

# Jerome's Jewish Asceticism

## The Targum of Qohelet's Influence on Jerome's Theology of Asceticism in the *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for a Bachelors of Arts with Honors in History

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Submission Date: 4-14-2016

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### ABSTRACT

This thesis examines Jerome's engagement with Aramaic targumim, specifically the Targum of Qohelet. I survey the state of Hieronymian studies. I argue that Jerome's theological work has been unfairly subordinated to his philological work. I then proceed to examine Jerome's *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, setting it within the context of debates about asceticism in late fourth century Rome. I argue that Jerome used the Targum of Qohelet as an interpretive guide for his commentary, which I demonstrate through close textual analysis. The Targum showed him how to transform the cynical philosopher who speaks throughout the work into a model of Hieronymian asceticism.

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## Acknowledgements

The saying, “It takes a village to raise a child” could easily be modified so that it applies to the writing of an Honors Thesis. I could not have completed this project were it not for the support, advice, and encouragement of many people, some of whom it is only right to mention by name. First, I must extend a heartfelt thank you to my three thesis advisors: Professor David Peterson, Professor Alexandra Brown, and Professor Richard Marks. All three of my advisors were willing to work with me through the various shifts in emphasis that occurred in the course of research. I am deeply indebted to Professor Peterson’s open mind for allowing me to pursue a topic that was more than a little off the beaten track, as well as allowing me to alter my topic midway through the summer before this year. Moreover, his keen editing has greatly improved my habitually turgid prose. To Professor Brown I am exceedingly grateful both for the probing questions that she provided, which directed me towards closer scrutiny of the anachronistic distinctions that are often drawn between Judaism and Christianity in this period, and for the truly delightful conversations that we had in thesis meetings. From her I have learned a great deal about theology and the academy. In many ways, this thesis would not treat the topic and texts that it does without Professor Marks. His rigorous standards for evidence of intellectual influence between various texts kept me from jumping to grandiose conclusions, thereby helping enjoy the thrill of scholarly discovery all the more when I found truly concrete evidence.

Two other scholars have been ever-present in my mind during the writing of this thesis: Professor Ida Toth and Dr. Robin Whelan, my tutors in Greek and Late Antique history during my year abroad at Oxford. They cultivated my deep passion for Late Antique studies with a blend of kindness and rigor found in the best educators. To them I owe a great deal. Without Dr. Whelan’s encouragement in the course a discussion of Late Antique Christian epistolography during Trinity Term, I never would have found this topic, so he deserves special mention.

Scholarship could not happen without a support staff, naturally. Thus, I must thank the entire staff of Washington and Lee’s Leyburn Library. In particular, I must thank Elizabeth Teaff, who diligently tracked down obscure books and articles necessary for my research through Inter-Library Loan, in addition to granting me a locked study that became my home in the course of the year. Finally, I feel compelled to thank my friends, who put up with my hermit-like behavior as my holed up in the library time and time again. You all are the best.

## **Introduction: The State of Hieronymian Scholarship and the**

### **Scope of this Project**

The past twenty years have witnessed a veritable renaissance in Hieronymian scholarship, buoyed perhaps by the maturation of the field of Late Antique studies. Moreover, as researchers in this field have increasingly cultivated interests in the study of cross-cultural exchange, part of a trend within historical scholarship in general, Saint Jerome, the *vir trilinguis* and defender of *Hebraica veritas*, has received more frequent visits from modern scholars. This renewed interest has led to him receiving greater credit for being a cultural mediator who injected elements of Jewish and other Semitic religious traditions into Late Antique Latin Christianity that were crucial for its development. My thesis will examine to what extent Jerome was a mediator of these Jewish religious traditions and how exactly he transmitted them to the Latin West through his writings. To do so, however, will require a survey of the current status of Hieronymian scholarship in English.

Within this body of work there have been two major areas of emphasis, focusing on different parts of Jerome's literary output yet with occasionally intersecting interests. Scholars have examined in detail both Jerome's asceticism, often through the lens of his letters, and his scriptural and philological works. They have investigated Jerome's self-fashioning in his letters, sermons, and prefaces to his exegetical works and translations to discern how he gained authority as a spiritual director, crafted and promoted his own brand of asceticism, established his authority as an expert on scripture, and maintained his long-distance relationships. These works have stressed how Jerome used his trilingualism and his association with the East and with Jewish learning to become known as an expert

in several areas. When writing to the Christian Roman noblewomen desiring to become ascetics, he used his experiences as a hermit in the Syrian desert, working knowledge of Syriac, his (purported) visits to the Egyptian desert, and, after 385, his permanent residence in Bethlehem to convey the image of a thoroughgoing ascetic, perfectly at home among the wild holy men of the desert, yet learned and genteel enough to educate the Roman aristocracy in their ways.

Peter Brown, Andrew Cain, and Stefan Rebenich have provided some of the most insightful recent scholarship in this area. Brown has drawn attention to how Jerome, in his writings to the Roman nobility in the 380's, deftly cast the ascetics of the Syrian desert both as Cynic philosophers and as almost animal-like so as to emphasize the radical nature of his brand of asceticism, thereby increasing the extent to which its practitioners would be dependent upon his direction.<sup>1</sup> Rebenich has detailed how Jerome's fictional *Life of Paul of Thebes, the First Hermit* was intended to supplant the image of the ascetic that was fast gaining prominence in the West due to Athanasius's *Life of Anthony*, that of an unlearned yet immensely holy rustic, with that of a rugged yet immensely learned holy man.<sup>2</sup> In so doing, Jerome would not only promote his own ascetic archetype, but also displace Athanasius as the chief conveyer of Eastern Asceticism to the Latin West.<sup>3</sup> Cain has produced the most detailed work on this area of Hieronymian studies in recent years. His monograph on Jerome's letters argued that he fashioned a self-consciously exotic ascetic persona that both justified his legendarily

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350-550 AD*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 259-273.

<sup>2</sup> Stefan Rebenich, "Inventing an Ascetic Hero: Jerome's *Life of Paul the First Hermit*" in *Jerome of Stridon: Life, Writings, and Legacy*, (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 13-28.

<sup>3</sup> Rebenich, "Inventing an Ascetic Hero," 26-27.

quarrelsome personality and gained him recognition among Latin Christians as a spiritual and exegetical authority. Cain identifies Jerome's skillful highlighting of the spatial distance between his residence in Bethlehem and his Western correspondents and demonstrations of his knowledge of Hebrew as the two primary methods by which he fashioned his reputation and authority among Latin Christians.<sup>4</sup> These works furnish two impressions of Jerome's Jewish learning. First, his knowledge, as displayed in his letters, was primarily linguistic and philological. Second, such learning was important to Jerome chiefly because of its usefulness in buttressing his reputation as an expert on Eastern asceticism.

The other major area of scholarship in recent Hieronymian studies has been a re-examination of Jerome's scriptural and philological works. Work in this area has first entered into and then tried to move past the long-standing dispute over how competent Jerome actually was in Hebrew and even in Greek.<sup>5</sup> Early work in this area studied Jerome's philological work in relation to his translations of the Old Testament. Stefan Rebenich, in an article that was central to the formulation of current scholarly perspectives on Jerome, argued that Jerome's explicit self-labeling as a "*vir trilinguis*" and his philological works, such as *On the Location and Names of Hebrew Sites*, *Book of Interpretation of Hebrew Names*, and *Hebrew Questions on Genesis*, were attempts to defend his support for the *Hebraica veritas* version of the Old Testament from criticisms

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<sup>4</sup> Andrew Cain, *The Letters of Jerome: Asceticism, Biblical Exegesis, and the Construction of Christian Authority in Late Antiquity*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> See Hillel I. Newman's discussion of the reopening of this debate and his attempt to move past it: "How Should We Measure Jerome's Hebrew Competence?" in *Jerome of Stridon: Life, Writings, and Legacy*, (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 131-140.

that he was corrupting Christianity with Jewish influences.<sup>6</sup> By drawing on both internal textual material from Jerome's philological works as well as contextual material from the controversies that raged over the translations during Jerome's own lifetime, Rebenich shows that Jerome was indeed a competent biblical scholar who, despite being heavily dependent upon the works of preceding Greek exegetes, most notably Origen, Didymus the Blind, and Eusebius of Caesarea, did in fact develop new methods of exegesis. Crucially for Rebenich, however, these philological works were largely at the service of the Stridonian's translation work.<sup>7</sup>

Rebenich's paper was published in the same year as a monograph by Adam Kamesar. This monograph consisted of an in-depth study of *Hebrew Questions on Genesis*.<sup>8</sup> Kamesar argued, in a vein very close to Rebenich, that despite his heavy dependence upon Greek exegetical predecessors, Jerome did in fact develop a new method of exegesis. Kamesar, however, centers his investigation on the question of *why* Jerome returned to the Hebrew text to the detriment of understanding *what* he did with the Hebrew text. Under this interpretation, Jerome's work on Genesis is solely intended to be a defense of his new translation of the Old Testament from the Hebrew. Jerome was apparently relatively uninterested in answering questions regarding the theological content of the text and more concerned with demonstrating that the Hebrew provided a

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<sup>6</sup> Stefan Rebenich, "Jerome: The 'Vir Trilinguis' and the 'Hebraica Veritas'", *Vigiliae Christianae*, 47 (1993), 50-77. The *Hebraica Veritas*, or "True Hebrew," was Jerome's term for the Hebrew text of the Old Testament, which, he argued, should be adopted instead of the Septuagint by the Christian Church as its source for the text of the Old Testament.

<sup>7</sup> Rebenich, "The 'Vir Trilinguis' and the 'Hebraica Veritas'", 56, 64-65.

<sup>8</sup> Adam Kamesar, *Jerome, Greek Scholarship, and the Hebrew Bible: A Study of Quaestiones Hebraicae in Genesim*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993). See especially 73-97.

far better source than the Septuagint. According to Kamesar, Jerome sought a better translation of the text in response to pagan criticisms about the literary quality of the Greek and Latin Bible during and after the reign of Emperor Julian.<sup>9</sup> The import of this study, then, is that theological debates, and theological methods of interpretation, such as typology, allegory, etc., were or could be divorced from philological ones. Moreover, philological questions become more closely associated with stylistic rather than with theological issues.

Together, these two works established the paradigm in which studies of Jerome's scholarly work, i.e. his philological and exegetical material, would largely be conducted. In the twenty years since their publication, a number of scholars have produced insightful studies on Jerome that have started from the assumption that the gateway to understanding his interaction with scripture is to place philological concerns or an intent to defend the *Hebraica Veritas* at the center. For example, in another article Kamesar cast Jerome as the most sophisticated defender of the Christian reading of Isaiah 7:14 on the basis of his philological skill.<sup>10</sup> Michael Graves suggested that Jerome's rejection of literalist interpretations of some Old Testament prophecies was influenced by the fact that his main interaction with Jewish sources and with the Old Testament itself was devoted to historical-critical work.<sup>11</sup> This same scholar has also dealt with Jerome's use of Hebrew philological scholarship at length, again viewing it as central to Jerome's

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<sup>9</sup> Kamesar, *Jerome, Greek Scholarship, and the Hebrew Bible*, 193.

<sup>10</sup> Adam Kamesar, "The Virgin of Isaiah 7:14: The Philological Argument from the Second to the Fifth Century", *The Journal of Theological Studies*, 41 (1990), 50-75.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Graves, "'Judaizing' Christian Interpretation of the Prophets as Seen by Saint Jerome" *Vigiliae Christianae* 61 (2007), 142-156. See 148-150.

concerns in the Old Testament.<sup>12</sup> Giacomo Raspanti has argued that the first foray Jerome made into New Testament exegesis, his *Commentary on Galatians*, was undertaken because of the possible validation that Paul's letter offered for his philological project.<sup>13</sup> Jerome believed that chapters three and four of Galatians showed Paul acting as a haggadic exegete, thereby being concerned with the semantics and philology of the biblical text. More importantly, Jerome maintained that Paul's quotations from the Old Testament in this book, particularly at 3:13-14b, were direct translations from the Hebrew text, which lent credence to his support of the *Hebraica Veritas*.<sup>14</sup>

This paradigm has also informed those scholarly productions that have examined Jerome's interaction with Jewish sources in more specific detail. John Cameron has examined Jerome's translation of the Psalms for evidence that it was influenced not merely by Hebrew philology but also rabbinical exegesis, and argued that the evidence for this is lacking.<sup>15</sup> C. T. R. Hayward has produced an interesting study of Jerome's use of Jewish exegetical traditions in his final exegetical work: his *Commentary on Jeremiah*. Hayward demonstrates that Jerome was in fact reliant upon very specific Jewish sources, namely the Aramaic targumim, for critical sections of his commentary.<sup>16</sup> Crucially, however, Hayward only points out Jerome's dependence upon the targumim as a source of explanations regarding "geographical locations, Hebrew etymologies, and the

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<sup>12</sup> Michael Graves, *Jerome's Hebrew Philology: A Study Based on his Commentary on Jeremiah*, (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

<sup>13</sup> Giacomo Raspanti, "The Significance of Jerome's *Commentary on Galatians* in his Exegetical Production" in *Jerome of Stridon: Life, Writings, and Legacy*, (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 163-171.

<sup>14</sup> Raspanti, "Jerome's *Commentary on Galatians*" 167-169.

<sup>15</sup> John Cameron, "The Rabbinic Vulgate?" in *Jerome of Stridon: Life, Writings, and Legacy*, (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 117-129.

<sup>16</sup> C. T. R. Hayward, "Jewish Traditions in Jerome's *Commentary on Jeremiah* and the Targum of Jeremiah" *Proceedings of the Irish Biblical Association*, 9 (1995), 100-120.

philological exegesis of certain words and phrases.”<sup>17</sup> No attempt is made to determine whether or not the targumim influenced Jerome’s theology.

The orientation of current scholarship should now be clear. Modern scholars have subordinated his theological works, particularly his commentaries, to his larger project of promoting the *Hebraica Veritas*. When his theological ruminations are considered, they are examined for the evidence that they can provide of his linguistic abilities or as part of his philological and translation projects. Moreover, those scholars who examine his knowledge of Jewish traditions fail to look for connections between this knowledge and his theology.

