BIBLICAL STUDIES JOURNAL (BSJ)

http://www.biblicalstudies.in/ Theodore El-Baramosy. BSJ.2026; 8(3):47-68

Research article ISSN 2582-0214

HEBRAICA VERITAS AND CHRISTOLOGICAL PRIORITY:JEROME'S VULGATE BETWEEN PHILOLOGY AND DOCTRINE

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Doi: https://doi.org/10.54513/BSJ.2026.8304

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received: 18-7-2026

Accepted: 22-8-2026

Available online 14-9-2026

Keywords:

Jerome; Vulgate; Hebraica Veritas; textual criticism; biblical translation; Christology; Septuagint; Vetus Latina; Latin biblical tradition; theological interpretation

ABSTRACT

This article examines Jerome's Vulgate as more than a philological revision of the Latin Bible, arguing that his translation practice functioned as a form of Christological reasoning within the doctrinal controversies of Late Antiquity. Focusing on the relationship between Jerome's commitment to the Hebraica Veritas and his preservation of established Septuagintal and Old Latin readings, the study argues that Jerome did not apply Hebrew textual priority as an absolute principle. Rather, his method reveals a hierarchical hermeneutic in which philological considerations could be subordinated to Christological coherence, prophetic fulfillment, and ecclesial reception. Through a close examination of selected passages—including Psalm 22:17, Psalm 40:6, Psalm 110:1, Isaiah 7:14, John 1:1, John 1:18, Jude 5, and Hebrews 10:12—the article demonstrates how Jerome's textual and lexical decisions contributed to the articulation of Christ's incarnation, divine identity, suffering, and salvific work. Particular attention is given to the Latin renderings Verbum, unigenitus Filius, and offerens, as well as to Jerome's retention of Septuagintal readings in passages that became central to Christian interpretation. The study further considers the theological consequences of lexical choices such as gratia plena, sacramentum, poenitentiam agite, and caritas. It concludes that the Vulgate developed into more than a translation: through its liturgical, exegetical, and doctrinal reception, it became a Christological textual framework that contributed to the stabilization and transmission of Western Christian theology for more than a millennium.

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Introduction

The relationship between Jerome's commitment to the *Hebraica Veritas* and his theological understanding of Scripture raises an important question concerning the nature of his Vulgate revision: to what extent did Jerome allow philological considerations to determine his textual choices, and to what extent did Christological and ecclesial concerns influence them? Although Jerome is widely recognized for his return to the Hebrew text of the Old Testament and his revision of the Latin biblical tradition, his translation practice cannot be understood adequately through the principle of Hebrew textual priority alone. In several passages examined in this study, Jerome retained established Septuagintal or Old Latin readings even when they differed from the Hebrew text, particularly where those readings had acquired significance within Christian interpretation and the confession of Christ.

This study therefore argues that Jerome employed a hierarchical hermeneutic in which philological fidelity and theological responsibility were not mutually exclusive but ordered according to the interpretive function of Scripture. Through an examination of selected textual variants and lexical choices in both the Old and New Testaments, the article investigates how Jerome's translation decisions contributed to the articulation of Christological themes including the incarnation, divine sonship, Christ's suffering, and the efficacy of his saving work. The study focuses particularly on passages in which the relationship between the Hebrew, Greek, Vetus Latina, and Vulgate traditions reveals the interaction between textual criticism and theological interpretation. It proposes that Jerome's Vulgate should consequently be understood not merely as a linguistic revision, but as a textual framework through which the Latin Church received and transmitted a distinctly Christological reading of Scripture.

The Textual Crisis of the Vetus Latina and the Papal Commission:

By the late fourth century, the Vetus Latina[1] tradition had become textually unstable and theologically problematic. Rather than constituting a single translation, the Old Latin Bible represented a diffuse collection of regional renderings produced across North Africa, Italy,

[1] Vetus Latina (the Old Latin version, sometimes also called pre-Vulgate) is a collective name used to refer to all the Latin translations of biblical text that preceded Jerome's Vulgate.

Gaul, and Spain[2]. Augustine famously lamented the proliferation of Latin translations, noting that their sheer number generated confusion within the Church[3]. Jerome likewise complained that any attempt to correct a familiar Latin text was received as an act of impiety[4]. In the context of acute Christological controversy, such instability posed a doctrinal risk rather than a merely philological inconvenience.

In response to this crisis, Pope Damasus I commissioned Jerome around 382 CE to revise the Latin biblical text, beginning with the Gospels[5]. The papal initiative was motivated by the need for a reliable Latin text capable of sustaining doctrinal precision and liturgical unity. The resulting translation came to be known as the Vulgata -the common or public text- intended to replace the uncontrolled plurality of Old Latin versions and to serve as a shared textual standard for the Latin Church.[6]

Christology Embedded in the Text: Jerome's Philology as Theological Intervention:

The enduring influence of the Vulgate is a testament to Jerome's theological and linguistic genius, which ensured that the text endured for so long and left an indelible mark on Christianity. This paper aims to demonstrate that Jerome's work was a conscious effort to provide a textual foundation for Nicene orthodoxy. This involved two distinct but related strategies: first, the careful selection of textual variants to support orthodox Christological claims; and second, the deliberate choice of Latin terminology that would solidify key soteriological and ecclesiological concepts flowing directly from Christology.

[2] P. H. Burton, *The Old Latin Gospels: A Study of Their Text and Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 5. H.A.G. Houghton, The Latin New Testament A Guide to its Early History, Texts, and Manuscripts, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), VIII.

[3] Augustine, *De doctrina Christiana* in *Patrologia Latina*, vol. 34, ed. J. – P. Migne (Paris: Migne, 1841), 43.

