

JEROME

Stefan Rebenich



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1
FROM STRIDON TO AQUILEIA
Between Career and Conversion

Men of letters often make their way into the civil service.

Symmachus

At the end of the fourth century AD, Jerome contemplated writing a history in which he would show how the church during this period 'increased in influence and in wealth but decreased in virtue'.¹ In the course of his lifetime, Jerome experienced the rapid transformation of the Christian church in Roman society and the Christianization of the imperial government. After the end of the Great Persecution (311) and especially from the moment of Constantine's promotion of the new religion (312–13), the Christian communities acquired legal privileges and financial benefits from the emperor. The bishops, who received rights of civil jurisdiction, gained much power and influence in the cities. More and more members of the urban and provincial elites were attracted by the prospect of an ecclesiastical career, and many of the ordinary people in the cities were Christianized by the second half of the fourth century. Christian communities flourished, new churches were erected, institutions of charity were founded. Christian culture, based upon the Bible and traditional learning, became more elaborate, better-off Christians travelled to the holy places in Palestine, and the ascetic movement fascinated many true believers.

At the same time, Christian congregations all over the Roman Empire were fragmented through religious divisions. Violence and intimidation were frequent, and many cities saw riots over the election of a bishop.² In Africa, where Christianity was strong, the dispute between Catholic and Donatist parties forced Constantine to intervene soon after he became senior ruler (312). The conflict started when the latter group refused to accept the bishop of Carthage in about 311 on the grounds that his consecrator had surrendered the Scriptures in the Diocletianic persecution. In spite of several interventions of the state, the schism persisted during the fourth century. During his reign, Constantine was also confronted with the teaching of Arius, a priest of Alexandria, who distinguished the divine status of God the Father from that of the Son. His doctrine was strongly opposed and condemned by other theologians. The contending parties, however, appealed to Constantine who summoned, in 325, the Council of Nicaea (now Iznik) to settle the dispute. There, the opponents of Arianism defined the Catholic faith in the consubstantiality of Father and Son, using the famous term *homoousios*. The emperor took an active part in the discussion since his policy was to unite the Christian church to the secular state in order to stabilize the newly unified Empire. Thus, he enforced the *homoousios* formula, condemned Arius, and deposed two insubordinate bishops. But, soon, Constantine began to waver and banished some prominent advocates of the Nicene Creed. Therefore, the Arian question was not solved and remained open until Theodosius implemented a strictly Nicene definition of orthodoxy at the beginning of the 380s.

When Jerome was born in 347,³ Athanasius, the ferocious chief opponent of Arianism, had just returned from exile to his see in Alexandria. The influence of Constantine's son, Constans, who ruled the western part of the Empire, helped to restore him against the will of his brother Constantius, emperor in the east, who openly embraced Arianism.⁴ Jerome grew up in an obscure town called Stridon, which was located somewhere on the border between the Roman provinces of Dalmatia and Pannonia and within easy reach of Aquileia and Emona (Ljubljana/Laibach).⁵ Later, when he ardently campaigned for asceticism, he complained about the rusticity and religious indifference that were to be found in his own country: 'Men's only God is their belly. People live only for the day, and the richer you are the more saintly you are held to be.'⁶ Although Jerome's parents were Christians, who took care that he had been, as a baby, 'nourished on Catholic milk',⁷ he was not baptized as a child in Stridon, but as a young man in Rome. In those days, baptism was postponed until maturity, or even until one's deathbed, for fear of the responsibilities incurred by it. Augustine and Jerome's friends, Rufinus and Heliodorus, are parallel cases.⁸

Jerome's father Eusebius, like so many other parents, both Christian and pagan, invested in the tuition of his son to prepare the ground for a future career. The family owned property around Stridon and was well off; slaves belonged to the household and nurses took care of the children. We hear of a younger brother named Paulinianus and a sister. Later, Jerome recalled to memory how he romped about the young servants' cells, how he spent his holidays in play, and how he had to be dragged like a captive from his grandmother's lap to the lessons of his enraged teacher.⁹ Jerome may have attended the elementary school

in his hometown. The syllabus was rather modest and consisted of reading and writing and some arithmetic. We know from Augustine's *Confessions* that late antique teaching was not very sophisticated. Pupils were forced to chant 'One and one are two, two and two are four'; the main stimulus was the *ferula* (the cane), and educational theory focused on coercion and punishment.¹⁰ 'Who is there who would not recoil in horror and choose death, if he was asked to choose between dying and going back to his childhood!'¹¹ Jerome would certainly have joined in the lamentation of the aged bishop of Hippo.

Still, the detestable experience of primary school was the first step towards the advanced education that was the privilege of the elites of the Roman Empire, and a classical training was of vital importance for recruitment into the imperial bureaucracy. Ambitious and affluent parents were prepared to send their children first to the school of the *grammaticus*, who advanced the study of language and literature, and then, at the age of fifteen or sixteen, to the rhetor, who introduced the students into the theory and practice of declamation. There were, of course, remarkable regional and social differences in these schools. Whereas Augustine's father, a member of the municipal council of Thagaste in Numidia, was hardly able to pay for his son's education in North Africa, Jerome was allowed to go to Rome to attend the classes of the best teachers the Latin speaking world could provide. Many years later, Jerome mentioned in a letter to a young monk from Toulouse that the latter's mother, when sending her son to Rome, spared no expense and consoled herself for her son's absence by the thought of the future that lay before him.¹² Jerome's father was also prepared to make the economic sacrifice, since he was convinced that exclusive tuition would be the key to his son's success. Three other young provincial careerists joined Jerome in Rome: his friend Bonosus, who came from Stridon or a neighbouring village, Rufinus of Concordia (close to Aquileia), and Heliodorus of Altinum. All of them were Christians, enjoyed their student life, but also visited the shrines of the martyrs and the Apostles on Sundays.¹³ After they had finished their studies, the fellow-pupils remained in close contact.

In 'the renowned city, the capital of the Roman Empire',¹⁴ Jerome was taught by the famous grammarian Aelius Donatus,¹⁵ and then went to a Roman school of rhetoric. His student years in Rome were essential to his intellectual formation. All his later work reveals the brilliant pupil who is proud of his language, style, and dialectic. He closely studied the classics and may have picked up some Greek.¹⁶ Whether he had already followed lectures on philosophy in Rome is difficult to say. But when he left the *Urbs*, he was undoubtedly well acquainted with the traditional canon of Latin authors who are ubiquitous throughout his oeuvre. Jerome also started to build up with immense zeal and labour his own library, which, though initially restricted to classical authors, soon also housed Christian texts.¹⁷

The provincial parvenu shared his bibliophilia with Christian senators, who stored in their libraries copies of classical texts and magnificent manuscripts of the Bible.¹⁸ Rome, the centre of the old senatorial aristocracy, also offered Jerome the possibility of getting in touch with influential friends, *amici maiores*, who were always important for social promotion. He and his friends from northern Italy met the young aristocrat Pammachius, who belonged to the illustrious *gens Furia*, and perhaps Melania the Elder, whose husband was prefect of Rome from 361 to 363. Both Jerome and Rufinus profited through all their life from the contacts with the Christian nobility of Rome that they had established during their years of study at the end of the 350s and the beginning of the 360s.

It was now up to Jerome, *bene uti litteris*, as Augustine once said,¹⁹ to make the best out of his education. Hence, Jerome, after his graduation, moved, together with his friend Bonosus, to Augusta Treverorum (Trier). Although Jerome does not tell us the motives for this journey to Gaul in his later writings, there cannot be any doubt that the two young men intended to make careers in Trier, which was at that time both an imperial residence and an administrative centre. In Ausonius' *The Order of Famous Cities*, written c.388–9, Trier comes sixth, after Rome, Constantinople, Carthage, Antioch, Alexandria, and just ahead of Milan.²⁰ The tetrarchs had based the Gallic prefecture there, and, throughout the fourth century, it accommodated various emperors and their entourages. Valentinian I, who was elected emperor in Nicaea in February 364, reached Trier in October 367, where he concentrated on frontier defence, fought against the Alamanni, and rebuilt the fortifications on the Rhine. Soon after his arrival, Ausonius, who had been teaching grammar and rhetoric in Burdigala (Bordeaux) for 30 years, was summoned to Trier and appointed tutor of the emperor's son and heir, Gratian. Valentinian was known for promoting professors and bureaucrats, and, after his death in 375, Ausonius went on to enjoy a remarkable career, securing family and friends positions of influence at the imperial court. He himself gained a praetorian prefecture and the consulship of 379.²¹

The ambitious and talented son of a rich landowner in Stridon must have hoped that the liberal arts he had studied in Rome would help him to get a post in the imperial bureaucracy. Such an appointment was the passport to success and ascent into the governing classes. It seems that Jerome decided to go to the right place at the right time. Valentinian's court was an important cultural and political centre in the west and a catalyst of social mobility, where an exclusive group of new functionaries was formed. Service at court promised economic success and social prestige, offered relative security, and could even promote the 'courtier' to the highest ranks of the Empire.

As we know, Jerome did not end as a bureaucrat at the imperial court. The intended career was abruptly stopped through a religious awakening. What happened? Once again, we have no testimony from Jerome himself, who only mentions some years later that he purchased Christian texts and theological treatises for his ever-growing library.²² A revealing account of a conversion at Trier is also to be found in Augustine's *Confessions*: that of two court officials, *agentes in rebus*, who, while walking through the gardens on the fringe of Trier, happened to meet two hermits who possessed a copy of the *Life of Antony*

by Athanasius.²³ The two friends were captivated by the inspirational biography and spontaneously decided to embrace an ascetic life, giving up their worldly employment (*militia saecularis*) to serve God. ‘What is our motive in doing service? Can our hopes in court rise higher than to be friends of the emperor (*amici principis*)?’ they asked, and came to the conclusion that they should ‘become a friend of God (*amicus dei*).’²⁴ It has been suggested that the office-holders mentioned in Augustine were Jerome and Bonosus.²⁵ This ingenious hypothesis cannot be confirmed, especially since Augustine’s stylized story describes an exemplary conversion. But Jerome’s withdrawal from the imperial service may be imagined in a similar way. In Trier, he could have come across the popular Latin version of the *Life of Antony*, which spread through the west, and may have experienced new forms of Christian living in an area where, in those days, the first monasteries were founded.

His dedication to the ascetic life was a major event, powerful and overwhelming. But, in his later work, Jerome did not reflect upon his conversion. Instead, he describes another episode that has always fascinated later generations: his famous dream. We find an impressive account of this event in letter 22, which encouraged the young Roman lady Eustochium to devote herself to virginity and warned her against overestimating the relevance of classical education:

Many years ago when, for the kingdom of heaven’s sake, I had cut myself off from home, parents, sister, relations, and, what was harder, from the dainty food to which I had been accustomed, and when I was on my way to Jerusalem to wage my warfare, I still could not bring myself to forego the library which I had formed for myself at Rome with great care and labour. And so, miserable man that I was, I would fast only that I might afterwards read Cicero. After many nights spent in vigil, after floods of tears called from my inmost heart in recollection of my past sins, I would once more take up Plautus. And when at times I returned to my right mind and began to read the prophets, their style seemed rude and repellent. With my blinded eyes I could not see the light; but I attributed the fault not to them, but to the sun. While the old serpent was thus making me his plaything, about the middle of Lent a fever attacked my weakened body, and while it destroyed my rest completely—the story seems hardly credible—it so wasted my unhappy frame that my bones scarcely held together. Meantime, preparations for my funeral went on; my body grew gradually colder, and the warmth of life lingered only in my poor throbbing breast. Suddenly I was caught up in the spirit and dragged before the judgment seat of the Judge; and here the light was so bright, and those who stood around were so radiant, that I cast myself upon the ground and did not dare to look up. I was asked to state my condition and replied: ‘I am a Christian.’ But he who presided said: ‘You lie, you are a follower of Cicero and not of Christ (*Ciceronianus es, non Christianus*). For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also (cf. Matthew 6.21).’ Instantly, I became dumb, and amid the strokes of the lash—for he had ordered me to be scourged—I was even more severely tortured by the fire of conscience, considering with myself that verse, ‘In the grave who will give you thanks?’ (Psalm 6.5). Yet for all that I began to cry and to lament, saying: ‘Have mercy upon me, O Lord: have mercy upon me.’ Amid the sound of the scourges my voice made itself heard. At last the bystanders, falling down before the knees of him who presided, prayed that he would have pity on my youth and that he would give me opportunity to repent of my error, on the agreement that torture should be inflicted on me, if I ever again read the works of gentile authors. Under the stress of that awful moment, I should have been willing to make still larger promises than these. Accordingly I took an oath and called upon his name, saying: ‘Lord, if ever again I possess worldly books or read them, I have denied you.’ After taking this oath I was dismissed and returned to the upper world. There, to the surprise of all, I opened again eyes so drenched with tears that my distress served to convince even the incredulous. That this was no sleep nor idle dream, such as often mock us, I call to witness the tribunal before which I fell down and the verdict which I feared. May it never be my lot again to come before such a court! I profess that my shoulders were black and blue, that I felt the bruises long after I awoke from my sleep, and that henceforth I read the books of God with a greater zeal than I had previously given to the books of men.²⁶

Domine, si umquam habuero codices saeculares, si legero, te negavi—‘Lord, if ever again I possess worldly books or read them, I have denied you.’ It is obvious that Jerome lied—without blushing in embarrassment. Of course he read pagan authors after his vow.²⁷ Still, this dramatic story, full of classical rhetoric, might reflect a real experience, which Jerome later inserted into and embellished in his treatise on virginity. The exact setting and date of the celebrated dream is controversial. Some place it at the beginning of the 370s at Antioch on the Orontes, others three or four years later in the desert of Chalcis. There is, however, reason to think that this episode occurred in Trier when Jerome realized that his initial ambitions of a secular career, and his new yearning for an ascetic life, could not come together.²⁸ His conversion was followed by the radical negation of his former conduct and implied the revocation of his classical (i.e. ‘gentile’) education and the subsequent study of the Bible and Christian authors. The dream’s narrative, in other words, focuses on the one consequence of the ascetic reorientation that was most agonizing for Jerome, who was a traditionally trained intellectual and highly talented writer. We may conclude that this magnificent piece of showmanship refers to Jerome’s decision to serve God taken in Trier in about 370.

After his conversion, Jerome stayed for some time in northern Italy. We are not able to reconstruct his itinerary and the chronology of this period, but, from the scattered evidence, it can be deduced that he wished, and tried, to live a life according

to ascetic ideals, and established contacts with like-minded Christians. Thus, he got in touch with a monastic circle at Aquileia, the capital of the province of Venetia and Istria. After Rome and Trier, it was again an urban centre that attracted Jerome. Others followed in due course: Antioch on the Orontes, Constantinople, and Rome again. The first decades of his life were formed through stays in major cities and imperial residences.

