The Vulgate Genesis and St. Jerome's Attitudes to Women

Jane Barr

Much has been written about Jerome's attitudes to women as expressed in his letters and pamphlets, and it has not gone unnoticed that his exegesis contains anti-feminist material. To quote from David Wiesen's work, *St Jerome as a Satirist*:

The major vehicles of Jerome's propaganda were his letters and polemical works. When composing his biblical commentaries, however, he naturally found it difficult to suppress entirely thoughts of those causes for which he was simultaneously campaigning in his other works. Satiric comments, therefore, intended to promote such causes, frequently obtrude themselves incongruously into his exegesis.

Wiesen then goes on to quote examples of "profound anti-feminism" in Jerome's commentary on Isaiah.

I would like to carry this argument a stage further and to suggest that Jerome's attitudes to women were such a powerful and all-pervasive influence upon him that the accuracy of his Vulgate translation itself has been affected.

It is Jerome's hostility to women (and his suspicion and fear of them) that is usually emphasized. Some of my examples show evidence of this bias. But some of my examples also show a great warmth and sensitivity on his part to the women concerned in the passages, and I am inclined to attribute to St. Jerome a much more sympathetic and affectionate nature than does David Wiesen, who says:

In his relationship with Paula alone does Jerome reveal any natural tenderness or affection. The tone of his relationship with other people was determined above all by the harsh and inexorable nature of a scholarly and doctrinaire ascetic.

Now it was, as is well known, Jerome's intention to produce a strictly accurate translation from the Hebrew. In his introduction to his translation of the Psalms from the Hebrew he says emphatically (and I believe that the same statement would have equal validity with reference to his translation of the Pentateuch): "Certe confidenter dicam . . . me nihil, dumtaxat scientem, de Hebraica veritate mutasse."

It is my contention that in the Book of Genesis Jerome is, as a general rule, a very careful and accurate translator (I am confining myself to a discussion of this one book only, although similar examples could be adduced from other books). When I assembled my list of passages in the Book of Genesis where Jerome's translation is either quite inaccurate, or is too free to accord with his aim of attaining *Hebraica veritas*, I was interested to find that most of these irregularities occurred in passages
concerning women. It is my observation that whenever Jerome approached a passage where women were involved his usual objectivity deserted him, and his translation became less precise, and, not infrequently, biased. (I would, as an aside, want to make this plain: this paper does not spring from a preconceived belief that Jerome's attitude might have affected his Vulgate translation, or from a feminist stance. It sprang from observations made during a linguistic study of the Vulgate Genesis in relation to the LXX, the pre-Vulgate Latin and, especially, the Hebrew.)

It is of course important for us to be sure that Jerome knew Hebrew well, otherwise we might have to attribute his mistakes to simple ignorance. As we have just heard, it was his declared intent to change nothing, at any rate, not knowingly. I am quite sure that he knew Hebrew well. Where the Septuagint and Old Latin had an error, Jerome usually noticed and produced a correct rendition.

In both of the following instances it would have been easy to overlook the error because the LXX translation made sense in the context. But Jerome noticed and corrected:

Now the examples I am bringing forward to support my argument are by no means all errors. Most of them are examples of a rather free translation. My argument would have less validity if it were the case that Jerome did translate rather freely throughout the Book of Genesis. But, as I have already said, this is not the case. I use the term "free" with regard to meaning and content. The one exception I would make is the matter of adverbs. Jerome is inclined to insert these gratuitously. This is an interesting observation, suggesting, I think, that he noticed a dearth of adverbs in the Hebrew language and felt that Latin called for them. While he insists that elegance of style should be shunned in a Bible translation, I think that he was an instinctive stylist and felt that the insertion of adverbs was essential for a readable and smooth-flowing Latin version. While many of his added adverbs are somewhat conventional ones like magis, valde, vere, etc., he also uses highly descriptive words like sapientissime or violenter, for which there is no Hebrew equivalent.
I have therefore treated adverbs as a special case and have excluded them from consideration, but the following example will illustrate their use. As you will see, the first adverb, *propius*, though pleonastic, has some basis in the Hebrew verb, but the second, *confidenter*, is pure addition:

Now at this point I have to make a qualification. The possibility cannot be excluded that Jerome had in places a different Hebrew text from ours or that of the early Greek or Latin translators. It is also possible that the Vulgate itself has suffered alteration and that we do not have Jerome's version at all points. But for practical purposes we are entitled to work with the texts as we have received them and draw our conclusions on the basis of them.

