

JEROME AND THE HEBRAICA VERITAS: A PORTRAIT OF JEROME AND HIS RELATIONSHIP WITH THE HEBREW TEXT

JERÔNIMO E A *HEBRAICA VERITAS*:

UM RETRATO DE JERÔNIMO E SEU RELACIONAMENTO
COM O TEXTO HEBRAICO

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ABSTRACT

Jerome is a well known Christian interpreter who lived between 345 and 420 C.E. His Latin translation from the Hebrew, i.e., *iuxta hebraeos*, the so-called Vulgata, stands among his most notable contributions to the Old Testament scholarship. To engage with his writings, the today's reader will access one of his most interesting characteristic, the Hebrew verity (*hebraica veritas*), that is Jerome believed that the Hebrew text is the pure source to understand the Old Testament as Christian Scripture. This distinguished aspect of Jerome's contribution is relevant for the right appreciation of his work. In this article, I will provide a synthesis of factors that offer a rounded portrait of Jerome's relationship to the Hebrew text.

Keywords: Old Testament interpretation. Jerome and *hebraica veritas*. Patristic exegesis.

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RESUMO

Jerônimo é um conhecido intérprete cristão que viveu entre 345 e 420 a.C. Sua tradução do Hebraico para o Latim, isto é, *iuxta hebraeos*, conhecida como Vulgata, é uma de suas contribuições mais notáveis para os estudos do Antigo Testamento. Ao engajar-se em seus escritos, o exegeta dos dias de hoje irá acessar uma de suas mais interessantes características, a verdade hebraica (*hebraica veritas*), ou seja, a crença de Jerônimo de que o texto hebraico é a fonte pura para se entender o Antigo Testamento como escritura cristã. Este importante aspecto da contribuição de Jerônimo é crucial para a correta apreciação de sua obra. Neste artigo, providencio uma síntese de fatores que oferecem um retrato eficaz do relacionamento de Jerônimo com o texto hebraico.

Palavras-chaves: Exegese do Antigo Testamento. Jerônimo e a *hebraica veritas*. Exegese patristica.

INTRODUCTION

Jerome is one of the most important biblical scholars of the fourth century. He developed a significant contribution to the history of interpretation of the Old Testament (OT hereafter), as a result of such intense devotion to biblical translation and interpretation. To engage with his commentaries and letters, the contemporary exegete must access one of Jerome's most interesting characteristics, which is the Hebrew verity, or the *Hebraica veritas*. Such idea has to do with the preference that he kept regarding the superiority of the Hebrew text over the Greek and Latin versions of the OT. Indeed, his devotion to the Hebrew text as the major source for biblical translation and interpretation cannot be overestimated.

Although Jerome's attempt to establish the Hebrew text as the source for the trustful interpretation had not been accepted enthusiastically by his contemporaries such as Rufinus and Augustine,² the latter scholars recognized his efforts. Jerome's impact in scholarship had begun after his death with a renewed interest for his writings.³ Recently, Rebenich⁴ and Brown⁵ have appreciated the *Hebraica veritas* as a significant characteristic of Jerome that cannot be neglected by the today's exegete. In light of this, the scholarship is indebted to Jerome as an OT scholar and the idea

²REBENICH, Stefan. *Jerome*. The early church Fathers. London: Routledge, 2002. p. 52.

³RICE, Eugene F. *Saint Jerome in the Renaissance*. Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1985. p. 23-48.

⁴REBENICH, Stefan. *Jerome: the vir trilinguis and the hebraica veritas*. *VChr* 47 (1993). p. 50-77.

⁵BROWN, Dennis. *Vir Trilinguis: a study in the biblical exegesis of Saint Jerome*. Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1992. p. 55-86.

of *Hebraica veritas* is, therefore, a strong characteristic of Jerome's contribution to biblical interpretation up to the present.