During the second half of the fourth century, northern Italy and southern Gaul saw the growth of the ascetic movement and the development of monastic life. Church politicians, pilgrims, and exiles—Athanasius and Peter of Alexandria, Hilary of Poitiers and Eusebius of Vercelli—either leaving or returning from the east brought a wealth of information into the west and conveyed different eastern models of ascetic living. The eremitic tradition of asceticism represented by the Latin translation of the *Life of Antony* mentioned above now became immensely influential. Ascetic conduct turned out to be more austere, seclusion from communal life was demanded, and spiritual perfection in solitary contemplation required. The contemporary debate on orthodoxy and the Arian conflict also had a strong impact on the ascetic movement, since the fight against heresy and self-imposed ascetic perfection were interrelated, and ascetic propaganda was manipulated for ecclesiastical politics. In this environment, a new type of church politician appeared: the ‘monk-bishop’. As we can, for instance, deduce from the *Life of Martin* by Sulpicius Severus, the *moine-évêque* combined pastoral and ascetic life, defended the orthodox tradition, and was vested with spiritual authority.²⁹ Jerome’s further career, which led him to become one of the most influential Christian writers of his time, is only to be understood in the context of the gradual emergence of occidental monasticism.

From an entry in Jerome’s *Chronicle*, we learn that, in the year 374, a group of clerics founded a monastery in Aquileia. Their monastic programme was perhaps influenced by the coenobitic community that Eusebius, the bishop of Vercelli, had introduced upon his return from exile.³⁰ Jerome and his friends communicated with ascetic clerics and monks in the region of Aquileia, Vercelli, Concordia, and Emona.³¹ A very close acquaintance was the presbyter Chromatius, a learned scholar, who seems to have lived together with his relatives in an informally organized ascetic community. Chromatius’ widowed mother denied herself a second marriage, and his sisters vowed themselves to virginity. Such quasi-monastic households were popular at this time among pious Christians in northern Italy. Chromatius’ brother, the deacon Eusebius, instructed Rufinus, Jerome’s fellow-student, for baptism.³² At the beginning of the 370s, Aquileia was a stronghold of Nicene orthodoxy and the bishop Valerian gained much influence, since Milan, the nearby imperial residence, was controlled by the Homoeans, an Arian party that was led by the bishop Auxentius.³³ Even after having moved to the east, Jerome remained in touch with the Aquileian circle, whose other members were the archdeacon Jovinus, the subdeacon Niceas, and the monk Chrysocomas. After his conversion, Jerome immediately built up a network of influential clerics based upon ascetic commitment and orthodox zeal. The form and intention of these personal contacts remained traditional. The ascetically orientated Christians from the educated classes, like their pagan compeers, banded together with their social equals and looked for powerful patrons. Old friends were used for establishing new friendships. Jerome’s seventh letter to Chromatius and his family shows that the combination of the ascetic profession and the battle against heterodoxy was the principal constituent of this interconnection. What Jerome missed in his own country, he found in Aquileia: ‘Though every day you confess Christ by keeping his commandments, you have added to this private glory the public fame of an open confession, and it was by your efforts in the past that the poison of the Arian heresy was expelled from your city.’³⁴

During his stay in northern Italy, Jerome intensified his commitment to the ascetic movement and became acquainted with divergent patterns of ascetic living. Some Christians stayed together as clerics in monastic or quasi-monastic groups, some founded coenobitic communities fulfilling ascetic commitment, and others pursued their religious perfection in eremitic privation. The ascetic convert sought a form of ascetic living that appeared to him to be acceptable. At the same time, his new companions in Aquileia introduced him to the correlation between Christian learning, asceticism, and orthodoxy (i.e. the Nicene definition of orthodoxy). All those not willing to endorse his interpretation of a Christian life were ostracized, like the rustic inhabitants and lukewarm Christians of his hometown Stridon. Prepared in such a way, Jerome decided suddenly to go on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

ANTIOCH AND CHALCIS

The Making of an Ascetic Champion

La force de ses tentations me fait plus d'envie que sa pénitence ne me fait peur.

Nicolas Chamfort

In the early 370s, Jerome, accompanied by some friends, left northern Italy and set out for the east. Trouble with his relatives, who may have been deeply disappointed at the complete failure of his secular career, and quarrels within the Aquileian group of devout clerics about the best possible form of ascetic self-fulfilment forced Jerome to embark on a pilgrimage to the east and to Jerusalem. He decided to take his large personal library of pagan authors and Christian texts with him. Jerusalem, a Mecca of Christian pilgrims for some time already, was beginning to attract monastic and ascetic aspirants.¹ But the would-be *monachus perfectus* got only as far as Antioch on the Orontes. He reached the residence of the eastern emperor Valens as a broken man, exhausted and fever-stricken—in his own words: ‘Syria presented itself to me, as a secure haven to a shipwrecked sailor.’² The haven was the household of his wealthy and powerful friend Evagrius, whom he had met earlier in Aquileia and who now received him with open arms and provided him with a roof.³ Evagrius of Antioch ranked among the class of local councillors (*curiales*) and joined the imperial service where he exerted some influence. After he was dismissed from his provincial office, he entered the church and was ordained a priest by the bishop Eusebius of Vercelli, who brought him to Italy where he got involved in various ecclesiastical affairs. For a Greek speaker, he had an extraordinary command of Latin and translated into his language the *Life of Antony*. Evagrius’ example illustrates the continuation of a secular career in the church: in 388, he was made bishop of his native city Antioch. Such an ecclesiastical ‘reorientation’ was not exceptional for a man of his standing and wealth.

The rich patron Evagrius, who had supported Jerome, his protégé, in northern Italy, returned to his home in Antioch on a diplomatic mission from Damasus, bishop of Rome. There is reason to think that Jerome and his friends travelled together with Evagrius through the Balkans, Greece, Thrace, and Asia Minor to Antioch. In the comfortable Antiochene household, however, the planned pilgrimage to Jerusalem was to be postponed indefinitely. Jerome, having regained his health and good temper, instead improved his understanding of spoken and written Greek, the language of the urban elites, studied philosophical and theological treatises from Evagrius’ well-equipped library, learnt more about the sophisticated controversies concerning the doctrine of the Trinity then troubling the eastern churches, and—after some rather pleasant months—secluded himself in the desert of Chalcis to practise asceticism.

The following two or three years in the wilderness are supposed to have transformed the ascetic neophyte into an ascetic champion. Ecclesiastical art, devotional literature, and modern scholarship have created the image of a penitent recluse.⁴ ‘Like the other hermits he earned his daily living as a craftsman in the sweat of his brow,’ wrote Georg Grützmacher, Jerome’s Protestant biographer, at the beginning of the twentieth century.⁵ The Catholic Ferdinand Cavallera was at least disposed to believe that ‘la solitude de saint Jérôme’ was ‘plus encore morale que matérielle,’⁶ and J.N.D. Kelly, representing the Anglican church, thought that Jerome found his home in ‘a natural cave in the rocks’, where he experienced ‘the harsh reality’ of a troglodyte.⁷ All of these accounts of Jerome’s ascetic *secessus* are misleading since they unhistorically try to harmonize his desert stay with the concept of total isolation practised by eastern hermits and pictured, for example, in Athanasius’ *Life of Antony* and in Theodoret’s *Historia religiosa*. Jerome himself described, and praised, the self-denying eastern asceticism in his amazingly popular and entertaining novels on various desert heroes. His primary emphasis was on the need for poverty and withdrawal, and he was inviting western readers to join what amounted to a new society, and to feel no longer at a loss about their ascetic aspirations, but to follow the firm example set by ascetic pioneers.

Let us first discuss Jerome’s domicile. Chalcis, also called Chalcis ad Belum or, in the language of the native population, Qinnésîn (‘eagle’s nest’), lies on the border between northern Syria and the region west of the Euphrates.⁸ Today, some ruins of the acropolis, lower town, and cemetery are still extant. In Jerome’s time, Chalcis was an important strategic point in the Roman defence system of the province of Syria and an economic centre, through which major caravan routes passed. It was located 55 miles east-south-east of the Syrian capital Antioch and 17 miles south-west of Aleppo (Haleb/Berrhoea). So, it has

been argued that Jerome exposed himself to the scorching sun in the menacing desert which began a few miles to the south-east of Chalcis.⁹

His own letters written in this period, however, portray a different reality. They give ample evidence that, during his stay in the *solitudo Syriae Chalcidis*, he was never completely secluded from the outside world. He was still in touch with Evagrius, who often visited him and served as a postman delivering letters and parcels.¹⁰ Jerome maintained his correspondence with his friends at Aquileia, exchanged epistles with Florentinus, a wealthy western monk residing in Jerusalem with whom he had corresponded from Antioch,¹¹ and he wrote two excited letters to Damasus asking for theological advice and spiritual direction.¹² Obscure as he then was, Jerome mentioned his *patronus* Evagrius, who was an ideological confidant of the Roman bishop. Jerome also ensured that a runaway slave of Florentinus was sent back to his master. Moreover, he made several efforts to acquire interesting books. In a letter, for example, he asked Florentinus to have their mutual friend Rufinus send him the commentaries of Reticus, bishop of Autun, on the Song of Songs, and return the transcript of Hilary's explanation of the Psalms and work *On the Synods* that he had copied for him at Trier. Next, he begged Florentinus to get transcribed by a copyist certain books he did not possess. As compensation, Jerome offered to provide any work, especially on Scripture, he desired: 'And since, through the Lord's bounty, I am rich in volumes of the sacred library, you may command me in turn. I will send you what you please; and do not suppose that an order from you will give me trouble. I have pupils devoted to the art of copying (*habeo alumnos, qui antiquariae arti Serviant*).'¹³ The sentence makes you think twice. Jerome must have lived in quite a spacious hollow to store his expanding collection of *codices* and to supervise young assistants, or protégés, who were copying manuscripts there. Not only *alumni*, but also *fratres* joined his solitude.¹⁴ Apart from copying manuscripts, Jerome was also concerned with writing. Perhaps his *Life of Paul the First Hermit* should be assigned to the desert period, although a reasonable case can be made for dating the work later.¹⁵ All this information reminds us of monks' cells excavated in Egypt, which were rather underground atrium-style houses, 'with rooms, a court, a well, and other amenities, including cool rooms for the storage of bread, movable doors, and even glass in some windows.'¹⁶

Jerome also took language lessons. First, he made himself familiar with Syriac, the native tongue of the peasants and the monks in his neighbourhood: '*hic enim aut barbarus semisermo discendus est aut tacendum est*: For hereabout you must either learn the barbarous gibberish or else keep your mouth shut.'¹⁷ Further, he began to study Hebrew: 'I betook myself to a brother who before his conversion had been a Hebrew and asked him to teach me his language. Thus, after familiarising myself with the pointed style of Quintilian, the fluency of Cicero, the seriousness of Fronto and the gentleness of Pliny, I now began to learn the alphabet again and practise hissing and breath-demanding words.'¹⁸ Although this passage was written more than thirty years later, at a stage when Jerome ostentatiously celebrated his knowledge of Hebrew and carefully depicted himself as *vir trilinguis* to defend his authority as a translator and commentator of Scripture, I cannot see any reason to mistrust his assertion that an anonymous Jewish convert taught him the elements of Hebrew in the desert of Chalcis.

Finally, Jerome became involved in the heated debate over the Trinity that divided the church at Antioch into three factions. The schism in the metropolis also shook the *hinterland* and disturbed the monastic and ascetic communities in Jerome's vicinity. Asked to express his position, Jerome first manoeuvred and then supported Paulinus, who himself was backed by Evagrius¹⁹ and who refused to cooperate with the rival orthodox party at Antioch led by Meletius. But, before he declared himself for Paulinus, Jerome had referred to the authority of the bishop of Rome whom he effusively praised and to whom he promised his loyalty.²⁰

Obviously, the priests, monks, and hermits around Chalcis considered Jerome an unwelcome guest. When he preached the consubstantial Trinity, they ostracized him; when he subscribed to their statement of belief, they did not trust him. In the end, even the orthodox majority accused him of being a heretic. He bitterly complained: 'Every day I am asked for my confession of faith, as though when I was regenerated in baptism I had made none. I accept their formulas, but they are still dissatisfied. I sign my name to them, but they still refuse to believe me. One thing only will content them, that I should leave this place. I'm on the point of departure. [...] It is preferable to live among wild beasts rather than with Christians such as these.'²¹ People were annoyed by this western partisan of Paulinus, who continued his correspondence throughout the world and was joined, amazingly enough, by a group of copyists and was supported by the Antiochene *curialis* Evagrius. No wonder that all they wanted was for Jerome to go away—and, eventually, he, with his close friends, made the journey back to Antioch.

An unbiased examination of Jerome's contemporary evidence about his brief period in the desert of Chalcis shows that he did not live the life of a heroic hermit incessantly struggling against vices and sensuality. He did not take up residence in the most inaccessible wilderness, but in a place where he could maintain relations with his patron and with Italian friends and establish new contacts. His residence was obviously situated on the road that led from Antioch to Chalcis. It is very likely that he stayed at an estate of Evagrius' called Maronia, less than thirty miles from Antioch.²² The property probably belonged to the district of Chalcis and was perhaps located on a rocky plateau that runs south of the town of Imma and is known by the name *Jebel Baricha*. The rich Antiochene priest Evagrius, who sympathized with the ascetic movement, seems to have allowed Jerome, along with his friends and *alumni*, to practise their ascetic ideals in Maronia.

But, how does this hypothesis fit with Jerome's description of his desert domicile as solitude (*solitudo*), desert (*desertum*), and wilderness (*eremus*). What do these words mean? They refer to a place where Jerome could realize his ascetic proposal

(*propositum*), and they underline the contrast with the tumultuous urban life that Jerome had experienced, and enjoyed, in Antioch and in other major cities of the Roman Empire. ‘*Interpretare vocabulum monachi, hoc est nomen tuum: quid facis in turba, qui solus est*: Consider the meaning of the word “monk”, that is your name: What are you doing in the crowd, who should stay alone?’²³, he wrote to Heliodorus at Altinum in northern Italy, urging him to join him in the desert. Some years later, he advised Paulinus of Nola: ‘Abandon cities and their throng, live on a small patch of ground, seek Christ in solitude.’²⁴ The perfect monk has to avoid the busy cities, the *urbium frequentia*,²⁵ and retire to a calm refuge where, ‘far away from the crowds (*procul a turbis remotus*),’²⁶ he can find God through prayer and contemplation. In his ferocious polemic *Against John of Jerusalem*, written in 397, Jerome stated that he had forsaken the famous city of Antioch to weep over the sins of his youth and draw upon himself the mercy of Christ ‘*in agris et in solitudine*: in the countryside and in solitude.’²⁷ The great Syrian metropolis, after Rome and Alexandria the third largest city in the *oi-koumene*, with nearly 200,000 inhabitants, offered a thrilling life and many sophisticated pleasures; but it was no place for an ambitious ascetic novice. So, Jerome exchanged his urban *vita activa* in Antioch for a *vita contemplativa* in the *hinterland*, which he called solitude and desert.

