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**SAINT JEROME AND *VERITAS HEBRAICA*
ON THE BASIS OF THE CORRESPONDENCE
WITH SAINT AUGUSTINE***

Saint Jerome is known most of all from the biblical commentaries as well as from *the Vulgate*, the Latin translation of the Bible. The change of the approach towards the Holy Bible suggested by Jerome is unquestionably one of the turning, just revolutionary, points for Church in the 4th and 5th centuries. This was the moment when the new text, which later on strengthened its undeniable position in the West, was introduced into the intellectual and liturgical circulation. In this translation, Jerome adopted the principle of returning to *veritas hebraica* as the superior one in the interpretation of the Old Testament. Jerome himself called the sense of the Hebrew text in this way and in the Middle Ages Jerome's translation was called *veritas hebraica*, as this was his favourite saying¹.

For Jerome, one of the biggest linguistic undertakings was to learn the Hebrew language. This man, later Doctor of the Church, was not only the first Latin-speaking Christian writer who started research into the Hebrew Bible; he was also the person who achieved such mastery in Hebrew that no other Christian writer – before and a few thousand years after him – could compete with him². This is how he modestly wrote about this in a letter to Marcella:

„Nos, ut scis, Hebraeorum lectione detenti, in Latina lingua rubiginem obduximus; in tantum, ut loquentibus quoque nobis stridor quidam non latinus interstreat. Unde ignosce ariditati”³.

He had the first lessons of Hebrew during his stay in the Syrian Desert (after 374) and then he was taught by some converted Jew⁴. He continued this

* The latin text is based on the corrected edition J. Migne's (PL 22) by H. Pietras: Hieronim ze Strydonu, *Listy*, The introduction and study, on the basis of the reverend Jan Czuj's polish translation, by M. Ożog, *ŻMT* 54 (1-50), 55 (51-79), 61 (80-115) Kraków 2010-2011.

¹ Cf. H. de Lubac, *Esegesi medievale*, Roma 1971, 437.

² Cf. J. Barr, *St Jerome's appreciation of Hebrew*, „Bulletin of the John Rylands Library” 49 (1966) 280-302.

³ *Epistula* 29, 7, PL 22, 441 or *ŻMT* 54, 131.

⁴ On the subject of the learning of Hebrew by Jerome cf. *Epistulae* 18, 15; 29, 7; 108, 26; 125, 12.

education in Bethlehem under Jew Bar Aninas who is told to have come to teach Jerome at night due to Aninas' fear of other Jews:

„Veni rursus Ierosolymam et Bethleem. Quo labore, quo pretio Baraninam nocturnum habui praeceptorem! Timebat enim Iudaeos, et mihi alterum exhibebat Nicodemum”⁵.

Usually, those lessons were private, not necessarily systematic and we know nothing about his teachers' pedagogical skills. Moreover, he tried very fervently to enrich his enormous library with the texts written just in this language⁶.

At the turn of the years 383 and 384, Jerome started the biggest work of his life, on which he was working for 20 years. At the end of the 4th century, the Latin translations of the Bible were the works of several dozens of translators and they were very inconsistent and abounding with errors. While being the secretary of Pope Damasus, Jerome – at Pope's request – prepared a uniform text of the Bible, starting from the Old Testament, in which he corrected the translation, drawing on the original version. This work was probably completed quite fast and this was the first part of the Latin Bible. Like in the case of the translation of the Old Testament – to be discussed later on – there were some objections. A great defender of the old Latin version who was against the Jerome's corrections of the Old Testament was Ambrosiaster⁷.

For Jerome, like for the majority of the Christians of the first centuries, it was certain that all languages had come from the Hebrew language which was to have been the only language until the construction of the Tower of Babel and by this it was more important than other tongues⁸. From *De viris illustribus* 135, written in 393, we learn that until this moment, Jerome had already translated the whole Holy Bible, however, when his tendencies to exaggeration are taken into consideration, we might doubt this⁹. In the letter written to Lucinus in 398, he claimed that the only part he had yet to translate was the Octateuch¹⁰. Taking into account Jerome's big involvement in the Origenism conflict, we might be rather sure that this translation was completed in the years 405-406 (a few months after Paula's death), as emerges from Pope Innocent I's letter¹¹.