[4] Jerome, *"Preface to the Four Gospels,"* in Nicene and Post – Nicene Fathers, Second Series, vol. 6, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. W. H. Fremantle, G. Lewis, and W. G. Martley, (USA: Christian Literature Company, 1893). 488.

[5] Jerome, "Preface to the Four Gospels," in *The Principal Works of St. Jerome*, trans. W. H. Fremantle, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, vol. 6, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 487–488. H. A. G. Houghton, "From the Vetus Latina to the Vulgate: Transition in the Manuscripts of the Latin Bible," in *La Bibbia dal Tardo Antico all'Alto Medioevo: Atti delle Settimane LXXII* (Spoleto: CISAM, 2026), 31–51.

[6] F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 1988), 89.

1. The Hebraica Veritas and Its Christological Imperative:

Jerome's decision to translate the Old Testament directly from the Hebrew text, rather than revising the Vetus Latina based on the Greek Septuagint (LXX), is typically understood as a philological reform; the pursuit of the Hebraica Veritas (the Hebrew truth)[7]. However, this philological project was inextricably linked to a profound Christological imperative. For Jerome, therefore, the integrity of the biblical text was not merely a linguistic or technical concern; rather, it was closely related to an exegetical and theological responsibility concerning the meaning of Scripture. In his letter to Pammachius[8], Epistula 57, Jerome articulates his translation principle based on the priority of meaning over verbal form, emphasizing that a translation should convey the meaning, not the words, "sense for sense and not word for word." while recognizing the particular sensitivity and distinctive character of the biblical text in comparison with other writings. This perspective is also reflected in his awareness that any disturbance in the transmission of the text could, in turn, affect its exegetical interpretation, including passages with a Christological dimension upon which Christian faith is grounded. Consequently, his project of revising the Old Latin text was not merely an attempt at linguistic improvement, but rather an effort to establish a reliable textual foundation through which the revelation of Christ could be read within the Latin tradition, thereby preserving the accuracy of the biblical meaning as a condition for sound theological interpretation within the Church[9].

The Genius and Controversy of Jerome's Method:

While Jerome's work was foundational, it was not without controversy. His translation choices were often criticized, from his contemporary Augustine to the Renaissance humanist Erasmus.[10] A famous example of a controversial rendering is found in Exodus 34:29. While most modern translations state that Moses' face was "radiant" after speaking with God, the Vulgate reads that his face was *cornuta* ("horned"). This translation stems from the Hebrew

[7] Igor Pohl Baumann, "Jerome and the Hebraica Veritas: A Portrait of Jerome and His " *Journal of Early Christian Studies 11* (2003): 141 – 172.

[8] Pammachius was a Roman aristocrat and a member of the Roman Senate. He was a friend and correspondent of Jerome and was known for his support of ascetic life and charitable works in Rome during the late fourth century.

[9] Jerome. Epistulae, 57: Ad Pammachium de optimo genere interpretandi, trans. W. H. Fremantle, G. Lewis, and W. G. Martley, in *Nicene and post – Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, vol. 6, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1893), 113.

[10] Augustine, Epistulae, 71. Edited by J. P. Migne. *In Patrologia Latina*, vol. 33, (Paris: Migne, 1841), 241 – 244.

root *qāran* (קרן), which can mean both "to shine" and "horn"[11]. Jerome's choice, likely influenced by the use of "horn" to refer to the corners of the sacred altar, suggests a theological interpretation: Moses' face had become a living altar after his encounter with God[12]. This reading, though textually defensible, led to centuries of artistic depictions of a horned Moses, including Michelangelo's famous statue, and stands as a testament to the long-lasting impact of a single lexical choice.[13]

Modern scholarship, such as the work of Christophe Rico, has sought to re-evaluate Jerome's method, not as a collection of errors, but as a sophisticated "artistic performance." Rico argues that Jerome's genius lay in his ability to balance the demands of the source language (Hebrew and Greek) with the capacities of the target language (Latin) [14].

Jerome's Methodology and Early Opposition:

Jerome's qualifications for this task were unparalleled among the Latin Fathers. Trained in classical Latin rhetoric, fluent in Greek, and uniquely proficient in Hebrew, Jerome revised the New Testament based on of Greek manuscripts and translated the Old Testament directly from Hebrew rather than from the Septuagint. This methodological decision, grounded in his commitment to the Hebraica Veritas, reflected a theological conviction that doctrinal integrity depends upon textual accuracy[15]. Jerome's concern for the biblical text was situated within a broader polemical and theological context, as he recognized that textual instability could lead to instability in interpretation[16].

Jerome's project provoked significant resistance. Augustine, while acknowledging Jerome's erudition, expressed concern that replacing the Septuagint with a translation based

[11] Ruth Mellinkoff, *The Horned Moses in Medieval Art and Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970).

[12] Jerome. *Commentary on Ezekiel, 43: 15, in the Fathers of the Church*, trans. Thomas P. Scheck (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2017), 507.h

[13] The ancient Greek translator used the word δοξα (glory) to describe what happened to Moses because he (the translator) was more familiar with the Hebrew language. Arsani Gaber Youssef, *Al-Tarjama Al-Sab'iniyya*, 87.

[14] Christophe Rico, *L'interprète de Bethléem: Le génie de l'exégèse chez saint Jérôme à la mesure de la linguistique* (Paris: Cerf, 2023).

[15] Monika Ożóg, "Saint Jerome and Veritas Hebraica on the Basis of the Correspondence with Saint Augustine." *Vox Patrum*, 2010. doi: 10.31743/VP.4353.