Thus, my thesis will examine to what extent Jerome’s theology was influenced by certain aspects of the Jewish theological tradition, specifically the Aramaic targumim. Due to spatial constraints, I will limit my analysis to Jerome’s *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, using it as a case study. Since this work is Jerome’s earliest surviving commentary, it will indicate how early in his exegetical career Jerome was turning to Jewish sources and how they influenced him during a period of his life crucial for the formation of his theological outlook—the tumultuous end to his time in Rome. I will argue not only that did Jerome borrow heavily from the targumim, but that it was a source for solutions to some vexing theological issues raised in certain scriptural passages and guided the overarching themes in his *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*. The solutions formulated by the targumists to deal with some of its unorthodox passages allowed Jerome to use this commentary to articulate a theology of asceticism in the context of debates about the nature of asceticism in late fourth century Latin Christianity. Thus, this

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<sup>17</sup> Hayward, “Jewish Traditions” 101.

investigation will help provide a more detailed history of Jerome's relationship with Jewish thought. We can understand his ascetic theology better if we understand his sources, namely the Targum of Qohelet. Before I can examine his commentary and its ascetic theology in relation to the targumim, however, it is necessary to introduce the genre of the targum and argue that Jerome could and did have access to the Aramaic targumim.

### **The Targumim: Their Origin, Style, and Function**

By the early Tannaitic period, which lasted from roughly 10 CE to 220 CE and saw the composition of the Mishnah, Hebrew was no longer a spoken language among the Jewish inhabitants of Palestine. Although Hebrew survived in the rabbinic academies, it had been replaced by West or Palestinian Aramaic, which would remain the first language for the vast majority of inhabitants up until the Arab conquests in the seventh century.<sup>18</sup> This development posed a serious problem for the assemblies of Jewish faithful, since they could no longer understand the Tanakh when it was read aloud in the synagogues.<sup>19</sup> Within Pharisaic-Rabbinic thinking this was worrisome for three reasons.<sup>20</sup>

First, any Jewish community had to be on "speaking terms" with its ancestors if it were to maintain its faith, which for the early Rabbis meant being able to be a people of the book, in the sense that the lives of the faithful were shaped by the sacred texts of the

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<sup>18</sup> For the rise of Aramaic as the spoken language, see Hagith S. Sivan, *Palestine in Late Antiquity*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 33. For the survival of Hebrew as a spoken language in some rabbinic academies, see Shaye J. D. Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1987), 120.

<sup>19</sup> Tanakh is a Hebrew acronym that refers to the Hebrew Bible. The acronym is derived from the first three letters of the names given to the Masoretic text of the Hebrew Bible: the Torah, the Nevi'im, and the Ketuvim.

<sup>20</sup> Etan Levine, "Conceptual Categories of Targum" in *Encyclopedia of Midrash, Volume Two*, eds. Jacob Neusner and Alan J. Avery Peck, (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 928.

Tanakh. This kind of relationship with the community's ancestors would only be possible if there was sufficient "linguistic mutuality" for the preceding generations to speak to the present one. Second, the Hebrew language of the Bible acted as a barrier to the distortions of translations, which consequently were automatically treated with suspicion. Third, Pharisaic-Rabbinic thought held that there was a distinctly emotive element to the Tanakh, rooted in what might be termed a "linguistic unconscious."<sup>21</sup> This term refers to the way in which Hebrew, through its grammar and phonology, does not merely convey a message, but shapes and constrains it. For this reason, it was necessary for the scriptures and the liturgy to remain in Hebrew.

To satisfy the first tenet of Pharisaic-Rabbinic thought on the matter, it was still necessary for the members of the synagogue assembly to understand what was being read aloud from Torah. Since not every Jewish believer had the luxury of studying Hebrew to the extent necessary to understand the words of the entire Tanakh, the scriptures would have to be translated. No simple verbatim translation, however, such as that found in the Septuagint, would suffice.<sup>22</sup> Rather, the scriptures would have to be *conceptually* translated as needed, depending on how obscure the passage might otherwise seem in translation. Thus, the Targumim first came into existence as translations of the Hebrew scriptures into Aramaic meant to accompany the reading of the Torah during synagogue assemblies, which would thereby permit those taking part in the liturgy to understand

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Levine, "Conceptual Categories of Targum," 929. Please note that I am following Levine in this section, who asserts that the rabbis of the Tannaitic period believed that the Septuagint Greek failed to convey the richness of the theological message of the Hebrew original. An older scholar, Pinkhos Churgin, has also argued that this worry also underlay the creation and standardization of the Targum. See Pinkhos Churgin, "The Targum and the Septuagint" *The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures* 50 (1933), 41-65.

what was being read aloud. After a passage from the Tanakh had been read aloud, it would then be followed by an extended oral translation of the passage into spoken Aramaic for the benefit of the assembly. Someone other than the lector who read from the Hebrew Tanakh would perform the translation. This person was known as a *Meturgeman*, a term that, like Targum itself, came from the Hebrew verbal root *trg*, which can be roughly translated as “to translate.”<sup>23</sup>

The targumim existed as a hybrid genre including both oral and written components. While there was undoubtedly a strong element of oral performance that led to the circulation and memorization of targumim as oral traditions, there is ample evidence for their existence in written form from the first and second centuries, or the period of early and high Tannaitic Judaism. The Jerusalem Talmud preserves a Targum of Job from the time of Rabban Gamaliel I in the mid-first century CE. The caves at Qumran held scrolls containing Targumim of Genesis, Leviticus, and Job, which York maintains are Essene documents dating from after Pompey’s Conquest, but prior to the Jewish Revolt in 66 CE.<sup>24</sup> Evidence found within the Jerusalem Talmud indicates that there was some controversy over the written translation that was the Targumim. Rabbi Samuel, who served as one of the chief administrators for Jewish schools in third century Palestine, taught that the Targumim were part of the Oral Law, and consequently it was forbidden to write them down.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, nearby passages in the Talmud stipulate that they must be written down. The implication seems to be that something that is both

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<sup>23</sup> Anthony D. York, “The Targum in the Synagogue and in the School”, *Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman Period*, 10 (1979), 76, note.

<sup>24</sup> York, “The Targum in the Synagogue and in the School” 78. York argues for the dates given above in Anthony D. York, “רומאה זרצ” as an Indication of the Date of 11QtgJob?” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 93 (1974), 445-446.

<sup>25</sup> York, “The Targum in the Synagogue and in the School” 79.

necessary and forbidden must be done with the utmost care, and only after great preparation and training. Thus, the translation of the Targumim began in Jewish elementary schools in Palestine and was supervised by the instructors in those schools, who would also serve as the meturgemanim. York dates the beginning of this process to as early as the mid- to late-second century CE, in the aftermath of the Bar Kokhba Revolt.<sup>26</sup>

As a result of the targumim's connections to Jewish teachers, the uses to which targumim were put extended beyond translations for synagogue assemblies in late Tannaitic and Amoraic Palestinian Judaism.<sup>27</sup> This fact should not be surprising, since during the period of Tannaitic and even Amoraic Judaism the lines of distinction between school and synagogue were not as clear-cut as they would eventually become.<sup>28</sup> Targumim seem to have been employed as texts for elementary students to study in Jewish schools in second, third, and even fourth century Palestine. These texts were especially useful because they contained built-in explications of difficult passages, which could guide young students as they read. Students were expected to start with the Mikra before moving on to the targumim, which would serve as a springboard for more advanced studies of the written and oral law. Such widespread usage speaks to the value inherent in the methods by which the targumim, as a fusion of translation and commentary, sought both to explain difficult scriptural passages and adapt scriptural

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<sup>26</sup> York, "The Targum in the Synagogue and in the School" 82-83. In this passage I am indebted to York for my arguments. York, it should be noted, deduces his evidence for what took place in synagogue assemblies from the Mishnah and the Targum.

<sup>27</sup> The Amoraic period in Jewish history refers to a period lasting roughly from 230 CE to 500 CE during which time much of the Targum was composed.

<sup>28</sup> York, "The Targum in the Synagogue and in the School" 83.

passages and alter their meaning or emphasis to serve the needs of the Aramaic-speaking Jewish communities both during the Tanaitic period and throughout Late Antiquity.

It is now necessary to delineate the different strategies by which the meturgemanim would explain or alter given biblical passages to suit their needs.<sup>29</sup> Aside from literal, verbatim translations, there are three strategies of what may be termed targumic-style commentary. First, the meturgeman could simply insert minor words and/or phrases that would clarify the obscure syntax of a biblical passage or shift the meaning of the passage in an effort to drive home a homiletic or devotional theme. For example, in the Targum of 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel, contained in the collection Targum Jonathan of the Former Prophets, during the description of the sacrileges committed by the sons of Eli, the meturgeman alters 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel 2:15. In the Revised Standard Version of the verse, which is taken from the Masoretic text, the passage read, “Even before the fat pieces were boiled down, the young man of the priest was coming and saying to the man slaughtering, ‘Give the meat to the priest to roast! And he will not take from you boiled meat but when it is fresh.’” The meturgeman has altered the verse so that it reads, “Even before the meat *was brought to the altar...*”<sup>30</sup> This change was presumably made to

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<sup>29</sup> Please note that there is no hard and fast rule to guide a scholar in determining that a given change to the biblical text in the Targum is an intervention by a meturgeman, though the general practice is to maintain that a given variant within a targum represents an intervention or interpolation if it is not found in all or most of the relevant Hebrew language manuscripts.

<sup>30</sup> *The Aramaic Bible, Volume 10: Targum Jonathan of the Former Prophets*, Daniel J. Harrington, S.J. and Anthony J. Saldarini, Editors and Translators, (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1987), 106. The Targum Jonathan was, according to legend, translated by Rabbi Jonathan b. Uzziel in the first century. The text seems to have existed in its present form by the end of the third century. Due to the consistency of the translation into Aramaic, especially the extent to which it matches Sperber’s edition of the Masoretic text, Harrington and Saldarini conclude that the translators of this Targum

clarify what made the actions of the sons of Eli, who were the priests in question, improper. Namely, they were taking the meat intended for the sacrifice before it had been sacrificed.

In other instances, the insertion of minor words or phrases could become a pattern throughout the Targum for a single book. This version of the first strategy can lead to new themes and emphases within a biblical book. For example, the repeated insertion of the Hebrew word *memra*, which means “word” or “reason” and is roughly equivalent to the Greek “*logos*,” in the Targum of Jeremiah refocuses the emphasis of several prophetic speeches. The message thereby becomes one that stresses God’s wise governance over events.

The second strategy found in Targumic commentary is the complete rewriting of verses or even entire passages. This is usually done to correct particularly obscure Hebrew syntax, to do away with theologically problematic readings, or to reorient the passage to focus on some theme considered more timely from the meturgeman’s point of view. A particularly good example of this kind of rewriting is the Song of Deborah from the Targum of Judges in the Targum Jonathan collection. This song of praise and thanksgiving, which constitutes the entire fifth chapter of Judges, extolls the might of the Lord, telling of the wonders that he has wrought in the past, how he gave Deborah and the “noble remnant of Israel who marched down” the strength to overcome Jabin, the King of Canaan. The song then lists the tribes of Israel, praising those that did fight and excoriating the faithlessness of those who did not.

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must have been working from a relatively standardized version of the Hebrew text. See Harrington and Saldarini, *Targum Jonathan of the Former Prophets*, “Introduction,” 3-4.

In the Targum of Judges, however, this chapter has been radically rewritten. Instead of dwelling on the wonders that the Lord has wrought, or praising the faithful of Israel and berating the cowardly among its tribes, the song now focuses on how God is faithful to those who follow the law and abandons those who do not. Thus, Judges 5:2, which had read, “That the leaders took the lead in Israel, that the people offered themselves willingly, bless the Lord!” was rewritten by the meturgeman to read, “When the house of Israel rebelled against the Law; the nations came upon them and banished them from their cities. And when they turned to do the Law, they were victorious over their enemies...”<sup>31</sup> In addition, Deborah’s voice is altered from that of someone proclaiming how God had used her and the generals to lead Israel to victory to that of a prophet calling the people to return to the study of the Law. Hence, Judges 5:9, which had read, “Deborah said, “My heart goes out to the commanders of Israel who offered themselves willingly among the people. Bless the Lord!” is rewritten by the meturgeman to read, “Deborah speaks in prophecy: ‘I was sent to give praise to the teachers of Israel who, when that affliction happened, did not cease from studying the Law; and who, whenever it was proper for them, were sitting in the synagogues at the head of the exiles and were teaching the people the words of the Law...’”<sup>32</sup> These dramatic alterations are interpreted as being intended to rally the people of Israel to remain steadfast in their faith in the aftermath of the revolt of Simon Bar Kochba.<sup>33</sup>

The final category of Targum style commentary consists of the patent insertion of extra-biblical material into and alongside the text of a given passage, usually to explain

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<sup>31</sup> *Targum Jonathan of the Former Prophets*, 66-67.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, “Introduction”

away theologically problematic readings of the text. Often times these texts would put an additional speech into the mouth of major figure within that book of the Tanakh. For example, in the Targum of Ezekiel, Israel itself is given several extra addresses, as is Ezekiel himself.<sup>34</sup> An even more striking example is the Targum of Qohelet (Ecclesiastes). In this targum, the character of the preacher, understood to be Solomon, is given long additional speeches that work to explain away the nihilistic doctrines espoused by the preacher in some passages. For example, the opening address of the book, in which the preacher asks, “What remains after a man’s death of all his labor that he labored under the sun?” (Ecclesiastes 1:3) is altered to read, “What remains after a man’s death of all his labor that he labored under the sun, other than if he studied the word of God, to receive a good reward in the world-to-come before the master of the universe?”<sup>35</sup> From there the preacher launches into a long speech not present in the Hebrew, one which extols the study of the Torah above all else, added by meturgeman to compensate for the nihilistic tone of the preacher’s opening.<sup>36</sup> This strategy differs from that of rewriting verses because in this strategy the original verses remain largely unchanged while new material is inserted alongside of the original passage.

These are the major strategies employed when a targum veers from literal translation. In his *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, Jerome will borrow from examples of all these strategies found within the text of the *Targum of Qohelet*. The difference, however,

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<sup>34</sup> See *The Aramaic Bible, Volume 13: The Targum of Ezekiel*, Samson H. Levey, editor and translator, (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1990), 28-29, Ezekiel 5:8-21. The theologically problematic reading involves God’s anger.