⁵ *Epistula* 84, 3, PL 22, 745 or *ŽMT* 61 (in print); cf. J 3, 1; J.A. Loader, *Die Problematik des Begriffes hebraica veritas*, „Hervormde Teologiese Studies” 64 (2008) 241.

⁶ On the subject of quick rewriting of lent books from the synagogue cf. *Epistula* 36, 1.

⁷ Cf. H. Vogles, *Ambrosiaster und Hieronymus*, *RBen* 66 (1956) 16-19.

⁸ Cf. *Epistula* 18, 6, PL 22, 365 or *ŽMT* 54, 48: „Initium oris et communis eloquii, et hoc omne quod loquimur, Hebraeam linguam, qua vetus Testamentum scriptum est, universa antiquitas tradidit. Postquam vero in fabricatione turris per offensam Dei linguarum diversitas attributa est, tunc sermonis varietas in omnes dispersa est nationes”.

⁹ Cf. *De viris illustribus* 135, PL 23, 715-720.

¹⁰ Cf. *Epistula* 71, 5.

¹¹ Cf. Innocentius I, *Epistula* 6, 7, PL 20, 501-502.

Initially, he was not sure about the principles, according to which he should work. The conviction that the Hebrew original should constitute the basis for translation continually grew in him. For some time, he was neither ready nor willing to take up this challenge. His first intention was rather the correction of the accepted version of the Bible based on *the Septuagint*. And this improvement was to consist in using the tools of text criticism as well as in comparing this text with other Greek versions and the Hebrew original¹². Apart from *the Septuagint*, there were other Greek translations of the Bible: literal Aquila's version, free Symmachus' translation as well as the corrected edition of *the Septuagint* prepared by Theodotion. However, none of these texts was in sufficient conformity with the Hebrew original in order to be the basis for translation, as was claimed by Jerome. Furthermore, it was not enough only to correct the texts since there were too many mistakes. In the letter devoted to the explanation of Israel's stop places in the desert, he wrote the following:

„Prudentem studiosumque lectorem rogatum velim, ut sciat me vertere nomina iuxta Hebraicam Veritatem. Alioquin in Graecis et Latinis codicibus praeter pauca, omnia corrupta reperimus: et miror quosdam eruditos et Ecclesiasticos viros ea voluisse transferre, quae in Hebraico non habentur, et de male interpretatis, fictas explanationes quaerere, ut in praesenti pro Dephca, legant Rephca, litteram ponentes pro littera, eo quod res et deleth parvo apice, distinguantur, et interpretantur curationem: atque exinde tropologiam similem prosequuntur”¹³.

The order of translating particular portions of the text depended on the current requests of friends and his needs. He probably started from the Books of Samuel and the Books of Kings¹⁴. Then, he worked on Psalms, the books of prophets and the Book of Job. He had some problems with the translation of the Book of Job and he wrote about them in *the Letter to Pammachius* in 393¹⁵. The system of translation was to consist in the translation of the original sense without making references to the literal meaning which – according to Jerome – was not comprehensible for ordinary people. He justified his position in the following way, writing about his translation of those Books:

„[...] Ecclesiastica interpretatio, etiam si habet eloquii venustatem, dissimulare eam debet et fugere, ut non otiosis philosophorum scholis paucisque discipulis, sed universo loquatur hominum generi”¹⁶.

¹² Cf. S. Rebenich, *Jerome: The „Vir Trilinguis” and the „Hebraica Veritas”*, VigCh 47 (1993) 50-77.

¹³ Cf. *Epistula* 78, 11, PL 22, 705-706 or *ŽMT* 55, 213.

¹⁴ The doubt what to their precedence cf. F. Cavallera, *Saint Jérôme: sa vie et son oeuvre*, vol. 2, Louvain 1922, 28.

¹⁵ Cf. *Epistula* 48, PL 22, 493-511 or *ŽMT* 54, 197-198.

¹⁶ *Epistula* 48 (49), 4, PL 22, 512 or *ŽMT* 54, 198.