[16] Jerome, "Preface to the Four Gospels," in *Nicene and Post – Nicene Fathers*, 488.

on the Hebrew text could create differences between the Latin and Greek churches and cause confusion and disturbance among the faithful[17]. Other contemporaries accused Jerome of innovation and excessive reliance on Jewish sources. These objections reveal a fundamental tension between textual reform and ecclesial reception that shaped the early history of the Vulgate.[18]

Augustine clung to the authority of the Septuagint as the Bible of the Church, remaining unaffected by Jerome's scholarship and fame. Despite his repeated complaints about the scribal errors in the Latin manuscripts that transmitted the Septuagint, which he described as "numerous beyond bearing," it remained for him a divine gift to the Church. Like earlier Christian writers, he referenced the story of Aristas[19] twice to support his position[20].

Augustine praised Jerome's scholarly capabilities and his usefulness to the Church in his work "The City of God," even declaring his conviction about the benefits of translation from the Hebrew Scriptures. However, Augustine continued to assert that the Septuagint should never be corrected in line with the Hebrew Scriptures, as the Septuagint ultimately represents a new prophetic message for the Church.[21]

Case Studies: Christological Variants Between the Vetus Latina and the Vulgate:

To demonstrate concretely how textual decisions affect Christology, this section analyzes key textual units where the Vetus Latina and Vulgate diverge or where Jerome's choice of reading had a decisive Christological impact.

[17] Augustine. *Epistulae, 71*. Edited by J. P. Migne. *In Patrologia Latina*, vol. 33, (Paris: Migne, 1845), 241–244.

[18] Augustine, *Epistula 71* (Ad Hieronymum), in *Patrologia Latina*, vol. 33, 241-244.

[19] According to the Letter of Aristeas, Ptolemy II Philadelphus commissioned the translation of the Jewish Torah into Greek to enrich the Alexandrian Library, advised by his librarian Demetrius and courtier Aristeas, who proposed freeing Jewish captives and summoning 72 elders (six from each tribe) from High Priest Eleazar in Jerusalem. Eleazar sent the scholars with Hebrew scrolls; isolated in separate chambers on Pharos Island, they miraculously produced identical Greek translations over 72 days, celebrated as divine inspiration by the Jewish community, who decreed curses on any changes. Ptolemy hosted a banquet, marveled at the wisdom, rewarded the translators, and the Septuagint became authoritative for Hellenistic Jews and early Christians. Dries De Crom, "The Letter of Aristeas," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Septuagint*, ed. Alison G. Salvesen and Timothy Michael Law (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 121 – 135.

[20] Arsani Gaber Youssef, *Al-Tarjama Al-Sab'iniyya* (Egypt: St. Mina Monastery Worker Press in Maryout, 2025), 145-147.

[21] Arsani Gaber Youssef, *Al-Tarjama Al-Sab'iniyya*, 145-147.

A. Incarnation and Birth Narratives:

1. Matthew 1:16 – The Genealogy and the Virgin Birth:

The final verse of Matthew's genealogy, Matthew 1:16, contains a crucial variant concerning the parentage of Jesus:

Vetus Latina (various MSS): *ex qua natus est Iesus Christus* "of whom was born Jesus Christ". This reading could potentially blur the doctrine of the Virgin Birth.

Vulgate (Jerome): *de qua natus est Iesus qui vocatur Christus* "of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ". Jerome's reading aligns more directly with the Greek holegomenos Christos (*ὁ λεγόμενος Χριστός*).

Christological Implication: Jerome's precision in adding *qui vocatur* (who is called) clarifies that "Christ" is a messianic title, not a biological descriptor. This textual choice avoids any potential adoptionistic[22] or docetic interpretations[23], thereby reinforcing the doctrine of the Virgin Birth and the unique, non-biological nature of Christ's conception. The textual precision serves to safeguard the miraculous nature of the Incarnation.[24]

2. Luke 2:14 – The Angelic Hymn and the Scope of Salvation

The angelic hymn at Christ's birth contains a variant that affects the scope of Christ's salvific work:

Vetus Latina (Cyprianic[25] tradition) / Vulgate: *et in terra pax hominibus bonae voluntatis* "and on earth peace to men of good will". This is the genitive reading, reflecting the Greek *eudokias* (*εὐδοκίας*)[26], meaning "of good pleasure" or "of good will."

Old Latin (Type "Western"): Some manuscripts reflect a reading closer to the nominative/dative, suggesting "peace on earth, goodwill toward men" universally.

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[22] Adoptionism is an early Christian Christological heresy asserting that Jesus was born fully human and became divine only later through adoption by God. This view contrasts with orthodox Trinitarian doctrine by denying Christ's eternal pre-existence as the Son. J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (London: A&C Black, 1977), 115.

[23] Docetism is an early Christian heresy that denies the true humanity of Jesus Christ, claiming his physical body, suffering, and death were mere illusions or appearances. This view, rooted in Greek dualism viewing matter as evil, contrasts sharply with orthodox doctrine affirming Christ's full divinity and humanity in the Incarnation. J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 141.

[24] Biblia Sacra iuxta Vulgatam Versionem, ed. Robert Weber and Roger Gryson (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2007), 1527. See also, Bart D. Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 54.

[25] Attributed to Saint Cyprian of Carthage.

[26] Bruce M. Metzger. *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 133.

Christological Implication: The genitive reading, which Jerome retained, frames Christ's birth not as a universal peace for all humanity regardless of disposition, but as peace for those who are the objects of God's favor or good will. This reading aligns with the emerging Augustinian emphasis on unmerited grace and the particularity of salvation grounded in Christ's action.[27] The emphasis *on bonae voluntatis* as God's will, rather than man's, reinforces the divine initiative in salvation, which is fundamentally a Christological act.[28]

B. Christological Titles and Identity:

1. Logos (Word) - Emphasizing Christ as the divine reason and creative order.

In John 1:1, the Greek text reads: *Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ Λόγος*.