For the same reason, John Chrysostom left Antioch in 375 to join a monastic community on Mount Silpius close to the city and to bring himself to perfection under the guidance of an old Syrian. The rejection of the body implied the rejection of the *patria*, ‘A monk cannot be perfect in his own country,’²⁸ and the rejection of the *civitas*, the urban centre of ancient civilization. The true ascetic, Jerome suggested, must break completely with his family, renounce all his possessions, and, above all, live in solitude: ‘Those living in a city are not Christians (*quicumque in civitate sunt, Christiani non sunt*).’²⁹ From the beginning of antiquity, urban living had distinguished the civilized from everything savage, rustic, and barbarous. Jerome’s withdrawal from Antioch implied a reversal of the traditional values he had previously held.

Although his interpretation of asceticism involved many features typical of the east, and especially of Egypt, Jerome felt attracted to the company of others, to ‘the heavenly family here on earth.’³⁰ Among the various competitive forms of ascetic life, Jerome thus decided against the radical seclusion and repudiation of the world, an idea later propagated in some of his writings. In Chalcis, or Maronia, he settled to live in a coenobitic community, a style of living with which he was familiar from Aquileia. His sojourn in the *solitudo Chalcidis* anticipated his later life in Bethlehem where the monasteries founded by Paula and himself followed the ‘western’, more moderate forms of asceticism, which were, for instance, also practised in the communities of Paulinus in Nola, of Augustine in Cassiciacum, of Martin in Ligugé, and of Melania in Jerusalem.

The examination of Jerome’s contemporary evidence about his brief period in Chalcis, then, makes the traditional picture of his desert solitude, still popular among pious Christians as well as critical scholars, obsolete.

When the dogmatic disputes had finally spoilt his pleasure in solitude, he made the journey back to Antioch where he was ordained priest, followed the lectures of Apollinaris of Laodicea, who introduced him to scriptural exegesis, and probably learnt of Origen’s writings.³¹ After the disillusionment of the desert, it was again the cities that attracted him. There, the predominance of Christianity allowed more and more wealthy people to preserve their virginity or widowhood, to study the Bible, to support the poor with alms, and, not least of all, to entertain the wandering ascetic. After Antioch, Constantinople and Rome were the next stages in Jerome’s ecclesiastical career.

Later in his life, however (i.e. from the time of his stay in Rome), Jerome carefully integrated his limited ascetic experience in the desert of Chalcis into the radical ascetic concept that he spread among aristocratic Roman ladies. These women had established what were virtually domestic nunneries in their palaces on the Aventine, where the small communities of noble ladies and their household slaves vowed themselves to chastity and biblical study, fasted, and neglected their clothing. Jerome was determined not merely to theorize about the ascetic life, but to give practical advice about the protection of virtue. He encouraged ascetic seclusion, sexual abstinence, and biblical reading, but he also tolerated the quasi-monastic communities in the aristocratic households. ‘Let her find in the busy city the desert of the monks (*in urbe turbida inveniret heremum monachorum*).’³²

It was only when powerful opposition forced him to leave Rome, in summer 385,³³ that he shifted his ground again. In a letter, he described in great detail the attraction and beauty of rural life. There is nothing like this in Rome, with its hurry, the fury of the arena, the madness of the circus, the profligacy of the theatre, not even in the daily meetings of pious matrons. He quoted Tertullian ‘*habeat sibi Roma suos tumultus*’.³⁴ Here, a frustrated Jerome is revelling in reminiscence of an existence far removed from urban civilization. But his willingness to tolerate a city life was not abandoned, only modified. In several letters written in Bethlehem, he did not cease praising the household asceticism he had encountered in Rome. Paulinus of Nola, the Roman lady Furia, Salvina, daughter-in-law of the powerful Moorish officer Gildo and resident in Constantinople, and others in Gaul and Spain: they were all to practise ascetic perfection at home. Although he stressed that the essence of monastic life is poverty and solitude, away from the city,³⁵ he often recommended household asceticism and coenobitic life as worthy preparation for the eremitic life and, sometimes, for ordination to the priesthood. It was not theological insecurity, as has been suggested,³⁶ that led Jerome to different answers to the question: ‘How should an ascetic live?’, but the individual expectations and requests of his audience. Jerome’s concept of ascetic life was not only theologically motivated, but also aimed at winning the supporters and patrons who were always essential for him.

In Rome, he had started propagating his qualities as an ascetic master and spiritual leader. Whereas the interpretation of virginity proposed by Cyprian, Damasus, and Ambrose was stamped with the authority of episcopate,³⁷ Jerome had to refer to his personal experience to enforce his discourse. Thus, he summarized his period in the wilderness in a passage often quoted:³⁸

Oh, how often, when I was living in the desert (*heremus*), in the vast solitude (*vasta solitudo*), scorched by the burning sun, which offers monks a savage dwelling place, how often did I imagine myself back among the pleasures of Rome. I used to sit alone because I was filled with bitterness. My unshapely limbs were covered in sackcloth and my skin from long neglect had become as black as an Ethiopian's. Tears and groans were every day my portion; and if sleep chanced to overcome my struggles against it, I bruised my bare bones, which hardly held together, against the ground.

He had no companions but scorpions and wild beasts. He slept on the bare ground, drank only water, and spurned cooked foods as an unacceptable luxury. He mortified a body tormented by visions of dancing girls. He subdued his rebellious flesh with weeks of fasting.

I remember [Jerome continues] crying out for days and nights together; and I ceased not from beating my breast till tranquillity returned to me at the Lord's rebuke. I used to dread my small cell as though it knew my thoughts. Stern and angry with myself, I used to make my way alone into the desert. Wherever I saw hollow valleys, rough mountains, steep cliffs, there I made my place of prayer and tortured my unhappy flesh. The Lord himself is my witness, that, after I had shed many tears and had fixed my eyes on heaven, I sometimes found myself among angelic hosts. And in joy and gladness I sang: 'We will run after you because of the savour of your good ointments.' (Song of Songs 1.3).

This touching portrait impressed not only the Roman ladies, but also generations of clergymen, artists, and scholars. It is found in the most famous of all his letters, *de virginitate servanda*, addressed to the young Roman aristocrat Julia Eustochium. In fact, a fairly large treatise, this *epistola* lays down the motives that should inspire those who devote themselves to a life of virginity, and also the rules by which they ought to regulate their daily conduct. It is brilliant in style, full of rhetorical display, and deals with a whole variety of related themes. The letter must be read in the context of the ascetic campaign that Jerome was carrying on in 383 and 384, with the approval of the Roman bishop, not only among his circles of devout ladies but in Rome at large. Jerome was using this epistle as a platform for setting out his challenging programme of female asceticism, and also for presenting himself as an expert in ascetic guidance. He therefore denounced his numerous rivals, who were also competing for the favour and fortunes of the Roman *patronae*, as would-be Christians, worldly clergy or charlatans posing as ascetics. And he depicted his desperate struggle for perfection and against temptation when he dedicated himself to the ascetic life. Eloquent reminiscences of his time in the desert of Chalcis and his famous dream and outright rejection of classical culture³⁹ are inserted in the letter. Elsewhere, he even gave an ascetic explanation of his initiative to learn Hebrew: 'When I was a young man walled by the solitude of the desert, I could not resist the promptings of vice and the fire of my nature. I tried to crush them by repeated fasting, my mind was in a turmoil with sinful thoughts. To bring it under control, I made myself the pupil of a Christian convert from Judaism.'⁴⁰

Since only a man of rich ascetic experience could obtain the position of an ascetic guide to noble men and women, Jerome did not hesitate to recast the story of his desert solitude in Chalcis so that it smoothly fitted into the ascetic ideas and practices he passionately campaigned for in Rome and, later, in Bethlehem. Acceptance of his theological and ascetic competence was vital to his ambitious literary programme. Jerome, the Christian *litteratus* and the hermit of Chalcis, wanted to make himself the spiritual leader of wealthy Christian intellectuals in the western part of the Empire, who in their turn were able to support Jerome and, later, his monastic community in Bethlehem. His brilliant showmanship as an ascetic champion who had started his impressive career in the wilderness of Chalcis has been so successful that, for more than 1,600 years, scholars have been deceived by the picture of the learned ascetic in his barren cell in the *solitudo Syriae Chalcidis*.

CONSTANTINOPLE

The Formation of a Christian Writer

I awoke one morning and found myself famous.

Lord Byron

On 27 February 380, the emperor Theodosius issued an edict that made the Nicene teaching of the bishops Damasus of Rome and Peter of Alexandria compulsory for all his subjects. Henceforth, the only form of Christianity to be tolerated was the one that acknowledged the full, undivided divinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.¹ In the same year, while suffering from a serious illness, Theodosius decided to be baptized in Thessalonica. On 24 November 380, he entered Constantinople and, immediately after his arrival, took measures against the Arian bishop Demophilus. When the latter refused to subscribe to an orthodox, that is, Nicene Creed, Theodosius did not hesitate to depose him and to entrust the churches of the eastern metropolis to Gregory of Nazianzus. Some weeks later, on 10 January, 381, Theodosius addressed a rescript to the Praetorian Prefect Eutropius depriving the heretics—the Photinians, the Arians, and the Eunomians are mentioned *expresses verbis*—of their consecrated places of assembly and handing them over to the representatives of the *Nicaena fides*.² Then, in May, he convoked a council of all eastern churches in Constantinople, which was meant to approve his ecclesiastical politics.³

This contemporary background allows us to understand Jerome's journey to, and residence in, the eastern capital at the beginning of the 380s.⁴ Contrary to what has often been supposed, he had no intention of carrying on the literary and theological studies begun in Antioch.⁵ We should not infer from Jerome's subsequent allusions to his preceptor and teacher Gregory of Nazianzus that his sojourn to Constantinople was an educational leave.⁶ In his later writings, Jerome, depicting himself as Gregory's pupil, made much of the authority of the learned and, we may add, orthodox Cappadocian Father, in the hope of reducing the critics of his scholarship and orthodoxy to silence. The contemporary ecclesiastical and political implications of their first meeting were thus thrust into the background; not surprisingly perhaps, since they did not at all fit the image Jerome later promoted of himself, which was that of a secluded scholar.

Ecclesiastical affairs and ambitions led him to the Golden Horn. It has been convincingly suggested that Jerome's decision to go to Constantinople was also influenced by his effort to back Paulinus, the bishop of the uncompromising ultra-Nicene minority in Antioch.⁷ Jerome had committed himself to Paulinus, by whom he was ordained priest and whose influential partisan Evagrius was also Jerome's patron. Although leading western bishops like Damasus of Rome and Ambrose of Milan had long since ostracized his opponent Meletius, the leader of the larger Nicene community in Antioch, and openly supported Paulinus,⁸ the latter's position in Antioch and in the eastern part of the Empire was rather weak. Thus, Paulinus was in desperate need of influential friends to boost the prestige of the tiny Antiochene congregation and its controversial bishop. What better place was there to promote Paulinus' claims than Constantinople, especially when it was loudly rumoured that a great council to solve the theological disputes of the east was shortly to be held there?⁹

Jerome did not hesitate to plead Paulinus' cause in words and writings, even though the emperor recognized Meletius of Antioch as a compromise candidate of the majority of eastern theological factions and appointed him president of the council. A masterpiece of Jerome's propaganda for Paulinus was his translation and continuation of Eusebius' *Chronicle*, which was probably composed during his stay in Constantinople.¹⁰ Jerome accused Meletius of apostasy from the true faith (*recta fides*), and styled Paulinus the only catholic bishop of Antioch. Two Arian bishops, he wrote, introduced Meletius to Antioch, but Paulinus was ordained bishop by the orthodox Lucifer of Cagliari who himself met the approval of two other confessors. Trickily, Jerome disguised the fact that Lucifer acted precipitately and without authorization. At the same time, he alleged that Meletius supported the position of an Arianizing party—the Macedonians—and thus opposed the teaching of the western churches and of Alexandria. The message of Jerome's *Chronicle* is obvious: the bishop of the Antiochene catholics could be none other than Paulinus.¹¹

Shortly before and during the assembly, which was later to be recognized as the Second Ecumenical Council, Jerome had an opportunity to meet various important theologians and church politicians. He took it with both hands. He became acquainted with Gregory of Nazianzus, who was appointed bishop of Constantinople and replaced Meletius as president of the

council after the latter's sudden death. Gregory in turn acted as a mediator in establishing new connections for Jerome. Thus, he met Gregory of Nyssa¹² and Amphilochius, bishop of Iconium in Cappadocia and cousin of Gregory of Nazianzus.¹³ In Constantinople, therefore, the ambitious westerner made contact with important representatives of Nicene theology— and orthodoxy—in the east.

At the same time, and with Gregory's assistance, Jerome came to know members of the imperial court. In 400, when he had been living in Bethlehem for more than a decade, he wrote a consolatory letter to Salvina,¹⁴ daughter of Gildo, the governor of Africa who had revolted against the western government in 397 and been killed in the following year. Salvina's recently deceased husband, Nebridius,¹⁵ was a nephew of Flaccilla, first wife of Theodosius the Great and mother of the reigning emperors Arcadius and Honorius. His father, also called Nebridius, held high offices.¹⁶ While city prefect of Constantinople, he married Olympias, who came from one of the leading senatorial families of the eastern capital. Soon after their nuptials, he died. Jerome emphasized in his letter to Salvina that the elder Nebridius was a close friend of his.¹⁷ He must have become acquainted with him during his stay in Constantinople between 380 and 382 and secured the confidence of an official who was about to attain an influential post in the imperial administration. Although we have no evidence that their relations were as close as Jerome later pretended, the case of Nebridius and his family nevertheless proves that Jerome, from the time of his stay in Constantinople, had access to the Christian elite of the eastern part of the Empire.