He also gave the translations diacritics already used in the Origen's *Hexapla*, which he on many occasions consulted, as well as in the copies of the Holy Bible prepared under the guidance of Eusebius of Caesarea on the basis of Origen¹⁷.

An important result of Jerome's conversion into *veritas hebraica* was his adoption of the Hebrew canon – the list of the books regarded by the Jews as belonging to the Bible which do not coincide with the canon of *the Septuagint* accepted by Church. The intensive biblical studies he was carrying out for many decades made him believe that irrespective of how radical and revolutionary his position was, the only correct translation was the one which expressed the meaning of the Hebrew original¹⁸. Jerome did not know that *the Septuagint* was older than the Hebrew text used in his times because this text was determined by rabbis only at the end of the 1st century in Jamne or even later¹⁹. Before that, it was undisputable that the text of *LXX* was equally authoritative, or even more, as the Hebrew one. And it was so not only in the Christians' view but also in the Alexandria Jews' view, who made a legend about its creation: in the times of king Ptolemy II Philadelphus (285-246), 72 (or 70) translators who had been invited by the king from Jerusalem were to have translated the text identically²⁰.

At this point it is worth stressing that the selection of the Hebrew original as the basis for translation does not mean that Jerome rejected the whole value of *the Septuagint*. He highlighted that he continually drew on it in order to find the spiritual sense and he used it in liturgy²¹. For this purpose, as he claimed in the letter to Lucinius, he corrected the text in its entirety²² and the Psalter was translated by him separately, besides the translation from the Hebrew language²³.

What was essential to him was that refuting the arguments of the Jewish critics of Christianity could be effective only when the discussion would be

¹⁷ Cf. *Epistula* 104, 3, PL 22, 833: „[...] ubi tamen asteriscis notasti, quae in Hebraeo sunt, et in Graeco desunt; obeliscis autem, quae in Graeco inveniuntur, et in Hebraeo non sunt: tam mirabili diligentia, ut quibusdam in locis ad singula verba singulas stellas videamus, significantes eadem verba esse in Hebraeo, in Graeco autem non esse”.

¹⁸ Cf. Loader, *Die Problematik des Begriffes hebraica veritas*, p. 233.

¹⁹ Cf. M. Wojciechowski, *Kanon biblijny*, in: *Encyklopedia Religii*, vol. 5, Warszawa 2002, 345-346.

²⁰ Cf. Apocryphon: *Aristeae Epistula*, ed. A. Pellettier, SCh 89, Paris 1962, transl. in polish M. Wojciechowski: *List Arysteasza*, STV 40 (2002) 121-167; M. Müller, *Hebraica sive Graeca Veritas. The Jewish Bible at the time of the New Testament and the Christian Bible*, „Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament” 3 (1989) 55-71; idem, *Graeca sive hebraica veritas? The defence of the Septuagint in the early Church*, ibidem 3 (1989) 103-124.

²¹ Cf. Hieronymus, *Apologia adversus libros Rufini* II 24, PL 23, 447-448, transl. in polish S. Ryznar, PSP 51, Warszawa 1989, 84.

²² Cf. *Epistula* 71, 5, PL 22, 671 or *ŽMT* 55, 173: „Septuaginta interpretum editionem et te habere non dubito; et ante annos plurimos diligentissime emendatam, studiosis tradidi”.

²³ Cf. *Epistula* 106, 2. To Sunniasa and Fretela.

based on such text of the Old Testament which would be regarded as authentic by both parties. Noticing the differences between the Hebrew and Greek texts, Christians were prone to say that the Jews had committed frauds. On the other hand, Jerome wanted to prevent the Jews from levelling charges against Church which, as they thought, falsified the Bible²⁴. We can find the example of this in the discussions about the Book of Daniel and the story of Susanna included only in the Greek version. The correspondence on this topic between Julius Africanus and Origen also bears witness to this²⁵.

Jerome also paid attention to the differences between the Hebrew text and *LXX* probably while consulting the Origen's *Hexapla*²⁶. Residing in Bethlehem, he had an easier access to the Caesarean library where this work was kept. When he commented upon the books of the Bible, the dependence on Origen referred him to the first column in *the Hexapla*; it also helped him to translate and complement the *Onomasticon* by Eusebius of Cesarea, which resulted in such philological works as *Liber interpretationis hebraicorum nominum*²⁷.