Early Latin translations (collectively known as the *Vetus Latina*) rendered *Λόγος* inconsistently, most commonly as *sermo*[29], though other renderings also occur. While *sermo* primarily denotes speech or discourse and can suggest a transient or functional act of communication, Jerome, however, reinforcely chose *verbum*[30] in his Vulgate revision, which carries greater ontological weight, expressing a stable, personal, and eternal reality: *In principio erat Verbum, et Verbum erat apud Deum, et Deus erat Verbum.* "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

Christological Implication: Jerome's translation reinforces a high Christology, in which Christ is not merely the bearer of divine speech but the Word Himself, eternally begotten and

[27] Oriental Christianity responds to the Augustinian emphasis on unmerited, particular grace by affirming that while salvation is entirely initiated by divine grace, this grace is healing, universal, and synergistic rather than arbitrary or irresistible. Human nature, though wounded by the Fall, retains the image of God and the real capacity to respond to grace, which restores rather than overrides freedom. Salvation is therefore understood not as a juridical decree granted to a predestined few, but as a therapeutic and participatory process grounded in Christ's universal assumption of human nature and God's will for the salvation of all, with condemnation arising from persistent rejection of divine life rather than from a pre-temporal decree.

[28] Augustine. *Epistulae, 186*. Edited by J. P. Migne. *In Patrologia Latina*, vol. 33, 830, 831.

[29] Tertullian's Use: When referencing Isaiah 2:3, for instance, the early Christian author Tertullian, who is connected to the African Old Latin tradition, regularly used *sermo* to translate logos. He made a clear defense of this decision, citing its application in even earlier Christian translations. According to Tertullian, *sermo* expressed the idea of active "speech" or "discourse," which was important theologically in expressing Christ as God's uttered Word. Tertullian*, De Pudicitia* 4–6, in The Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol. 4, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885), 82.

[30] Later African Old Latin versions, like Cyprian's, tended to favor verbum, which eventually gained popularity and was simpler to understand as explicitly referring to Christ as the Incarnate Word. H.A.G. Houghton, *"The Latin New Testament*," in The Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research, ed. Bart D. Ehrman and Michael W. Holmes (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 284–85

consubstantial with the Father. The Logos is not an act but a hypostasis. This aligns closely with Nicene theology and guards against subordinationist readings[31].

2. John 1:18 – The Son's Relationship to the Father

John 1:18 presents one of the most theologically charged textual variants in the New Testament. The Greek manuscript tradition is divided between:

μονογενὴς θεός "the only-begotten God", attested in early Alexandrian witnesses (e.g., 𝔓[66], 𝔓[75], א, B),

μονογενὴς υἱός "the only-begotten Son", supported by the majority text and widely reflected in early versions and patristic citations.

The Vetus Latina tradition overwhelmingly rendered the verse as *unigenitus Filius*, and Jerome, despite his awareness of Greek textual variation, consciously retained this Latin reading in the Vulgate:

Deum nemo vidit umquam: *unigenitus Filius*, *qui est in sinu Patris, ipse enarravit*. "No one has ever seen God; the only-begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known."

This decision illustrates Jerome's complex translation philosophy, in which doctrinal stability could outweigh strict adherence to a particular Greek textual form. Jerome chose to retain the traditional Vetus Latina reading*, unigenitus Filius*[32], over the Greek *monogenēs theos (unigenitus Deus).*

Christological Implication: Jerome's decision was a strategic act of Christological stabilization. The Filius reading was the established terminology in the West for combating Arianism and Modalism[33]. By prioritizing the Filius reading, Jerome ensured that the Vulgate

[31] Kurt Aland, and Barbara Aland, The Text of the New Testament: An Introduction to the Critical Editions and to the Theory and Practice of Modern Textual Criticism, Translated by Erroll F. Rhodes, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 288. H.A.G. Houghton, "The Latin New Testament," in The Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research, ed. Bart D. Ehrman and Michael W. Holmes (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 438, 445.

[32] Bart D. Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 78 – 82.

[33] Modalism (or Sabellianism) is a Christian theological doctrine that denies the Trinity, teaching that God is one person who appears in three different "modes" or roles—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—rather than existing as three distinct persons (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) in one divine essence, which is the orthodox Trinitarian view. It suggests God manifests as Father (Old Testament), then Son (Jesus' earthly life), then Holy Spirit (after Pentecost), acting as masks rather than separate, co-eternal persons, a view considered heresy by

text supported the church distinction between the Father and the Son, preventing the text from being co-opted by Modalists who might use *unigenitus* Deus to argue for a confusion of the persons. The choice reflects a pragmatic theological conservatism, valuing established, orthodox terminology over a potentially more textually accurate but theologically destabilizing reading.

3. Jude 5 – The Pre-existent Christ and the Exodus

Jude 5 contains a variant that dramatically affects the understanding of Christ's pre-existence and role in the Old Testament:

Greek (best Alexandrian witnesses): Jesus (*Ἰησοῦς*) saved a people out of Egypt.

Vetus Latina (Majority): *Dominus* (Lord) or *Deus* (God) saved a people out of Egypt. Jerome's Vulgate: *Iesus* (Jesus) saved a people out of Egypt.

Christological Implication: The reading Iesus (Jesus) posits the pre-existent Christ as the actor of the Exodus, a powerful affirmation of high Christology. Contrary to the previous analysis, Jerome's original Vulgate text retained this bold Christological reading, following the best Greek witnesses. This decision was a radical act of textual and theological affirmation, directly linking the New Testament Christ to the saving acts of the Old Testament. The subsequent scribal and editorial tendency in later Vulgate editions (such as the Nova Vulgata) to revert to Dominus or Deus demonstrates the resistance within the Latin tradition to this high Christological reading, highlighting the tension between Jerome's philological boldness and the theological conservatism of the Church. Jerome's choice, therefore, was not one of caution but of Christological conviction that was later suppressed[34].