<sup>35</sup> *The Aramaic Bible, Volume 15: The Targum of Job, The Targum of Proverbs, The Targum of Qohelet*, (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 20.

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.*

is that Jerome will make an explicit distinction between his commentary and the biblical text. It is to Jerome that we now turn.

### **The *Vir Quadrilinguis* and his Access to the Targum**

Two facts, among others, concerning Jerome's scholarly endeavors have been established beyond the shadow of a doubt. First, it is now undisputed that Jerome did indeed have deep knowledge of biblical Hebrew. As Hillel Newman has sagaciously concluded, Jerome "had greater control of Hebrew than has been denied him by his severest detractors, but less than that attributed to him by his most ardent admirers."<sup>37</sup> Second, though this revelation has not altered perceptions of him as drastically as other work, it has become well established that Jerome was very well-acquainted with the Aramaic targumim. Jerome's philological works display this most clearly, as he freely quotes from *Targum Onkelos* and *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* throughout *Quaestiones Hebraicae in Genesim* and *Liber Interpretationis Nominum Hebraeorum*.<sup>38</sup> As was noted above, however, the scholarly literature on Jerome's use of the targumim has focused on how it influenced his philological and historical commentaries, and not investigated the influence of the targum on his theology.

To establish the historical basis for an investigation of Jerome's scholarly output looking for targumic influence on his theology, it is necessary to reexamine what languages he learned, when he learned them, and from whom he received his linguistic instruction. Jerome's Hebrew competence may no longer be in doubt, but one fact that, while not a point of major scholarly contention, is nevertheless too often overlooked is

<sup>37</sup> Newman, "Jerome's Hebrew Competence" 132.

<sup>38</sup> See Kamesar, *Jerome, Greek Scholarship, and the Hebrew Bible*, 117-120 for a list of Targumic citations in the *Liber Nominum*. See Hayward, *Jerome's Hebrew Questions on Genesis*, 258-261 for a list of Targumic references in *Quaestiones Hebraicae*.

Jerome's repeated claim to know "*Chaldaeus*" and "*Syrus*." In other words, the *vir trilinguis* actually claimed to be a *vir quadrilinguis*, or even perhaps a *vir quinquelinguis*, having a working knowledge of biblical Aramaic and Syriac, though the two terms sometimes seem to be interchangeable for Jerome.<sup>39</sup> Thus, it is his knowledge of Aramaic, the language of the targumim, another language that Jerome claims to have learned, that is central to the question of whether or not Jerome could have been deeply influenced by the targumim. So, did Jerome actually have knowledge of Aramaic? If so, when did he acquire it?

Jerome claims to have acquired his initial knowledge of "*lingua Chaldaea*" while living as a hermit in the Syrian desert between 375 and 378. In the earliest of his letters to survive from his first attempt at the hermetical life, Jerome writes "Hic enim aut barbarus seni sermo discendus est aut tacendum est."<sup>40</sup> Also during this period Jerome began his study of Hebrew, reporting that he initially took up his study of the language for ascetic reasons, seeing it as a way to discipline his wandering mind. He maintained that his first teacher was a rabbi who had converted to Christianity.<sup>41</sup> Most scholars, following J.N.D. Kelly, have tended to accept that Jerome gained knowledge of Hebrew at this time but discount the idea that Jerome acquired a grasp of Aramaic or Syriac during his desert

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<sup>39</sup> Daniel King, "Vir Quadrilinguis? Syriac in Jerome and Jerome in Syriac" in *Jerome of Stridon: Life, Writings, and Legacy*, eds. Andrew Cain and Josef Lossl. (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 211.

<sup>40</sup> Jerome, *Letter VII.2*. "Here one must either speak in a barbarous tongue or be silent." All quotations and citations of Jerome's letters are taken from *Jerome: Selected Letters*, ed. F.A. Wright, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1954).

<sup>41</sup> Jerome, *Sanctus Hieronymi Presbyteri Opera: Pars I, Opera Exegetica: Commentarius in Danielelem*. Ed. Francesco Glori. (Turnhout: Brepols, 1964), "Praefatio" 28. See also *Letter CXXV.12*.

sojourn.<sup>42</sup> That Jerome knew Hebrew after he returned to Rome in 382 is hard to dispute once one accepts that he had knowledge of Hebrew, considering that he began to display his learning at the court of Pope Damasus and in his writings around this time.<sup>43</sup>

Moreover, Jerome not only displayed his knowledge of Hebrew through piecemeal epistolary exegesis employing Hebrew words and exegesis, he also began, at Damasus's insistence, his translation of the Bible that would in time become the Vulgate. While in Rome between 382 and 385, Jerome completed his translation of Psalms *iuxta Hebraeum*.<sup>44</sup> Thus, Jerome must have known Hebrew.

If Jerome did complete his translation of the Psalms in Rome, however, he must have known Aramaic as well, since his translation seems to be aware of the *Targum of Psalms* and uses terms that could only have come from the Aramaic version of Psalms for the translation into Latin. For example, a Hebrew word that frequently appears in several Psalms is *miktam*, which is often interpreted to mean "holy and blameless." Jerome adheres to this translation repeatedly in consecutive Psalms (56, 57, 58, and 59) when the word appears. When he translates Psalm 60, however, he translates *miktam* as "copy," for seemingly inexplicable reasons. Conveniently, though, the Targum for Psalm 60 renders *miktam* with an Aramaic word meaning "copy". No known Hebrew manuscripts contain this rendering, just the Aramaic Targum for the Psalms. Thus, it seems that Jerome must have been consulting the Aramaic Targumim for his translation of the Psalms as well as

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<sup>42</sup> J. N. D. Kelly, *Jerome: His Life, Writings, and Controversies*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 49-50.

<sup>43</sup> Jerome, *Letters XVIII-XXI*.

<sup>44</sup> Kelly, *Jerome*, 83, 88-89.

the Hebrew text.<sup>45</sup> Some might object that this is a miniscule difference, one that Jerome could have picked up from his multi-lingual Hebrew instructor in the Syrian desert. But the specificity of the example is its greatest strength. Jerome's memory would have had to have been either extraordinary or markedly idiosyncratic to recall such a trivial alternate translation.<sup>46</sup> Given the fact that Jerome attracted negative attention during the period in which Pope Damasus patronized his work due to his habit of running up large bills for the purchase of rare Semitic manuscripts, it is by no means implausible that some of the imported texts were targumim in Aramaic.<sup>47</sup>

When Jerome moved permanently to Bethlehem in 385-386, he seems to have made a point of deepening his knowledge of Aramaic for two reasons. First, gaining greater fluency in Aramaic was necessary for practical reasons, as it was the first language of the majority of the population in that area. Second, if he was to complete his translation of the Old Testament, then he would need a knowledge of Aramaic to translate significant parts of Daniel and Ezra, that is, those parts that interrupted Hebrew with Aramaic in the earliest texts.<sup>48</sup> Jerome's later knowledge of Aramaic is on display throughout his works produced after the move to Bethlehem, such as in *Quaestiones*

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<sup>45</sup> For this argument I am indebted to King, "Vir Quadrilinguis" 214-215. King cites a plethora of examples demonstrating Jerome's knowledge of Aramaic. This is the only one included specifically here because it refers to Jerome's time in Rome.

<sup>46</sup> This is the problem with much of the speculation as to where Jerome received his knowledge of the Targumim. Scholars assume that the vast majority, if not all, of it came orally through his Hebrew instructors. For example, see Hayward, *Jerome's Hebrew Questions on Genesis*, 21. Much of it certainly did come to Jerome in this manner, but it seems implausible to deny him contact with it through written sources. First, the Targumim themselves circulated widely within Palestine and the Levant as written texts. Secondly, as I hope to demonstrate in this thesis, Jerome's knowledge was too broad for it to filter through "unconsciously" and "second-hand" as Hayward and others assume.

<sup>47</sup> See Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle*, 263, for a discussion of Jerome's book buying habits while under papal patronage.

<sup>48</sup> King, "Vir Quadrilinguis" 211-213.

*Hebraicae in Genesim* and in his commentaries on Hosea, Malachi, Matthew, and many others.<sup>49</sup> In his preface to the Vulgate version of Daniel, Jerome explains how his

knowledge of Aramaic developed:

“When at last I met with Daniel [i.e. came to translate the book], such a sense of weariness came over me that, in a fit of despair, I could have counted all my former toil as useless. But there was a certain Hebrew who encouraged me, and was forever quoting for my benefit the saying that “Persistent labor conquers all things”; and so, conscious that among Hebrews I was only a smatterer, I *once more* began to study Chaldee. And, to confess the truth, to this day I can read and understand Chaldee better than I can pronounce it.”<sup>50</sup>

Thus, it seems clear that Jerome developed over the course of his scholarly career an increasingly deep knowledge of Aramaic, one that would have allowed him to read texts in that language competently. Among these texts almost certainly would have been the corpus of Aramaic targumim. This conclusion seems doubly buttressed both by the textual support that other scholars have uncovered to show that Jerome was aware of and used the targumim and the linguistic evidence showing that he could have read the Aramaic texts themselves. With this in mind, we can now begin examining the Jerome’s *Commentary on Ecclesiastes* and its relationship with the *Targum of Qohelet*.

The following sections of this thesis will consist of an examination of Jerome’s *Commentary on Ecclesiastes* and the way in which Jerome uses the Targum of Qohelet, as Ecclesiastes is known in the Hebrew Bible, to articulate a theology of asceticism in spite of the nihilistic and Epicurean bent of the text itself. Before turning to the book itself, however, it is necessary to embed his commentary within the context of its

<sup>49</sup> King, “Vir Quadrilinguis” 215-217.

<sup>50</sup> Jerome, *Commentarius in Daniele*, Ed. Francesco Glori, “Praefatio,” 2. By “smatterer,” I take Jerome to mean that he initially possessed only a very limited ability to converse in, as he would say, ‘Chaldee’.

composition, so as to understand why Jerome would have turned to the targum, rather than other Christian writers, such as Origen or St. Gregory of Nyssa, to ground the large sections of his exegesis.

### **Jerome and Roman Christianity**

From the time of his arrival in Rome in the summer of 382, Jerome had been embroiled in controversy, even as his star rose in the court of Pope Damasus. Jealous clergy bristled at both the influence over Pope Damasus that he possessed and his close relationships with the wealthy matrons to whom he gave spiritual direction. Early accusations included claims that Jerome was a “Judaizer,” since he forged close links with the city’s Jewish community as part of his project to translate the Old Testament from the Hebrew. The fact that he had secured Damasus’s patronage for this project only increased suspicion among other clerics that he had risen far too rapidly for a non-native clergyman. Most controversial of all, however, was his asceticism, which was viewed as both overzealous and dangerous for the profile of the church in a city that was still predominantly pagan.<sup>51</sup>

Perhaps the most famous controversy from this time was the debate over Mary’s perpetual virginity. Jerome mercilessly routed an unfortunate layman named Helvidius with a scathing pamphlet that was bitter even by Hieronymian standards.<sup>52</sup> Initially, the

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<sup>51</sup> Kelly, *Jerome*, 83-84.

<sup>52</sup> Kelly, *Jerome*, 105-107. Jerome asserts that he “deferred making a reply, not because it is a difficult matter to maintain the truth and to refute an ignorant boor who has scarcely known the first glimmer of learning, but because I was afraid that my reply might make him appear worth defeating!” He goes on to claim that Helvidius has committed a sacrilege worse than the burning of a church, since he has “set on fire the temple of the Lord’s body,” and “defiled the sanctuary of the Holy Spirit from which you [i.e. Helvidius] are determined to make a team of four brethren and a heap of sisters come forth!” Jerome, *Contra Helvidium*, 1, 18.

fact that this controversy had arisen among Roman Christians, a congregation that by the late fourth century was already developing a deep devotion to Mary, might seem strange.<sup>53</sup> The controversy was, however, actually a thinly veiled proxy war over the respective statuses of the celibate ascetic life and the married life. Helvidius's argument was rooted in an exegesis of several gospel passages. The overarching point that he sought to emphasize was the equality of the married life and the celibate life. Helvidius argued that Mary's sanctity would in no way have been lessened were she to have had marital relations with Joseph. He claimed that for someone to argue otherwise was tantamount to claiming that any celibate was superior to the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, all of whom were married men who fathered children.<sup>54</sup>

Jerome refused to countenance this possibility, however, and concluded his reply with a lengthy assault upon Helvidius's assertion of equality between the married life and the celibate life. He compares the married life to the Old Law, saying that the command, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth" was superseded under the New Covenant with Paul's admonishment: "The time is shortened, that henceforth those that have wives may be as though they had none".<sup>55</sup> The married woman is, he maintains, always weighed down by the cares of husband, home, and family. Consequently, she has very little time to devote to God. In contrast, the celibate woman has time for prayer, the reading of scripture, and can welcome into her home the poor and destitute in need of alms.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> For the rise of the cult of Mary in Late Antique Rome, see Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 53ff.

<sup>54</sup> Kelly, *Jerome*, 104.

<sup>55</sup> Genesis 9:1; 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 7:29

<sup>56</sup> Jerome, *Contra Helvidium*, 23.

According to Jerome, only through “imitating the chastity of the virgin” can we become “what the angels are.”<sup>57</sup>

This controversy was rooted in the debates that erupted with the introduction of Eastern ascetic practices to late fourth century Rome. The conflict was by and large not waged between debauched pagans and ascetic Christians, but rather was a struggle between moderate senatorial Christians and radical ascetic senatorial Christians. Peter Brown has shown that there were two currents at work in the Christianization of the Roman aristocracy. The first was a quiet, low-key shift in the religious affiliation of some noble families that was well underway by the second quarter of the fourth century. This trend included families like the Anicii clan, whose illustrious members included some of the first Christian doyens of the Roman aristocracy. Among them were Proba, the composer of a Vergilian canto on the life of Christ that, in the eyes of St. Isidore of Seville, made her the only female ecclesiastical writer, and Sextus Petronius Probus, the early patron of St. Ambrose of Milan and the subject of a famous character sketch in Ammianus Marcellinus.<sup>58</sup> Families like the Anicii and Valerii gradually produced a respectably aristocratic form of Roman Christianity that would eventually facilitate the conversion of the entire Roman nobility through the continued acceptance of many of their secular traditions.<sup>59</sup>

Standing in stark contrast to this understated, if not uncommitted, senatorial Christianity was the strain of ascetic Christianity that arose in Rome and elsewhere in the

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Peter Brown, “Aspects of the Christianization of the Roman Aristocracy,” in *Religion and Society in the Age of St. Augustine*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 177-178.

