had been left in transliteration in the past, either because they were hard to translate, or because of the poverty of both Greek and Latin languages in comparison with Hebrew. Jerome had passed beyond a mere contempt for a barbarous tongue and began to appreciate its richness.

Jerome refers again and again to the ambiguity of Hebrew. "Sam" could mean either "he put" or "there". "Ba" could mean "in" or "he came". The work of constant translation had made him familiar with the difficulties of homonymy and polysemy. Actually, as Jerome knew, many or most of the

¹ See F. Stummer, "Griechische-römische Bildung und christliche Theologie in der Vulgata des Hieronymus", in *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*, lviii (1940-1), 258 f. The point was noticed by the Latinist Wilhelm Süss.

ambiguities which he cited in Hebrew were only partial. The forms were ambiguous because the writing system did not set out the full form of the word, failing to discriminate the vowels properly; and, since the citations are actually in Roman script, the ambiguity is much increased, since Jerome had no means of marking all the distinctions which were marked in Hebrew script. In most cases, where Jerome gives a transcription with vowels, this in effect settles the ambiguity. The sequence "sin", "nun", "iod", he says, is ambiguous (Ezek. xv. 4), but this disappears with the reading: "sene" is "two" but "sane" is "years" (not, however, in Massoretic Hebrew, where these forms are identical). Other ambiguities, however, are rather cases of polysemy. "Esebon" (Eccles. vii. 27; "ḥešbon") can, "secundum Hebraei sermonis ambiguitatem", mean "numerus" or "summa" or "ratio" or "cogitatio". The work of translation then forces the translator to make a choice.

Ambiguity and homonymy, however, are not confined to Hebrew, and Jerome, exasperated by the stupidity of other translators before his time, often shows how this led them astray. In Psalm cxxviii. 2 (Hebrew numbering) the LXX had written *τοὺς πόνους τῶν καρπῶν σου φάγεσαι*. The Latin version before Jerome had the phrase as "labores fructuum tuorum manducabis": and on the basis of this rendering there had arisen a dispute whether there was not better sense in "the fruit of labours" than in "the labours of fruits". All such discussion, as Jerome saw, was a sheer waste of time. The trouble lay with the Latins, who had been deceived by the ambiguity of the Greek *καρποί*. It was not the word *καρποί* "fruits" at all, but *καρποί* "hands" (literally "wrists"). The Latin translator, translating what was already a translation, would not have made this elementary mistake in homonyms if he had known the original Hebrew.¹

On the structure of Hebrew, Jerome says very little; his remarks are mainly lexical in character, and when he talks about phonology it is generally subservient to the making clear of lexical differences which were not easily marked in the rudimentary Latin transcription. One might have expected that

¹ *Ep.* xxxiv. 5.

obvious features of biblical Hebrew, such as the construct state or the "waw consecutive", or indeed the tense system generally, might have received some treatment; but I have found practically nothing. Gender finds some mention. The Holy Spirit, "rua codsa", is feminine in Hebrew. One should not be scandalized by this fact. It is masculine in Latin and neuter in Greek, and the fact that in the three principal languages it is called by words of three different genders shows clearly that it is quite transcendent and above sexual difference altogether.¹

In Jerome's time, and we know this also from Talmudic sources, a kind of primitive comparative philology existed, almost all of its tenets, needless to say, being wrong. Some, however, were more wrong than others. It was not unreasonable to hold that the language of Job was close to Arabic, and Jerome probably heard this from Jewish informants. The occasional comparisons with Punic words, on the other hand, probably came to him from within Christian experience, for many of Augustine's people in the churches of the province of Africa were bilingual in Punic and Latin.² Punic furnished a suggestion for the obscure "yemim" of Genesis xxxvi. 24 ("aquas calidas iuxta punicae linguae uiciniam, quae hebraeae contermina est") and also for the famous "'alma" of Isaiah vii. 14 ("lingua quoque punica, quae de hebraeorum fontibus manare dicitur, proprie uirgo alma appellatur").