Another question might be put. Jerome is known to have consulted Jewish scholars on difficult points. Might not they have persuaded him of some unusual interpretation? They might indeed, and, except where we have evidence in the Targums or other relevant sources, it is impossible to be sure. But one should not suppose that Jewish interpretations worked so frequently on Jerome's mind that they caused him to differ from the plain sense of the language of the text; there are many places where Jewish interpretations are well known, but where there is no sign of them in the Vulgate. If Jerome in fact produced renderings which were not required by the language of the text, whether or not these interpretations reached him from other sources, he produced them because they appealed to him at these particular points. It was not his normal practice to fly in the face of the accepted text and the traditional meaning of the passage.

The following are only a few instances from a large collection of examples, and they are treated only very briefly. They have been chosen for their variety. Some betray Jerome's antipathy to women, some show a deep sensitivity and awareness. Some may seem trivial at first sight, but Jerome is a faithful translator of the Hebrew as a rule, and therefore any divergence from it is unusual and assumes importance.

First, an example from the story of Dinah:

Here Jerome has both perceived the correct meaning of the Hebrew verb (in contrast...
to the Greek and the Old Latin) and used an extremely vivid expression, *conglutinata est*: the Hebrew means, literally, "to stick," and his vivid rendering is also very close to the original.

In the second part of the same verse we find:

The Hebrew seems to say, "he spoke to the heart of the girl," which is commonly understood to mean "he spoke kindly to the girl." The Greek and Latin hardly express the emotional depth of the phrase; they are something like, "he spoke according to the understanding of the girl." Jerome goes much farther: "He soothed her in her sadness with soft words." Notice the tri-stem, an addition to the bare text. Here Jerome is adding his own comment. The girl is grief-stricken, and he is interpreting her feelings sympathetically. The tenderness towards her is shown by two words: "He soothed her with soft words."

In the next example we again have an addition:

The LXX and OL follow the Hebrew and say simply "he went in to Rachel." Jerome says "having at last obtained the desired marriage." Then he produces the strained and periphrastic phrase *amorem sequentis priori praetulit* in place of the simple and touching "he loved Rachel more than Leah." I do not think he has improved on the original; his usual good judgement is here at fault.

A much more marked lack of taste is evident in the next example, from the story of Judah and Tamar:
Here for the simple Hebrew "Behold, she is with child" we have *videtur uterus illius intumescere*. Jerome found the sight of pregnant women disgusting, and in his letters speaks with distaste of tumor uteri. He inserts the reference here quite unnecessarily and crudely. Look however at v. 28:

Here Jerome again adds his own material, this time however in a most striking and effective manner. The Hebrew has simply "at her giving birth." The birth (of twins), you will remember, is complicated. First one child appeared (the nurse tied a colored cord round its hand); then it disappeared again, making way for the other. Jerome, with a touch of brilliance, says *in ipsa effusione infantum*.

The rest of my examples contain a hint, sometimes more than a hint, of moral judgement. Not surprisingly the story of Potiphar's wife yields some examples. In Genesis 39.7 we have her demand to Joseph, "Lie with me." In the next verse the Hebrew, followed by the LXX and OL, then says simply "And he refused."

Jerome makes Joseph's denial much more emphatic, and stresses the wickedness of the deed: *Vg nequaquam adquiescens operi nefario*. Two verses later, at 39.10, the woman is called *molesta* and her crime is called *stuprum*, a very strong word. While one may agree with the justice of Jerome's condemnation, the fact is that these words are not in the Hebrew. I have noted two other insertions by Jerome in the same story, at verse 13 *se esse contemptam* and verse 19 *nimium credulus*.

Then a minor but typical example from the story of Rachel's theft of her father's idols. Rachel is sitting on them to conceal them from Laban.
The Hebrew says, "He searched and did not find the teraphim," The Vulgate has "Thus the anxious care of the searcher was cheated" - a much more emotive phrase than the original.

We now have a more serious instance, from Genesis 3.16:

It is the first half of the verse that concerns us. In the Hebrew we have the word [ ] which means "strong desire," probably of a sexual nature, giving "Your desire will be for your husband." The LXX amd OL have the unsatisfactory [πατοστροφη] and conversio, "turning": but the general meaning is not too far from the original. In the Vulgate however we have sub potestate, "you will be under the power of your husband." Now it is not the case that Jerome found the Hebrew word difficult. In the next chapter in the story of Cain, the same word occurs and Jerome there translated it as appetitus, "strong desire." So unless the Vulgate has meantime been changed by another hand we must conclude that Jerome intended to suppress the true meaning here, and this alteration is of the greatest significance.

