The Place of the Biblical Jew in the Early Christian Holy Land

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In the prefaces to his Latin Old Testament, Jerome’s arguments in favor of interpretation iuxta Hebraeos seem solidly anti-Jewish: ‘so that you might respond word-by-word to Jewish slanderers.’¹ In the same prefaces, however, Jerome offers his readers (and detractors) a seemingly contradictory, even ‘pro-Jewish’ defense: ‘If you don’t believe me, read the Greek and Latin versions and compare them with these little works, and whenever you find them in disagreement, ask any Jew, in whom you ought to have more trust.’² This retort, to ‘go ask the Jews,’ recurs throughout Jerome’s writings³. Could a Christian of Jerome’s day insist in the same breath on these two positions: thorough theological contempt of Jews and reliance on their linguistic and interpretive skill? We know, from Jerome’s insistence, that the solitary of Bethlehem did just this. He protests to friends in Rome, ‘If it is expedient to hate any people and to detest any nation, I have a notable hatred for the circumcised,’ and asks immediately after, with apparent sincerity, ‘Yet can anyone object to me for

¹ Jerome, Proef. in libro Psalmorum (IH) 33-34. Line numbers follow the editions of the prefaces found in R. Weber et al., eds., Biblia sacra iuxta Vulgatem versionem, 2 vols. (Stuttgart, 1964), here 1:769. This is addressed to Sophronius, who apparently had himself recently been frustrated in debates with Jews (super cum Hebraeo disputas ... per sermones paene singulos adserebat non ita haberti in hebraeo) (18-20 [Weber 1:768]). See also Proef. in libro Isaiae 31 (Weber 2:1096): ‘Lest the Jews (Judaei) continue to insult the churches on account of the falsification of Scriptures’; and his Proef. in libro Isaei 19-20 (Weber 1:285): ‘the usefulness of our sweating with toil ... is to afflict the Jews (dolere Judaeos), that the opportunity might be removed for them to slander and laugh at Christians.’ J.N.D. Kelly, Jerome: His Life, Writings, and Controversies (London, 1975), pp. 160-61, seems to accept this as Jerome’s main motivation for his Hebrew studies, as well. The ‘anti-Jewish’ approach to biblical interpretation enjoyed a rich history before Jerome: see Marc Hirshman, A Rivalry of Geniuses: Jewish and Christian Biblical Interpretation in Late Antiquity, trans. Batya Stein. SUNY Series in Judaica: Hermeneutics, Mysticism, and Religion (Albany, 1996).

² Jerome, Proef. in libris Samuel et Malachim 69-72 (Weber 1:365-66). See also his Proef. in libro Paralipomenon (LXX) (PL 29:404A). Even though this later preface is appended to a translation of the LXX Chronicles, Jerome already introduces his defenses of Hebrew learning and for the first time makes the oft-repeated challenge, ‘Interroget Hebraeos!’

³ Jerome, Proef. in Penitentia 43, in libris Samuel et Malachim 70-71, in libro Esrae 31, in libro Psalmorum (IH) 28 (Weber 1:4, 365-66, 638, 768); Comm. in Exech. 10.33.1300-301 (CCL 75:475); and ep. 112.205.8 (CSEL 55:391), to Augustine. It is variously phrased: interrogent quemlibet Hebraei et Malachi, interroget Hebraeos, interroga quemlibet Hebraeorum, interroga Hebraeos.
having had a Jew as a teacher.\(^4\) Of course people did object, from his notorious rival Rufinus of Aquileia to his purported ally Augustine of Hippo Regius.\(^5\) In the face of all challenges, however, Jerome maintained his particular 'double vision' of Christian scholarship.