The purpose of this essay is to trace the various elements which are related to Jerome's relationship with the concept of *Hebraica veritas* for the sake of understanding Jerome's preference for the Hebrew text. It has been said that Jerome's claim in favour of the *Hebraica veritas*, the deeper meaning of the OT Scripture that comes from Hebrew, is the main reason for rejecting the Septuagint as the divine authority for the OT translation and Christian learning in which Jerome established a new paradigm for the OT exegesis.⁶ If this is true, then the elements involved in Jerome's decision for the *Hebraica veritas* are relevant. The rest of this essay will explore the elements which explain Jerome's relationship with the Hebrew and his consistent rationale for preferring the Hebrew text. Such elements are not displayed chronologically nor in order of importance, yet all of them are interconnected.

1. ORIGEN'S INFLUENCE

Origen exercised a positive influence on Jerome's formation of the *Hebraica veritas*. One can see at least a threefold influence. Firstly, Origen, one of the most praised exegete from the Alexandrian school, provided a fertile ground for the allegorical interpretation of Scripture to Jerome, who reflexively included it in his own hermeneutics. Secondly, Jerome translated and classified⁷ some of Origen's works from Greek into Latin,⁸ which means that Jerome was an intense and critical reader of Origen. Although some scholars have the tendency to accuse him of plagiarising Origen, there is no substantial evidence to believe that Jerome was a "blind follower" and plagiarist of Origen.⁹ Jerome found in Philo and Origen important techniques for seeking the spiritual sense, but did not identify with the exegetical principles of his predecessor. This can be confirmed by his eclectic hermeneutical experience in which the allegorical search should not be the only approach in order to understand the biblical truth. In fact, Jerome's exegetical influence is diverse. Further, Jerome's responsibility was to preserve vast material from Origen, and he was strongly habituated with Origen's language, hermeneutics and thoughts. Therefore, Origen's influence on Jerome is significant.

⁶ BROWN, 1992, p. 55.

⁷ BROWN, 1992, p. 15.

⁸ SUTCLIFFE, E. F. Jerome. In: LAMPE, G. W. H (Edit.). *The Cambridge history of the Bible - the west from the Fathers to the Reformation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969. v. 2, p. 83-85.

⁹ BROWN, 1992, p. 197.

Thirdly, one can find Jerome under the formative influence of Origen's *Hexapla*. Trigg says that this material was "an immense and complex word-for-word comparison of Septuagint with the Hebrew Bible and other Greek translation".¹⁰ The *Hexapla* reveals that the Hebrew text and textual criticism were important for Origen but they still remained secondary to the Septuagint. Although Origen had mentioned some critical notes in regards to the OT text in his writings, the Septuagint was still the prime text to support the Christian interpretation.¹¹ Despite Origen's acceptance of the Septuagint, which differs from Jerome, Jerome is indebted to Origen's *Hexapla* for the following reasons.

The first, Jerome took for granted the fact that Origen was mastered in Hebrew,¹² as did every other scholar before him. Since Origen's influence finds resonances in Jerome's career, there is no reason to reject the idea that Jerome had been pushed to be mastered in Hebrew, as was his "master". If Origen was or not mastered in Hebrew, and if he was the one responsible to point out the flaws in the Septuagint in light of Hebrew, the interest relies in Jerome's appropriation. Whether Origen had a high domain of Hebrew or not is still an open discussion.¹³ However, Jerome had taken for granted that Origen knew Hebrew and due to Origen's references to the Hebrew in his writings, Jerome was encouraged to follow his footprints.¹⁴

Second, the *Hexapla* represented the best alternative for scholars who were accessing the OT critically in those days. Jerome became familiar with this material in his years at Palestine where he accessed the library of Caesarea¹⁵ and started to revise the Psalter with the *Hexapla* in hands.¹⁶ Though he revised the Psalter in Greek, it is obvious he could consult the Hebrew text and conceive the differences between them. Also, Lamp suggests that Jerome provided a revision in the *Hexapla* but he does not bring any speculation on what kind of revision should have been done. However, given the familiarity that Jerome had with Origen's work, it is not so doubtful to consider such revision considering he proceeded improving his Hebrew. Yet, Jerome did not only passively receive the *Hexapla* as the standard material for consulting the OT, but he was able to develop a critical evaluation of it, as I shall demonstrate in the next paragraph.

¹⁰ TRIGG, Joseph. *Origen*. The early church Fathers. London: Routledge, 1998. p. 16.