Jerome was on less good ground when he maintained (as many Jewish opinions also did) that Hebrew contained some Latin and Greek words. "The Hebrews use words of almost every language, for example the word in the Song of Songs taken from Greek *φορεῖον*."³ Treating of "semel" "sign" or "idol", Jerome notes that it is a Latin word, taken from the same source as "similitudo" and "simulacrum".⁴ Returning to the "'alma" of Isaiah vii. 14, Jerome knew that the Hebrew evidence would not support directly the traditional Christian interpretation as "virgin"; but he got round this, and indeed went

¹ *Comm.* on Isa. xl. 9-11.

² Cf. Bardy, *op. cit.* pp. 53 f.

³ *Comm.* on Isa. vii. 14.

⁴ *Liber interp. hebr. nom.*, under Ezekiel.

one better than the traditional interpretation, by using an etymological explanation from “-l-m” “hide”. This gave the sense “abscondita” or “secreta”; she was not only a virgin, but more than a virgin. Jerome adds the argument from Punic, already cited; and, a last touch, he points out that in Latin too “alma” meant “sancta”. I think he knew that this was no good argument; he offered it “to give the Jews a laugh”, “ut risum praebeamus Iudaeis”. Just above, by his admitting that the word for “virgin” was “bethula” (and not “alma”—this was the normal Jewish argument against the Christian interpretation), he had deprived them of the customary pleasure of deriding the Christians for their ignorance of Hebrew. But he knew that nothing could be proved from Latin “alma”.¹ One final example—at Daniel iv. 14 Jerome, reading the word he transcribes as “hir” (“ir”) “watcher”, is reminded of the Greek and Latin ἵρις, “quae per multicolorem arcum ad terras descendere dicitur”.

The idea that all languages were related and therefore used a common lexical pool could, of course, be supported from the story of the Tower of Babel. Moreover, the word “seraphim” was known to have an etymology as “principium oris eorum”, and Jerome comments on this that the Hebrew language was the “initium oris et communis eloquii”.² Yet Jerome also knew very well that the task of the scholarly interpreter is easier if he keeps different languages apart. It was to his interest, as the one man in the Church who knew something about Hebrew, to silence the voices of those who thought they could interpret a Hebrew word as if it were Greek or Latin.

A puzzle familiar to exegetes was the reason why the name of Sarah had been changed. Jerome knew an explanation which thought it had something to do with the letter “r”: in Greek the name had one ρ before the change, two after.³ Since ρ in Greek is the number 100, many interpretations had been tried on this basis: “multae ineptiae”, many foolish ideas, says Jerome, for no one gives a person in one language a name the etymology of which lies in another.

¹ *Comm.* on Isa. vii. 14.

² *Ep.* xviii. 6.

³ *Hebr. Quaest. in Gen.*, xvii. 15.

Quite so ; but it was easier to formulate this principle than to carry it out in full. The etymological tradition in bib'ical exegesis, both Jewish and Christian, was very firmly rooted, and had a background in both Jewish and Greek attitudes to language. It was deeply rooted for two reasons. Firstly, folk etymologies were prominent in certain parts of the Bible itself, though only a small number of names are actually etymologized. The procedure was made natural by the fact that many Hebrew names were semantically transparent—though, by a human perversity, many of the etymologies attempted in the Hebrew Bible are of names like Noah or Cain which unfortunately were rather opaque. Secondly, the Bible contained some long lists of names which, under the conditions of the time, appeared to make no sense unless the names had some deeper meaning. Etymologies were therefore very popular, and there were many which Jerome felt or knew to be wrong but which he continued to register and so transmit to posterity.

As for the languages to be used, Philo already had explained Hebrew words with etymologies from the Greek ; for instance, the river Pishon, Greek *Φεισων*, was explained from *φείδομαι*. Jerome was not able to abolish the influence of such etymologies taken from Greek ; and even where the etymology was based on Hebrew he often offered alternative explanations, both of which could not be right. In the New Testament the reverse took place ; not so much in the Gospels, where most of the names are Semitic, but when the action moves out into the Greco-Roman world. The names were now certainly not Hebrew. And yet Hebrew remained the language in which etymologies were attempted, perhaps *faute de mieux* ; for who, after all, could provide from any language a good explanation for a highly significant name like " Pilatus " ? Was it not satisfying to take it as " os malleatoris ", the mouth (Hebr. " pi ") of the hammerer (" l-ṭ-š ") ?