Historians have explained this paradox of Jerome's attitude towards Jews in diverse ways, including ascribing to him a benign 'academic curiosity' understandable to modern scholars.\(^6\) I suggest that we might alternatively understand Jerome's stubborn display of Hebrew learning as part of a particular form of knowledge that developed in the Constantinian and Theodosian eras. In writings produced about Jews in and around the Christian holy land, Christians such as Eusebius, Epiphanius, or Cyril of Jerusalem found the Palestinian Jew good to 'think with.' By positing the Jew as a religious object-to-be-known in a new and unapologetic manner, Christians began to understand themselves in positions of social and cultural authority. Jerome demonstrates with particular depth and clarity that to 'know' Jews was to display religious and imperial dominion over them, to acknowledge their otherness and master it. In his biblical exegesis executed in the holy land in the first decades of the fifth century, this appropriation and mastery included pressing Jewish 'natives' for their lexical expertise as well as construing the Jews themselves as inherently historical and linguistic subjects at the service of the Christian expert.

The provinces of Palestine were, for Jerome, the most biblical places on earth; he compared the Christian exegete living among the holy places to a scholar of Vergil sailing from Troy to Latium: 'so, too, will he gaze with greater clarity upon holy Scripture who has contemplated Judaea with his own eyes.'\(^7\) Yet the land is always strange to Jerome, and uncovering its foreign secrets requires ascetic 'sweat' embodied for Jerome in the 11th 'fruit': Through appropriation of their fruit from their 'bitter seed.'\(^8\) It means to transform the land into places to construct Christian imperial ideology.

On the most basic level, their places. Often the references are to the shade of linguistic authenticity, transcribers into specifically Christian.

I myself once heard a Jew speak in Bethlehem is situated toward the east (natus esti), so there it is said of himself, he will be born (nasceor) in Bethlehem also: born in Bethlehem also: also 'holy who comes from Mount Sinai.'\(^9\)

In this commentary passage, and Jerome begins. It is unlikely that either the 'savior' already having he as the Jew's local knowledge becomes an appellation to the two testaments and the Church.

Local Jews also provide Jerusalem and shrubs, otherwise obfuscated restored to their original meaning.

\(^4\) See Jerome, Proef. in libro Isai (CSEL 56:7, 15).

\(^5\) As he recalls the meaning of Hebrew fructus capio (ep. 125.12.2).

\(^6\) See, for instance, Hebraica quaest. 49.21 (CCL 72:12, 23, 26, 43-44, 50, compiled more as a list of names, refers directly to the entire project as a Christian 'complemenm. Comm. in Isai 3.4, 12 (CCL 76:207).

\(^7\) Comm. in Abacuc 2.3.3 (CCL 76:2). veniet, et sanctus de monte pharaon. He would be born in Bethlehem in Tract. 5.1.

\(^8\) Although see y. Ber. 2.4 (5a), upon hearing that, on the day Jerusalem would be restored to its original meaning.

\(^9\) Especially the flos in Isa. 11, 1 cited in Matt. 2, 23: Comm. in Isai. (CCL 76:207).
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secrets requires ascetic ‘sweat’ and toil. This strangeness is most often embodied for Jerome in the living and alien bodies of Jewish ‘natives.’ Through appropriation of their knowledge, Jerome is able to cultivate ‘sweet fruit’ from their ‘bitter seed.’

Contemporary Jews provide Jerome with the means to transform the land into a Christian space, to use Jewish knowledge to construct Christian imperial identity.

On the most basic level, their knowledge allows him to Christianize the holy places. Often the references are subtle, an anonymous Jewish source adding a shade of linguistic authenticity. But Jerome can also press his Jewish geographers into specifically Christian, and even anti-Jewish, use:

I myself once heard a Jew speaking thus about this passage (istum locum): Because Bethlehem is situated toward the south, in which the Lord and Savior was born (natus est), so there it is said of him: ‘The Lord will come from the south’; that is, he will be born (nasceetur) in Bethlehem, whence he shall rise. And since he who was born in Bethlehem also gave the former Law (quandam legem) on Mount Sinai, he is also ‘holy who comes from Mount Pharan,’ since Pharan is in the area of Mount Sinai.