¹¹ KAMESAR, Adam. *Jerome, greek scholarship, and the Hebrew Bible: a study of the quaestiones hebraicae in Genesim*. Oxford: Clarendon Press Oxford, 1993. p. 4-28.

¹² BROWN, 1992, p. 78-79.

¹³ BROWN, 1992, p. 79.

¹⁴ BROWN, 1992, p. 78-79.

¹⁵ SUTCLIFFE, 1969, p. 88.

¹⁶ REBENICH, 2002, p. 53.

Third, although the *Hexapla* had become the standard material for Jerome's translation, it provided a starting point for learning and improving the Hebrew from the critical perspective. This material also represented the diversity of OT manuscripts consulted by scholars who preceded him.¹⁷ It is instructive to note that it consisted of a Hebrew version in Hebrew; the Hebrew transliterated into Greek; the Greek translation of Aquila; the Greek translation of Symmachus; the Septuagint corrected by the Hebrew; and the Greek version of Theodotion.¹⁸ Aquila's version, for instance, was a correspondent of an interlinear Hebrew into Greek. Such version was very useful for Hebrew learners. In this sense, Barr has argued that Jerome probably benefited from Aquila when he started to learn Hebrew seriously.¹⁹ In addition, Jerome could not only learn from the *Hexapla* but he could examine and decide what was the best textual note of a passage, which makes him a textual critic.²⁰

Jerome's appropriation of the *Hexapla* points out that he went further than Origen. Jerome added to the techniques of textual criticism practiced from the *Hexapla*. He suggested the possibility to use it as a resource for interpretation from the Hebrew text critically.²¹ This certainly led him to accept the *Hebraica veritas*. Simonetti reinforces the issue by saying that Jerome's *Hebraica veritas* "was encouraged by contact with Origen's *Hexapla*, which, setting the Septuagint side by side with other translations, showed up its limitations and defects".²² Nevertheless, this issue is significant because Jerome had started his *Hebraica veritas* under the influence of Origen and his *Hexapla*.

2. JEROME'S TRANSLATIONS

Jerome, a profitable translator, is significant for the understanding of his *Hebraica veritas* preference. His efforts to understand the true meaning of the texts under his translations are connected to *Hebraica veritas*. Kelly has understood that his work as a translator became serious in view of *Hebraica veritas* when he began to translate the Psalter and then determined to translate the whole OT anew, from Hebrew into Latin.²³ Providentially, both of them had taken place when he was set at Bethlehem where he

¹⁷ DECOCK, Paul. Jerome's turn to the *Hebraica Veritas* and his rejection of the traditional view of the Septuagint. *Neotestamentica* 42.2 (2008). p. 209.

¹⁸ RICE, 1985, p. 15.

¹⁹ BARR, James. St. Jerome's appreciation of Hebrew. *BRL* 49 (1967). p. 284.

²⁰ BROWN, 1992, p. 21-54.

²¹ BROWN, 1992, p. 52-54.

²² SIMONETTI, Manlio. *Biblical interpretation in the early church: an historical introduction to patristic exegesis*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994. p. 100.

²³ KELLY, J. N. D. *Jerome: his life, writings, and controversies*. London: Duckworth, 1975. p. 157.

could learn Hebrew more intently than when he lived at Chalcis.²⁴ As a translator, one should have in mind that Jerome indeed had a technical approach to Hebrew, Greek and Latin as was never seen before in Christianity. However, a religious perspective cannot be excluded: Jerome was a Christian translator whose purpose was to provide the meaning of the revelation, and this suggests a reasonable argument for such preference.

When he reviewed the Latin Psalter for the Pope at Rome, he did it from Greek to Latin, which demonstrates that he did not dismiss the Septuagint at that moment and could increase his expertise as a translator.²⁵ However, by this time in Bethlehem, he had lost his faith in the Septuagint and started to provide fresh translations of some Psalms directly from the Hebrew. Keeping in mind that Origen's *Hexapla* was his critical source, he could compare the Hebrew and Greek versions altogether with his former notes from the Pope's version to Latin. This is still not the translation of the whole Bible, but a significant step to the *Hebraica veritas*. Although these translations on some Psalms have not survived and Kelly has considered them as "unimportant productions",²⁶ Jerome did not consider such enterprise to perceive the inconsistencies between the Latin and Greek versions a sheer waste of time. Therefore, he dedicated his *trilinguis* capacity in order to translate his *iuxta Hebraeos*, the OT according to the Hebrew.