Of course, in the acceptance of such a position, there were many objections and controversies. A dilemma arose: should Church agree to the translation from Hebrew, as Jerome wanted, or should Church defend the canonicity of the *Septuagint*, as did, among others, Saint Augustine. The importance of the Greek text which was better than the Hebrew one was also touched upon by Rufinus of Aquileia in his interpretation of the *Church history* by Eusebius:

„Per idem tempus erat etiam Africanus vir inter scriptores ecclesiasticos nobilis. huius epistula fertur ad Origenem scripta obicientis ei vel proponentis, quod historia Susannae, quae in Danihelo scripta est, ficta videatur et aliena ab scriptura prophetica. cui Origenes magnificentissime rescribens adserit nequaquam Iudaeorum commentis et fraudibus auscultandum, sed hoc solum pro vero habendum in scripturis divinis, quod septuaginta interpretes transtulissent, quoniam id esset auctoritate apostolica confirmatum”²⁸.

Rufinus was, as a matter of fact, sceptical about Jerome's plans²⁹ and the fact that a friend was in favour of the Hebrew truths, so to speak, signalled the break-up of friendly relations.

On the basis of the correspondence between Augustine and Jerome, we know that the former put pressure on Jerome so that he, while translating the

²⁴ Cf. Hieronymus, *Apologia adversus libros Rufini* III 25, PL 23, 476, PSP 51, 124.

²⁵ Cf. *Epistula Julii Africani ad Origenem; Epistula Origenia ad Julium Africanum*, ed. N. De Lange, SCh 302, 514-573, transl. in polish S. Kalinkowski, ed. H. Pietras, ŻMT 6, Kraków 1997, 62-84.

²⁶ Cf. M. Simonetti, *Między dosłownością a alegorią*, MT 26, Kraków, WAM 2000, 331.

²⁷ PL 23, 771-859; CCL 72, 57-161 (ed. P. de Lagarde).

²⁸ Eusebius, HE VI 31, ed. E. Schwartz, GCS 9, 585, 25 - 587, 3.

²⁹ Cf. Rufinus, *Apologia contra Hieronymum* II 32, CCL 20, 107, transl. in polish A. Smaroń, ŻMT 29, Kraków 2003, 121.

Old Testament, did not use the Hebrew text. He claimed that he should not withdraw from the *Septuagint* in the form revised by Origen and included in Origen's *Hexapla*, with the addition of diacritics, as he did in the translation of the Book of Job³⁰. In this way, the differences from the Hebrew version would be highlighted. While giving arguments for his dislike for the Hebrew translation, Augustine stressed that:

„Perdurum enim erit, si tua interpretatio per multas Ecclesias frequentius coeperit lectitari, quod a Graecis Ecclesiis Latinae Ecclesiae dissonabunt, maxime quia facile contradictor convincitur, Graeco prolato libro, id est linguae notissimae. Quisquis autem in eo quod ex Hebraeo translatum est, aliquo insolito permotus fuerit, et falsi crimen intenderit, aut vix, aut nunquam ad Hebraea testimonia pervenietur, quibus defendatur obiectum. Quod si etiam perventum fuerit, tot Latinas et Graecas auctoritates damnari quis ferat? Huc accedit, quia etiam consulti Hebraei possunt aliud respondere; ut tu solus necessarius videaris, qui etiam ipsos possis convincere: sed tamen quo iudice, mirum si potueris invenire”³¹.

Augustine was of the opinion that the authority of *LXX* was indisputable and it resulted from the translators' unanimity and from the divergences existing in minor versions based on the Hebrew text. According to him, it showed the possibility of the occurrence of errors also in the Jerome's translation. To support this thesis, he quoted an event which had taken place in one of the African churches where reading based on the Jerome's translation was introduced. The congregation, accustomed to the former example, started to fight claiming that the Bible was falsified. Then, they required the testimony of the Jews who stated that the Hebrew texts contained the same as did the Latin and Greek texts. The bishop, fearing that he might lose some followers, had to correct the disputable fragment³². Augustine made Jerome aware of the fact that he himself might have been mistaken. He wrote:

„Et vide hoc quale sit, in eis litteris, quae non possunt collatis usitatarum linguarum testimoniis emendari”³³.