To this no solution was to be found. When we meet with explanations from Hebrew for " Ephesus " (" uoluntas mea in ea, siue finis eorum ") or " Macedo " (" orientalis ", i.e. " macedem ") or " Claudius " (" spes tranquillitatis ") or " Cornelius " (" intellegens circumcisionem "), we have reached a

limit. These explanations are of interest only as puzzles to the scholar who tries to conceive of how they were reached. Jerome knew that all these are wrong ; almost all the names under C and under L, for instance, have, he says, been forcibly (“ uiolenter ”) interpreted. But he did not have the strength of logic and conviction to assert that for such names no etymology was possible or useful.

In conclusion, then, it is to be hoped that future research may define more closely the mode and the quality of Jerome’s command of Hebrew. There must be evidence in his writings that has been missed in the study done for this paper ; and I have not used his actual translation of the Bible as evidence to any great extent. The Vulgate text, taken alone, is difficult to assess, because of the complicated relations both to the earlier Latin (translated from the Septuagint) on one side and to the post-Septuagintal Greek renderings (like Aquila) on the other. If we had these versions in their entirety, it would be easier to tell exactly how heavily Jerome depended on Aquila’s or Symmachus’s knowledge of Hebrew rather than his own. Jerome could translate well ; but this in part depended, not on straightforward virtuosity in Hebrew, but on a sensible understanding of what a translation, intended for the universal and non-Jewish reader, must be ; in this he stood far above Aquila, much as he may have depended on the linguistic accuracy of the latter.

Moreover, as I have said, Jerome’s translation rested on a firm foundation in the vocalization, the importance of which for the detection of meanings in Hebrew was clear to him. He never formulated this quite clearly and forcibly enough, and tended to argue, wherever he could, from the written spellings in the Hebrew text.¹ But by resting upon vocalized Hebrew Jerome was, half unconsciously, taking his stand on the real nature of the language. In this he showed an instinct superior to that of Aquila, even if Aquila, as I suspect, actually knew more Hebrew. Aquila’s version had a built-in contradiction in it : the principle of literalness contradicted the principle of etymologization. The etymologizing approach, because it tried to class

¹ For the reasons why he did this, see my forthcoming article in the *Journal of Semitic Studies*.

together words which had the same consonantal root, could at times override the distinctions of vocalization. One good example is at Zechariah xiv. 20.¹ Jerome had understood a word to be "mesuloth", corresponding to Aquila's βυθόν "depths". On asking a Jewish informant, he found that the word was "mesaloth". The vocalization clearly identifies the word as meaning the trappings of horses, which exactly fits the context. The Aquila rendering is a transparent etymologizing to produce identity with the commoner Hebrew "mšwlh", a solution which is as destructive to the meaning as any that could be devised. There are, indeed, places in Jerome's own version where the traces of the etymological method remain; sometimes it produced results which were doctrinally too dear to him for him to abandon them. But, in general, by his emphasis upon two principles he made a step forward in translation: (a) by his use of vocalized Hebrew he took advantage of the full phonological form of the Hebrew word; (b) by his policy of translating for the sense, and abandoning the attempt to reproduce similarities in Hebrew verbal form, he often succeeded in escaping from the literalistic and etymological traps to which earlier translators had often fallen victim.

Jerome started out with something of the civilized man's prejudice against the barbarity of an entirely strange tongue; but he learned in the end that such comparisons could work both ways. It was strange, he found, that by the Hebrew idiom Ishmael could be called a "child" ("paruulus"; Hebr. "yeled") when chronological calculations showed that he must have been eighteen (on Gen. xxi. 14).² But, he goes on, we should not be surprised that a barbarous language has its idioms, for even at the present day in Rome all sons are called "infantes".

With such a recognition that no language is entirely "proper" and that all, when set against logic, have their peculiarities and

¹ On this, cf. Sperber, *op. cit.* pp. 117 f. I think that he misinterprets the statement of Jerome.

² Jerome might, I think, well have accepted the source-critical solution to the difficulty, had it been known to him. Gen. xxi took Ishmael to be a small child; it came from another source than the passage (Gen. xvii. 25) which made Ishmael thirteen years old in the year before the birth of Isaac. This solution removes the further difficulty of Hagar's having to *carry* a hefty adolescent.

improprieties, something of a modern insight into the nature of language has been born. It is not surprising that it should have come from a man who, more than any other up to his time whose individuality is clear to us, had faced and struggled with the diversity of human tongues.