C. Passion Narratives and Soteriology:

1. Luke 22:43–44 – The Agony in Gethsemane

The verses describing Christ's agony in Gethsemane (the appearance of an angel and the sweat of blood) are absent in many early Greek manuscripts but appear widely in the *Vetus Latina*.

mainstream Christianity. J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1960), 121,122.

[34] Bruce M. Metzger, *Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed., 725,726.

Vetus Latina / Vulgate: Includes the verses.

Christological Implication: By retaining these verses, Jerome reinforced the doctrine of **Christ's true human agony** (anti-docetic) and the reality of Christ's human will struggling before its final acceptance of the Father's will. Their inclusion strengthens a "low Christology" at the moment of passion—emphasizing Christ's vulnerability and full humanity—which paradoxically serves a high soteriology: the suffering of the fully human Son of God is what makes the redemption effective.[35]

2. Hebrews 2:9 – The Nature of Christ's Suffering

A variant in Hebrews 2:9 concerns the nature of Christ's suffering:

Vetus Latina (majority): *gratia Dei* "by the grace of God."

Some Vetus Latina MSS: *absque Deo* "apart from God.[36]"

Christological Implication: The variant *absque* Deo (*ἀχωρὶς θεοῦ*) would imply that Christ suffered in separation from God, a concept that could provide fertile ground for heterodox Christologies that divided the person of Christ. Jerome's adherence to the majority reading, *gratia Dei*, protected the unity of Christ's person in the passion, ensuring that the text affirmed that the Son of God suffered by the grace of God and not in separation from the Godhead. This choice is a clear example of the Vulgate functioning as a guardian of the Father's principle of the unity of Christ's person.

3. Hebrews 10:12 – The Eternal Efficacy of Christ's Sacrifice

Greek: *οὗτος δὲ μίαν ὑπὲρ ἁμαρτιῶν προσενέγκας θυσίαν εἰς τὸ διηνεκὲς ἐκάθισεν ἐν δεξιᾷ τοῦ Θεοῦ* "But this one, having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, sat down at the right hand of God."

Latin (Vulgate): *hic autem unam pro peccatis offerens hostiam in sempiternum sedit ad dexteram Dei* "But this one, offering one sacrifice for sins, sat down forever at the right hand of God."

[35] Bart D. Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*, 187 – 194.

[36] Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 104 – 106.

Hebrews 10:12 is a key Christological text concerning the nature and efficacy of Christ's sacrifice. The Greek aorist participle *προσενέγκας* presents Christ's offering as a single, completed act that precedes and grounds his exaltation ("he sat down at the right hand of God"). The key verbal form *προσενέγκας* (*prosenenkas*) is an aorist active participle, denoting a completed sacrificial act. Grammatically, the aorist participle indicates an action that precedes the main verb (*ἐκάθισεν*, "he sat down") and is foundational to it.[37] Jerome renders *προσενέγκας* not with a simple perfect or aoristic verb (*obtulit*), but with the present participle *offerens* ("offering"), while retaining the decisive perfect verb *sedit* ("he sat down") and the temporal phrase *in sempiternum* ("forever").

Christological Implication: This translation introduces a deliberate theological nuance: Christ's sacrifice is historically once for all yet eternally efficacious. Jerome's preference for *offerens* preserves Christ's ongoing priestly identity without implying repeated sacrifice. The resulting tension between *offerens* and *sedit* shaped Western theology by allowing the Mass to be understood as participation in the one eternal sacrifice of Christ, not a re-offering. During the Reformation, both Catholic and Protestant interpretations appealed to this same Vulgate text, demonstrating how Jerome's nuanced translation became a foundational point for divergent theological developments. However, the interpretation of this verse and its relationship to the Eucharist became a major point of division during the Reformation. The debate centered on whether the Mass was a re-presentation of Christ's one, eternal sacrifice or a new, unbloody sacrifice. This nuance allowed the text to be interpreted to support the church doctrine of the Mass as a participation in that one, eternal sacrifice, rather than a re-offering[38]. The subtle tension between the *offerens* and *sedit* allowed for differing theological interpretations to emerge, all rooted in the same textual foundation.

D. Old Testament Citations and Christological Typology

Jerome's Hebraica Veritas project dramatically reshaped Christological exegesis by prioritizing the Hebrew Old Testament over the LXX. However, his commitment was not

[37] The aorist participle προσενέγκας grammatically denotes an action antecedent to that of the indicative verb ἐκάθισεν. Thus, the offering of the sacrifice precedes the sitting at the right hand of God, thereby emphasizing the completion of the sacrifice and its non-repetitive character.

[38] Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics, by Daniel B. Wallace (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 624, 625. Biblia Sacra iuxta Vulgatam Versionem, ed. Robert Weber and Roger Gryson, 1852.

absolute; in cases of clear Christological prophecy, he often deferred to the traditional LXX/Latin reading.

1. Psalm 22:17 (LXX 21:17) – The Prophecy of the Crucifixion

The prophecy of the crucifixion in Psalm 22:17 contains a famous textual divergence:

Septuagint / Vetus Latina: *ὤρυξαν χεῖράς μου καὶ πόδας, foderunt manus meas et pedes meos* "they pierced my hands and my feet".

Hebrew (MT): כָּאֲרִי יָדַי וְרַגְלָי "like a lion my hands and feet."[39]

The Masoretic reading is syntactically difficult and lacks an explicit verb, requiring interpretive supplementation. While traditionally understood metaphorically -evoking violent attack- it does not explicitly describe piercing or wounding. The Greek verb used in the septugint, "*ὤρυξαν*" ("they dug through, pierced") presents a concrete action inflicted upon the speaker's body.