Replying to this accusation, Jerome claimed that the disputable word which Jerome had allegedly translated was not mentioned and therefore he himself had no possibility of defending his own text³⁴. Moreover, he claimed that:

„Sin autem Iudaei vestri, ut ipse asseris, malitia vel imperitia, hoc dixerunt esse in voluminibus Hebraeorum, quod in Graecis et Latinis codicibus con-

³⁰ In the fifth column there was a critical text of the Septuagint with diacritics which showed the places where the Greek text, as compared with the Hebrew one, contained unnecessary words or gaps, cf. *Epistulae* 57, 11; 56, 2; 54, 3.

³¹ Augustinus, *Epistula* 104 (ad Hieronymum), 4, PL 22, 833 or *ŽMT* 61 (in print).

³² Cf. *Ion* 4, 6.

³³ *Epistula* 104, 5, PL 22, 834 or *ŽMT* 61 (in print).

³⁴ Cf. *Epistula* 112, 22, PL 22, 930 or *ŽMT* 61 (in print).

tinetur, manifestum est eos aut Hebraeas litteras ignorare, aut ad irridendos cucurbitarios voluisse mentiri³⁵.

„Sin autem amicus qui me primus gladio petiit, stylo repulsus est; sit humanitatis tuae atque iustitiae accusantem reprehendere, non respondentem. In Scripturarum si placet campo sine nostro invicem dolore ludamus³⁶.

Among many critical voices, Jerome asserted that his aim was certainly not the reduction of the role of the old translation; he only aimed at making the unclear places understandable as well as at restoring what had fallen out of the text or what had been eliminated as a result of copyists' errors. Some time later, he proved that there would have been no need for another translation if the *Septuagint* had been kept in its primary purity, however, the diversity of the more or less corrupted translations, when other essential issues are left out, made this reform necessary. In the letter to Pammachius, Jerome wrote that the difference between the old and new translations was very crucial:

„Lege eundem Graecum et Latinum et veterem editionem nostrae translationi compara, et liquido pervidebis, quantum distet inter veritatem et mendacium³⁷.

Augustine was surprised that in the Hebrew copies there was something that could have escaped the translators' attentions, omitting the Seventy translators whose skills had been and were undisputable³⁸. He wrote that if they had made a mistake in something, there was no reason to believe that it was just Jerome who was to do the correct translation. He wrote the following:

„Si enim obscura sunt, te quoque in illis falli potuisse creditur: si autem manifesta, illos in eis falli potuisse non creditur. Huius igitur rei pro tua caritate expositis causis, certum me facias obsecraverim³⁹.

To this, Jerome replied:

„Omnes veteres tractatores qui nos in Domino praecesserunt, et qui Scripturas sanctas interpretati sunt, aut obscura interpretati sunt, aut manifesta. Si obscura, quomodo tu ausus es post eos disserere, quod illi explanare non potuerunt?

³⁵ *Epistula* 112, 22, PL 22, 931 or *ŽMT* 61 (in print).

³⁶ *Epistula* 115, 1, PL 22, 935 or *ŽMT* 61 (in print).

³⁷ *Epistula* 48, 4, PL 22, 512 or *ŽMT* 54, 198.

³⁸ Cf. *Epistula* 56, 2, PL 22, 566, *ŽMT* 55, 54: „Omitto enim Septuaginta, de quorum vel consilii, vel maiore spiritus concordia, quam si unus homo esset, non audeo in aliquam partem certam ferre sententiam; nisi quod eis praeeminentem auctoritatem in hoc munere sine controversia tribuendam existimo. Illi me plus movent, qui cum posteriores interpretarentur, et verborum locutionumque Hebraearum viam atque regulas mordicus (ut fertur) tenerent, non solum inter se non consenserunt; sed etiam reliquerunt multa, quae tanto post eruenda et prodenda remanent”.

³⁹ *Ibidem*.