We may note, too, that members of the senatorial aristocracy were devoting themselves to the ideals of asceticism then being propagated in the Empire. Nebridius' second wife Olympias has already been mentioned.¹⁸ After her husband's death, Theodosius I intended to marry her to a Spaniard from his family, but she declined. Olympias instead sold her estates in the provinces and founded the first monastic community for women at Constantinople in one of her houses, although members of her class were strongly opposed to her new conduct. Educated by Theodosia, sister of Amphilochius of Iconium, Olympias supported John Chrysostom and was ordained deaconess by Nectarius, previously *praetor* and then bishop of Constantinople, who succeeded Gregory of Nazianzus in the imperial see. Jerome, for his part, met Amphilochius in Constantinople. This example illustrates the multiple interrelations between Christian aristocrats, intellectuals, and clergymen who had adopted the Nicene definition of orthodoxy and devoted themselves to the ascetic ideals. It is also worth mentioning that Nebridius' son by his first marriage is praised for his outstanding ascetic virtues, his contempt of wealth and his charitable relief of the poor. His widow, Salvina, is advised by Jerome to honour his memory by refusing a second marriage and practising strict asceticism.¹⁹

Nebridius was not an isolated case. Other distinguished members of the Theodosian court took a fancy to the ascetic movement and lavished favours upon its intellectual representatives.²⁰ There are good grounds for believing that Jerome, during his stay in Constantinople, succeeded in establishing new contacts with powerful friends and subsequently with Spanish associates of the emperor Theodosius, like the Praetorian Prefect of Italy in 395, Nummius Aemilianus Dexter, who received the dedication of his *De viris illustribus*.²¹ Nebridius and others granted their favour and benevolence to Jerome, regarding him as an ambitious man who was capable of propagating ascetic ideas and Nicene dogma in fine-sounding language. In later years, these relations were crucial for Jerome's ambitious literary projects, his ascetic community in Bethlehem, and his survival in the bitter quarrels with Rufinus during the Origenist controversy. The case of Evagrius has illustrated the function of spiritual support and material assistance for spreading theological concepts and new forms of living. Jerome's stay in the eastern part of the Roman Empire at the end of the 370s and the beginning of the 380s thus exemplifies the function of traditional patronage structures in the theological and ascetic discourse of the fourth century.

Jerome's arrival at Constantinople around the year 380 was almost perfectly timed. Once again in his life, he was in the right place at the right moment. Theodosius had just begun to enforce his religious policy against paganism and Christian heresies and to strengthen links with exponents of Nicene orthodoxy. Members of the court society of Constantinople gave financial and ideological support to the ascetic movement and posed as influential patrons of the intellectual avant-garde of asceticism. But, how did Jerome succeed in calling the attention of the Christian court society of Theodosian Constantinople to his person? Certainly, Jerome could promote himself as the protégé of the Antiochene grandee Evagrius and of the 'Nicene' bishop Paulinus. But, this personal network cannot fully explain his impressive ecclesiastical career in the aftermath of the council of Constantinople. It must furthermore be noted that, during his time in the east, Jerome laid the foundation of his recognition as a Christian scholar and writer. We should hence be well advised to have a look at the major works that Jerome composed in Constantinople and, beyond that, in the eastern part of the Roman Empire, to define their target groups and to comprehend the reasons for their immense success.

In the *Life of Paul the First Hermit*, Jerome described the exemplary ascetic virtues and achievements of his protagonist and invited the reader to imitate the saintly hermit.²² As the title proclaims, the object of the booklet is to prove that the famous Antony, who was believed to have been the first hermit, had in fact had a predecessor in Paul of Thebes (in Upper Egypt). A literary masterpiece, skilfully composed and extremely entertaining, the *vita* obviously enjoyed great popularity immediately upon its publication.²³ Deliberately revising the ideals of Athanasius' *Life of Antony*, which had been freely translated into Latin by Evagrius, Jerome insisted that Paul, unlike Antony, had received an excellent traditional training. It is

obvious that the *Life of Paul the First Hermit* was addressed to a public of educated Christians who were themselves interested in the ascetic movement. Jerome, in a brilliant antithesis, characterized the expected audience at the end of his work:

I may be permitted at the end of this little treatise to ask those who do not know the extent of their possessions, who adorn their homes with marble, who string house to house and field to field, what did this old man in his nakedness ever lack? Your drinking vessels are of precious stones; he satisfied thirst with the hollow of his hand. Your tunics are trimmed with gold; he had not the clothing of the meanest of your slaves. But on the other hand, poor though he was, Paradise is open to him; you with all your gold will be received into Gehenna. He, though naked, yet kept the robe of Christ; you, clad in your silks, have lost the vestures of Christ. Paul lies covered with worthless dust, but will rise again to glory; over you are raised costly tombs, but both you and your wealth are doomed to burning. Have a care, I pray you, at least have a care for the riches you love. Why are even the grave-clothes of your dead made of gold? Why does not your vaunting cease even amid mourning and tears? Cannot the carcasses of rich men decay except in silk?²⁴

Jerome's *Life* is evidence for a monastic practice of belles-lettres²⁵ that combined religious edification and ascetic instruction with pleasant entertainment. After Jerome had made his public debut as an author with the exciting story of the miraculous rescue of the Christian woman of Vercelli,²⁶ he turned to the *lecture à la mode*²⁷ of the Christian upper classes, imitating the literary model and success of the *Vita Antonii* and its Latin translations. By virtue of its literary qualities and the fact that Jerome had written the life of the supposed first hermit, the *Vita Pauli* was able to replace the earlier Latin versions of the Athanasian biography, which had so far been the only accessible writings on this topic in the western part of the Empire. Jerome's fame as a writer of the ascetic movement was founded upon his first *Life* and later increased through the other two *Lives*, the *Vita Hilarionis* and the *Vita Malchi*, and many relevant treatises and letters. The contemporary genesis of an occidental monasticism explains Jerome's first best-seller. For he was the first Christian writer to respond to the lack of an authentic Latin monk's biography.

Although the book was sent to his aged friend Paulus of Concordia in northern Italy and although Jerome pretended to have adopted a simple style,²⁸ we may assume that this work delighted the western associates of the Theodosian court at Constantinople who took an interest in ascetic literature. Jerome tried to reach the same group of potential benefactors with another genre, his Latin translations of Greek theological writings. His immense success in this field had four reasons. First, the Latin west was then by no means able to match the abundant Greek Christian literature. Second, the theological discourse of the fourth century intensified academic interest in Greek scholarship, and it became necessary for westerners to tackle the complex philosophical and theological systems of the Greek Fathers. Third, more and more Latin-speaking Christians turned to ascetic ideals originating in the east. Finally, the number of intellectuals in the western Empire, who had a good command of both Latin and Greek, was steadily declining.²⁹ Jerome thus continued the practice of some earlier western bishops, like Eusebius of Vercelli and Hilary of Poitiers, who were exiled in the east during the Arian controversy and had succeeded in conveying Greek theological concepts to the west through their translations. Since Jerome mastered Greek and had familiarized himself with Greek Christian literature, he was able to put Latin-speaking Christians greatly in his debt as an *interpret Christianus*.

Jerome commenced this career by translating into Latin Origen's thirty-seven homilies on Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. In a dedicatory letter to his friend Vincentius, who was the first recipient of his version of the homilies on Ezekiel, Jerome drew an outline for a translation of Origen's exegetical work, to 'make available to Roman ears the man who, in the judgement of Didymus, blind but so clear-sighted, is second only to the Apostles as teacher of the churches.'³⁰ Unfortunately, he continues, a serious affliction of his eyes, caused by continuous reading, prevented him from executing the job, which was also made more difficult by the 'the lack of stenographers (*notariorum penuria*), since shortage of cash has removed this aid too.'³¹ This ambitious programme, which was never carried out because Jerome became occupied with other projects, needed Vincentius' financial support. Paying the bill for stenographers was an important task of wealthy sponsors, who were also responsible for copying and disseminating the writings they paid for. Vincentius, however, was presbyter in Constantinople³² and came, like Jerome, from the western Empire, as may be deduced from his request for a translation of Origen's work into Latin. Thus, he was associated with the Latin-speaking orthodox Christians of Constantinople and able to propagate Jerome's versions among the westerners at the Theodosian court. Vincentius may also have paid the *notarii* whom Jerome needed in order to translate the fourteen homilies on the prophet Jeremiah, completed some time previously, and Eusebius' *Chronicle*. The latter work is also dedicated to Vincentius and to a certain Gallienus who is otherwise unknown.³³

Jerome not only translated into Latin the *Chronicle* of Eusebius of Caesarea (i.e. its second part, the synchronistic tables of relevant pagan and Christian dates), but added a continuation of the work from 327 to 378, ending with the death of the emperor Valens. He also enlarged the Eusebian work, inserting events and names that were of interest to western readers.³⁴ Modern scholarship has tried to reconstruct Jerome's sources for these supplements.³⁵ With the translation and continuation of Eusebius' *Chronicle*, however, Jerome for the first time made a chronologically structured compendium of world history from Abraham down to the year AD 378 available to Latin Christianity. Up to this date, the western church possessed no

work that could be compared to the outstanding chronographical achievement of the bishop of Caesarea. The immediate success of Jerome's *Chronicle* among Latin-speaking Christians causes no surprise. As in the case of the *Life of Paul*, Jerome responded to the lack of, and need for, a certain genre in the Christian literature of the Latin west and undertook to supply the want by imitating a Greek model. But he was not content to present a world history to Latin readers that, in accordance with Eusebius' work, claimed the superiority of the Jewish—Christian tradition. His *Chronicle*, especially its supplements, had to meet the expectations of a well-defined audience. Jerome, therefore, inserted the names of Latin authors, Roman emperors, and Christian bishops, and mentioned religious, political, and military events of the western Empire. He did not leave it at that. In addition to new entries of general interest, he included numerous other details which, at first sight, seem to be irrelevant, biased, subjective, and gossipy. Jerome has often been blamed on this score.³⁶ This criticism, however, ignores the fact that the additional entries were deliberately fitted into the Latin chronicle in order to attract certain kinds of reader; they are, in other words, the precondition of its literary success.

By stigmatizing some eastern bishops, like Meletius, as Arian heretics, Jerome adopted the position held by the majority of politicians and theologians of the Latin church.³⁷ The *Chronicle* depicts the heroic struggle of orthodox bishops and clergymen, who did not submit to threats and banishments of heretical emperors, against Arianism. Moreover, Jerome notes various events relating to the history of asceticism and monasticism³⁸ and thus responds to the interest in these new forms of living, which became increasingly popular among Christian men of letters in the western Empire during the later fourth century. The references to miscellaneous and miraculous phenomena, such as hailstorms and curious rain showers,³⁹ are simply meant to entertain the reader. The inclusion of celebrated Latin authors and of illustrious contemporary orators, rhetoricians, and grammarians,⁴⁰ who quite often came from Gaul, reflects the literary and intellectual preferences of an educated audience. Finally, there is a considerable number of entries that highlight important patrons and personal friends, like Pompeianus, an ancestor of his 'dearest Evagrius',⁴¹ or Jerome's Roman *praeceptor*, the grammarian Donatus,⁴² or the circle of friends living together in a monastic community in Aquileia 'like a band of blessed ones' (*quasi chorus beatorum*),⁴³ or Florentinus, Bonosus, Rufinus, who are honoured through their monastic life (*insignes monachi habentur*),⁴⁴ or Rufinus' rich patrona Melania the Elder.⁴⁵

Jerome's purpose in translating and supplementing Eusebius' *Chronicle* is easily understood. He composed a chronological compendium that served the needs of Christian *litterati* in the western Empire who maintained the position of Nicene orthodoxy and sympathized with the ascetic movement. His additions observed their literary taste and their theological experience. Vincentius and Gallienus, the dedicatees and the 'friends', who are mentioned in the *Chronicle*, were encouraged to spread the work. Jerome's literary concept of a Latin chronicle could win many benefactors at once.⁴⁶

But Jerome flew even higher. His masterpiece of propaganda was to reach the court of Theodosius. At the end of the preface, Jerome reveals that he has ended with the sixth consulship of the emperor Valens and the second of the emperor Valentinian II (i.e. the year AD 378), since he has 'reserved the remaining period of Gratian and Theodosius for a wider historical survey.'⁴⁷ The announcement of a separate description of the reign of Gratian and Theodosius (i.e. of a new imperial history), at such a prominent place perfectly fits with Jerome's aspirations to be successful as a best-selling Christian author in the Latin west. This statement directed the attention of the western entourage of Theodosius to a man of great literary talent, of some ascetic experience and firm convictions. Perhaps Jerome had high hopes in those days of obtaining access to the inner circle of the emperor's friends (*amid imperatoris*) and thereby promoting his ecclesiastical career. The *Chronicle*, however, is by no means a 'tumultuous work', as it is called in the preface.⁴⁸ This *captatio benevolentiae* should not obscure the fact that the work is coherent and that the presentation of the material is convincing. Jerome used his alleged *opus tumultuarium* to advance the causes of Nicene orthodoxy and Christian asceticism. To all those who identified themselves with the *fides catholica* and the ascetic movement, Jerome presented himself through his *Chronicle* as a highly capable author, worthy of support.

Finally, Jerome, during his time in the eastern Empire, tried to make a reputation for himself not only as a biographer and a translator,⁴⁹ but also as an exegete.⁵⁰ He published a short treatise on the vision that Isaiah had of God and of the two Seraphim, one of whom touched the prophet's mouth with a glowing coal (Is. 6, 1–9). It has come down in two letters, and some of the manuscripts give the Roman bishop Damasus as addressee.⁵¹ Whether Jerome had already sent the *tractatus* from Constantinople to Rome, or whether he added the heading *Ad Damasum* during his time in the western capital or even later, cannot be decided. But, it should be noted that this little study had the special purpose of displaying a learned commentator of the Bible. Jerome mentioned the various readings of the Septuagint and other Greek versions of the Old Testament, referred to the Hebrew original, and discussed the Hebrew meaning of the names Seraphim and *Jahve Sabaoth*. The exegesis, however, seems to be strongly dependent on earlier expositors, especially Origen, and prompts doubts as regards the author's theological and exegetical originality. Nevertheless, Jerome seems to have been aware at this early time of the importance of a return to the Hebrew text of the Old Testament.⁵²

Jerome thus began the literary production for which he was and still is distinguished in the eastern part of the *Imperium Romanum*. He appeared as a well-read exegete with a profound command of languages, as a talented translator of Greek theological works, and as a capable author of ascetic and monastic literature. Thanks to his linguistic competence, Jerome was

able to adopt eclectically the works of Greek Christian writers and to endow the Latin west with new literary genres. At the same time, he wanted to make himself the favourite author of wealthy Christian intellectuals, who in their turn were able to support his ambitious projects and ensure his advancement. The foundation of his career as an advocate of the ascetic movement and of Nicene orthodoxy, as a translator and commentator of the Bible, and as an intermediary between western and eastern theology was laid in the Eastern Empire, in Antioch, Maronia, and, above all, Constantinople. After his early and immediate success as a leading western protagonist of eastern religious piety, Jerome decided to make a profession as a Christian writer.