In this commentary passage, it is unclear where ‘the Jew’ stops speaking and Jerome begins. It is unlikely that the Jew is speaking of the ‘former Law’ or the ‘savior’ already having been born in Bethlehem; nonetheless, the Jew’s local knowledge becomes evidence for Jerome’s supersessionist view of the two testaments and the Christian messiah.

Local Jews also provide Jerome with plant and animal expertise. Various bushes and shrubs, otherwise obscure in both Hebrew and Septuagint texts, are restored to their original meanings. As with his geographical informants,

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9 See Jerome, Praef. in libro Isaiae 30:31 (Weber 2:1096): ‘who does not know on what account I have sweated in learning this foreign language?’

As he recalls the learning of Hebrew in his old age: de amaro semine litterarum dulces fructus capio [ep. 125:12.2 (CSEL 56:131)].

11 See, for instance, Hebraicoe quasiones in libro Genesenos 10.6, 19.30, 22.2, 35.21, 46.28, 49.21 (CCL 72:12, 23, 26, 43-44, 50, 55); Liber interpretationis hebraicorum nominum, compiled more as a list of names, refers directly to no sources, but in the prologue Jerome configures the entire project as a Christian ‘completion’ of Jewish knowledge (CCL 72:59-60). See also Comm. in Isaiam 3, 12 (CCL 76:200, 204); in Hier. 2.45 (CCL 74:84).

12 Comm. in Abacuc 2.3.3 (CCL 76A:623). Jerome has translated Hab. 3, 3 as deus ab austro veniet, et sanctus de monte pharan. He refers to the same interpretation of this passage (that Jesus would be born in Bethlehem) in Tract. de psalm. 106 3 (CCL 78:197), but without the Jewish informant.

13 Although see y. Ber. 2:4 (5a), a strange rabbinic tale of a man who moves to Bethlehem upon hearing that, on the day Jerusalem was destroyed, the ‘messiah and king’ had been born in Bethlehem. The tale, focusing on the messiah’s unhappy mother, strikes me as least partially anti-Christian resistance to the growing cult of Mary and Jesus at Bethlehem.

14 Especially the flum in Isa. 11, 1 that (Jerome claims) has muddled the prophetic passages cited in Matt. 2, 23: Comm. in Isaiam 4.11.1 (CCL 73:147). See also Comm. in Isaiam 3.18 (CCL 76:207).
Jerome can also press his floral and faunal experts into explicitly Christianized, anti-Jewish interpretations: 'A Jew who instructed me in the reading of the Old Testament translated the word geber as "domestic rooster." He says: just as a domestic rooster, on the shoulder of its carrier, is moved from one place to another, so the Lord will cast you lightly from your own place.' Jerome goes on to interpret the Isaiah verse in question as a prophetic judgement against the Jews themselves, foretelling their own present-day 'scattering to the ends of the earth.' Jerome here employs his local 'expert,' a Jewish Old Testament teacher, to read this passage as a prediction of the transformation of Palestine from a Jewish into a Christianized space.

In addition to providing geographical and agronomic expertise, the Jews in Jerome's exegesis become the very embodiment of biblical history. Their linguistic expertise makes them invaluable in recapturing the original scriptural Hebraica veritas; in the same way, their contemporary culture and knowledge provide Jerome with a positive form of veritas historiae. While at times he refers dismissively to 'Jewish fables,' he also equates Jewish biblical knowledge with the Christian 'historical' interpretation of Scripture:

Desiring to imitate the head of household who brought forth from his treasury both old things and new [Matt. 13:52], and the bride in the Song of Songs who says, 'new as well as old have I saved for you, my beloved' [Song 7, 13], I have mixed Jewish history (historiae Hebraeorum) with our own moral interpretation (tropolism), so that I might build on stone and not on sand [Matt. 7, 24-27], and so I might establish a stable foundation, just as Paul the master-builder wrote he was able to do [I Cor. 3, 10].