It is instructive to point out that his decision to translate the OT from Hebrew has highlighted his preference for the *Hebraica veritas*, and a unique enterprise has never been seen before. This singularity of his legacy has consistently argued to his rationale preference for Hebrew. Although I will not describe neither the translation techniques nor how Jerome applied them in some particular works due to the limited scope of this paper, it is noteworthy that Margerie has concluded that Jerome achieved all requirements of a respected translator of his time and along his career he consistently developed and shared his own guidelines to be a great and original translator.²⁷ The main interest of this essay is in regard to Jerome's attitude behind the enterprise to translate from the Hebrew text. Thereby, it is relevant to indicate that Jerome, as a translator, rooted his thoughts, techniques and expertise, which have led him to promulgate the *Hebraica veritas*. Indeed, "Jerome was enabled to do justice to the Hebraic truth" as Margerie correctly pointed out.²⁸

²⁴ BROWN, 1992, p. 71.

²⁵ KELLY, 1975, p. 89.

²⁶ KELLY, 1975, p. 158.

²⁷ MARGERIE, Bertrand de. *An introduction to the history of exegesis - the latin Fathers*. Petersham: Saint Bede's, 1994. v. 2.

²⁸ MARGERIE, 1994, p. 127.

3. JEWISH INTERPRETATION

Jerome's preference for the Hebrew text was certainly influenced and shaped by the presence of Jews. Jerome saw himself as mostly an OT interpreter. Part of his work as a commentator is indebted to his work as a translator. Nevertheless, Jerome's contributions as a translator cannot be divorced of his activity as a Christian exegete. Arguably, Jerome has demonstrated the presence of Jewish influence through his commentaries. He most likely found it useful to be in touch with Jews, enriching the debate of Christian interpretation, and increasing the scope of his influence; not only to enlarge his knowledge of Hebrew.²⁹

Rebenich has correctly emphasised that Jerome's concept of *Hebraica veritas* is dependant of the influence of Jewish exegetes.³⁰ If the scholars such as Rebenich³¹ and Wiesen³² have pointed out that the relations between Christians and Jews were still warm, and Jerome sometimes is seen as an irascible person against Jews, how can one evaluate Jerome's relationship with Jews? I propose two alternatives to explain such influence that are cultural and apologetic.

First, it is significant, from the context where Jerome was placed, that the Roman Empire was embedded of the presence of the Jewish culture. Although Wiesen has mentioned that Jews were no longer a threat to Christians in those days,³³ Dohrmann has shown that Jerome could benefit from the remarkable presence of Jews in the whole empire.³⁴ Significantly, the Jewish culture was part of the common life of the fourth century. One can see Jerome surrounded by Jews from the beginning, for example, when he started to learn Hebrew in Chalchis by the way of spiritual discipline.³⁵

Williams has developed Dohrmann's argument by saying that Jerome had not only accessed the work of Philo or Josefo but also he appropriated the Jewish exegesis under his cultural possibilities from learning directly with Jews and converting it into his own Christian terms.³⁶ At Bethlehem he had a productive time with the assistance of a

²⁹ BROWN, 1992, p. 200.

³⁰ REBENICH, 2002, p. 55.

³¹ REBENICH, 2002, p. 55.

³² WIESEN, David S. *St. Jerome as a satirist: a study in Christian latin thought and letters*. New York: Cornell University Press, 1964. p. 188-194.

³³ WIESEN, 1964, p. 194-197.

³⁴ DOHRMANN, Natalie. Manumission and Transformation in Jewish and Roman Law. In: DOHRMANN, Natalie; STERN, David (Edit.). *Jewish biblical interpretation and cultural exchange: comparative exegesis in context*. Philadelphia: Philadelphia University Press, 2008. p. 51-65.