Ammianus Marcellinus, XXVII.11

<sup>59</sup> Brown, “Aspects of the Christianization of the Roman Aristocracy” 178-179.

West following the widespread circulation of stories about the first Eastern monastic figures, such as Anthony of Egypt. This movement represented a dramatic break with the previous Christian religious life of the city. Not only were its leaders, such as Jerome himself and later also Pelagius, from outside the city. It also rejected much of the social life of Rome.<sup>60</sup> Roman Christian religious practice in the late fourth and early fifth century was centered upon nighttime vigils and daytime processions, both intensely public. The role of the aristocratic Christians, even those adherents of asceticism among them, in these scenarios was to reassert their traditional noble status through, among other things, the distribution of alms.<sup>61</sup> Noble Roman Christians normally practiced almsgiving either by the traditional act of scattering coins at public festivals or through the granting of large sums of money to the church for the construction of hospitals, hostels, and Christian cemeteries. In so doing, they were reorienting a longstanding tradition of displays of public benefaction, *amor civitatis*, towards the *ecclesia et populus dei*.

Upon his arrival in Rome in 382, Jerome would give a new twist to the ascetic movement already sweeping the city. In no way did he reject the practice of almsgiving, but he would argue for its transformation. Deeply influenced by the radical asceticism that he had encountered during his time in the Syrian desert, Jerome pressed for comprehensive renunciations of wealth. Such renunciations would normally take the form of massive liquidations of wealth distributed directly to the poor. According to Jerome, this method of giving alms was the only way to show “that the Lord is our only

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 169.

<sup>61</sup> Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle*, 265.

portion.”<sup>62</sup> Radical acts of giving removed the temptation of making a continuous and vain display of one’s wealth through repeated smaller acts of almsgiving, since “you must... not merely refuse to claim what belongs to another, but you must also give up clinging to your own property, which has now become no longer yours.”<sup>63</sup> Upon completing this act of renunciation, one should not cease to give alms. Rather, one should be a “staff to the blind, food for the poor, hope for the wretched, and consolation to the sorrowful,” but do so in such a way that “God alone sees you.”<sup>64</sup> Jerome emphasizes that almsgiving must include more than money after one has renounced one’s wealth. When eulogizing the Roman noblewoman and ascetic Fabiola, whom he casts as a model of his brand of asceticism, he is careful to distinguish between those who found private hospitals and those who, like Fabiola, found a hospital and then proceed to devote large portions of their time to working anonymously as a nurse in that hospital, “giving those poor bodies worn with sickness and hunger all a nurse’s care.”<sup>65</sup>

Once a person has ensconced himself or herself in this private, devotional brand of asceticism, he or she can focus on prayer, fasting, and, what is central to a Hieronymian ascetic, the reading of scripture.<sup>66</sup> Jerome counsels the women under his spiritual direction to study the scriptures to such an extent that their minds become “a library of Christ.”<sup>67</sup> Jerome eulogizes Fabiola because, upon visiting him in the Holy Land, she “ran through the prophets, the gospels, and the psalms, suggesting questions

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<sup>62</sup> Jerome, *Letter LII.5*

<sup>63</sup> Jerome, *Letter to Eustochium*, 31.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>65</sup> Jerome, *Letter to Oceanus and Fabiola*, 6

<sup>66</sup> For the relatively private nature of Jerome’s brand of asceticism, see Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle*, 266-270.

<sup>67</sup> Jerome, *Letter LX.10*

and storing up answers in her heart's repository. Blessed Jesus, with what fervor and zeal did she study the sacred volumes!"<sup>68</sup> He places this description at the climax of his eulogy of Fabiola, thereby identifying scriptural reading as the heart of his ascetic practice. Diligent devotion to this regimen is difficult, but if they persevere in it "with discipline and love," they will obtain "the reward of their present labors." He asks them to imagine "that day, when Mary, the mother of the Lord shall come to meet you, attended by her bands of virgins... then Thecla shall fly rejoicing into your arms... then your Spouse Himself shall come to meet you and say: 'Rise up, my love, my fair one, my dove, and come, and look, the winter has gone, and the rain has left you.'"<sup>69</sup> Thus, Jerome encourages these ascetic practices, almsgiving and the study of scripture, explicitly for the sake of heavenly reward.

As has already been noted, Jerome's ascetic preaching outraged many among the Roman nobility, both Christian and pagan. Some ancient noble families, such as the Furi Camilii, to which Paula and Eustochium belonged, were divested of practically all of their wealth in less than three years due to their spectacular benefactions.<sup>70</sup> Melania the Younger's miscarriage, which was blamed on the strict fasting regimen that Jerome had encouraged her to undertake, only exacerbated the ire of the aristocracy.<sup>71</sup> Jerome soon found himself the subject of a vicious whisper campaign among the social circles of the Christian aristocracy in Rome. After the death of his patron, Pope Damasus, in December 384, Jerome was at the mercy of his accusers. In the high summer of 385 he was brought

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<sup>68</sup> Jerome, *Letter to Oceanus and Fabiola*, 7.

<sup>69</sup> Jerome, *Letter to Eustochium*, 40-41.

<sup>70</sup> For Jerome's account of these years, see *Letter CXXVII*. See also, Kelly, *Jerome*, 92-93.

<sup>71</sup> Brown, "Aspects of the Christianization of the Roman Aristocracy," 176.

before an ecclesiastical court on various charges, ranging from the practice of Satanic magic to breaking his vow of celibacy. Although he was acquitted, the council gave him no indication that he was still welcome in Rome. So, in August of 385, he departed for Bethlehem. Many of his ascetic followers would eventually join him there within two years.

### **The Origin and Nature of Jerome's *Commentary***

In the midst of these stormy debates over asceticism, Jerome began work on his first surviving commentary on a book of the Bible. His previous effort was a short commentary on Obadiah, which he destroyed soon after its completion.<sup>72</sup> According to Jerome, the idea for the commentary arose from a scriptural lesson that he gave to Blessila, one of the women to whom he gave spiritual instruction and a daughter of Paula, a close confidant of Jerome both in Rome and later in Bethlehem. While listening to Jerome extol the virtues of asceticism and scriptural study, Blessila asked him to compose “a brief commentary on Ecclesiastes so that she could understand the obscure things contained therein, and so that she could understand what she read in my [i.e. Jerome's] absence.”<sup>73</sup> Jerome unhesitatingly obliged her request, though he took longer to complete the commentary than he anticipated, and the work was not finished until after Blessila's death when he had been settled in Bethlehem for a year, likely in late 386. The explanation that Jerome provides for initiating the project makes it clear that he

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<sup>72</sup> Kelly, *Jerome*, 44-45.

<sup>73</sup> Jerome, *Sanctus Hieronymi Presbyteri Opera: Pars I: Opera Exegetica: Hebraicae Quaestiones in Libro Geneseos, Liber Interpretationis Hebraicorum Nominum, Commentarioli in Psalmos, Commentarius En Ecclesiasten*. Edited by P. Antin, O.S.B. Corpus Christianorum Series Latina, LXXII, (Turnhout: Brepols, 1959), *Commentarius in Ecclesiastem* “Preface.” (my translation).

intended the commentary to have some bearing on the form of asceticism that he was promoting.

Ecclesiastes, however, is a strange book to choose for the purpose of extolling the ascetic life. The book advocates a quasi-Epicurean view of life, which for a long time prevented it from being accepted into the Jewish biblical canon, even after rabbinic editors added a preface and postscript to make it sound more orthodox.<sup>74</sup> At times the book even seems to deny the providence of God and the possibility of life after death outright.<sup>75</sup> Moreover, in stark contrast to Jerome's austerity, Qohelet recommends feasting over fasting.<sup>76</sup> Even in the works of other church fathers, Ecclesiastes is not given an ascetic interpretation. For example, Gregory of Nyssa, in his *Homilies on Ecclesiastes*, identifies a faith in God's providence as the central theme; he allocates his exhortation to the ascetic life to his allegorizing *Life of Moses*.<sup>77</sup> One other commentary on Ecclesiastes does, however, reinterpret the work so that it emphasizes values and practices amenable to Jerome's ascetic program: the Targum of Qohelet.

Jerome in fact depends heavily on the targum throughout his commentary. While our earliest copies of the targum date from the late seventh century, the targum itself seems to have reached its final form in the early fourth, as it fails to mention the Arab

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<sup>74</sup> Levine, "Conceptual Categories of the Targum," 938. Qohelet would not be accepted into the canon until the early Tannaitic Period.

<sup>75</sup> See Ecclesiastes 4:1-3; 6:1-6; 8:9-11.

<sup>76</sup> Ecclesiastes 5:12-16. Qohelet is the Hebrew word for "preacher," and refers to the speaker in Ecclesiastes, who gives the book its title.

<sup>77</sup> See Gregory of Nyssa, *Homilies on Ecclesiastes: An English Version with Supporting Studies*, Ed. and Trans. Stuart G. Hall, (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1993). See also, Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, trans. Abraham Mahlerbe, Everett Ferguson, John Anthony Meyendorff, (New York: Paulist Press, 1971).

conquest and presumes the existence of a functioning Great Sanhedrin.<sup>78</sup> Most often, he employs material from it without citing it explicitly, and when he does he simply refers to it as exposition given by “the Hebrews”. This habit should not surprise us, though, as Jerome frequently borrows from other sources without citing them.<sup>79</sup>

### **Jerome’s Method of Borrowing from the Targum**

Jerome does not draw upon the targum at random. Rather, I will show that the targum guides his exegesis. Having selected a difficult text to interpret, the targum provides him with and points him towards interpretations that allow him to exhort his readers towards asceticism and resolve thorny theological problems posed by the text. Thus, the Targum of Qohelet becomes an essential guide to understanding Jerome’s theological project in his *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*.

Jerome’s borrowings mostly fall into three major categories. First, there are borrowings that provide Jerome with basic linguistic or historical knowledge to flesh out his commentary. Second, there are instances where the targum urges its reader to devote himself to the study of the Torah, which Jerome will take as an exhortation to study the bible. Third, Jerome borrows interpretations from the targum in which it encourages its audience to be generous almsgivers, which Jerome turns to his own advantage. Crucially, in the latter two cases, the targum informs its readers that these things are to be done for

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<sup>78</sup> *The Aramaic Bible, Volume 15: The Targums of Job, Proverbs, and Qohelet*, trans. and eds. Celine F. Magnan, O.P., John F. Healey, and Peter S. Knobel, 12-13. The Great Sanhedrin was the highest court of Jewish law in Palestine. It is generally believed to have come into existence in the fourth century BCE. An imperial decree of 358 CE greatly restricted its powers, while another rescript, issued by Theodosius II in 425 CE, officially dissolved it.

<sup>79</sup> For a discussion of Jerome’s habit, see Alfons Fürst, “Jerome Keeping Silent: Origen and his Exegesis of Isaiah,” in *Jerome of Stridon: Life, Writings, and Legacy*, (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 141-152.

the sake of eternal reward, something that Jerome is eager to echo in his own commentary. While the targum's goal is to turn the wizened and somewhat nihilistic philosopher of Qohelet into a devout and dutiful scholar of the Torah, Jerome seizes upon its solutions to the problems in Ecclesiastes to turn Solomon into an advocate of his brand of asceticism.<sup>80</sup>

Although the instances where Jerome follows the targum's reworking of the text to promote his ascetic theology are of greater interest to this project, it will be helpful at the outset to examine the places where he has borrowed narrative details from the targum. By doing this, both the fact that he has borrowed and the method of his borrowing can be established. Jerome follows the targum very closely when it elaborates upon the character of Qohelet by adding details about Solomon's life. In Jerome's translation of the passage, as recorded in his commentary, Ecclesiastes 1:12 reads: "I, the Preacher, was king over Jerusalem." The targum expands upon this verse in the following way:

When King Solomon of Israel was sitting on his royal throne, his heart became very proud because of his wealth, and he transgressed the decree of the Memra<sup>81</sup> of the Lord; he gathered many horses, chariots, and cavalry; he collected much silver and gold; he married among many foreign, idolatrous peoples. Immediately the anger of the Lord grew strong against him for these unclean marriages. Therefore, he sent Ashmedai, king of the demons, against him who drove him from his royal throne and took his signet ring from his hand so that he would wander and go into exile in the world to chastise him. He went about in all the districts and towns of the Land of Israel. He wept, pleaded, and said, "I am Qohelet, who was previously named Solomon, I was king over Jerusalem."<sup>82</sup>

The expansive rewriting here is quite drastic, and provides a great deal of biographical context into which Qohelet can be placed. Jerome quickly exploits this

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<sup>80</sup> For a discussion of the ideal proposed by the Targum of Qohelet, see Etan Levine, *The Aramaic Version of Qohelet*, (New York: Sepher-Hermon Press, 1978), 64-83.

<sup>81</sup> For the meaning of this Aramaic term, see below.

<sup>82</sup> *The Targum of Qohelet*, trans. Peter S. Knobel, 22.

background information provided by the targum. He makes the following comments on verse twelve: “The Hebrews say that this is the book of Solomon showing repentance for having placed his trust in his wisdom and wealth, and offending God with his women, for which he was punished with a demon.”<sup>83</sup> Although Jerome merely summarizes the expansion provided by the targum, borrowing clearly is occurring. Moreover, Jerome does not cite the interpretation of “the Hebrews” merely to display his vast reading. Rather, this interpretation supplies needed context for the points that he will emphasize in his commentary. Since Solomon is viewed as repenting for his extravagant lifestyle, the idea that he will be extolling the virtues of ascetic renunciation becomes far less implausible.

There are other instances in which Jerome borrows from the targum to supply himself with narrative details in his commentary. Ecclesiastes 2:18-19 (ESV) laments:

And I have hated all my labor that I have been laboring under the sun, because I am leaving it to the man who will come after me. And who knows whether he is a wise man or a fool? And he will have dominion over all my labor, at which I have labored, and in which I have become wise under the sun; but this is also vanity.