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15 Jerome, Comm. in Isaiam 7.22.17 (CCL 73:306).
16 Perhaps one of the most vivid examples of this embodied historicization of Jews is found in Jerome, Comm. in Sophoniam 1.15-16 (CCL 76A:672-74), in which he collapses the Babylonian and Roman 'captivities' into the contemporary mourning of late-ancient Jews at the Temple mount, constructing a sort of recapitulatio of their neotestamentic deeds and their present distress.
17 Jerome, Comm. in Isaiam 5.23.18 (CCL 73:223), in Abdiim 20 (CCL 76:372), in Abauc 2.3.2 (CCL 76A:620), in Sophoniam 2.5 (CCL 76A:681), in Zacharim 1.4.8 (CCL 76A:793-94), in Malachiam 2.13.16 (CCL 76A:924). In employing certain fabulae Hebraeorum as interpretive historia, Jerome falls within a particular Christian exegetical tradition: see Adam Kamesar, 'The Evaluation of the Narrative Aggada in Greek and Latin Patristic Literature,' JThSt n.s. 45 (1994): 37-71.
18 Jerome, Comm. in Isaiam 5.14.18, 8.27.1 (CCL 73:169-70, 346), in Ezech. 8.25.8, 9.28.19 (CCL 75:338, 398-99), in Danielem 2.5.2 (CCL 75A:821), in Amos 1.2.12 (CCL 76A:239-40), in Abauc 1.2.15 (CCL 76A:610). This last reference seems to refer specifically to contemporary rabbinic midrash, as it is attributed 'to a wise man who is called a ἐβεβαιότας among them,' which seems to signify tanna (see Günter Stemberger, 'Hieronymus und die Juden seiner Zeit,' in Dietrich-Alex Koch and Hermann Lichtenberger, eds., Begegnungen zwischen Christentum und Judentum in Antike und Mittelalter: Festschrift für Heinz Schrechenberg (Göttingen, 1993), pp. 347-64 at pp. 354-55). Jewish fabulae could likewise be used against pagan fabulae: see Comm. in Amos 2.5.7/9 (CCL 76:280-81).
19 Jerome, Comm. in Zachariam prol. (CCL 76A:748); see also in Amos 3.7.9 (CCL 76A:318-19), in Naum 1.11 (CCL 76A:536).

Just as passages from the Old and New Testament were co-opting synthesis of 'old' and 'new' history. Since the Hebraica veritas, with which to fill out his own scriptural exemplum, come from contemporary Jewish writers and apocalypticists and demonstrate Christ's coming.

One of the more significant tools at Jerome's disposal is the recovery of original documentary traditions from the Hebrew Old Testament text. He often turns his attention to passages beginning with 'it is written' or 'it is written in the Septuagint,' and the changes he then suggests go back to the Hebrew, since they have followed his lead. Jerome's arguments are often so strong that at no time does he allow the reader to forget that he is not using the language of a Jewish toxicological distinction between present-day Jew and non-Jew, but rather a 'citations' clarified by Jerome's unusual linguistic and used for anti-Jewish and apocalyptic purposes. The fact that he is talking about these 'citations' is clarified by Jerome's use of the word 'Hebraeis,' and for the Gentile audience he was writing to, and the phrase 'citations' is used to refer to the material that would be familiar to the Jews.

To this end, Jerome reworks the phrase from Hebrews 11.17-18 as Hebraeus ex Hebraeis (Phil. 3.16.21-22), and 'they will gaze upon the word of the Lord, and the Jew to defend Christ as God's servant.