³⁵ BROWN, 1992, p. 71-72.

³⁶ WILLIAMS, Megan H. Lessons from Jerome's Jewish teachers: exegesis and cultural interaction in late antique Palestine. In: DOHRMANN, Natalie; STERN, David (Edit.). *Jewish biblical interpretation and cultural exchange - comparative exegesis in context*. Philadelphia: Philadelphia University Press, 2008. p. 66-86.

Jewish teacher.³⁷ One of his teachers is named *Baranina*; another one is said to have met him at night to not be recognized in public.³⁸ In addition to that, Lampe has seen some agreements between Jerome's comments and the *Targum*, which implies he had some *Midrashim* at hand.³⁹ Similarly, Newman understands that the usage of *Midrashim* was predominantly oral rather than written,⁴⁰ which is possible due to the effective phonological command that Jerome performed in Hebrew. In fact, there is no evidence to discern absolutely how much or how far his Jewish sources were written or if they were oral. It is relevant, therefore, that this cultural influence is evident.

Secondly, Jerome could be under Jewish learning for apologetic purposes against the widespread Jewish presence in the world. Brown has supported Jerome's apologetic motive because by those times, Jews were "scorned" Christians, ridiculed of weak knowledge of the Pentateuch.⁴¹ On the other hand, Decock informs that some Christians who defended the supremacy of the Septuagint were accusing the Jews of having adulterated the OT. Jerome saw that the solution for both reasons was to consult Hebrew.⁴² In addition, if we accept Dohrmann's view of a widespread Jewish presence, non-Hebrew readers and even interested Christians could consult the Hebrew text by talking to the Jews and comparing their current versions. Jerome was providing a Christian alternative to avoid misunderstandings inside or outside the ecclesiastical context. Decock adds that even though the Septuagint was not too esteemed by Jews, they are able to discuss the issues on the versions. If this is true, Jerome was compelled to provide fresh material to supply such increasing demands among the church.

The approach between Jerome and Jews, especially insofar his preference by the Hebrew text became more evident, was received negatively by some of his contemporaries. Rufinus illustrated how dramatic his decision was and how he was constantly attacked for being a friend of the Jews, and for dismissing the Septuagint as the correct text for the trustful interpretation.⁴³ One can wonder how far is

³⁷ KELLY, 1975, p. 141-157.

³⁸ BROWN, 1992, p. 73-74.

³⁹ SUTCLIFFE, 1969, p. 99.

⁴⁰ NEWMAN, Hillel. How should we measure Jerome's hebrew competence? In: CAIN, Andrew; LÖSSL, Josef (Edit.). *Jerome of Stridon: his life, writings, and legacy*. Farnham, Burlington: Ashgate, 2009. p. 134-135.

⁴¹ BROWN, 1992, p. 72-73.

⁴² DECOCK, 2008, p. 210.

⁴³ RICE, 1985, p. 18.

Jerome's interpretation from the Jewish? Indeed, Jerome has echoes of the *Haggadah* and *Halakah*.⁴⁴ They are non-biblical resources to the Jewish understanding of Scripture and Jerome has presented both of them in his commentaries.⁴⁵ However, a close reading in Jerome's commentaries easily proves that although the similarity between such approaches is there, Jerome's interpretation is consistently Christian and such accusations have seemed a misinterpretation of this purpose and a historical rooted preference by the Septuagint.

Jerome's commentaries are not rabbinical exegesis. Rather, his hermeneutical background is diverse including a threefold lens: the literal sense inherited from the Antioch school; the allegorical sense so spread out by the Alexandrian perspective; and, he includes Jewish elements in his interpretative Christian framework.⁴⁶ For him, Jewish exegesis has been important for Christians so long that they are consistent with the whole corpus of the Bible and Christian theology.⁴⁷ Jerome was not a "blind follower" of Jews, on the contrary, he can be seen as highly polemical against the Jewish faith and fellows.⁴⁸

Jerome explicitly differentiates his sympathy of Jewish approach from his firm Christian conviction, which carries a negative evaluation of the role of Jews in history. Arguably, Jerome believed that God fulfilled his promises in the church and the Jews were only blessed in a definite moment of history.⁴⁹ In a certain sense, in re-establishing the Hebrew text as authoritative, Jerome returned to the church what was hers already. If Rebenich is right suggesting that Jerome's enterprise to write commentaries was a "strategy of defending the new Latin Bible", we can see Jerome's commentaries embedded in the *Hebraica veritas* for the sake of promoting his view on why and how the Hebrew text can deepen the Christian understanding of the OT and consequently the Gospel. Jerome was not only a propagator of Hebrew; he was indeed a scholar committed to the understanding of Christ.