The Targum of Qohelet expands upon this verse as follows:

And I hated all labor for which I have labored under the sun in this world because I leave it to Rehoboam my son who will come after me, but Jeroboam the son of Nebat will come and take the ten tribes from his hand and possess half the kingdom. And who knows whether the king will succeed me and will rule over the land for which I have labored in this world and everything which I kept in order by my wisdom, whether he will be a sage or a fool, and I was dumbfounded and again said “Also this is vanity.” For no man should have a fool as his successor.<sup>84</sup>

Jerome himself will echo the targum in his commentary upon these verses, asserting:

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<sup>83</sup> Jerome, *Commentarius in Ecclesiastem*, Ed. Antin, 1.12 (my translation).

<sup>84</sup> *The Targum of Qohelet*, 26.

He does seem to be changing his mind about wealth and possessions, because, as the Gospel says, we do not know, if we are taken by an unexpected death, what sort of heir we will leave when we die, whether the person is who is going to enjoy our labor is foolish or wise. That happened to Solomon as well, for he had a son, Rehoboam, who was not like himself. From this example we understand that not even a son, if he is a fool, deserves to inherit from his father.<sup>85</sup>

Here the influence exerted by the targum is somewhat more difficult to deduce initially. One could argue that Jerome merely made the connection between the preacher and the decidedly lackluster statecraft of Rehoboam simply by recalling the narratives given in First Kings and Second Chronicles. Nevertheless, the aphorism that Jerome includes about counseling fathers not to name foolish sons as their chief heirs does not seem like something that would naturally result from a simple analysis of Ecclesiastes 2:18-19. Rather, it is more likely that this point was borrowed from the lesson imparted by the targum. This conclusion is strengthened if we consider the fact that other Christian writers upon whom Jerome is known to have drawn do not include that aphorism. Gregory Thaumaturgus's paraphrase furnishes the following rendering of the verses in question, "To put it simply: everything that I had done was nothing but painfully achieved thoughtless passion; someone else will succeed to them, the trivial profits of my efforts, be he wise or foolish."<sup>86</sup> An even more interesting indicator of influence is Jerome's opening statement that this verse evidences the beginning of a change in Solomon's attitude regarding wealth. This is not necessarily what one would identify as the main focus of the verses in question; instead, exhausting labor rendered futile by unpredictable heirs is what is under discussion.

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<sup>85</sup> Jerome, *Commentarius in Ecclesiastem*, ed. Antin, 2.18-19, (my translation).

<sup>86</sup> Gregory Thaumaturgus, *Gregory Thaumaturgos's Paraphrase of Ecclesiastes*, trans. and ed. John Jarick, (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), 45-46.

In the targum for this chapter, however, wealth and covetousness are the main concern. Expanding upon Qohelet 2:23 the targum avers, “also at night the man who labors in vanity does not sleep because of the imaginings of his mind over his wealth.”<sup>87</sup> For this reason, “there is nothing worthwhile for a man except that he eat and drink and enjoy himself before the people, to obey the commandments of the Lord and to walk in straight paths before Him... For he who occupies himself with the words of the Torah” is the man “who has no fear of the great judgment day that will come.”<sup>88</sup> Thus, while the verses extracted from the context of the targum are not concerned with the uselessness of wealth in comparison with religious devotion, once understood within the context of the targum, these verses do indeed signal a shift in the preacher’s attitude towards wealth and religious devotion. Hence, Jerome would have needed to follow the targum’s interpretation of the whole chapter to produce the interpretation that he in fact did. Once again Jerome makes use of seemingly innocuous cues from the targum to guide his interpretation.

Jerome also follows the targum’s unique Aramaic linguistic contributions to Qohelet, using them to guide his theological interpretation. *Memra* is an Aramaic word with a range of meanings roughly equivalent to the Greek word *logos*. Within scripture the term can denote God’s wisdom, eternal word, commandments, the Torah, his messenger angel, oracles delivered from him through the prophets, or the underlying principles governing the universe.<sup>89</sup> This term, already appearing in one of the sections quoted above, is employed frequently throughout the entire targumic corpus, including

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<sup>87</sup> *The Targum of Qohelet*, trans. Knobel, 26

<sup>88</sup> *The Targum of Qohelet*, trans. Knobel, 27. Qohelet 2:24, 25.

<sup>89</sup> *The Targum of Qohelet*, trans. Knobel, 9-11.

Qohelet. Interpolations of *Memra* into Jerome's commentary are quite frequent. Moreover, he displays great dexterity in recognizing the various senses in which it is used. For example, Qohelet 8:2 declares, "Just like a king, he holds the power, and who says to him, 'What are you doing?'" The targum expands upon this in the following way: "In the place where the *Memra* of the king who rules over the world has decreed it is done quickly, and who is the man who can stay his hand and say to him, 'What have you done?'" In this passage, the connotation of *Memra* seems to be that principle by which God governs the world, or perhaps the Angel of the Lord who acts as his messenger. When Jerome comments on this verse, he interprets thus:

He seems to be teaching like the Apostle, that one must be obedient to kings and powers... but I believe that what is meant here is the king about whom David says: "Lord, the king will rejoice in your strength." And in another place, in order to signify the joint rule of the Father and the Son, the scripture says: "God, give your judgment to the king and your justice to the king's son." For the Father does not judge anyone, but he has given every decision to the Son. The king, who is the Son of God, is the son of the Father, the king. It is his commandments that must be carried out.<sup>90</sup>

His exegesis does not stem immediately from a simple reading of the verse, even if one takes into account the inclination of many Patristic exegetes for waxing Christological when reading the Old Testament. Rather, Jerome's needs extra context for a Christological interpretation to be deduced. Such an interpretation cannot be gleaned from Gregory of Nyssa, whose homilies are among his most frequent Christian sources for this commentary. Indeed, Goodrich and Miller point out that Jerome contradicts Gregory of Nyssa's interpretation here.<sup>91</sup> Were Jerome following the suggestion given by the Targum of Qohelet through the use of *Memra* here, however, such an interpretation

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<sup>90</sup> St. Jerome, *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, trans. and eds. Goodrich and Miller, 94.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 219-220.

would make sense. Having a word equivalent to *logos*, with the rich tradition of Christological interpretation that surrounded it in Patristic exegesis, would facilitate Jerome's assertion that the verse was referring to Christ's rule over the universe after his resurrection and triumph.

An extended example of Jerome borrowing symbolic formulations from the Targum of Qohelet comes in his exegesis of Ecclesiastes 9:13-15. As Jerome records them in his commentary, the verses read:

But I have also seen this wisdom under the sun, and it is great with me: there was a small city and few men in it, and a great king came to it and surrounded it and built a great siege engine against it; and he found in it a poor and wise man. This man saved the city in his wisdom, yet no one has remembered that poor man.<sup>92</sup>

Initially, the Stridonian offers a conventional exposition that basically restates the verses, only with an added lament over the ungratefulness of human beings. He then submits another reading, qualifying it with the statement that "the Hebrew put a different interpretation on this passage..."<sup>93</sup> This alternate interpretation, which Jerome ultimately commends to the reader as beneficial, is as follows:

The small city is a human being... The few men in it are the members comprising the man himself. When the great king—the devil—comes against it and tries to find a point through which he can break in, there is found inside it, obscure, wise, and tranquil, the thought of the inner man; and that saves the city, which was hemmed in and besieged by the enemy. Once the man is rescued from the danger of persecution, sufferings, or whatever adversity or sin it may be, the outer man, who is no friend to the poor, wise man, does remember his inner man and no longer puts himself under his advice but enjoys his own independence again.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

Scholars who have worked on Jerome's *Commentary on Ecclesiastes* previously have had great difficulty in establishing the source of this extended metaphor, which borders on allegory, provided by Jerome's "Hebrew". Goodrich and Miller conclude that the Hebrew-speaker with whom Jerome was working must have been referring to either the Greek philosopher Democritus or a passage in Plato's *Republic*.<sup>95</sup> Strangely, neither of them thought to examine any Jewish sources, specifically the targum. If we turn to the Targum of Qohelet's rendering of the passage, we find a much more plausible source of the Rabbi's example:

Solomon King of Israel said, "Also this I saw, wisdom is in this world under the sun and it is great to me." The body of a man may be compared to a little city in which there are just a few men [acting as] soldiers just as the heart of a man has in it few merits and the evil inclination, which may be compared to a great and powerful king, enters the body to conquer and it surrounds the heart in order to make it err and it builds a dwelling place because it wishes to cause him to depart from the way which is straight before the Lord to capture him in the great snares of Gehenna in order to make him stumble seven times for his sins. And there was found in the body the good inclination, humble and wise, and it prevailed over it and conquered it by its wisdom and it saved the body from the judgment of Gehenna by its power and its wisdom just as the soldier does battle and saves the inhabitants of the city by the wisdom of his heart and no man remembered afterward the good inclination that saved him, but says to himself, "I am pure," just as the inhabitants of the city do not remember the poor man who saved them.<sup>96</sup>

The targum's reworking of the passage possesses a far better claim to be the source of Jerome's extended metaphor. Whereas Plato and Democritus merely introduce the idea that a human being can be likened to a city or polity of some sort, the Targum goes further. The narrative of the siege, and most especially the inhabitants' neglecting of their savior, appears only in the Targum and in Jerome's commentary. Even Plato, who

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<sup>95</sup> Jerome, *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, trans. and ed. Goodrich and Miller, 227.

<sup>96</sup> *The Targum of Qohelet*, trans. Knobel, 46.

develops his analogy at length, fails to subject his analogical city to a protracted siege, in spite of the fact that he is discussing how human beings must learn to cope with desires.<sup>97</sup>

Had he wanted to do so, Plato clearly could have extended the analogy further, with the desires being represented by besiegers, and reason representing the poor wise man.

Jerome could have conceivably modified this to equate the desires with the devil.

Nevertheless, Plato did not do this, and Jerome cites a Hebrew source for the analogy.

Thus, it seems far more likely that the targum was indeed the source of this exegesis.

### **The Targum and Jerome's Ascetic Theology**

With Jerome's use of the targum as a source well established, we can turn to the ways in which he uses it more frequently in his commentary. The central problem of Qohelet with which the targum seeks to reckon is its seeming denial of an afterlife. It goes about resolving this issue in three stages. First, the meturgemanim treat the frequent mentions of the universality of death both for the righteous and the unrighteous as a kind of *momento mori* preparing its audience for the impending judgment. Second, the targum refashions the philosopher of Qohelet into a devout Jew, who studies the Torah, prays, and gives alms regularly. Crucially, the targum is able to recast Qohelet's praise of secular wisdom as actually calling for devotion to the study of the Torah. Third, in return for dutifully following the injunctions of the Law, the ideal Jew held up as an example by the refashioned Solomon in Qohelet will receive a reward at the final judgment.<sup>98</sup> In his own commentary, Jerome employs the Targumic reinterpretation quite readily.

Consistent references are made to devoting oneself to the ascetic practice of scripture

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<sup>97</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, ed. John Burnet, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1903), 432d2-435b2.

<sup>98</sup> For the identification of what the Targum of Qohelet seeks to correct within Qohelet and how it goes about this, see Levine, *The Aramaic Version of Qohelet*, 74-80.

reading and almsgiving with the hope of receiving merited reward in the afterlife for the performance of these practices.

### **Jerome, the Targum, and Exhortations to Study Scripture**

The passages where he follows the targum's reinterpretation of Qohelet's praise of wisdom as urging the study of scripture are quite numerous, extending throughout much of his commentary. To take an example from early in his commentary, unaltered Ecclesiastes 3:12-13 (ESV) reads: "I have learned that there is no good but to be happy and to do good in one's lifetime, and for every man who eats, drinks, and shows some good in all his labor, it is by the gift of God." The targum, however, reformulates this verse in the following way:

King Solomon said, "I know by the Spirit of Prophecy, that there is nothing good for them, for men, except to rejoice in the joy of the Torah and to do good during the days of his life. And every man who eats and drinks and sees good in his days and bequeaths to this son at the time of his death all his labor—it is a gift given to him from the Lord."<sup>99</sup>

The rewriting of these verses takes what would otherwise seem to be encouragement to eat, drink, and be merry and transposes them into a key whereby the passage now promotes the study of the Torah. Jerome, when commenting on this verse, maintains that "all the good that we have in the present age is to feed on his flesh and drink his blood... in our reading of the scriptures; because the true food and drink, which is gained from the word of God, is knowledge of the scriptures."<sup>100</sup> In a shocking move for a patristic theologian Jerome swiftly passes over a possible Eucharistic interpretation to focus on a reading that emphasizes the study of scripture. His construal of this passage

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<sup>99</sup> *The Targum of Qohelet*, trans. Knobel, 28.

<sup>100</sup> Jerome, *Commentarius in Ecclesiastes*, ed. Francesco Glori, 3.12-13 (my translation)

contradicts Gregory of Nyssa, who supplies an exegesis of this verse in his eighth homily on Ecclesiastes that focuses upon the Eucharist and the Beatific Vision.<sup>101</sup> He does not contradict, however, the Targum of Qohelet. Thus, here again he seems to be following the targum.

A further indication of the targum's influence on Jerome's gloss can be found by examination the wider Jewish exegetical tradition. A famous contribution to the Midrash Rabbah regarding this verse, dating from centuries after Jerome's time, asserts, "All eating and drinking mentioned in this book refers to the Torah and good deeds."<sup>102</sup> This demonstrates the strong presence of this solution in the Jewish tradition of scriptural interpretation. Moreover, the targumim for other books among the Hebrew Bible's Wisdom Literature contains similar interpolations in texts that speak of despair at the thought of death or contain exhortations to live in the moment. For example, exhortations to study the Law are frequent throughout the Targum of Job. In the RSV Job 11:8 reads: "The things of the Almighty are higher than heaven—what can you do?—deeper than Sheol—what can you know?" In the Targum of Job, however, this verse has been altered to enjoin the audience: "Be knowledgeable in the Law, which is deeper than Sheol."<sup>103</sup> Hence, the strategy of using enjoinders to study the law and other scriptures to correct texts that would otherwise be unorthodox seems a uniquely Jewish strategy. Thus, Jerome's employment of it here strengthens the notion that he used the Targum of Qohelet as a guide.