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20 Jerome, Praef. in libro Paralipomenon (CCL 76:131), 10.14.15, 11.1-12 (in the Praef. in Pentateuch 11-17 (WCU 2:261-76)).
21 Made striently clear in the context of the Talmud Tosefat ha-aggadah, see Shem-Tov, 112.14.1-2, 15.2-3, 17.2 (CSEL 55:35-41)
22 These passages had been mainly discussed by K. Lichtenberger, see Adv. Marcionem 4.8.1 (CCL 2:916) and de resurrectione 26.5 (CCL 2:954-55), on I Cor. 2, 9.
23 See for instance, Comm. in epist. ad Rom. 11.28.8, where the phrase becomes "in Hebrais." However, "De Hebraeis" is used of the evangelists Matthew (CCL 76A:536) and Mark (CCL 76A:318-19).
Just as passages from the Old and New Testaments blend to instruct on the fitting synthesis of ‘old’ and ‘new,’ so Jerome can justify seeking the ‘old,’ historia, with which to fill out his exegesis. That this ‘old’ foundation should come from contemporary Jews serves to ameliorate the dangers of Jewish consultants and demonstrate Christian authority over all things biblical.

One of the more significant uses to which Jerome can put his ‘biblical Jew’ is the recovery of original domirical speech. Jerome will insist, often in the face of much resistance, that Jesus and the apostles spoke Hebrew and quoted from the Hebrew Old Testament. He justifies this belief by ‘discovering’ that numerous New Testament passages purporting to be from the Old Testament, yet not found in the Septuagint, can be restored by a careful reading of the Hebrew text. He often trots out a string of domirical and apostolic pronouncements beginning with ‘it is written’ and asks, ‘So, where is it written? It’s not in the Septuagint, and the church does not recognize apocrypha. So we must go back to the Hebrew, since this is what the Lord spoke and the disciples followed his lead.’

To this end, Jerome reworks the Pauline epithet ‘a Jew born of Jews,’ Hebraeus ex Hebrais (Phil. 3, 5). He extends it to several New Testament writers, and usually refers to them writing ‘as if they were Jews born of Jews.’

The phrase comes to signal a form of knowledgeable mimicry, and can describe the evangelists or Paul as well as Jerome himself. We might hear...
echoes of Jerome’s own self-image as an imperial Christian scholar in his description of the New Testament authors:

Matthew draws his testimony here from neither Hebrew nor the Septuagint ... From this it is clear that the evangelists and apostles did not always follow some Hebrew translation, but, as if they were Jews born of Jews, because they were readers of Hebrew (quasi Hebraeos ex Hebrais quod legebant Hebraice), they expressed themselves in their speech.24

This form of knowledge production coheres with recent studies in culture and imperialism. We might therefore understand Jerome’s use of the ‘biblical Jew’ in terms of Edward Said’s memorable statement: “To know a thing is to dominate it, to have authority over it. And authority here means for “us” to deny autonomy to “it” ... since we know it and it exists, in a sense, as we know it.”25 Through his textual interaction with Palestinian Jews, Jerome is able to establish lines of hierarchy between Jew and Christian, since power and knowledge are made to flow uniquely from Jewish periphery to Christian center. He also creates networks of knowledge and power between the Christian ‘on the scene’ in the holy land and the Christian ‘back home.’ Of all these groups, Jerome alone is able to speak both imperially and colonially. Both the ‘local Jew’ and Jerome the knowledgeable Christian thus come into being in relation to one another, and Jerome’s construction of the untrustworthy yet necessary ‘biblical Jew’ is a construction of Jerome the imperial Christian, as well.

24 Jerome, Comm. in Hier. 18.2 (31.15) (CCL 74:306-7). In labeling various apostles and evangelists hebraei ex hebraiis, Jerome usually is referring to their ability to adapt linguistically to their audience: see Comm. in ep. ad Galatas 3.6.1 (PL 26:455B), in ep. ad Ephesios 2.3.1, 3.5.3 (PL 26:509B, 553B), in ep. ad Titum 2.11.3 (PL 26:622C, 628B-C).