The focus on this section has been Jerome and the influence that the Jewish exegesis had had on him. Whilst evidently influenced by Jews, Jerome is highly selective of what to incorporate in his own material. His erudition as a biblical interpreter is not restrained by the literal and allegorical hermeneutics, but he

⁴⁴ BROWN, Dennis. Jerome (c.340-420). In: MCKIM, Donald (Edit.). *Historical handbook of major biblical interpreters*. Illinois: IVP Press, 1998. p. 42.

⁴⁵ BROWN, 1992, p. 14-15.

⁴⁶ BROWN, 1992, p. 121-193.

⁴⁷ BROWN, 1998, p. 46.

⁴⁸ BROWN, 1992, p. 168.

⁴⁹ RICE, 1985, p. 19.

includes Jewish traditions into his hermeneutical lens. This originality makes him an eclectic Christian scholar; and his connection with Jews and Jewish interpretation led him to the “original” source of the OT. Insofar as Jerome incorporates the Hebrew text and Jewish perspectives in his Christian hermeneutics, the concept of *Hebraica veritas* becomes more evident through his commentaries.

4. JEROME’S KNOWLEDGE OF HEBREW

Certainly one of Jerome’s most interesting elements related to his preference to the *Hebraica veritas* is his knowledge of Hebrew. In such instances, his knowledge of Hebrew is directly connected to the *Hebraica veritas* and his performance as a translator and interpreter. Thus, the controversy involves how much Hebrew Jerome really knew. Newman, for example, is one who has contested Jerome’s knowledge of Hebrew.⁵⁰ He has suggested Jerome much more as controversialist and rhetoric than a Hebraist and has based his conclusions on some of Jerome’s grammatical errors.⁵¹

In fact, Jerome’s writings contain some grammar mistakes, however, accusing Jerome of inventing himself as a Hebraist is not only unfair but also underestimates the knowledge he certainly demonstrated throughout his work. There are some objections I would like to make in regards to this tendency of diminishing Jerome’s knowledge. Firstly, Jerome’s purpose is not to expound profound aspects of Hebrew grammar, but he is motivated by his biblical study and Christian impulses. His usage of Hebrew is a valid means to access the Christian truth and sometimes it is not necessary to produce more than a generalization. Secondly, the critics have not evaluated Jerome’s learning curve. Jerome has presented an increasing usage of Hebrew over the years. Jerome’s progress in Hebrew is significantly linked to his decision of the *Hebraica veritas*. If the OT retains the true meaning, the text is not only to be consulted but used as the prime source for seeking the truth.

Thirdly, Jerome had a better level of Hebrew than his predecessors. Brown⁵² has argued in line with Barr⁵³ that Jerome presented some advantages in comparison to others before him. Fourthly, Barr has convincingly argued that Jerome had more than a passive knowledge of Hebrew and can be rightly recognized as a Christian Hebraist.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ NEWMAN, 2009, p. 131-140.

⁵¹ BURSTEIN, E. La compétence de Jérôme en Hébreu. Explication de Certaines Erreurs, REAug 21 (1975). p. 3-12.

⁵² BROWN, 1992, p. 80.

⁵³ BARR, 1967, p. 282.

⁵⁴ BARR, 1967, p. 281-282.

A basic knowledge of Hebrew demanded only to copy and transliterate the text. Jerome's command of Hebrew was sufficiently trained to recognize structure and sonority. Perhaps, he was not able to talk in Hebrew but given the impressed Jewish presence in the Roman Empire, especially in Palestinian ground, it is not impossible that he could understand and communicate through some Hebrew or Aramaic.