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<sup>101</sup> See Gregory of Nyssa, *Homilies on Ecclesiastes*, trans. Hall, VIII.9.

<sup>102</sup> Rabbah Qohelet, III.ii.3.I.

<sup>103</sup> *The Aramaic Bible, Volume 15: The Targum of Job*, trans. Celine F. Mangan, O.P. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 41.

Further confirmation that Jerome is following the Targum in this section comes from his exegesis of the next several verses. Ecclesiastes 3:14-18 (ESV) state:

I have learned that all things that God has made, they will be forever; nothing can be added to them, and nothing taken away from them. And God has caused them to be afraid from his face. What is it that has been? That which is, and what will be has already been. And God shall seek what has been driven away. Moreover, I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, even there was wickedness. I said in my heart, “God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for there is a time for every matter and for every work. I said in my heart with regard to the children of man that God is testing them that they may see that they themselves are but beasts.

The Targum expands upon these verses in the following way:

I know by the Spirit of Prophecy that everything that the Lord does in the world whether good or evil since it is decreed from His mouth it will be forever. A man has no power to add to it nor subtract from it. And when punishment comes to the world, the Lord is the one who did it so that people may fear Him. That which was previously, it has already come to pass. And that which will be in the end of days has already happened. And on the great Day of Judgment the Lord will save the needy from the hands of the wicked who pursue him. And further I saw under the sun in this world a place where the court judges corruptly. They declare the innocent guilty in order to acquit the guilty in his case, and a place where an innocent man is found there, the guilty man is found ruling over him on account of the sins of an evil generation. I said to myself, “The Lord will judge the innocent and the guilty on the great Day of Judgment, for a time is allotted to every matter and to every deed which they did in this world, for them to be judged there on that day.” I said to myself concerning people that wounds and evil decrees come upon them in order to test and try them. The Lord did it to see if they will return in repentance, so that they will be forgiven and healed and rewarded. But the wicked are like cattle who do not repent, therefore, they are chastened by them in order to do them harm.<sup>104</sup>

Since Jerome is providing a verse-by-verse commentary, it will be easier to furnish selections from his extended commentary upon each verse. What will become clear is that Jerome has followed the targum in shifting the emphasis of these verses from a lament on the fallibility of human justice and the brute nature of human beings to one

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<sup>104</sup> *The Targum of Qohelet*, trans. Knobel, 30.

focused not only upon divine justice, but also upon the possibility of mercy, healing, and reward in the world to come after a delayed judgment.

First, Jerome has clearly followed the targum's personalizing of the language in its translation of verse fifteen. Modern editions of Ecclesiastes/Qohelet 3:15 read, "the Lord will seek/save what is driven away," as seen in the quotation above. This version is preferred because it is closer to the earliest Hebrew manuscripts. Jerome himself is cognizant of this being the reading that is closer to the original Hebrew, noting that here is an instance where the Septuagint is actually in complete agreement with the Hebrew. He asserts, though, that "that is said better in Greek as '*kai ho Theos dzetesei to diokomenon*'" which translates to "And God will seek that which is pursued," since *diokomenon* is a singular neuter participle, as signified by the neuter article *to*.<sup>105</sup> Jerome goes on to explain that here the Greek word translated as 'pursued' has a sense closer to "that which has passed by, that which has been expelled, that which has ceased to be."<sup>106</sup> Nevertheless, he offers his own reconstruction of the passage, which reads, "And God will seek him who is suffering persecution." In support of this reading, he claims that this reading makes enough sense to be "as if it is the primary reading."<sup>107</sup>

No further reasons are offered in support of this rendering of the passage, in spite of the fact that Jerome has just passed over a version that he claims is closer syntactically to the Hebrew. Jerome could not appeal to Gregory Thaumaturgus's paraphrase of Ecclesiastes, as it does not offer a similar gloss. Thaumaturgus's formulation instead reads: "Those things which have taken place, have endured; and those things that will

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<sup>105</sup> Jerome, *Commentarius in Ecclesiastem*, ed. Francesco Glori, 3.15 (my translation).

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

take place, have already occurred, as far as foreknowing is concerned, and the person who is wronged has a helper in God.”<sup>108</sup> The only text where this reading predominates in the manuscripts is the Targum of Qohelet. Thus, Jerome must have been following the targum in this passage. The rewording of this entire passage, while not only serving “he who has persevered unto martyrdom,” also supports Jerome’s overall argument that the practice of scripture reading will lead to one being rewarded at the final judgment.<sup>109</sup>

Second, the targum’s loose interpretation of Qohelet 3:16-18 emphasizes the delayed nature of the judgment. The Lord “*will judge on the great Day of Judgment, for a time is allotted*” in the future for such an event. Until then, God delays judgment so as to offer the penitent a chance to be “forgiven and healed”.<sup>110</sup> Hence, when surveying the various possible interpretations that he has delineated for this verse, Jerome concludes, “I understood that God does judge in part, person by person, but reserves judgment until the future time, so that everyone may be judged equally, and will receive rewards according to their volition and their works.”<sup>111</sup> Here Jerome has seized upon the idea of delayed judgment to buttress the connection that he identifies between a practice central to his asceticism—the study of scripture—and eternal reward. The targum has allowed him to find scriptural support for that connection in this verse. Therefore, it is unmistakably clear that the targum guided Jerome in his approach to most of the third chapter of Ecclesiastes, furnishing the interpretations Jerome needed to make his theological argument in support of asceticism.

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<sup>108</sup> Gregory Thaumaturgus, *Paraphrase of Ecclesiastes*, 70.

<sup>109</sup> Jerome, *Commentarius in Ecclesiastem*, 3.15, (my translation).

<sup>110</sup> *The Targum of Qohelet*, trans. Knobel, 30. Emphasis added.

<sup>111</sup> Jerome, *Commentarius in Ecclesiastem*, 3.16-17, (my translation).

Jerome repeats this targum inspired exegesis outlined above in his commentary upon Ecclesiastes 8:15. This passage presents a particularly thorny problem for an orthodox interpreter, be they Christian or Jewish, as it offers one of the most unmistakably Epicurean exhortations in the book. As it appears in Jerome's commentary, the verse states:

And I praised happiness, because there is nothing good for man under the sun, except to eat, to drink, and to be happy. And that will be the result with him from his labor over all the days of his life, which God gave to him under the sun.<sup>112</sup>

Jerome's use of sources in developing his exegesis of this verse is very revealing. He undoubtedly grasped the actual import of the verse, as he first offers a reading that is completely, perhaps even, for Jerome, awkwardly faithful to the gist of the verse. Nevertheless, he immediately notes that this reading is unsatisfactory for a Christian, and offers a different one. Thus, he writes that:

He prefers the pleasure of feasting and drinking (albeit brief and soon to be ended) to the distress of the present, and also to the things that seem to occur unfairly in the world. This is because all it seems that a man can gain from his own labor is the enjoyment of some slight refreshment.

This interpretation, however, if taken literally, will make those who are fasting, starving, thirsting, and mourning, whom the Lord calls "blessed" in the Gospel, appear pitiable. So then let us understand both the *food* and the *drink* differently, as well as those, the *happiness* as that which we are hardly able to discover in the brute labor of our life. That these words should be understood as we have said is shown by his words in the next sentence: "I gave my heart that I might see wisdom and the business done on the earth," because clearly men are active upon the earth, and by day and night they are involved in meditation upon the scriptures, so that frequently sleep escapes their eyes in favor of investigation of the truth.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Jerome, *Commentarius in Ecclesiastem*, 8.15, (my translation).

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

Transforming the thrust of the verse into praise of those who study scripture day and night indicates that Jerome is following the targum in its solution to the problem. His invocation of Ecclesiastes 8:16 as part of his alternate reading particularly belies its influence in this section of the commentary, for the targum extends its reworking of this problematic passage into verse sixteen as well:

And I praised the joy of the Torah for a man does not have good in this world under the sun except to eat and drink and to rejoice in his labor and his portion, which is given to him by Heaven... [beginning of verse sixteen] I just set my mind to know the wisdom of the Torah and to see the business which is done on the earth so the sage who desires to occupy himself with the Torah and to find wisdom, it is labor, for he has no rest in the day time and at night he sees no sleep with his own eyes.<sup>114</sup>

Thus, the targum provided Jerome with the cue that he needed to reinterpret the verse as a reference to scripture, specifically by using verse sixteen to rework the meaning of verse fifteen. Were he not following the targum, Jerome's invocation of the following verse as key to interpreting 8:15 would make less sense. In his own commentary he offers a gloss on 8:15 alone, quoting that verse in isolation from verse sixteen then providing his exegesis. Not only is verse sixteen quoted and discussed separately from verse fifteen, but it and verse seventeen are actually quoted together and discussed in their own gloss, with no reference to verse fifteen being made.<sup>115</sup>

If we turn to other sections of the commentary, we find that Jerome continues to use the targum's theological reinterpretation of Qohelet to exhort his readers to study scripture regularly. He does so, however, in ways that reveal how creative he was in using the targum as a guide for the incorporation of ascetic theology into his commentary. Ecclesiastes 6:7-8 (RSV) declares:

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<sup>114</sup> *The Targum of Qohelet*, trans. Knobel, 43-44.

<sup>115</sup> See Jerome, *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, trans. and ed. Goodrich and Miller, 99-100.

All a man's labor is in his mouth, and yet his soul will not be filled. For what does a wise man have more than a fool? What does a poor man have, but to know how to encounter life?

When Jerome comments on this verse he offers two possible interpretations. First, he provides an explanation that stems from a close reading of the text of Ecclesiastes itself. He notes that “the wise man is just as unable as the foolish one to live without food, while the poor man seeks nothing but how he may support the organism of his own body without dying of starvation...”<sup>116</sup> The second interpretation, for which Jerome asserts his preference, is as follows:

However, it is better for this to be understood as being about the churchman who, learned in the heavenly Scriptures, has all his labor in his mouth and his soul is not filled, as he always wants to learn. The closer to God he becomes, the closer he desires to become. And what gives the wise man the advantage over the fool is that, though he knows himself to be poor (the poor who is called “blessed” in the Gospel), he hurries to grasp the vital things. He is walking the narrow, constricted way that leads to life. What he is poor in is evil works. He knows where Christ, who is life, dwells.<sup>117</sup>

It should first be noted that Jerome's preferred interpretation is not one that flows naturally from the text, nor is it one that stems from other patristic writers who are frequently cited as Jerome's sources for this commentary, such as Gregory Thaumaturgus, Origen, and Apollinaris of Laodicea.<sup>118</sup> For example, Gregory Thaumaturgus, in his third century paraphrase of Ecclesiastes, radically recasts this passage in a different way, paraphrasing it as “Justice of life mostly leads a person to poverty.”<sup>119</sup> If one compares Jerome's interpretation with the rendering of these verses in

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<sup>116</sup> Jerome, *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, trans. and ed. Goodrich and Miller, 79.

<sup>117</sup> Jerome, *Commentarius in Ecclesiastem*, 6.7-8, (my translation).

<sup>118</sup> See the introduction to Goodrich and Miller's edition of Jerome's *Commentary on Ecclesiastes* for a discussion of the role that earlier Patristic writers play in Jerome's exposition. See also, *St. Jerome*, 205.

<sup>119</sup> Gregory Thaumaturgus, *Paraphrase of Ecclesiastes*, 146.

the Targum of Qohelet, however, then it becomes very easy to see where Jerome found the source of his interpretation. The Meturgemanim, unsatisfied by Qohelet's cynical view concerning the possibility of happiness in this world, rewrote the verses in the following way:

As for all the labor of a man, for the sake of the food of his mouth he labors and by the *Memra* of the Lord he is fed and also the soul of man is not satisfied with food and drink. For what advantage does the wise man have in this world over the fool on account of the evil generation by whom he is not accepted? And what does that poor man have to do but occupy himself with the Torah of the Lord so that he will know how to walk in the presence of the righteous in the Garden of Eden?<sup>120</sup>

Here the targum decidedly shifts the emphasis of the concern over food and drink to the traditional metaphor whereby scripture, the word of God, is the source of sustenance upon which people truly depend, true food and true drink. More importantly, the targum, like Jerome's interpretation, transforms the poor man into the truly wise one because of his dedication to scriptural learning. Thus, both Jerome and the targum elide the distinction between the wise man and the poor man that is actually drawn by the Preacher. Furthermore, Jerome concludes that such devotion to biblical study puts one on the path to eternal reward. The targum asserts that the poor, but wise, man studies the Torah "so that he will know how to walk in the presence of the righteous in the Garden of Eden."<sup>121</sup> Knobel's edition of the Targum of Qohelet notes that, in a few manuscripts, the "righteous in the Garden of Eden" are identified as those "who in their death are called living."<sup>122</sup> Hence, the Targum has allowed Jerome to import a good deal of his ascetic program into his interpretation of this verse. Again, the Targum seems the most likely candidate to be the source of Jerome's interpretation in this verse.

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<sup>120</sup> *The Targum of Qohelet*, trans. Knobel, 36-37.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, note 11.

What is most interesting, however, is that the targum has allowed Jerome to insert a deeply theological, and indeed mystical, characterization of the contemplative life into his commentary. Jerome maintained that the soul of the Christian who studies the scriptures is “never filled, as he always wants to learn.”<sup>123</sup> This portrait of the soul always hungry for scriptural knowledge receives detailed treatment elsewhere in Jerome’s writings. When eulogizing Fabiola in *Letter 77* Jerome depicts her as always desirous to learn about the scriptures. Never “did her eagerness to hear [exposition of the scriptures]... bring with it satiety.”<sup>124</sup> In the commentary, Jerome now stresses that there is no end point to one’s study of scripture, for scripture is a fountain from which one drinks only to want to drink again, and from which one is able to drink continually. This lack of satiety is not, however, construed as a negative. Rather, as Jerome says, “the closer one becomes to God, the closer one desires to become.” With this statement Jerome has reached the bedrock of his ascetic theology and revealed its Eastern origins.