In early Christian interpretation, this language was read unambiguously as prefiguring crucifixion. The Old Latin tradition faithfully reflects the Septuagint reading and preserves its explicit physical imagery. Despite his stated preference for the *Hebraica veritas*, Jerome retained the Septuagint/Latin reading in this verse.

Christological Implication: Jerome was fully aware of the Hebrew reading but knowingly rejected it in favor of the LXX/Latin *foderunt*[40]. Jerome's retention of the Septuagint/Vetus Latina reading *"*they pierced my hands and my feet*"* in Psalm 22:16(17) functions to reinforce the psalm as a direct prophetic witness to the crucifixion of Christ.

By rejecting the ambiguous Hebrew reading *"*like a lion my hands and my feet*,"* Jerome ensured that the text clearly depicts bodily piercing, a detail that corresponds precisely to the manner of Christ's death. This choice safeguards the psalm's role in Christian soteriology, presenting the suffering Messiah as foreseen in Scripture and confirming the unity of Old Testament prophecy and New Testament fulfillment. More broadly, it reveals Jerome's

[39] https://www.sefaria.org/Rashi_on_Psalms.22.17.1?lang=bi. *Septuaginta*, ed. Alfred Rahlfs and Robert Hanhart (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2006), Ps. 21: 17. *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, ed. Karl Elliger and Wilhelm Rudolph (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1997), Ps. 22: 16.

[40] G. Vall, "Psalm 22: 17B: 'The Old Guess'," *Journal of Biblical Literature 116*, no. 1 (1997): 45 – 56.

conviction that Scripture, as transmitted in the Church, functions as a Christological canon, where doctrinal clarity and the confession of Christ may rightly take precedence over strict philological literalism.

2. Psalm 39(40):6 — *corpus autem aptasti mihi*

Hebrew: Ears you have dug for me אָזְנַיִם כָּרִיתָ לִּי

Septuagint / Vetus Latina: But a body you prepared for me *σῶμα δὲ κατηρτίσω μοι*

Vulgate: But a body you prepared for me. *corpus autem aptasti mihi*

Jerome's Handling: Jerome keeps the Septuagintal phrasing in the Psalter tradition, even though it diverges from Hebrew[41].

Christological Implication: Although the Hebrew text reads "ears you have dug for me," Jerome deliberately preserves the Septuagintal rendering, *corpus autem aptasti mihi*, within the Psalter tradition, fully aware of its divergence from the Hebrew Vorlage. The retention of the Septuagintal phrase reflects a conscious theological judgment. The Septuagint form of the verse had become foundational for early Christian incarnational theology, articulating the assumption of a prepared body by the pre-existent Son. This passage thus reveals Jerome operating with a functional canonical hierarchy, in which the Christological authority of the New Testament governs the use of the Septuagint, while the Hebrew text serves as a critical but subordinate historical witness. Far from indicating inconsistency, Jerome's practice here demonstrates a theologically ordered textual method in which Christological coherence constrains philological correction.

3. The Lord said to my Lord: Psalm 110:1 Christology

Jerome's Vulgate rendering of Psalm 110:1 as "*Dixit Dominus Domino meo*" preserves the Septuagint's (LXX) dual "Lord" structure, enhancing Trinitarian and Christological implications over the Hebrew's subtle lordship distinction.

Hebrew MT: נְאֻם יְהוָה לַאדֹנִי ("YHWH said to my lord")[42]

[41] *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, Ps. 40: 6. *Septuaginta*, Ps. 39: 7. *Biblia Sacra iuxta Vulgatam Versionem*, Ps. 39: 7.

[42] In the ancient Hebrew Scriptures, the divine name YHWH functions as the proper name of Israel's God. It is distinguished from אֲדֹנִי (ʾădōnî), meaning "my lord" or "my master," a form that is ordinarily used in reference to human figures of authority. In the Masoretic text of Psalm 110:1, this distinction is expressed in

Septuagint / Vetus Latina: *Εἶπεν ὁ κύριος τῷ κυρίῳ μου* ("The Lord said to my Lord")

Vulgate: *Dixit Dominus Domino meo* ("The Lord said to my Lord")

Christological implications: Jerome recognized Psalm 110:1 as decisive for New Testament Christology, especially in Jesus' use of the Septuagint in Matthew 22:41–46 to affirm the Messiah's superiority to David. By retaining the Vulgate's *"Dominus…Domino,"* identical to the LXX and New Testament (Acts 2:34; Heb 1:13), Jerome avoided the flattening implications of a purely human *adoni* and preserved an intra-divine dialogue that supports Father–Son exaltation. This choice safeguards the text against Jewish Unitarian[43] reduction and Arian subordination, privileging a *sensus plenior*[44] shaped by liturgical and theological reception. It exemplifies Jerome's selective hermeneutic: fidelity to the Hebrew where possible, but deliberate alignment with the LXX in fulfillment texts to prevent the "re-Judaizing" of messianic prophecy, a position he defends in his prologues against Augustine's call for uniform Septuagint authority.[45]

4. Isaiah 7:14 – The Virgin Birth

The prophecy of the Virgin Birth in Isaiah 7:14 is another instance where Jerome's Christological commitment dictated his translation:

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the phrase נְאֻם יְהוָה לַאדֹנִי (neʾum YHWH laʾdōnî), conventionally translated, "The LORD says to my lord." It is important, however, to distinguish אֲדֹנִי (ʾădōnî) from אֲדֹנָי (ʾădōnāy), the latter being the traditional Jewish reading used in place of pronouncing the divine name YHWH. Within Christian interpretation, Psalm 110:1 came to be understood as referring to the Messiah and, in the New Testament, is applied explicitly to Christ; Jewish interpretations, by contrast, have offered different readings of the identity of the figure addressed as laʾdōnî.

Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown – Driver – Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907), 10, 11. F. D. Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 423 – 424.

[43] Jewish Unitarianism is the classical Jewish belief that God is absolutely one, indivisible, and unique, grounded in the Shema (Deut. 6:4). It rejects any division or incarnation within God, affirming that angels, divine agents, or the Messiah may represent God but never share God's essence or worship. This strict monotheism served as a boundary marker in Second Temple and rabbinic Judaism and stands in contrast to later Christian Trinitarian and incarnational theology. Larry W. Hurtado, *One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism* (London: T&T Clark, 2015), 55 – 79.

[44] Sensus plenior denotes the *"fuller sense"* of Scripture, namely the deeper theological meaning intended by God but not fully grasped by the human author, which becomes manifest through later revelation, particularly in the Christological interpretation of the New Testament. Raymond E. Brown, *The Sensus Plenior of Sacred Scripture* (Baltimore: St. Mary's University Press, 1955), 92–104.

[45] Augustine. *Epistulae*, 71. Edited by J. P. Migne. *In Patrologia Latina*, vol. 33, 241 – 244.

Greek (LXX): *ἰδοὺ ἡ παρθένος ἐν γαστρὶ ἕξει καὶ τέξεται υἱόν* "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son."

Hebrew: הִנֵּה הָעַלְמָה הָרָה וְיֹלֶדֶת בֵּן "Behold, the young woman is pregnant and is bearing a son."

Vetus Latina / Vulgate: *ecce virgo concipiet et pariet filium* "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son."

The Hebrew noun עַלְמָה (*ʿalmāh*) denotes a young woman of marriageable age. While it may imply sexual purity in certain contexts, it does not explicitly denote virginity. From a strictly philological perspective, the term is lexically ambiguous and does not require a miraculous conception.

Christological Implication: By translating *ʿalmāh* as *virgo* in Isaiah 7:14, Jerome intentionally secured the text as an explicit prophecy of the Virgin Birth of Christ. His choice affirms that the incarnation is a miraculous divine act,[46] not a merely natural or symbolic event. In doing so, Jerome aligned the Old Testament prophecy with its New Testament fulfillment (Matt 1:23), safeguarded orthodox Christology against adoptionist and Ebionite[47] interpretations, and preserved the doctrinal unity of Scripture. This decision demonstrates that, for Jerome, biblical translation served the Church's confession of Christ; the Vulgate functions not only as a linguistic rendering of Hebrew and Greek texts, but as a normative Christological canon that guarantees the doctrine of the Virgin Birth for the Latin tradition[48].

Lexical Decisions and the Shaping of Western Christology and Soteriology

Beyond the major textual variants, Jerome's choice of specific Latin words to translate key Greek theological terms had an equally profound, and often more lasting, impact on Western Christology and its associated doctrines. These lexical decisions solidified the theological

[46] M. Fieger, "Vulgate in Use: A Lexical Approach: Why talk about the virgin in Isaiah 7: 14?" *Vulgata in Dialogue*. A Biblical On – Line Review 3 (2019): 29 – 36. . https://doi. org/10.25788/vidbor.v3i0.193.

[47] The Ebionites were an early Jewish-Christian movement (2nd–4th centuries) that denied the virginal conception and pre-existence of Christ, understood Jesus as a merely human Messiah, and typically held an adoptionist Christology, according to which Jesus was adopted as God's Son at his baptism. They generally insisted on continued observance of the Mosaic Law and rejected the authority of Paul, using a Hebrew or Aramaic form of Matthew as their principal Gospel. Stephen Goranson, "Ebionites," *in The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 2:261.

[48] Jerome *Epistulae* 57, *Liber De Optimo Genere Interpretandi* (Leiden: Brill, 1980), 13, 78,79.

trajectory of the Latin Church, often providing the linguistic foundation for later sacramental and devotional practices.

1. *Gratia Plena* (Full of Grace) and the Incarnation

In Luke 1:28, the angel Gabriel greets Mary with the Greek term *kecharitōmenē* (*κεχαριτωμένη*). This dense verb, a perfect passive participle, might be most literally translated as "having been graced" or "highly favored." Jerome (or the previous Latin translation he adopted) rendered this as *gratia plena* "full of grace."[49]

Christological Implication: This translation choice had a direct and lasting Christological impact by shaping the church's understanding of Mary's unique role in the Incarnation. The West took this translation as the linguistic foundation for the later theological development of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. Moreover, it is evidence of Mary's singular status as the *Theotokos* (God-bearer). Her fullness of grace is understood as the necessary precondition for her to bear the Son of God, thus underscoring the purity and perfection of the human vessel chosen for the Incarnation. The phrase became central to the Marian devotion that is inextricably linked to the worship of Christ in the west.

2. *Sacramentum* (Sacrament) and the Marriage of Christ and the Church

In Ephesians 5:32, Paul refers to the joining of a man and woman in marriage, stating, "This is a great mystery, but I speak in reference to Christ and the church." The Greek word for "mystery" is *mystērion* (*μυστήριον*). The Vulgate translates this as *Sacramentum hoc magnum est*—"This is a great sacrament."[50]

Christological Implication: Jerome's choice to translate the Greek word *mystērion* as *sacramentum* (the sacred sign or external rite) in this context, while translating it as *mysterium* (the theological mystery or hidden truth) elsewhere, was a deliberate theological decision. It provided the textual basis for the Western Church's later formalization of marriage as one of the seven sacraments. The Christological link is explicit, where the human institution of

[49] *The Gospel According to Luke I – IX*, by Joseph A. Fitzmyer (New York: Doubleday, 1981), 346. "7 Ways St. Jerome′s Vulgate Helped to Shape the Church." *Catholic Exchange*, September 28, 2020. Mary Through the Centuries, by Jaroslav Pelikan (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), 99.