4
ROME
High-Flying Hopes and Deep Fall

I would have wished him a wife; so many things he would have written in a different way.

Martin Luther

In the late summer of 382, Jerome, the ambitious Christian author, left Constantinople, where he had translated into Latin Eusebius' *Chronicle* and established relations with many influential church politicians and even with the imperial court. He accompanied Paulinus of Antioch and Epiphanius of Salamis as interpreter and adviser. They were heading for Rome to attend a synod that Ambrose of Milan had persuaded the Emperor Gratian to convoke.¹ Paulinus intended to protest at the court of the Roman bishop Damasus against the decision of the council of Constantinople that had approved his rival Meletius. Once the eastern delegation reached Rome, they were accommodated by families of the senatorial aristocracy. Epiphanius was a guest of the young widow Paula who, like her relative Marcella, had transformed her household into a domestic nunnery. There had been some form of western asceticism in Rome before Jerome arrived. During the fourth century, patterns of ascetic life exercised in Rome evolved under the influence of visitors from the east, especially through Athanasius, who spent some years in Rome during his second exile, and his successor Peter of Alexandria. Thus, the ascetic family homes, where a life of prayer and chastity was common, were often transformed into monastic communities.²

Although the synod was a failure, Jerome stayed on in Rome when Paulinus and Epiphanius returned to the east some months later. In the following four years, Jerome made a brilliant career, which ended abruptly in 385. First, the clever monk and multilingual scholar was noticed and favoured by bishop Damasus, who relied upon him for information about the complex ecclesiastical affairs of the Greek east.³ Jerome is likely to have worked in the ecclesiastical archive, which was reorganized and housed in a new building under Damasus. He may have been responsible for drafting the official correspondence with the Greek churches, and perhaps Damasus asked him to comment upon synodal interpellations and inquiries from the eastern part of the Empire. Later generations have therefore depicted him as the bishop's secretary. Years later (409), Jerome himself wrote: 'I was helping bishop Damasus of Rome with his ecclesiastical correspondence and writing his answers to the questions referred to him by the councils of the east and west.'⁴

Damasus also consulted him on the interpretation of difficult points of Scripture,⁵ encouraged him to translate Greek theologians like Origen and Didymus,⁶ paid the bills for copyists, and, most important, commissioned him to revise the Latin text of the Gospels according to the Greek original:

You urge me to make a new work out of an old one, and, as it were, to sit in judgement on the copies of the Scriptures now scattered throughout the whole world, and, because they differ from one another, you ask me to decide which of them agree with the Greek original. The labour is one of love, but at the same time both perilous and presumptuous; for in judging others, I must be myself judged by all; and how can I dare to change a language that is old and carry the world back in its hoary old age to the early days of its infancy? Is there a man, learned or unlearned, who will not, when he takes the volume into his hands, and perceives that what he reads does not suit his settled tastes, break out immediately into violent language, and call me a forger and a profane person for having the audacity to add anything to the ancient books, or to make any changes or corrections therein? Now there are two consoling reflections which enable me to bear the odium—in the first place, the command is given by you who are the supreme bishop; and, secondly, even on the showing of those who revile us, readings at variance with the early copies cannot be right. For if we are to pin our faith to the Latin texts, it is for our opponents to tell us which, for there are almost as many forms of texts as there are copies. If, on the other hand, we are to glean the truth from a comparison of many, why not go back to the original Greek and correct the mistakes introduced by inaccurate translators, and the blundering alterations of confident but ignorant critics, and, further, all that has been inserted or changed by copyists more asleep than awake?'⁷

Jerome anticipated in this preface the criticism that his new translation of the Bible met in Rome and, later, in Bethlehem. For the moment, the powerful Roman bishop protected his challenging literary projects. But, Damasus also took a fancy to his protégé since both of them were disseminating the ideal of virginity and chastity in their writings. Damasus' sister, too, had dedicated herself to an ascetic life. The elegant style, the linguistic competence, and the ascetic zeal of the prolific author fascinated the bishop, who himself wrote fine epigrams, which are still extant in the Roman catacombs. They met with Jerome's approval: 'Damasus, bishop of Rome, had a fine talent for making verses and published many brief works in heroic metre.'⁸

Damasus opened the door for him to noble ladies who practised chastity in their family homes. Within a short period, Jerome became the centre of an ascetic circle that included Marcella, Asella, Lea, Paula and her daughters Blesilla and Eustochium. His letters and threnodies, which give touching portraits of late Roman women, illustrate their role in the conversion of the Roman aristocracy and have excited scholarly controversy concerning the extent to which the ascetic movement contributed to the emancipation of the *feminae clarissimae*.⁹

What could Jerome himself offer to attract the matrons' attention? First of all, he was able to convey the ascetic concepts of the east in fine-sounding language. A marvellous example of his rhetorical campaign for asceticism is his famous letter, more precisely, his treatise 'On the preservation of virginity' (*De virginitate servanda*) addressed to Eustochium,¹⁰ but aimed at a wider audience, in which he praised the virgin as the Lord's bride, laid down exact rules for her daily conduct and defined virginity as the highest level of asceticism. Classical allusions, biblical references, extensive borrowing, and ascetic examples are the central elements of his literary style.¹¹ But, it was not sufficient to combine Scripture and classical literature and to give practical advice. Jerome had to rewrite the story of his limited ascetic self-experience. He integrated the episode in his handbook in which Eustochium was told to remain in the safety of her home, to avoid ostentation, to be submissive to the guidance of an older man of sanctity, and to be surrounded by a pious *familia*, whose life and daily tasks she shared completely:

I would not have you court the company of married women or visit the houses of the high-born. I would not have you look too often on what you despised when you desired to be a virgin. Even if women of the world plume themselves if their husbands are judges or in other high positions, even if an eager crowd of visitors flocks to greet the wife of the emperor, why should you insult your husband? Why should you, God's bride, hasten to visit the wife of a mere man? [...] Avoid men also when you see them loaded with chains and wearing their hair long like a woman's, contrary to the Apostle's precept, not to speak of beards like those of goats, black cloaks, and bare feet braving the cold. All these things are plain signs of the devil. [...] Let your companions be those who are pale of face and thin with fasting, approved by their years and their conduct.¹²

In this treatise, as in other epistles, Jerome encouraged ascetic seclusion, sexual abstinence, fasting, and scriptural meditation.¹³ He urged the superiority of virginity to marriage and the monastic to civic life, advocated the renunciation of one's property, recommended prayer and Bible reading, and gave dietary advice. In Rome, Jerome established himself as an educated churchman and developed to the full his interpretation of the ascetic life. His experience in the desert of Chalchic contributed to his contemporaries' image of Jerome as a spiritual teacher and ascetic exemplar. At the same time, he sought to reconcile Christian virtues with the traditional primacy of the Roman senatorial aristocracy: 'Learn in this respect a holy arrogance (*sancta superbia*); know that you are better than all of them.'¹⁴ Ascetic virtues now guaranteed the superiority of the Roman ladies and transcended their noble origin. While pagan relatives strongly opposed their conversions to asceticism, Jerome Christianized aristocratic competitiveness and emphasized that the holy women of asceticism surpassed the old nobility of birth and office: 'Noble in family, she was much nobler still in holiness (*nobilis genere, sed multo nobilior sanctitate*).'¹⁵ The better part of mankind, to use Symmachus' definition of the senatorial aristocracy,¹⁶ still identified itself by impressive genealogies, immense fortunes, overwhelming prestige, and social munificence; Jerome just added ascetic values, above all sexual renunciation and virginity.

Moreover, the *Christiani senatus lumina*, the lights of the Christian senate,¹⁷ were captivated by Jerome's linguistic and exegetical competence. Not only did he legitimize his ascetic concepts through scriptural commonplaces taken from the Song of Songs and the Pauline Epistles, Jerome also presented himself as a learned commentator on the Bible. Special attention should be directed to his correspondence with the Roman aristocrat Marcella, who herself published studies on the Old and New Testament and whose exegetical-theological expertise attained a remarkably high intellectual level. Marcella, having been widowed at an early age, held firm to her decision, against the resistance of her family, to live an ascetic life and to group around herself, in her house on the Aventine, a circle of like-minded Christian women.¹⁸ She may have paid Jerome for some of his treatises on the interpretation of difficult biblical passages and the meaning of Hebrew words.

As in his ascetic papers, Jerome borrowed extensively from earlier theological writers. But his plagiarism did not damage his image. He knew how to incite 'the ardent love of the divine Scriptures'¹⁹ and even persuaded some of his senatorial friends to learn Hebrew. His most challenging project was the adaptation of Origen for Latin readers. He continued his propaganda for the great Alexandrian scholar, which he had already spread in Constantinople. In his letters to Marcella, Jerome,

without any reservation, applauded Origen for his Old Testament scholarship and his philological recourse to the Hebrew original. He celebrated Origen's restless biblical work and criticized Latin writers for ignoring Origen's outstanding theological legacy:

Do you see how the labours of this one man have surpassed those of all previous writers, Greek and Latin? Who has ever managed to read all that he has written? Yet what reward have his exertions brought him? He stands condemned by his bishop, Demetrius, only the bishops of Palestine, Arabia, Phoenicia, and Achaia dissenting. Rome consents to his condemnation, she convenes her senate to censure him, not—as the rabid hounds who now pursue him cry—because of the novelty or heterodoxy of his doctrines, but because men could not tolerate the incomparable eloquence and knowledge which, when once he opened his lips, made others seem dumb.²⁰

Jerome emulated the role that the Alexandrian Biblicist played in the eastern churches, and depicted himself as a Latin Origen.²¹ Like his paragon, he wrote on a wide range of topics. His instruction for the preservation of virginity became so famous, or notorious, that, according to Rufinus, even pagan readers copied it.²² He also abandoned his former plan of writing a history of the Empire under Gratian and Theodosius the Great, especially since the Roman aristocrats did not seem to be very fond of historiographical work.²³

His 'taskmaster' and 'slave-driver' Marcella,²⁴ and some senatorial men like Jerome's fellow-student Pammachius and the latter's friend Oceanus, combined the ascetic vocation and the *lectio divina* under Jerome's intellectual guidance. The representatives of the higher echelons in the city of Rome propagated the ideals of an ascetically orientated Christianity to which they themselves had subscribed. Jerome provided theoretical legitimation and practical advice. His traditional education, brilliant style, linguistic capacity, and his knowledge of Greek theology made him popular with the senatorial aristocracy of Rome who were also responsible for spreading his work. His *epistulae* and *tractatus*, like those of other contemporaries, were not only written for discussion within private circles, but copied and circulated, and thus attained wide publicity and guaranteed ideological as well as material support. The exploitation of effective sources of influence and patronage enabled Jerome to realize his ambitious literary plans and to communicate his programme of *studia scripturarum* combining ascetic reading and Greek exegesis.

Jerome could have enjoyed life in Rome. He was on good terms with some powerful patronesses and patrons, and Damasus also protected him. With all due modesty, Jerome later described his position in the bishop's entourage as follows: 'I was the spokesman of Damasus.'²⁵ And he added: 'Men called me saintly; men called me humble and eloquent.' Almost everybody would have judged him worthy of the highest office in the church.²⁶ But he did not become bishop of Rome. His militant campaigns for asceticism not only brought him admirers and supporters, but also enemies in many places. The oriental ascetic ideas and practices Jerome propagated vigorously offended pagan aristocrats and moderate Christians. With the same ardour and harshness, he crusaded against luxury of the better-off, coquetry of matrons, worldliness of the clergy, and hypocrisy of monks. His sharpest weapon was satire.²⁷ Impressively, he expressed his indignation about wealthy widows and avaricious priests:

Look at them as they ride in their capacious litters, a row of eunuchs walking in front of them, look at their red lips and their plump bodies, you would not think that they had lost a husband, you would fancy they were seeking one. Their houses are full of flatterers, full of guests. The very clergy, who ought to inspire them with respect by their teaching and authority, kiss these ladies on the forehead, and then stretch out their hands—so that, if you did not know, you would think they were in the act of blessing—and to take wages for their visit (*salutatio*). The widows meanwhile, seeing that priests cannot do without them, are lifted up with pride; they know by experience what a husband's rule is like, and they prefer the liberty of widowhood. They call themselves chaste nuns, and after an immoderate dinner they dream of the Apostles.²⁸

Jerome also ridiculed a noble lady standing in the basilica of the blessed Peter with a band of eunuchs in front of her. She exercised humility in public and was giving money to the poor, a coin apiece, 'with her own hand to increase her reputation of sanctity'. Each beggar received a penny. When an old woman ran forward to get a second coin, she received not a penny but the lady's fist in her face, 'and for her dreadful offence she had to pay with her blood.'²⁹ These citations describe the ecclesiastical patronage wielded by Christian women of the Roman senatorial aristocracy who welcomed their new clerical clientele for the formal morning call paid by the client on his patron (*salutatio*) and supported the poor through alms and welfare work. These ascetic aristocrats thus amalgamated their traditional liberality and public beneficence with the new Christian command for charity.