Jerome himself recognizes that his learning process was dramatic until he became mastered. Since he lived in a pre-Massoretic world as Barr describes, this implies that the technique to learn Hebrew was predominantly oral learning, which means "from ear".⁵⁵ After that, he could improve his knowledge interacting with Jewish teachers and more profoundly with the *Hexapla*. He did not access the Hebrew grammar and lexicons that we have. However, he could evaluate the Hebrew in philological and phonological senses. According to Barr, his learning process and techniques could explain why his translations relies on vocalization of Hebrew exemplified by the curious commentaries for Jeremiah 1.11; 9.21.⁵⁶ Therefore, the difficult learning of Hebrew, from the very beginning, might have given Jerome the desire to prefer the *Hebraica veritas*.

Instead of only being a "cultural mediator" of his time as Newman has suggested, Jerome is certainly more than that and had more competence than some scholars, cited above, have presumed. It is acceptable to ponder that Jerome could have less competence than normally is attributed to him, especially if compared with the present state of research and the contemporary knowledge of Hebrew and Semitic languages. Simply to ignore his effective command of Hebrew pointing his gaps and to deny his increasing competence over the years is to mistaken Jerome in very negative terms. What should be taken seriously is that, given the true possibilities of learning Hebrew in his time, Jerome has represented a unique example of knowledge of Hebrew in early Christianity; and Jerome's concept of *Hebraica veritas* is strongly dependent of his Hebrew usage and his competence to translate *iuxta Hebraeos*.

5. SEPTUAGINT CONTROVERSY

Jerome's hard work of establishing a new paradigm had touched a crucial assumption, which triggered what I shall call the Septuagint controversy. Since the Jews had already accepted the concept of *Hebraica veritas*, and in bringing the same authoritative view of the Hebrew text to the Christian field, Jerome could not avoid

⁵⁵BARR, 1967, p. 293-294.

⁵⁶BARR, 1967, p. 292-293.

high criticism. Although the Septuagint was not the only translation, it had been used for three centuries as the Christian OT Scripture. Whilst the Septuagint had a prominent role in the life of the church, Jerome gave preference to Hebrew. Translating and interpreting the OT directly from Hebrew had signified a renewed form of understanding the Bible. In what follows, I will examine the main issue of this controversy, which relies on why Jerome had turned to Hebrew.

Why did Jerome reject the *Graeca veritas* in favour of *Hebrew veritas*? Decock has developed this issue arguing that from Jerome's viewpoint, he has a consistent rationale for preferring the Hebrew.⁵⁷ Firstly, Jerome argued over the traditional view, which pictured the apostles giving the Septuagint to the church. Jerome argued that the OT quotations into the NT come from the Hebrew language. His purpose is to reinforce that Jesus, the apostles and the evangelists had used the Hebrew Scripture rather than the Septuagint.⁵⁸ However, Kato has written that Jerome's position is inconsistent. In light of the modern literary research, Kato analysed how Jerome handled seven of three hundred OT quotations in the NT and found that there is not a standard established,⁵⁹ concluding that Jerome "adopts different opinions when the LXX disagrees with the Hebrew text and when the quotation disagrees with the Hebrew text".⁶⁰ Thus, Jerome naturally saw that the Holy Spirit guided the NT writer, who could freely choose in quoting from the OT even though he adapted it to his own scriptural purposes.⁶¹

Secondly, Jerome rejected the mythological view of Septuagint's inspiration and all stories surrounding it.⁶² Jerome then states that the Septuagint is a translation and not a revelation. At this point, it is clear that Jerome disagrees from Origen who believed in a firm inspiration of the Septuagint. Thirdly, he dismissed the fact that the mosaic oral tradition was perpetuated until the work of the Seventies translators of the Septuagint.⁶³ Rather, he argued that the history of Jesus found in the NT is "the true key or guide to the deeper meaning of the Scriptures".⁶⁴ Fourthly, Jerome strongly believed that the Septuagint had only a secondary role in

⁵⁷ DECOCK, 2008, p. 205-222.

⁵⁸ DECOCK, 2008, p. 215.