Si manifesta, superfluum est te voluisse disserere, quod illos latere non potuit: maxime in explanatione Psalmorum [...]. Respondeat mihi prudentia tua, quare tu post tantos et tales Interpretes in explanatione Psalmorum diversa senseris⁴⁰.

Defending his translations, he wrote that everybody could select what to read and nobody was forced to read this translation:

„Ego enim non tam vetera abolere conatus sum, quae linguae meae hominibus emendata de Graeco in Latinum transtuli, quam ea testimonia quae a Iudaeis praetermissa sunt vel corrupta, proferre in medium; ut scirent nostri quid Hebraica Veritas contineret. Si cui legere non placet, nemo compellit invitum. Bibat vinum vetus cum suavitate, et nostra musta contemnat, quae in explanatione priorum edita sunt; ut sicubi illa non intelliguntur, ex nostris manifestiora fiant⁴¹.”

The new version of the Old Testament was the biggest literary achievement of that time, along with the previously corrected edition of the Gospel. In the West, it was being accepted gradually from the 6th century to the 9th century. As the *Vulgate*, it made a huge impact not only on religiousness but also on European languages and literature. Jerome prided himself on this and appealed to the readers to compare it with the original. Even Augustine himself admitted that the Jews who had considered the *Septuagint* full of errors, recognised the accuracy of the Jerome's translation⁴².

Despite the fact that Jerome was convinced that his new translation faithfully gave the spirit of the original, modern scholars have a number of doubts in this respect. The main accusation is the fact that many paragraphs were translated in such a way as to give them a more messianic and Christian sense, more than the Hebrew original allows for that. Sometimes Jerome shortened a too boring text in the places where – in the Hebrew version – there was some vagueness. He also concealed inconsistencies or altered inconvenient phrases. He added his own explanations, as well. The books which were translated as the last ones are characterised by greater freedom of translation.

Portly, short-tempered and not really liked by his family and friends, Jerome became the symbol of the enormousness of work that an individual could do. The translation of the Holy Bible from the Hebrew language, which he did, was not only a colossal linguistic enterprise but it was also something difficult to imagine for his contemporaries. The turn of the 4th and 5th centuries gained by his person the name of the revolutionary period in the area of reading and thinking about the word written on the pages of the Holy Book. The

⁴⁰ *Epistula* 112, 20, PL 22, 928-929 or *ŽMT* 61 (in print).

⁴¹ *Epistula* 112, 20, PL 22, 929 or *ŽMT* 61 (in print).

⁴² Cf. Augustinus, *De civitate Dei* XVIII 43; Loader, *Die Problematik des Begriffes hebraica veritas*, p. 241.

monumental accomplishment of one person who – despite the controversies he gave rise to among Jerome’s contemporary intellectual circles – marked for a dozen or so centuries not only the manner of understanding the Bible but also the approach to its translation.

ŚWIĘTY HIERONIM A *VERITAS HEBRAICA* NA PODSTAWIE
KORESPONDENCJI ZE ŚWIĘTYM AUGUSTYNYM

(Streszczenie)

Świętego Hieronima znamy przede wszystkim z komentarzy biblijnych oraz z *Vulgaty*, łacińskiego przekładu Biblii. Zmiana podejścia do Pisma Świętego zaproponowana przez Hieronima to bezsprzecznie jeden z momentów przełomowych, wręcz rewolucyjnych dla Kościoła IV i V wieku, moment wprowadzenia do intelektualnego i liturgicznego obiegu nowego tekstu, który z czasem utrwalił swą niezaprzeczalną pozycję na Zachodzie. W przekładzie tym Hieronim przyjął zasadę powrotu do *veritas hebraica*, jako nadrzędnej w interpretacji Starego Testamentu. Oczywiście w akceptacji tego stanowiska od razu pojawiło się wiele sprzeciwów oraz kontrowersji. Powstał dylemat: czy tłumaczyć z hebrajskiego jak chciał Hieronim, czy bronić kanoniczności Septuaginty, której podjął się św. Augustyn. W niniejszym artykule epizod ten, na podstawie korespondencji Hieronima z Augustynem, zostanie przedstawiony jako jeden z momentów przełomowych tego okresu, który utrwalił niezaprzeczalną pozycję tego tłumaczenia na Zachodzie.