In Rome, as in other cities of the Roman Empire, there was tough competition among bishops, priests, and monks for the favour of noble women. Damasus had been so successful in establishing contacts with wealthy Christian ladies that his opponents called him 'the matron's ear-pick' (*auriscalpius matronarum*).³⁰ Quite a few servants of God owed their promotion

within the clerical hierarchy to the influence of women.³¹ When Damasus' predecessor Liberius was exiled by Constantius, Roman *nobiles feminae* asked the emperor when he visited Rome in 357 to permit the bishop to reoccupy his see.³² In 370, an imperial rescript was addressed to Damasus that penalized legacy-hunting clergymen who, under the pretext of religion, misused the confidence of rich matrons to obtain their donations.³³ No wonder that the pagan city prefect Vettius Agorius Praetextatus said to Damasus in sport: 'Make me bishop of Rome, and I will be a Christian.'³⁴ A pagan historian like Ammianus Marcellinus also commented upon the ostentatious luxury of the new ecclesiastical elite sarcastically: 'They can ride in carriages, dress splendidly and outdo kings in the lavishness of their table.' They would be 'truly happy', he appended, if they were to despise urban life 'and follow the example of some provincial bishop' whose self-restraint in food and drink, rough clothes, and downcast eyes demonstrate to the supreme deity and his true worshippers the purity and modesty of their lives.³⁵

Christian intellectuals and clerics entered into rivalry with other Christian groups for material and ideological backing granted by the Christianized elite of Rome. Jerome was certainly a talented and successful *cliens*, but he was just one among many others. His aggressive polemic against 'certain worthless creatures (*quidam homunculi*),' 'two-legged asses (*bipedes aselli*)' and 'mercenary priests (*nummarii sacerdotes*)'³⁶ among the holy brethren also reflects the harsh struggle for powerful and propertied *patronae*. And every inch of the ground was contested. Valentinians, Marcionites, Sabellians, Manichaeans, Luciferians, and other heterodox movements agitated in Rome. Domestic circles like the one of Marcella integrated heretical and orthodox groups.³⁷ Theological treatises and ascetic manuals were disseminated. Hardly any Christian author in the second half of the fourth century failed to write about virginity.³⁸ Competing programmes circulated in the quasi-monastic households of ascetic ladies. Jerome attacked not only worldly clergy, but also divergent theoretical and practical concepts of a Christian way of life. Helvidius, for instance, who denied the perpetual virginity of Mary and defended Christian marriage against celibacy, was dismissed in a ferocious pamphlet.³⁹ Virgins and widows visiting married women's houses were called idle and inquisitive.⁴⁰ Novatianists and Montanists were ostracized.⁴¹ Special emphasis was put on the *monachisme hippie* (hippy monasticism)⁴² of the *agapetae* or *subintroductae* (i.e. of women who lived together with men in spiritual marriage):

Whence come these unwedded wives, these new types of concubines, these, as I will call them, one-man harlots? They live in the same house; they occupy the same chamber and often the same bed, and yet they call us suspicious if we think anything is wrong. A brother leaves his virgin sister; a virgin, slighting her unmarried brother, seeks a brother in a stranger. Both alike pretend to have but one object, to look for spiritual consolation among strangers; but their real aim is to indulge in sexual intercourse.⁴³

But Jerome, too, came under fire. His tactless pen and his ascetic zeal outraged many of the Roman clergy. Some accused him of having changed the Lord's words with his new translation of the Gospels.⁴⁴ Some were disgusted by his discourse on virginity, like Damasus' successor Siricius, a former Roman deacon. Jerome's spiritual influence on high-ranking women aroused suspicion; rumours arose. He complained that the disgrace of a false charge was laid upon him. 'I am said to be a scandal, a slippery turncoat and a liar using Satan's art to deceive others.'⁴⁵ The Roman patricians were not amused by one of Jerome's favourite topics, that Roman ladies should forget their social standing, renounce their traditional habits, neglect their clothing, and perform their servants' job; they were asked to carry water, hew wood, trim lamps, light fires, sweep floors, clean vegetables, lay tables, and wash dishes.⁴⁶ Such a lifestyle stood in sharp contrast to the traditional expectations of class and birth. The renunciation of family property for various charities was opposed by non-ascetic members of the kinship. Finally, the aristocratic clan feared that Jerome's campaign for chastity would prevent their wives and daughters from fulfilling their vocation of motherhood and thus securing the family tradition. Hence, they slandered Jerome as a sorcerer and a seducer who 'should be transported to the ends of the earth'.⁴⁷ When Blesilla, Paula's eldest daughter, who was persuaded to live a life of abstinence after her husband's death, died three months after her conversion, it was murmured that the young widow had died from fasting. At the funeral, her mother was carried out fainting and the crowd whispered: 'How long must we refrain from driving these detestable monks out of Rome? Why do we not stone them or hurl them into the Tiber? They have misled this unhappy lady; that she is not a nun from choice is clear.'⁴⁸

When Damasus, his patron, died on 11 December 384, a powerful opposition forced Jerome to leave Rome. There is reason to think that a council of the Roman clergy was summoned to exile the ascetic fomenter who in later days calumniated the 'senate of the Pharisees' that drove him from Rome.⁴⁹ Perhaps Ambrose participated in this meeting; at least the influential bishop of Milan did not grant his benevolence to the fallen priest, who was deeply disappointed by this and, some years later, accused Ambrose of having plagiarized Didymus' treatise 'On the Holy Spirit' for his own work on the subject. Jerome teased his rival as an ugly crow who adorned himself with borrowed plumes, and continued to heap venomous attacks upon him.⁵⁰ In summer 385, Jerome finally boarded ship in Portus, the harbour of Rome, to sail to the east. He was never to see the city he now called Babylon⁵¹ again.

Modern scholarship has often overestimated Jerome's position within the Christian society of Rome in the 380s by relying upon his own testimony, in which he depicts himself as an influential 'spiritual guide and scriptural teacher of a remarkable

group of Roman ladies.’⁵² In fact, his position was never unchallenged. Jerome was a highly controversial exponent of extreme ascetic conduct. The evidence provided in the letters written during his stay in Rome, and later in Bethlehem, shows that the Roman topography of the ascetic movement was complex and became even more complex when non-ascetic Christian groups were integrated into the discourse of dissent. Students of the Christian communities in Rome in the second half of the fourth century, or of the Roman noble women mentioned by Jerome, would therefore be well advised not to reproduce Jerome’s self-invention. Marcella was much more emancipated than Jerome wanted to lead posterity to believe. It is certainly clear that she discussed Montanist ideas, read the writings of many prominent Christian authors, formed her own opinions in theological and church—political matters and corresponded with various prominent theologians of her day. Jerome was reckoned among her theological counsellors, but he was by no means the only one who profited intellectually and financially from this remarkable Roman lady.

BETHLEHEM (I)

The Origenist Controversy

Yesterday, all my troubles seemed so far away.

John Lennon/Paul McCartney

Having left Rome in August 385, Jerome set out for the east again and, after an edifying tour of the holy places, established himself in Bethlehem in 386. During the following three years, Jerome, sponsored by the Roman aristocrats Paula and Eustochium, who had followed him into exile, founded a monastery, a convent, and a hospice for pious travellers. Servants, who had accompanied the illustrious group, were now enlisted as the first monks and nuns.¹ The withdrawal to Bethlehem did not imply renunciation of the world. The decision to settle at the birthplace of Christ and to build Paula's convent next to the Church of the Nativity promised a lively exchange with wealthy western visitors from the east and the west, who received a warm welcome at the hospice.² Sometimes, Jerome even complained about masses of pilgrims distracting him from work.³ His forced departure from Rome was in no way followed by the collapse of the ascetic network carefully constructed by Jerome during his stay in Rome. Letters, treatises, commentaries, and handbooks were addressed to influential Italian patrons like Marcella and Pammachius, who paid for the copyists and secured the distribution of Jerome's work. Messengers were sent on special missions delivering orders and inquiries and keeping Jerome in touch with the Christian circles of the western world. Their main task was to maintain communication between Palestine and Italy. His Roman friends were also in contact with ascetic groups in northern Italy, Gaul, and Spain whom Jerome approached after he had taken up residence in Bethlehem.⁴

His works of this period responded to the intellectual needs and literary interests of a constantly increasing number of Christians of birth, eloquence, and wealth, as Jerome himself once pointedly remarked;⁵ that is, of ecclesiastical and secular dignitaries, who advocated the theological tenets of the *fides catholica* and supported the ascetic movement. From among such people—men and women whose prestige and influence, according to Paulinus of Nola, rested on honour, education, and possessions⁶ — the supporters of the ambitious author were recruited. The bond of ascetic and orthodox friendship was now strengthened by an exchange of letters.

At Bethlehem, the erudite monk was occupied with the translation of Greek theologians, above all of Origen, and started to compose learned handbooks and commentaries on the Scripture and to translate the Old Testament into Latin from the original languages.⁷ He wrote the *Life of Hilarion*, a native of Thabata near Gaza and son of pagan parents, who allegedly founded the first monastic community in Palestine. Hilarion was said by Jerome to have been known for his biblical learning and his literary education and mirrored Jerome's perception of himself as the ideal monk—scholar.

In 392 or 393, Jerome published his *Lives of Famous Men*, which contains 135 Christian authors from Peter to himself. In fact more a catalogue, as Erasmus had already noted, than a literary history, it was meant to demonstrate to the ignorant pagan public that the church had men of great learning. This handbook of ecclesiastical writers, which was dedicated to his powerful friend Nummius Aemilianus Dexter, followed the model of Suetonius. It named Greek, Latin, and Syriac authors, included heretics and even mentioned Jews and the pagan Seneca.⁸ In another work, Jerome unleashed his venom against the monk Jovinian, who denied the superiority of virginity and widowhood to marriage and maintained that extreme abstinence did not make an ascetic champion holier than those baptized Christians who lived a normal life. Like Helvidius, he questioned the perpetual virginity of Mary. 'The Epicurus of Christians' was attacked in two books (*Against Jovinian*), which caused some annoyance at Rome, not only among Jovinian's adherents but also in the ascetic circles that were shocked by the violence of Jerome's polemic.⁹

Jerome was working day and night, corresponding with many Latin-speaking Christians, explaining obscure scriptural passages, giving pastoral advice, and fighting against heterodoxy. 'The heretics hate him, because he never desists from attacking them; the clerics hate him, because he assails their life and crimes. But beyond doubt, all the good admire and love him [...] He is always occupied in reading, always at his books with his whole heart: he takes no rest day or night; he is

perpetually either reading or writing something,' a friend of Sulpicius Severus remarked after visiting Jerome in Bethlehem.¹⁰ Jerome, the workaholic, would have thoroughly enjoyed such a portrayal of himself.

Just as Jerome had established himself in Palestine as learned oracle of western Christianity, the Origenist controversy broke out and seriously threatened his carefully erected reputation. The bitter quarrels about the orthodoxy of Origen's teaching would not be settled in Jerome's lifetime.¹¹ It was not until 553 that the debate came to an end, when the doctrine of the great Alexandrian theologian of the third century was anathematized by the Second Council of Constantinople. The first phase of the controversy was inaugurated by Epiphanius in 393, who was bishop of Salamis, the largest city of Cyprus, and a fierce fighter for the Lord's glory. His campaign in defence of orthodoxy was crystallized in his vitriolic *Panarion*, also known as the *Refutation of all the Heresies*, in which he banished every doctrine, from the beginning of the church, that he considered heretical. Jerome had met the militant heresy-hunter during his first stay in the east and then accompanied him to Rome in 382. On their route to the holy places, Jerome and Paula stopped in Cyprus, where they enjoyed the bishop's hospitality.

Almost twenty years after he had inserted Origen in his catalogue of heresies, Epiphanius was prepared to extirpate Origenism and decided to start in Palestine, his native country. Jerusalem was known to be a stronghold of Origenist teaching, where the clergy were fond of reading the works of Origen. Jerome's friend Rufinus and his patroness Melania the Elder, who had settled on the Mount of Olives, circulated Latin translations of his writings and were ready to oppose Epiphanius. In 393, they refused to sign a formal abjuration of Origen's errors, which the bishop of Salamis may have initiated. 'I do not accuse or change my teachers', Rufinus replied.¹²

And Jerome? Had he not just praised Origen's 'immortal genius'?¹³ Had he not, in his collection of letters to Marcella,¹⁴ announced that Origen's scholarship exercised a continuing fascination on him and reinforced his claim to be his Latin successor? Now, Epiphanius pointed his finger at Origen as 'the spiritual father of Arius and the root and parent of all heresies'.¹⁵ Jerome caved in. Overnight, as it were, he changed his mind and was converted from an ardent admirer into a zealous opponent. Scholarship has tried hard to explain Jerome's dramatic volte-face, which also had considerable implications for his friendship with Rufinus. Some have argued that Jerome wanted to please Epiphanius.¹⁶ But, it seems more likely that Epiphanius' witch-hunt disturbed him severely. If the Alexandrian theologian were condemned, then it was to be feared that he, the Latin Origen, would be banned along with him. That would have been the end of his far-reaching literary ambitions and the community in Bethlehem.¹⁷ In the following years, therefore, Jerome tried hard to dissociate himself from Origen and to refute the charge of Origenism.

Probably in mid-September 393, Epiphanius visited Jerusalem and wanted to obtain a condemnation of Origen from its bishop, John. He was not very successful. The young clergymen ridiculed his request to 'denounce the perverse doctrines of Origen', jeered at 'the silly old man', 'grinned like dogs, wrinkled their noses, scratched their heads, and nodded to one another'.¹⁸ The quarrel with the bishop of Jerusalem soon became worse when, in early summer 394, a frustrated Epiphanius ordained Jerome's brother Paulinian presbyter without calling in John in whose diocese Bethlehem lay. Jerome poured oil on to the fire when he translated a letter of Epiphanius into Latin, in which the latter vindicated his condemnation of Origen. Thus, the conflict, which so far had been limited to the east, was exhibited to western readers,¹⁹ and Jerome was charged with having mistranslated the original Greek letter. John was disgusted with these machinations and Paulinian's ordination gave him a most welcome formal cause to intervene. Without further ado, he excommunicated Jerome and the insubordinate monks troubling the peace in Palestine and obtained a sentence of exile against Jerome from the imperial authorities.²⁰ There is some reason to think that the powerful official Rufinus, then Praetorian Prefect of the East, was involved in the proceedings; his assassination at the end of November 395 may have prevented the banishment from being carried out. And certainly the attention of the government was at that time likely to be directed to the incursions of the Huns into Asia Minor and not to an obscure ecclesiastical case in the Holy Land.

The debate over the nature of the Origen's teaching divided the monasteries of Palestine and aggravated the tensions between various nationalities and different ascetic groups. Origenism had so far been a subject of theological discussion, but was now transformed into an ecclesiastical and even political issue. It was a struggle for power. Elitist networks were involved in the controversy from the very beginning. Powerful friends and influential patrons served on both sides as advocates for the literary exponents of the debate and ensured the dissemination of polemical and theological statements. The controversy had become an international affair. It has been conjectured that this debate cost Jerome his friendship with Rufinus. But the rift may have occurred earlier, when the latter disapproved of Jerome's decision to translate the Old Testament from the Hebrew original.²¹ There was also a certain amount of rivalry between the monasteries in Bethlehem and Jerusalem, and Palladius, in his *Lausiac History*, pointed at the ill will and envy between the groups.²² Both Rufinus and Jerome were anxious not to discourage wealthy patrons from supporting their communities and suppressed every possible doubt about their orthodoxy. In 395, Jerome wrote to Paulinus of Nola, the offspring of a noble Aquitainian family, who had just decided to lead a monastic life at the tomb of St Felix at Nola in Campania. He warned him not to come to Jerusalem, which he described as a worldly city full of prostitutes, actors, and idlers.²³ Some months earlier, when he had still hoped to persuade Paulinus to live in Bethlehem, he had lampooned his powerful monastic antagonist on the Mount of Olives as Melania's

handmaid and theological ignoramus: ‘Others—I blush to say—learn of women what they are to teach men; and as if even this were not enough, they boldly explain to others what they themselves by no means understand.’²⁴

When a letter of John, in which the bishop described in great detail his view of the debate and Jerome’s sudden change of heart, was read in Rome and weakened his case, he answered with his most aggressive pamphlet *Against John of Jerusalem* (397). Two or three years earlier (394–5), Augustine launched his first attack against Jerome.²⁵ He first questioned Jerome’s exegesis, in his *Commentary on Galatians*, that Paul’s confrontation with Peter at Antioch (Gal. 2, 11–14) was staged to serve the expectations of both the Gentile and the Jewish Christians. Then, he raised the issue of the authority and veracity of the Septuagint and expressed his doubts about Jerome’s decision to go back to the Hebrew original when translating the Old Testament into Latin.²⁶ In both instances, Jerome’s approach had been influenced by Origen’s biblical scholarship, so that Augustine’s enquiry forced Jerome to define his relation to the Origenist tradition. When his first letter failed to find its way to Bethlehem, Augustine asked Jerome again and explicitly to specify Origen’s false doctrines.