The principle of the soul’s ever-deepening relationship with God is one developed at length in the ascetic treatises of the Cappadocian Fathers. For example, St. Gregory of Nyssa’s allegorical *Life of Moses* states near the conclusion that “the continual development of life towards God is... the soul’s perfection.”<sup>125</sup> Jerome had met and likely even studied for some time under both Gregory of Nyssa and his colleague Gregory of Nazianzus during his time in Constantinople to observe the Second Ecumenical Council there.<sup>126</sup> Thus, the rewording offered by the Targum has allowed

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<sup>123</sup> Jerome, *Letter LXXVII*, 7.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>125</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, 133.

<sup>126</sup> Kelly, *Jerome*, 70.

Jerome to insert a more detailed presentation of contemporary theological discourse into his commentary where he would not otherwise have been able to do so.

Jerome underscores this theme of the ascetic practitioner who is always hungry to acquire deeper knowledge of the scriptures later in his commentary, again with the help of the targum. In this next example, however, he connects the desire to study scripture with the need to cultivate patience in this life, since one will not receive all the desired answers until the next life, a point that fits within Jerome's assertion that ascetic practices will lead to eternal reward. Ecclesiastes 7:24-25, as quoted by Jerome, reads, "I have tried all these things in wisdom, and have said, "I shall be made wise"; yet it has become further from me, more than it was. And deep wisdom, who shall find it?"<sup>127</sup> Solomon is here referring to his search for wisdom while ruling as king of Israel. The more learning he acquired, the less practical wisdom he possessed, for he was eventually seduced by his foreign wives to follow false gods. Despite the fact that this passage discusses the futility of the search for wisdom, the targum alters the passage so that it emphasizes a point very similar to the one Jerome outlined in his targum-inspired commentary on Ecclesiastes 6:7-8.

"All that," I said, "I have tested with wisdom." I said to myself, "I will be wise also in all the wisdom of the Torah, but it eluded me, so I turn to reckon over the words of the Torah in my mind again and again. Thus, I seek wisdom so that I might receive the reward of the deeds of the righteous, to know the punishment of the sin of the fool and the folly and intrigues of governments."<sup>128</sup>

The targum thereby renders the verse that now bears witness to a devout scholar of the Torah, who wrestles earnestly with its words in search of the wisdom of God.

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<sup>127</sup> Jerome, *Commentarius in Ecclesiastem*, 7.24-25, ed. Francesco Glori, (my translation).

<sup>128</sup> *The Targum of Qohelet*, trans. Knobel, 40.

Apparently, such wisdom can only be fully obtained as a reward in the life to come. The lesson taught here, namely the need for one to read and ponder continually over the scriptures in the hope of eventual reward, certainly resembles Jerome's view that a true ascetic will never be sated in their study of the scriptures while on earth. It is difficult not to see Jerome's comments upon these verses as further evidence that he is following the Targum of Qohelet's lead in finding in Ecclesiastes support for his ascetic program, as his exegesis of these verses proceeds thus:

For one who would be learned in the scriptures, for however much he begins to know, so much more doubt arises in him each and every day, so he ponders all the more. The contemplation of the wisdom of the scriptures in this life seems to be in a mirror or representation. Therefore, when in the future I reflect upon the knowledge of his wisdom to be revealed once I am face to face with him, then I shall realize clearly that I was at this time a long way from complete knowledge.<sup>129</sup>

Jerome's commentary tracks the exegesis given by the targum remarkably closely. Gregory Thaumaturgus's paraphrase provides no help here, as it gives a contradictory reading:

“For wisdom fled from me to an infinite distance and immeasurable depth so that I could no longer take hold of it. So after that I abstained from seeking. Nor did I give any further thought to understanding the follies and empty counsels of ungodly people, and their meandering life.”<sup>130</sup>

Jerome, in contrast, refashions the meaning of the verse from Ecclesiastes so that it now speaks not to the futility of academic study but rather to the devout ascetic's insatiable desire for scriptural wisdom, a desire that causes one to meditate upon the word of God nearly constantly. From there he moves on to discuss the ascetic's hope for

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<sup>129</sup> Jerome, *Commentarius in Ecclesiastem*, ed. Francesco Glori, 7.24-25 (my translation). Please note that Jerome himself switches from third to first person in the midst of his commentary, and that I have merely followed him in this regard.

<sup>130</sup> Gregory Thaumaturgus, *Paraphrase of Ecclesiastes*, 185-186.

eternal reward, which will include the reception of complete understanding of the mysteries of God. Were one to replace the Christian ascetic, zealous for the study of scripture, in Jerome's commentary with the exemplary Torah scholar in the targum for Qohelet, one might find it difficult to distinguish which text was which!

### **Almsgiving in Jerome's *Commentary* and the Targum of Qohelet**

Aside from Jerome's emphasis on the need for the ascetic to study scripture diligently, he also promoted almsgiving in various forms, both massive divestments of wealth, which needed to be performed as soon as one dedicated oneself to an ascetic regime, and smaller acts of charity that should be done throughout one's life. The book of Ecclesiastes, however, contains very few exhortations to charitable giving. In fact, the preacher frequently recommends joyous feasting or rejoicing in human activity purely for its own sake. Such advice embodied the polar opposite of Jerome's ascetic program, with its stringent call to fasting and almsgiving in hopes of eternal reward. This tendency within Ecclesiastes clearly posed a problem for Jerome's attempt to use the text as a vehicle for the promotion of his ascetic program. Here again the Targum of Qohelet proved useful, as the meturgemanim had found ways of pushing the text towards exhortations of almsgiving and other good works through strategic rewording of the text.

One notable example of Jerome picking up on the Targum's suggestive reinterpretation of such passages appears in his commentary on Ecclesiastes 3:22. In the Hebrew text, this verse provides the conclusion to an argument for the meaninglessness of life due to there being no afterlife, since "man has no advantage over the beasts, for... all are from the dust and to dust all return."<sup>131</sup> For these reasons, the preacher declares:

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<sup>131</sup> Ecclesiastes 3:19-20 (ESV)

So I saw that there is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his work, for that is his lot. Who can bring him to see what will be after him?<sup>132</sup>

The meturgemanim clearly could not permit a verse with this sort of message to pass unaltered. Therefore, they substantially modified the verse so that it read:

And I saw that there was nothing better in this world than that a man rejoice in his good deeds and eat and drink and be of good cheer. For it is his good portion in this world to acquire by it the world to come, so that a man should not say to himself, “Why should I waste my money giving to charity? It would be better for me to leave it to my son after me or to support myself from it in the time of my old age. For who shall bring him to see what will happen after him?”<sup>133</sup>

As was demonstrated in the previous section, Jerome draws upon the targum throughout much of chapter three of Ecclesiastes because it allows him to present the chapter as boilerplate advice on how to be a Hieronymian ascetic. To conclude the chapter, he turns once again to the targum to find a way to navigate through the tricky theological waters of Ecclesiastes’s exhortations to Epicurean living. To that end, he interprets this verse, like the Targum, as encouragement to do good works in an effort to secure heavenly treasure:

There is nothing good in this life but that a man enjoys his work of giving alms and preparing future treasures for himself in the kingdom of the heavens. This is the only portion we have that neither thief nor bandit nor tyrant can take away, and which is to come with us after death; for, once this life has disintegrated, we can no longer profit from our own labors, nor know what will happen afterward in this world.<sup>134</sup>

Both Jerome and the Targum of Qohelet re-characterize the kind of work under consideration in the verse. This shift is the key change in emphasis that reveals the

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<sup>132</sup> Ecclesiastes 3:22 (ESV)

<sup>133</sup> *The Targum of Qohelet*, trans. Knobel, 30.

<sup>134</sup> Jerome, *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, trans. and ed. Goodrich and Miller, 64-65.

targum's influence lurking behind Jerome's comments. Whereas the preacher of Qohelet had in mind human labor within the economic sphere, the targum and Jerome present the labor in question as labor for the sake of righteousness—i.e. good works such as almsgiving. No Christian precedent, in the form of earlier Christian commentaries, exists to furnish Jerome with guidance in interpreting this verse. Gregory of Nyssa does not discuss it in his sermons on Ecclesiastes, which do not treat the verses after Ecclesiastes 3:14. Nor does Gregory Thaumaturgus's paraphrase provide the kind of solution upon which Jerome ultimately settles, for he renders the verse: "There seemed to be no other good but self-indulgence and making use of what is at hand, because I did not think it possible to return again to the enjoyment of these things after one had tasted death."<sup>135</sup>

An even more obvious example of Jerome using the targum to reinterpret passages as praising almsgiving occurs in his exegesis of chapter eleven. At the beginning of this chapter, the preacher imparts to his audience some advice on business. Specifically, he recommends that they should undertake maritime trade and diversify their investments, stating: "Let your bread go on the face of the water, because in a multitude of days you will find it."<sup>136</sup> Being a proponent of apostolic poverty, Jerome naturally could not read this verse as offering recommendations on how to conduct commerce. He could not turn to Gregory of Nyssa's homilies, as they did not cover the

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<sup>135</sup> Gregory Thaumaturgus, *Paraphrase of Ecclesiastes*, 79. Jarick points out that the Greek words employed by Gregory for "being joyful" and "self-indulgence," respectively *euphrainomai* and *truphê*, in his paraphrase are ones that have strong connotative connections to Epicurean philosophy. To me, this strengthens the argument that Gregory Thaumaturgus was in fact reaching opposite conclusions about the meaning of this verse from those that Jerome reached.

<sup>136</sup> Ecclesiastes 11:1 (ESV). Jerome, *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, trans. and ed. Goodrich and Miller, 119. The argument that this verse encourages commerce can be found in Goodrich and Miller's commentary.

latter chapters of the book; nor was Gregory Thaumaturgos's paraphrase helpful, as it merely repeats the verse verbatim.<sup>137</sup> The Targum of Qohelet, though, contained exactly the interpretation required for Jerome to continue using the book to extol the ascetic life:

Extend your nourishing bread to the poor who go in ships on the surface of the water, for after a period of many days you shall find its reward in the world to come.<sup>138</sup>

In this rephrasing of the verse, the targum has introduced not only the theme of almsgiving, central to Jerome's ascetic program, but also connected it to the ultimate end of ascetic practice for Jerome: reward in the afterlife. To do this, the advice given must be transformed from a maxim concerning investment to one concerning divestment. While one might query why the preacher feels an overwhelming need to urge his audience to provide relief to the nautical poor, this rendering of the verse does give the otherwise secular advice offered here decidedly religious overtones. Jerome employs the targum's solution almost to the letter, contending the following about the verse:

This is an encouragement to almsgiving: one must give to everyone who asks, and do good without making distinctions. Just as one who sows on watered land awaits the harvest of his sowing, so one who is generous to the needy is sowing an actual loaf of bread, not just a grain of seed, in anticipation of its increase. It is a kind of investment: when the Day of Judgment comes, he will find much more than he had given.<sup>139</sup>

Thus, the targum's rewording of the preacher's advice provided Jerome with another opportunity to expound the underlying logic of part of his ascetic program, namely, that almsgiving leads to eternal reward.

### **Complete Portraits of the Hieronymian Ascetic**

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<sup>137</sup> Gregory Thaumaturgos, *Paraphrase of Ecclesiastes*, 277.

<sup>138</sup> *The Targum of Qohelet*, trans. Knobel, 50.

<sup>139</sup> Jerome, *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, trans. and ed. Goodrich and Miller, 119-120.

There are also instances in which the targum produces interpretations of particular passages that draw together all the threads of Jerome's ascetic program, thereby making it possible for Jerome to present his ascetic program in its entirety. Like the previous examples involving the study of scripture or almsgiving, Jerome borrows from the Targum in instances where a literal reading of the verse would either support heresy or in the very least convey an impression that undermined the ascetic that Jerome was trying to depict through his commentary. Early in the commentary, when remarking upon Ecclesiastes 2:24-26, Jerome uses the targum's reworking of the verses to insert a discussion of the ascetic life into the work. The Hebrew verses from Qohelet are:

There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God, for apart from him who can have enjoyment? For to the one who pleases him God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, but to the sinner he has given the business of gathering and collecting, only to give to one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a striving after the wind.<sup>140</sup>

While in these verses the preacher certainly recognizes the sovereignty of God, his advice fails to incorporate any distinctively reverent overtones. Rather, the preacher enjoins his audience merely to be content with hearty food and some fulfilling labor. God might be providing the rain that falls upon the fields and the good fortune that the righteous enjoy, but very few details are offered about humanity's proper response to God. Moreover, the preceding verses of chapter two do not solve this problem, since in them the preacher narrates his realization of the futility of human labor when considered

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<sup>140</sup> Ecclesiastes 2:24-26 (ESV).

against eternity.<sup>141</sup> The targum, however, reworks these verses so that they promote the ideal Torah scholar:

There is nothing worthwhile for a man except that he eat and drink and enjoy himself before the people, to obey the commandments of the Lord in the Torah and to walk in straight paths before Him so that He will do good for him for his good works. Also this I saw that a man who succeeds in this world it is decreed from the hand of the Lord that it be so for him. For who occupies himself with the words of the Torah is the man whose deeds are straight before the Lord, He gave him wisdom and knowledge in this world and joy with the righteous in the world to come. But to the guilty man He gave an evil way to gather money and to collect much property to be taken from him and given to the man who is pleasing before the Lord. This also is vanity for the guilty and breaking of the spirit.<sup>142</sup>

Thus, the targum gives these verses a more orthodox flavor by grafting in commendations of Torah study and good works, which together will lead to “joy with the righteous in the world to come.” This constellation of themes matches the major elements of Hieronymian asceticism perfectly, and Jerome himself was quick to follow the targum’s lead in construing this verse in such a manner:

What is good is to take the true foods and the true drink, which we find in the divine books concerning the body and blood of the Lamb. For who is able either to eat, or, when necessary, to abstain, without God, who tells through his scriptures that the sacred should not be thrown to the dogs, and teaches how to give alms to his fellow slaves at the proper time, so that the giver might store up riches in heaven, and in another sense, when one has found honey, to eat only as much as is sufficient?<sup>143</sup>

Here Jerome has inferred from the verse a lesson that encompasses all of the major elements of his asceticism, including the study of scripture, almsgiving, and heavenly reward for such practices. The origin of this interpretation could not be Gregory

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<sup>141</sup> See Ecclesiastes 2:20-23.