⁵⁹ KATO, Tepei. Jerome's understanding of Old Testament quotations in the New Testament. *Vigiliae Christianae* 67 (2013). p. 289-315.

⁶⁰ KATO, 2013, p. 314.

⁶¹ DECOCK, 2008, p. 217; KATO, 2013, p. 314-315.

⁶² DECOCK, 2008, p. 216-217.

⁶³ DECOCK, 2008, p. 216-217.

⁶⁴ DECOCK, 2008, p. 216-217.

the history of salvation.⁶⁵ Yet such a place was significant for him but not central. His main argument was to highlight the role of the Septuagint as being necessary to transmit the Gospel to the Greek audience. However, he understands that the Hebrew can judge the Greek⁶⁶ and avoid mistranslations.⁶⁷

Such reasons listed above on why Jerome had turned to the *Hebraica veritas* are not exhausted but have indicated that Jerome is more than a philologist, as he was a believer and Christian scholar in which the return to the “original” Hebrew should grant access to a deeper Christian faith. His prime interest is the meaning of Scripture. It is important to remember what Decock said of the theological role in which Jerome handled his material, not as a scientist but as a Christian scholar, pointing out that Jerome’s influences “were not merely philology or historical critical investigations, but most definitely Christian theology, whatever the name *Hebraica veritas* may suggest”.⁶⁸

Consequently, Jerome did not completely reject the Septuagint. In a certain sense, Jerome was aware that the Septuagint had preserved some of the most ancient Hebrew text available and for this reason should be consulted. I will not debate whether Augustine has the best argument to insist in *Graeca veritas* or not, given the limited space of this paper. However, the Septuagint controversy was more than the readability of the OT.⁶⁹ Reducing this controversy only to which text is the reliable resource for reading the OT in the church’s liturgy, one should not pay attention to the ecclesiastical and theological contours involved.⁷⁰

In sum, Jerome impacted the society of his time because he had covered a crucial element, the hegemony of the Septuagint for the church, in face of the renewed interest of the Jews of the Hebrew OT. Jerome had not dismissed the Septuagint as a translation and although he had not succeeded to persuade Augustine that the Septuagint controversy was more than simply to seek the best readable resource for the church, he started a fecund discussion on the “irreplaceable value of the original text”⁷¹ that still persists until the present days. Arguably, Jerome’s turn

⁶⁵ DECOCK, 2008, p. 216-217.

⁶⁶ RICE, 1985, p. 15-17.

⁶⁷ BROWN, 1992, p. 81.

⁶⁸ DECOCK, 2008, p. 220.

⁶⁹ FLÜGEL, Eva S. The latin Old Testament tradition. In: SÆBØ, Magno (Edit.). *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: the history of its interpretation - from beginnings to the Middle Ages (Until 1300)*. Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht: Göttingen, 1996. v. 1, p. 642-662.

⁷⁰ STOCK, Brian. *Augustine the reader: meditation, self-knowledge, and the ethics of interpretation*. Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press, 1996. p. 201.

⁷¹ MARGERIE, 1994, p. 141.

from the Septuagint to Hebrew has found its contemporary relevance due to the understanding of the *Hebraica veritas*.

CONCLUSION

This essay has sought to trace Jerome's relationship with the concept of *Hebraica veritas* for the purpose to elucidate his preference for the Hebrew text. Some elements were sought to explore such preference. Whilst the *Hebraica veritas* is a relevant component for the exam of Jerome's exegesis, what has been demonstrated in our survey is that Jerome desired to demonstrate the superiority of the Hebrew text to understand Scripture. Still, the elements related to Jerome's decision for the *Hebraica veritas* are entirely necessary to point out his preference. Each element is significant to explicate the dynamic involvement between Jerome and the Hebrew language in which all of them shaped his perspective and practice. One should take into account that he was a pioneer to reinsert and exemplify a new paradigm for Christian interpretation of the OT. Jerome's influence for seeing the Hebrew text as the "pure" text continues to be significant in the present days keeping in mind that exegetes from different contexts still consult the Hebrew text as the prime source, with the purpose of clarifying the comprehension of the Bible.

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