Some time later, in about 397, he reiterated, in greater detail, his reservations against Jerome’s interpretation of the controversy between Peter and Paul in Antioch and insisted that Jerome should provide him with ‘an explicit account of Origen’s errors, which prove that a man of his stature departed from the true faith.’²⁷ And he asked Jerome to correct his views on Galatians, to ‘sing a palinode.’²⁸ One can imagine Jerome’s perturbation when the epistle by the bishop of Hippo reached him only after a long odyssey and by chance: a friend of his had found a copy on an Adriatic island and learnt that Jerome’s enemies in Italy thoroughly enjoyed reading Augustine’s letter. Wild rumours even said that he had written a book against Jerome!²⁹ It took Augustine quite some time and effort to make plausible that he did not intend to provoke Jerome, but he still insisted that the latter should ‘prove conclusively (*certa ratione*)’ that he had interpreted the passage from the Apostle’s letter accurately.³⁰ Jerome was not very willing to discuss the matter and supposed that Augustine had other motives:

Friendship ought to be free from all suspicion and one should be able to talk to a friend as to a second self. Some of my friends, vessels of Christ, many of whom live at Jerusalem and in the holy places, suggested to me that this had not been done by you with complete frankness, but through desire for praise and fame and popularity, intending to become famous at my expense; that many might know that when you challenge me, I am afraid, and that when you, a man of learning, write to me, I keep quiet like an ignorant man, now that someone has been found who knew how to stop my garrulous tongue.³¹

Augustine was obviously not impressed by Jerome’s learning and age. In his letters, which were read and copied in the circles of western Christianity, he openly questioned Jerome’s orthodoxy. When challenging Jerome to recant, Augustine violated the conventions of Christian friendship based upon agreement in theological issues.³² The exchange and publication of letters constituted and maintained complex networks, which were defined through friendship (or enmity). Augustine’s sharpest weapon was his matter-of-fact opposition and friendly tone. Was there a better method to put pressure on the famous master of polemics? Indeed, Augustine’s honey-coated sword (*litum melle gladium*)³³ was extremely difficult to parry, especially at a moment when Jerome was desperately struggling for his survival in the Origenistic controversy. Some ten years later, they were fighting side by side against Pelagianism,³⁴ politely discussing the origin of the human soul and the interpretation of James 2.10. Now, conformity and unanimity were displayed and they praised each other for their orthodox perseverance in the campaign against the heretics:

You are famous throughout the world; the Catholics respect you and honour you as the second founder of the ancient faith, while (and this is a sign of greater glory) all the heretics hate you and persecute me with equal hatred.³⁵

At Easter 397, however, John of Jerusalem and Jerome were reconciled through the mediation of Theophilus of Alexandria who, at that time, was still a supporter of Origenism. But the peace did not last long. In the same year, Rufinus returned to Rome, where he began his literary production for the sake of Origen’s rehabilitation, maintaining that unscrupulous forgers were interpolating dogmatic absurdities and heretical fallacies into the works of Origen. His translation of the *Apology* of Pamphilus and his own treatise on *The Falsification of the Books of Origen* were supposed to corroborate this theory. It was obvious that his accusations were directed against Epiphanius, who incessantly struggled to unmask the Alexandrian theologian as a heretic. In 398, Rufinus published in Rome his Latin translation of Origen’s major study *On First Principles* or *Peri Archon*. In the preface, he explained his theory of translation, a topic Jerome, too, had dealt with some time before. The issue of falsifying the original and forging orthodox doctrine incited the discourse ‘on the principles of good translation’,³⁶ Thus, Rufinus:

Wherever I have found something in his books contrary to the truth concerning the trinity which he has in other places spoken in a strictly orthodox sense, I have either omitted it as something foreign and interpolated, or set it down in

terms agreeing with the rule of faith which we find him constantly assenting to. There are things, no doubt, which he has developed in somewhat obscure language, wishing to pass rapidly over them, and as addressing those who have experience and knowledge of such matters; in these cases I have made the passage clearer by adding words which I had read in other books of his where the matter was more fully treated. But I have added nothing of my own; I have only given him back his own words, though I have taken these words from other passages.³⁷

Rufinus further declared that he would continue the job, and the method, of a well-known ‘brother’ and ‘colleague’, who had rendered seventy homilies of Origen into Latin and announced even more translations to incite in everybody an avid desire for reading Origen. It was not too difficult to identify the anonymous translator to whom this request was made by bishop Damasus. Jerome’s Roman circle, who had by questionable methods secured the first draft of the translation, were immediately alarmed and sent a copy to Bethlehem, long before Rufinus had it ready for publication. They asked Jerome to publish his own version and added maliciously that Rufinus manipulated Jerome’s reputation to spread the work of Origen.³⁸

Jerome, having received his friends’ message, did not hesitate to get down to work. In 399, he published a literal translation of Origen’s *On First Principles*, which was, together with two letters, sent to Rome. The one was destined for Rufinus, the other for his agents Oceanus and Pammachius.³⁹ Whereas the epistle to Rufinus was rather moderate in tone, the letter to his Roman allies, which was written for public circulation, admitted and defended his former admiration of the Alexandrian theologian, but then impugned Origen’s propagators and charged them with heresy. Although he gave no names, the attack was rightly considered to be directed against Rufinus, who never received Jerome’s personal letter since Jerome’s friends decided to withhold it.⁴⁰

The controversy reached its climax when one year later (400) a council at Alexandria convoked by Theophilus, who had, in the meantime, become an apostate of Origenism, condemned Origen, the ‘hydra of heresies’, and, largely for political motives, expelled from their monasteries the four monks who led the Origenist movement in Egypt and were called ‘Tall Brothers’. Jerome effusively congratulated the Alexandrian patriarch on the success of his crusade against Origenism,⁴¹ and translated into Latin a series of paschal and synodical letters in which the errors of Origen were listed and refuted.⁴² In Italy, however, the situation was still unsettled. There, Melania (who had returned from the Holy Land in 400) and Rufinus were uniting and enlarging their forces. The Roman lady used her far-reaching relationships throughout the western world, and even in Constantinople, to promote the case of her protégé. We know that the ecclesiastical politicians Chromatius of Aquileia, Gaudentius of Brescia, Siricius of Rome, and Simplicianus of Milan were prepared to support them. A war of propaganda was in progress: ‘Why do you write books addressed to others against me, and spread them by your satellites through the whole world?’ Jerome asked later.⁴³

On Jerome’s side there were to be found Pammachius, Oceanus, Marcella, who supported her Roman client (*cliens*) after some hesitation,⁴⁴ and one Eusebius of Cremona, who carried incriminating documents ‘round to private houses, to ladies, to monasteries and to Christian men one by one.’⁴⁵ The circles were linked through family ties, patronage, ascetic devotion, and orthodox profession. Each side aimed at winning new allies. Rufinus hoped for some time to attract Anastasius, bishop of Rome, as combatant, to whom he addressed a short treatise defending his position.⁴⁶ Also, John of Jerusalem wrote to his Roman colleague urging him to back Rufinus.⁴⁷

The public debate between Jerome and Rufinus, which was followed by an ever-growing audience, culminated in two large apologetical works. First, Rufinus published his *Apology against Jerome* in two books (401), in which he clearly, but tediously, demonstrated Jerome’s erstwhile and dogmatically untroubled admiration of Origen, his efforts at disguising the dependence on Origen in his commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians⁴⁸ and his violation of the solemn oath he had sworn to the Judge that he would never again possess or read wordly books.⁴⁹ In addition, Rufinus defended his translation of *On First Principles*.⁵⁰ Jerome did not wait to possess a copy of the apologia. When rumours reached him, he sat down to write his polemical answers. His *Apology* (401) combined self-defence and assault and is another masterpiece of polemic. The argument is less compelling. Evidently, Rufinus replied in a private letter asking Jerome to put an end to his onslaughts and threatening him with disclosures and even a lawsuit. Jerome came back with a third, extremely vitriolic book of *Apology* (402): ‘How can you dare to say that you are speaking as a Christian, not for display but for edification, when you set yourself in mature age to say things against your equal which a murderer could hardly say against a robber, or a whore against a prostitute or a buffoon against a farce-player?’ At the end, he suggested an agreement on his terms: ‘If you desire peace, lay down your arms. I can be at peace with one who shows kindness; I do not fear one who threatens me. Let us be at one in faith, and peace will follow immediately.’⁵¹ Augustine was right in concluding that the controversy had ruined an exceptional friendship.⁵²

Rufinus did not reply. He did not need to. His backing was strong enough to withstand Jerome’s attacks, whose inconsistent handling of the debate had enlarged the number of his enemies, who also criticized his new translation of the Bible and his ascetic verve. The Renaissance scholar Sabellicus was surely wrong to observe that the writings of Rufinus were ‘as the strumming of a flea to the trumpeting of the Indian elephant.’⁵³ His position as an original writer and successful translator could not be challenged by Jerome. At the invitation of Paulinus of Nola, for instance, he wrote a commentary on

the *Benedictions of the Twelve Patriarchs*.⁵⁴ Jerome, on the contrary, continued to calumniate Rufinus by nasty sobriquets. He loved to call his former friend ‘the scorpion’, ‘the gross swine,’ and the ‘grunting pig’ (*Grunnius*).⁵⁵ Even after Rufinus’ death in 410, he rejoiced: ‘The Scorpion lies under the soil of Sicily. [...] The many-headed hydra has at last ceased to hiss against me.’⁵⁶ Other enmities too were pursued. After a visit to Bethlehem, Vigilantius, a presbyter of Aquitaine, had attacked Jerome as an Origenist. Jerome replied with two letters and his *Against Vigilantius* (406), in which he nicknamed his opponent ‘Dormitantius’ (i.e. ‘sleepyhead’), blamed him for repudiating the cult of relics, the observation of vigils, celibacy, and monasticism in south-west Gaul. ‘Vigilantius has again opened his fetid lips and is vomiting out a torrent of filthy venom upon the relics of the holy martyrs,’ Jerome observed, and recommended: ‘The doctors should cut out his tongue or he should be put under treatment for insanity.’⁵⁷

The outbreak of the controversy over Origen’s orthodoxy moved Jerome to condemn his old hero and to deny, or at least play down, his earlier admiration. After 393, he tried to disconnect his literary programme from the Origenian *persona* and manoeuvred himself into a difficult situation that became even more difficult, since the great variety of the topics Origen dealt with led to a rather vague concept of Origenism, which could be applied to different theological positions. Jerome’s solution, which artificially separated Origen’s scriptural exegesis from his theological doctrine, did not convince everybody:

Origen is a heretic, true; but what is that to me, who do not deny that he was heretical in very many points? He erred about the resurrection of the body, he erred about the condition of souls, he erred by supposing it possible that the devil may repent, and—an error more important than these—he declared in his commentary upon Isaiah that the Seraphim mentioned by the prophet are the divine Son and the Holy Ghost. If I did not allow that he erred or if I did not daily anathematize his errors I should be partaker of his fault. For while we receive what is good in his writings we must on no account bind ourselves to accept also what is evil. Still in many passages he has interpreted the scriptures well, has explained obscure places in the prophets, and has brought to light very great mysteries, both in the Old and in the New Testament. If then I have translated what is good in him and have either cut away or altered or ignored what is evil, am I to be regarded as guilty on the score that through me the Latins receive the good in his writings without knowing anything of the bad?⁵⁸

Jerome, however, could weather out the severe crisis not because he had the better arguments and more vigorous polemic on his side, but because his Italian network provided financial means and personal resources throughout the controversy. Thus, the Origenist controversy is not only a story of personal rivalry, hostile insinuations, and rhetorical aggression, but also a splendid example of the social setting of a late antique Christian debate.

Jerome’s character and doctrine remained disputed,⁵⁹ and only few contemporaries would have agreed with the Spaniard Hydatius who, continuing Jerome’s *Chronicle* in the second half of the fifth century, characterized his predecessor as follows:

A man outstanding in all respects, left innumerable volumes of his work. He was highly skilled in Hebrew letters and it is written that he meditated constantly, both day and night, upon the law of the Lord. To the very end he pounded with the adamantine hammer of truth the sect of Pelagius along with its originator. His greatly esteemed works against these and other heretics are extant.⁶⁰

6

BETHLEHEM (II)

The Biblical Scholar

The great Jerome, the only scholar in the church universal who had a perfect command of all learning both sacred and heathen.