<sup>142</sup> *The Targum of Qohelet*, trans. Knobel, 27.

<sup>143</sup> Jerome, *Commentarius in Ecclesiastem*, ed. Francesco Glori, 2.24-26, (my translation).

of Nyssa's third homily on Ecclesiastes, which discusses these verses, as is often speculated. Gregory interprets verses twenty-four through twenty-six in close conjunction with the preceding three verses, which assert the futility of human labor and pursuing of worldly goods. In fact, Gregory contends that in 2:24-26 the preacher "deals with another objection... raised by the advocate of gluttony against the teacher."<sup>144</sup> Furthermore, even though the Cappadocian father connects verse twenty-four with the maxim from the Gospel of Matthew, "Man shall not live by bread alone," he proposes the virtues of prudence, justice, and freedom from the passions as the extra sustenance required that contribute to *eusophrosune*, which is the disposition towards doing the good, itself derived from *eunoiein*, or the possession of "right thinking mental disposition."<sup>145</sup> Thus, Gregory interprets this passage exactly as one might expect from someone who received his philosophical training in Athens. Such exegesis, however, lacks the focus upon maintaining a devotion to texts in connection with hope for reward in the afterlife that is present in both Jerome's exegesis and the targum's rephrasing, an emphasis that would be more appropriate in the setting of early rabbinic Judaism. This emphasis upon textual study along with other religious practices did, though, fit Jerome's model of the hermit, as sketched in works such as the *Life of St. Paul of Thebes, the First Hermit*.<sup>146</sup>

Ecclesiastes 5:12, which Jerome numbers as 5:11, serves as another example of a relatively innocuous verse that, when viewed through the lens of the targum, can be construed as describing Hieronymian asceticism. In Jerome's version, the verse reads: "Sleep is sweet to the one working, whether he has eaten a little, or more than a little,

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<sup>144</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Homilies on Ecclesiastes*, trans. Hall, III.371.2.

<sup>145</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Homilies on Ecclesiastes*, trans. Hall, III.371.11.

<sup>146</sup> See Rebenich, "Inventing an Ascetic Hero," 26.

while the rich man's satiety does not allow him to sleep."<sup>147</sup> The Stridonian gives two possible interpretations. First, he provides a very conventional reading of the verse, suggesting that it contrasts a rich miser with a humble day laborer. The latter, "thanks to the labor and sweat of his work," enjoys any kind of food and falls asleep quickly; the former is a shameless gourmand because "his hangover surges back at him, and his undigested food seethes in his tight stomach."<sup>148</sup> His second interpretation stems from the targum. Jerome writes:

Further, as "sleep" is used also of the departure of all of us from this life, the repose of the one who works diligently to master the scriptures in this present life and is saved because of his strength in the good work of giving alms will be better than the wealth of those of whom it is written: "Woe to you that are rich, for you have received your consolation."<sup>149</sup>

The second exegetical option brings to the reader's attention all the main points of Jerome's ascetic regime; there is the study of scripture, almsgiving, and eventual reward after death. Yet this alternative exegesis does not flow naturally from the sense of the text, which is clearly discussing how the simple pleasures of the common man could be considered more conducive to satiety in this life than could wealth. As noted above, Jerome reveals his awareness of this fact with his first possible interpretation. Nevertheless, he still finds a way to present a roughly complete picture of his ascetic program. When one examines how the targum modifies this verse, the source of Jerome's inspiration becomes clear:

Sweet is the sleep of the man who works for the Master of the World with a whole heart; he has rest in his tomb whether he will live for a few years or many. After he has served the Master of the World in this

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<sup>147</sup> Jerome, *Commentarius in Ecclesiastem*, ed. Francesco Glori, 5.11 (my translation).

<sup>148</sup> Jerome, *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, trans. and ed. Francesco Glori, 76.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*

world, he will inherit the reward of his almsgiving in the world to come. A man who is rich in wisdom is rich in the wisdom of the Torah of the Lord. Just as he occupied himself with the Torah and good deeds in this world and struggled with instruction, so it will rest with him in his tomb and not leave him alone, as a wife does not let her husband sleep alone.<sup>150</sup>

That the targum facilitates Jerome's construal of this verse as exhorting the readers to study the bible and give alms arises not merely because both texts read these exhortations into the verse, but because Jerome does not appeal to what could have been a very plausible symbolic reading of the text for a Christian exegete. Were one seeking a symbolic, or, as Jerome would refer to it, "spiritual," reading, one could easily interpret the labor as good works, the food as the Torah/scriptures, and the sleep as death. Jerome understands "sleep" to mean "death," but passes over the opportunity to fit the text into a tidy symbolic paradigm, one that later writers, such as Bede, would employ.<sup>151</sup> In passing over this opportunity, Jerome's exegesis aligns far better with the refashioning provided by the Targum.

Chapter twelve of Ecclesiastes presented mixed exegetical terrain for Jerome. On the one hand, the postscripts added by later rabbinic editors gave him more overtly orthodox passages to exposit, such as Ecclesiastes 12:1: "And remember your Creator, in the day of your youth..." On the other hand, within the main body of text the preacher ties together the final cords in his exhortation to contented Epicureanism, urging a pupil to "Be glad, young man, in your youth... and walk in the ways of your heart and of your eyes..."<sup>152</sup> To close his own commentary, and in so doing conclude his own exhortation

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<sup>150</sup> *The Targum of Qohelet*, trans. Knobel, 34.

<sup>151</sup> *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, Old Testament IX: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon*, ed. J. Robert Wright (New York: IVP Academic, 2005), 203.

<sup>152</sup> Ecclesiastes 12:2 (ESV).

to the ascetic life, Jerome turns to the targum one final time to supply him with a powerful *memento mori* that turns upon a symbolic reading of the preacher's description of a town in decline. This extended borrowing encapsulates Jerome's stated reasons for pursuing the ascetic ideal, namely, that life is short and eternity is long, so one must prepare oneself in this life for the life to come.

In the process of encouraging his audience to take advantage of the days of their youth, the preacher of Qohelet reminds them that the city in which they now live will one day decline and fall. Moreover, eventually the audience too will "go into the home of eternity." For this reason, the preacher counsels them to enjoy life while they have it. Thus, despite the clear reminder of human mortality, the lesson imparted in the passage is one that few Jewish or Christian exegetes could have accepted at face value. Jerome himself informs the reader that "in this section everyone's opinion has been different; there are almost as many opinions as there are people."<sup>153</sup> Hence, he says, it would fill his entire book if he included every possible reading that has been proffered, so instead Jerome promises to present the views that seem most plausible.

Among those views is an extended comparison of the city to the failing body of an aged and frail man. Goodrich and Miller presume that Platonic philosophy inspires this section, as in the previous instance when Jerome used the human body in an analogy.<sup>154</sup> This identification of Jerome's source still overlooks the possibility that Jerome made use of the Targum of Qohelet. That he is in fact doing so will become apparent if we compare Jerome's analogy with the one offered by the targum. This will require three extended quotations. Ecclesiastes 12:2-5, as recorded by Jerome, states:

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<sup>153</sup> Jerome, *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, trans. and ed. Goodrich and Miller, 124.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, 238.

Be glad, young man, in your youth and let your heart be in good in the days of your youthfulness, and walk in the ways of your heart and in the sight of your eyes. And know that God will bring you to judgment on all these things. And banish anger from your heart and remove wickedness from your flesh, because youth and folly are vanity. And remember the One who created you, in the day of your youthfulness, before the days of evil come and the years approach in which you will say: "I have no will in them." Before the sun darkens, and the light, and the moon, and the stars; and the clouds return after the rain, on the day when the guardians of the house have been moved, and the men of strength have perished, and the grinding-women will cease, because they have decreased; and the women looking in chinks will grow dark, and they will close the front doors on the street, in the lowness of the voice of the one grinding, and he will get up at the call of a bird, and all the daughters of song will grow dumb. But they will fear from high places, and will be afraid on the way, and the almond tree will blossom, and the locust will be flattened, and the caper berry will waste away, because the man will go into the home of his eternity, and they will go about mourning in the street.<sup>155</sup>

Starting in verse three, Jerome begins to draw very detailed comparisons between the ageing body and the decay of the city and its land. He states that "guardians of the house who have been moved" and the "men of strength" who have perished may be construed as "the ribs, because it is by them that the inward parts are walled in and all the softness of the belly is kept safe."<sup>156</sup> The strong men are understood to be the legs, while he matches the sun, moon, and stars that go dark in verse two with "the eyes, nostrils, ears, and the sense organs of the head as a whole."<sup>157</sup> The women who ceased to grind their flour refers actually to the teeth, "because in extreme old age the teeth, which grind up the food and pass it on to the stomach, either become worn or fall out."<sup>158</sup> Meanwhile, those women who looked through darkening chinks signify the eyes, "because in the very

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid., 127-129.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid., 128.

old sight becomes dim, and their vision is impaired.”<sup>159</sup> When the doors of the city are said to close up and down its streets, that is “to be taken of an old man’s impaired gait, because he is always sitting down and cannot walk.” The “lowness of the voice of the one grinding” represents the old man’s jaws, “being unable to chew the food, and to his breathing as being so restricted that a feeble voice can only just be heard.”<sup>160</sup>

From here the comparison becomes even more stretched, as Jerome contends that “getting up at the call of a bird” indicates that the ageing man “wakes up at a slight sound and hurries to get up in the middle of the night,” while the “daughters of song going dumb,” symbolize the ears going deaf.<sup>161</sup> The blossoming almond tree and the rotting caper berry each signify other aspects of ageing. Jerome maintains that the almond tree speaks to the fact that “with the onset of old age, the hair will go gray [and] the feet will swell.”<sup>162</sup> The caper berry wasting away signifies how “old men’s libidos grow cold and their sexual organs waste away.”<sup>163</sup> The point of this extended comparison becomes apparent when understood in connection with “vanity of vanities,” according to Jerome. This description of human mortality underscores for the reader that “it is serious vanity to be laboring in this present age over acquiring nothing that will be of any use on the Day of Judgment.”<sup>164</sup> Thus, it serves as another reminder that good works in this life count towards reward in the next.

The intricate symbolism employed by Jerome is nowhere present in Gregory Thaumaturgus’s paraphrase. Instead of treating the city as representing an aging body,

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid., 128-129.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> Jerome, *Commentarius in Ecclesiastes*, ed. Francesco Glori, 12.6-8, (my translation).

Gregory believes that this chapter speaks of God's wrath at the Second Coming. He in fact opens his paraphrase of chapter twelve with the statement, "You should fear the Lord while you are still young... before the great and terrible day of God comes."<sup>165</sup> Although he cites no source, Jerome's extended analogy can be read in parallel with the one given by targum, and the source of his exegesis here will become clear:

Before the bright splendor of your face, which may be compared with the sun, is changed and before the light of your eyes becomes blind and before the beauty of your cheeks becomes black and before the pupils of your eyes, which may be compared to the stars, become dim and your eyelids pour tears like clouds after rain. On the day that your knees will tremble and your arms will knock and the teeth of your mouth will become useless so that they are unable to chew food, so that your ribs begin to show, and your eyes, which look out of the opening of your head, will become dim. And your foot will be impeded from going out on the street because of your hobbled gait and your appetite for food will leave you and you will awaken from your sleep by the sound of a bird as if it were the sound of thieves who go about at night and your ears will no longer hear songs. Also you will be afraid to remember things that happened previously, and a small heap will be in your sight like a high mountain when you walk on the way and the top of your hair will gray because of deterioration like the almond tree and your ankles will be swollen and you will be prevented from having sexual intercourse. For man turns to go to the grave, and the angels who exact judgment go about like scribes in the street.<sup>166</sup>

## Conclusion

As the preceding analysis has shown, the Targum of Qohelet and the tradition of reinterpretation contained therein undoubtedly influenced Jerome's exegesis of Ecclesiastes significantly. Considering the his choice of biblical book to exposit and the time at which he began work on the commentary, Jerome quite likely intended to impress his audience with his exposition. Taking a book that seemingly argued against asceticism

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<sup>165</sup> Gregory Thaumaturgus, *Paraphrase of Ecclesiastes*, 289.

<sup>166</sup> *The Targum of Qohelet*, trans. Knobel, 52-53. Qohelet 12:2-5

and interpreting it as an exhortation to asceticism would have trumpeted Jerome's exegetical talents and taken away a source upon which his opponents could have drawn to make the case that scripture did not mandate a life of asceticism for Christians. To articulate this theology, however, Jerome required an interpretative key that showed him how to rework biblical texts that *prima facie* contradicted him. This key came in the form of the Targum of Qohelet, which, I have shown, he could easily have accessed.

How, then, does the fact that the Targum of Qohelet guided Jerome in his *Commentary on Ecclesiastes* inform our view of Jerome and his theology. First, Jerome was clearly in close contact with Jewish learning, and employing far more frequently, at the outset of his exegetical career than has been previously thought. J.N.D. Kelly, for instance, only believes that Jewish influence on Jerome's scriptural theology becomes prevalent in his later works on the major prophets, especially Jeremiah and Ezekiel.<sup>167</sup> Second, and perhaps more interestingly, Jerome was influenced by Jewish theology even in areas of his thought that were seemingly at odds with Jewish thought and belief. His radical asceticism, which ran counter to well-established Jewish teachings about the body and sexuality, were justified scripturally only through the prism of Jewish methods of exegesis!

While further research would be required to substantiate this final claim, it would not be beyond the bounds of credulity to assert that Jerome's asceticism was not a wholly Christian creation. His indebtedness to Syrian asceticism, which was itself deeply influenced by the tradition of Cynic philosophy, has already been discussed. Another, heretofore overlooked, element might very well be the tradition of Jewish learning and

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<sup>167</sup> Kelly, *Jerome*, 283-296.

theology upon which Jerome's exegesis of Ecclesiastes relied. Further research may yet reveal that Jerome's deep concern that an ascetic be a student of the scriptures betrays Jewish influence. Jerome was a man of contradictions: an introvert who led an extrovert's life, a man of bristling wit who was himself very sensitive to insults, an invalid who nonetheless worked tirelessly. Thus, to speak of Jerome's Jewish asceticism might actually encapsulate the paradoxical nature of this man.

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