My last example is from the story of Abraham, Sarah and Abimelech. Abimelech is addressing Sarah before sending her away:

The Hebrew form [ ] is still difficult today. Probably it may be understood as from the root [ ] and therefore as meaning "to be found to be right," that is, "be vindicated" (cf. RSV, NEB). The Greek and the Old Latin, however, probably identified it as belonging to the root [ ] (cf. LXX αληθεια for this at Isaiah 26.10), and this led to their interpretation "tell everything true" or "tell the whole truth." Even more uncertain is the basis for Jerome's rendering quocumque perrexeris, mementoque te
**deprehensam.** We shall leave aside the first phrase, as it makes better sense if taken as belonging to the previous clause; or else it may arise from double translation of the Hebrew. The second phrase, however, is very interesting indeed: "Remember that you were caught [i.e. caught out in wrongdoing]." There are several ways in which Jerome may have analyzed the Hebrew in order to reach such an understanding of the sense: possibly, for instance, he derived it from another meaning of the verb [ ], coming close to "convince, convict, reprove, chide"; or else he might even have diagnosed it as a form from [ ], with the meaning therefore of "to be taken." In any case, his rendering, as it emerges, expressed more than a hint of moral judgement; it is a very strong reproof to an erring wife. Jerome uses *deprehendere* for the catching out of a woman in immorality also in places like Leviticus 21.9, Numbers 5.13, where there is no closely corresponding Hebrew term. The expression seems to have appealed to him. Was his mind perhaps echoing the more famous *mulier deprehensa*, the "woman taken in adultery," of John 8?

If it is true, and here I quote J.N.D. Kelly, that "Jerome's treatment of questions of celibacy and marriage enormously helped to shape the Christian sexual ethic that was to dominate Western civilization until the Renaissance at least"\(^6\) - then, if it can be shown that the accuracy of the Vulgate was even to a small extent affected by his attitude and prejudices, this is of considerable importance.

Oxford, England

**Notes**

2 P. 142.
3 Epistle 49.4.

The essay "Fake Fathers" by Gary Macy deals with a problem of scholarship that has concerned modern classicists and medievalists but not medieval authors themselves, few of whom subjected manuscripts to critical evaluation. The problem is that many supposedly authoritative classical and patristic texts were falsely attributed to a respected authority, sometimes in error, sometimes deliberately forged. Macy begins with the great collection of canon law made in the twelfth century by the monk Gratian, the *Decretum*. It became the standard authority for teaching in faculties of canon law. Gratian himself had no legislative authority. His *Decretum* was a collection of the opinions of others: popes, councils, and patristic authors. As a collector, he and his continuators carefully specified the source for each document. But, Macy notes, Gratian sometimes accepted forgeries or misattributed works to influential authors and thus also attributed authoritative standing to false documents. On some points of law, there were so many genuine authorities available that the inclusion of false texts made little difference. But Macy notes one specific legal issue on which many of the texts were either forgeries or misattributions. This issue was the status of women in the church, specifically the texts that declared women ineligible to serve at the altar and in other respects made them legally inferior to men. Many of these documents were forgeries, notably the works of an unidentified author known as Ambrosiaster, which were attributed to either Ambrose or Augustine. Thus many of the laws that limited women to subordinate, inferior status in the church rested on flimsy foundations and established principles that were not reflected in the genuine works of the two great Latin Fathers. Macy provides a detailed analysis of the rule forbidding women to serve at the altar, showing that the authorities found in the *Decretum* were either forgeries or had been so corrupted by scribal errors that they appeared to support views not found in the original. One text forbidding women to teach men and laypersons to teach clerics is presented as a decree of the Fourth Council of Carthage, an assembly that never existed. That rule was patched together from two passages in the greatest medieval collection of forged legal documents, the pseudo-Isidorean Decretals, which Gratian had incorporated without suspecting that it was full of forgeries. Macy continues with other forgeries demeaning and subjugating women that Gratian accepted without question. He does not claim that these forgeries were the sole cause of the restrictions imposed on women by the canon law, but the inauthentic documents in Gratian's *Decretum* were "at least one factor" in the process.