Erasmus

Albrecht Dürer, in an engraving of 1492, depicted the learned ascetic and the translator of the Old and New Testament in his study dealing with Latin, Greek, and Hebrew versions of the Bible.¹ Still, today, Jerome's name is linked with Hebrew scholarship and, of course, the Vulgate.² But, we must not forget that the passionate controversies in Jerome's days about his rendering of the Old Testament *iuxta Hebraeos* (i.e. according to the Hebrew text), and hence about the inspiration of the Septuagint and the Old Testament canon, had the consequence that the merit of his translations, including the Gospels, was recognized only long after his death. Not until the ninth century was his work accepted, and, even then, up to the thirteenth century, monks and priests were still copying and reading the Old Latin versions of the Scriptures. In Jerome's lifetime, his translation would not even supersede the *Vetus Latina*, in Italy, though Rome was the place where he started to propagate his new interpretation with the ideological and financial help of influential friends, who also maintained a large staff of copyists. Augustine, Cassiodorus, and Gregory the Great, to give only three examples, used both versions at the same time. And, in practice, the text of the Vulgate quickly became corrupted with passages taken from the Old Latin Bible. Among the three oldest Gospel manuscripts of the Vulgate that date back to the fifth century, there is only one that has not borrowed elements from the *Vetus Latina*; the other two manuscripts have hybrid texts.³

Modern scholarship has been able to reconstruct Jerome's translations of the New and Old Testament. It has thus emerged that he only revised the text of the Gospels, but not of Acts, the Epistles, and Revelation. The passages Jerome himself cites from these books of the New Testament very often differ from the text of the Vulgate. And in his commentaries on the Pauline Epistles to Philemon, the Galatians, the Ephesians, and Titus, which were written in 386 (i.e. shortly after the alleged revision of the New Testament⁴), Jerome never referred to his own translation, but only criticized an anonymous Latin interpreter on several occasions. His statement in *Famous Men* that he had translated the whole New Testament from Greek into Latin⁵ might at best be understood as an intention that was never fully realized, unless one is prepared to explain it as another testimony to his amazing showmanship. The Vulgate version of Acts, the Pauline Epistles, and Revelation is now ascribed to an author working in Rome at the end of the fourth century; modern editors of the Old Latin versions in particular are prepared to identify this translator with Rufinus the Syrian, who is said to have been a friend of Jerome and Epiphanius of Salamis until he, at the beginning of the fifth century, went over to the Pelagian movement.⁶

Jerome, as we have already seen,⁷ started his revision of the Bible with the translation of the Gospels during his stay in Rome. There, he also corrected the Latin text of the *Psalter* according to the Septuagint and boasted of his substantial corrections. Shortly after his settlement in Bethlehem, judging by his own testimony, he undertook to revise the *Psalter* again, but now according to the *Hexapla*, the edition of the Old Testament produced by Origen, in which the Hebrew text, a transliteration into Greek characters and four Greek versions were arranged in parallel columns. That important work Jerome could consult in the nearby library of Caesarea in Palestine.⁸ The revised version was dedicated to Jerome's aristocratic friends, Paula and Eustochium.⁹ Finally, about 392, he declared that he had translated the *Psalter* from the Hebrew text.¹⁰

Immediately after his arrival in Bethlehem, Jerome started work on a first version of the Old Testament, which was based upon the text of the Septuagint, more precisely on the Hexaplaric text of the Septuagint. The revision of the *Psalter* was followed by the *Book of Job*, which was also dedicated to Paula and Eustochium.¹¹ We also have the prefaces to the *Books of Solomon* (i.e. *Proverbs*, *Ecclesiastes*, and the *Song of Songs*), and to the *Chronicles*.¹² The text of these books, however, has not survived. Despite some isolated remarks suggesting that he had revised the whole canon of the Old Testament according to the Septuagint,¹³ it is reasonable to assume, as Georg Grützmacher has already insisted, that Jerome's revision based upon the Septuagint and the *Hexapla*, respectively, only included the above-mentioned books of the Scriptures.¹⁴

This work had to remain unfinished since Jerome increasingly devoted himself to the Hebrew original or ‘Hebrew verity’ (*Hebraica veritas*). About 390, convinced of the superiority of the Hebrew text, he started on a new Latin version of the complete Old Testament *iuxta Hebraeos*. Both the relative and the absolute chronology of his translations of the books of the Old Testament are controversial. In *Famous Men*, he states, ‘I translated the Old Testament from the Hebrew.’¹⁵ This is, along with the corresponding remark on his rendering of the New Testament, most certainly an exaggeration since, in his own preface to Joshua, Jerome said that he finished the translation of the Old Testament according to the Hebrew text about 405.¹⁶ It appears that up to 392–3, Jerome had translated only the *Psalter*, the *Prophets*, the *Books of Samuel* and *Kings*, and *Job*.¹⁷ The remaining books of the Hebrew canon, as well as the deuterocanonical books *Judith* and *Tobit*, were translated in the following fourteen years or so.

The prefaces, but also the commentaries and many epistles demonstrate the occasion, intention, technique and theory of translation, and especially the criticism his new translations of the Old Testament provoked.¹⁸ The recourse to *Hebraica veritas* was firmly rejected by those who, like Epiphanius or Rufinus, recognized the Septuagint as the only true and legitimate, divinely inspired version of the Old Testament. In addition, those, like Augustine, who had doubts about the authority of the Septuagint nevertheless joined the critics, because the text was familiar to the congregation and a translation from the Greek version was checked more easily than one from the Hebrew original.¹⁹

The new Latin version of the Bible was an attempt at providing an educated Christian audience with a scholarly and accurate translation that also pleased the literary taste of an audience that was familiar with classical literature.²⁰ But, criticism forced Jerome to back it up with a vast programme of commentaries, dedicated to his Roman patrons, yet written for a wider public. His immense exegetical output was not only an answer to the growing need for intellectual studies on the Scriptures, but also part of his strategy of defending his new Latin Bible. At the same time, he tried to reconcile Christian exegesis with pagan literary standards.

He commented on many books of the Christian Bible and added special treatises, such as his *On Hebrew Names*,²¹ the *Book of Places*,²² and the *Hebrew Questions*.²³ The extent of Jerome’s dependence, as an amazingly productive exegete, on both Greek and Latin predecessors is apparent. Again, Origen emerges as the inspirer of Jerome’s textual criticism and exegesis of Scripture, even after the outbreak of the Origenist controversy. Vigilant readers among his contemporaries often discovered that Origen was his model. Jerome replied: ‘What they consider a reproach, I regard as the highest praise, since I desire to imitate Origen who, I doubt not, is acceptable to all wise men.’²⁴ When Rufinus charged him with having plagiarized heterodox arguments in his commentary on the Epistle of Paul to the Ephesians, Jerome justified his method:

What I have done in that and other commentaries is to develop both my own opinion and that of others, stating clearly which are heretical and which catholic. This is the common rule and custom of those who undertake to explain books in commentaries: They give at length in their exposition the various opinions, and explain what is thought by themselves and by others.²⁵

In writing his commentaries, Jerome borrowed from virtually all the Christian biblical exegesis that was available to him.²⁶ But, he consulted Jewish advisers as well, who also assisted him in translating the Bible into Latin. Recent research has rightly stressed that Jerome as biblical scholar learned from Jewish exegesis at least as much as from Origen. Jerome’s concept of *Hebraica veritas* was dependent on the help of Jewish scholars and exegetes.²⁷

In fact, Jerome’s approach to the works of preceding and contemporary writers was in no way different from his approach to secular literature. Many, if not most of the authors and their works he cited were quoted second-hand.²⁸ Even in Jerome’s lifetime, Rufinus laughed at the amazing number of philosophers, historians, and poets whose works he pretended to have studied. Thus, Rufinus inquired how it could be possible that Jerome had read letters of Pythagoras, given that probably no single work of this philosopher had been preserved.²⁹ Jerome’s reply was poor: ‘I was speaking not of the books but of the tenets, with which I was able to acquaint myself through Cicero, Brutus, and Seneca.’³⁰

Recognition of the extent of Jerome’s carefully disguised plagiarism and patchwork method has naturally prompted doubt about his theological and exegetical originality. For that reason, many students of Jerome, in the last decades, have formed a negative opinion of the *doctor ecclesiae*. But, Jerome was entirely in line with the contemporary practice of both Christian and pagan authors when he extracted the writings of preceding authors. And, in the Latin west, he played an important role as an intermediary of Greek and Hebrew exegesis. Jerome’s exegetical importance can properly be compared with the theological importance of Augustine.

The image of a learned exegete of Holy Scripture, promoted by Jerome himself, was absolutely necessary to obtain authority among, and support from, well-to-do Christians. Very much to the point here was his reputation as *vir trilinguis*, which underlay recognition of his prestige as a translator and commentator of Scripture, both by contemporaries and later generations. Hence, it is not surprising that, from the time of his stay in Rome, Jerome repeatedly and carefully depicted himself as a ‘trilingual’ scholar with a command of Latin, Greek, and Hebrew.³¹ He also reports, of an earlier stage of his life in the desert of Chalcis, that he spoke fluent Syriac,³² and often mentions that he was translating from the ‘Chaldee’ (i.e. from

Aramaic).³³ Jerome was able to celebrate his knowledge of languages since hardly any of his contemporaries could come near to rivalling him:³⁴ his knowledge of the Hebrew tongue receives special mention in the literature of the time.³⁵ Although modern scholars have sometimes questioned Jerome's command of the language, a close examination of the evidence makes it more than likely that he at least knew some Hebrew.³⁶ I would conjecture that his Hebrew was at the same level as his Aramaic, which he could read and understand better than he could speak it.³⁷ He had perhaps only received elementary instruction in both languages. The numerous references to Hebrew scholars, among whom one, Baranina, is mentioned by name,³⁸ and Hebrew sources confirm that Jerome did not only have access to the Jewish tradition through Greek authors, but was in direct contact with Jews, who were helping him in translating the Old Testament and in solving exegetical problems. It was their excellence that enabled Jerome to propagate and to defend his notion of the Hebrew verity. Throughout almost all his time in Bethlehem, he was able to consult Jewish scholars; their importance is proved not least by the fact that Jerome spared no expense to employ them. Thus, he remarked: 'What trouble and money it cost me to get Baranina to teach me during the night.'³⁹ The bills for the language lessons and Hebrew scholars were, of course, paid by Jerome's wealthy sponsors.

Jerome's new Latin translation raised serious suspicions, as the famous incident of the gourd shows.⁴⁰ In Jonah 4.6, in the Hebrew text, a plant is mentioned called *qîqâjôn*, which on God's command grew up fast in order to throw its shade over Jonah. Jerome translated the Hebrew word as *hedera*, ivy. As a result, he was heavily criticized in Rome because the Old Latin Bible rendered *qîqâjôn* as *cucurbita*, gourd, rather than Jerome's ivy. For that reason, an influential Roman opponent, probably a member of the senatorial aristocracy, accused him of sacrilege.⁴¹ Jerome, driven onto the defensive, tried to refute the charge both by personal polemics and botanical, as well as philological, expertise. The plant, called *ciceia* in Syriac and Punic, he explained, was a fast-growing bush, which was to be found especially in dry places in Palestine; the Latin tongue had no equivalent so that, to avoid a new word, he had translated the expression with *hedera*, ivy, following the Greek versions of the *Hexapla*, which have *kissós* (ivy), and not with *cucurbita*, gourd, found in the Septuagint and the Old Latin version.⁴² The new translation had not been criticized for linguistic, but for theological reasons: Jerome was attacked because his translation differed from the traditional (i.e. divinely inspired) reading of the Bible.

The affair was not settled then. Rufinus, in his *Apology*, sarcastically advised his readers that upon the ancient tombs the gourds should, for Jerome's sake, be replaced by ivy.⁴³ In Africa, too, the new rendering was found disturbing. The bishop of Oea (Tripoli) in Tripolitania had adopted Jerome's new translation of Jonah.⁴⁴ But, when the passage was read out in a church of his diocese, a tumult broke out since the word ivy was unfamiliar—the congregation expected the traditional gourd. It was even rumoured that the text was forged. Thus, some resident Jews were consulted who pronounced against Jerome's translation explaining that the reading of the Hebrew manuscripts corroborated the translation found in the Septuagint and the Old Latin version. As a result, the bishop had to erase the word. Augustine, who recorded the story, was seriously disturbed by the news of a protesting flock and tied up this event with his criticism of Jerome's translation of the Old Testament from the Hebrew. Jerome, in his reply, argued that the whole matter had been resolved for a long time, referred to the detailed philological and botanical observations in his commentary on Jonah, and, finally, assailed the Jews who 'through malice or ignorance (*malitia vel inperitia*)' pronounced in favour of the Septuagint. He concluded that his version was in correspondence with the Hebrew manuscripts.⁴⁵ In this case, a group of 'traditionalists' evidently challenged Jerome's 'modernizing' translation and accused him of an obvious mistranslation after consulting Jewish scholars, probably rabbis. In his refutation, Jerome defended his translation of *qîqâjôn* and countered criticism of his linguistic proficiency by emphasizing that he had conferred with Jewish experts, who had offered their assistance with difficult textual problems.⁴⁶

But the most perilous charge Jerome had to face while translating the Old Testament according to the Hebrew text lay in the argument that he was abandoning the divinely inspired version of the Septuagint and thus Judaized the Old Testament. His decision for *Hebraica veritas* and the Jewish exegesis led to the accusation that he was deviating from Christian tradition. It was precisely this point that Rufinus made in his *Apology against Jerome*:

This action is yours, my brother, yours alone. It is clear that no one in the church has been your companion or confederate in it, but only that Barrabas whom you mention so frequently. What other spirit than that of the Jews would dare to tamper with the records of the church which have been handed down from the Apostles? It is they, my brother, you who were most dear to me before you were taken captive by the Jews, it is they who are hurrying you into this abyss of evil.⁴⁷

Jerome's campaign for the superiority of the Hebrew text threatened his entire programme of *studia scripturarum*. His dissenters even forged a letter, in which Jerome was said to have condemned his new Latin version from the Hebrew; when this document circulated in Africa, his Roman supporters were seriously disturbed.⁴⁸ The strong opposition might explain Jerome's different, even inconsistent remarks on the Septuagint, which are not only contingent upon the time but also upon the addressee of the work.⁴⁹ There is no doubt that Jerome himself considered his translation of the Old Testament from the Hebrew superior to the Septuagint and even to the text of the Hexaplaric Septuagint, since his rendering followed the original

more closely. Time and again, he asked his readers to compare his version with the Septuagint and, if necessary, to consult Jewish scholars. But, since the sharp criticism, which his successively published Latin translations of the Old Testament evoked, could be silenced neither through ardent polemic nor through careful reasoning, Jerome developed a flexible response to vilification. On the one side, he justified his recourse to *Hebraica veritas* by adducing philological and theological arguments. Thus, he tried to provide his friends and patrons, who were responsible for propagating his works, with arguments to prove the supremacy of his version. On the other side, he repressed his underlying reservations and criticism and sometimes acknowledged the Hexaplaric text, even the Septuagint, whenever it was necessary to repulse the attacks of those who, like Rufinus, considered the Septuagint and consequently the Old Latin versions to be inspired by God, and therefore went on charging Jerome with heresy. This accusation was no less serious than the charge that he adhered to Origenism. Jerome had no choice but to fight against both charges in order to defend his reputation and his authority as a translator and commentator of the Bible.

When Jerome died on 30 September 419 or—more likely—420, he had produced an immense oeuvre. Next to Augustine, he was the most prolific of all Christian Latin authors in the ancient world. Later generations venerated him as a trilingual theologian and praised him as an ascetic virtuoso. But, he has also been attacked as a person of weak character and extremely nasty temper and as the spiritual seducer of aristocratic women. Yet, Jerome should also be understood as a provincial parvenu who made a brilliant career as a Christian writer. His literary talent, his ascetic self-invention, a strong feeling for self-promotion, many innovative writings, and an extraordinary command of languages enabled him to succeed at last as a literary exponent both of the ascetic movement and of Nicene orthodoxy, as a biblical scholar, and as a mediator between eastern and western theology. Jerome is thus a remarkable example of social mobility and intellectual achievement in the Christian society of late antiquity.