[50] T. B. Foster, "′Mysterium′ and ′Sacramentum′ in the Vulgate and Old Latin Versions," *The American Journal of Theology 19*, no. 3 (1915): 401 – 417.

marriage is understood as a sacred sign (*sacramentum*) that signifies the great mystery (*mystērion*) of the union between Christ and his Church. The Vulgate's terminology thus elevated the status of marriage, rooting its sanctity and indissolubility in the Christological relationship between the Bridegroom (Christ) and the Bride (the Church).[51]

3. *Poenitentiam Agite* (Do Penance) and the Active Response to Christ

In Matthew 3:2, John the Baptist issues the call to repentance. The underlying Greek word is *metanoia* (*μετάνοια*), which implies a change in thinking or a change of mind. The Vulgate renders this as *poenitentiam agite*—"do penance."[52]

Christological Implication: This translation profoundly shaped the Western understanding of the response required by Christ's message. While metanoia emphasizes the internal, intellectual shift, *poenitentiam agite* emphasizes the active, external expression of that change through deeds and satisfaction. This provided the linguistic foundation for the later development of the Sacrament of Penance, where true repentance is expressed in both contrition and works of satisfaction. This reading was famously challenged by Erasmus and Luther, who argued that it distorted the original meaning of metanoia and led to a legalistic system of works-righteousness.[53] The debate over this single phrase became a central flashpoint of the Reformation, demonstrating the immense doctrinal weight carried by a single translation choice.

4. *Caritas* (Love) and the Nature of God

The New Testament frequently uses the term ἀγάπη (agapē) for love, particularly in contexts emphasizing self-giving and benevolent action. In the Latin biblical tradition, Jerome consistently rendered ἀγάπη with caritas, rather than amor, a choice that became characteristic of the Latin Christian vocabulary of love.[54].

[51] T. B. Foster, 401 – 417.

[52] G. G. Stroumsa, "From repentance to penance in early Christianity: Tertullian′s De Paenitentia in context," in *Transformations of the Inner Self in Ancient Religions* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 167 – 178.

[53] G. G. Stroumsa, "From repentance to penance in early Christianity: Tertullian′s De Paenitentia in context," in *Transformations of the Inner Self in Ancient Religions*, 167 – 178.

[54] Nygren Anders, *Agape and Eros*, trans. Philip S. Watson, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953), 55 – 58. "7 Ways St. Jerome's Vulgate Helped to Shape the Church." *Catholic Exchange*, September 28, 2020.

Christological Implication: Jerome's choice of caritas over other Latin words for love (like *amor*) was a precise theological move. Caritas preserved the non-erotic, self-giving sense of *agapē*, helping to solidify the rich concept of love that would shape Christian theology and spirituality. The term caritas became the defining attribute of the God revealed in Christ. It links the nature of God (God is caritas) to the saving act of Christ (Christ's sacrifice is the ultimate act of caritas), ensuring that the Western theological tradition understood divine love as a self-emptying, sacrificial reality[55].

5. "Forma Dei": Between External Appearance and Divine Essence

Philippians 2:6–7, a prominent Christological hymn, describes Christ's preexistence and incarnation. The Greek text states that Christ existed ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ, "in the form of God." The Vulgate renders this expression as in forma Dei.

The Christological Dimension:

The Latin term *forma* carries a philosophical weight that may extend beyond the notion of mere external appearance or outward form, potentially referring to the essential nature or fundamental reality of a thing. By employing the expression *forma Dei*, the Vulgate conveys Christ's divine status and preexistence, affirming that Christ possessed the divine nature prior to the incarnation. In this way, the Vulgate's rendering became an important textual formulation in the context of opposition to Arianism. The hymn likewise describes Christ's self-emptying (*kenosis*) through his taking the **forma servi**, "the form of a servant." The parallel between *forma Dei* and *forma servi* highlights the mystery of the incarnation: the one who possesses the divine nature voluntarily assumed the condition of a servant[56].

Conclusion

This study has argued that Jerome's Vulgate must be understood not merely as a philological revision of the Latin Bible, but as a sustained Christological intervention within the doctrinal conflicts of Late Antiquity. Through close analysis of textual variants and lexical decisions, it has shown that Jerome's translation practice functioned as a form of theological reasoning,

[55] H. A. G. Houghton, *The Latin New Testament: A Guide to Its Early History, Texts, and Manuscripts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 10. "7 Ways St. Jerome′s Vulgate Helped to Shape the Church." *Catholic Exchange*, September 28, 2020.

[56] Gilles Emery, "Kenosis, Christ, and the Trinity in Thomas Aquinas," *Nova et Vetera 17*, no. 3, (Switzerland: University of Fribourg, 2019), 846.

in which textual criticism served the stabilization and transmission of Nicene Christology in the Latin West.

The evidence examined demonstrates that Jerome's choices were neither arbitrary nor uniformly governed by the principle of Hebraica Veritas. While Jerome consistently pursued the Hebrew text as a critical source, he subordinated strict philological reconstruction to Christological coherence in loci where prophetic fulfillment and ecclesial reception were at stake. In passages such as Psalm 22:17, Psalm 40:6, Isaiah 7:14, and Psalm 110:1, Jerome deliberately retained Septuagintal and Old Latin readings that had become foundational for the Church's confession of Christ's incarnation, passion, and exaltation. These decisions reveal a hermeneutical hierarchy in which Christological clarity and doctrinal stability governed textual preference.

Likewise, Jerome's handling of key New Testament variants and lexical choices—such as *Verbum* in John 1:1, *unigenitus Filius* in John 1:18, and *offerens* in Hebrews 10:12—demonstrates that the Vulgate encoded a distinct Christological grammar. This grammar stabilized the Latin Church's articulation of the Son's eternal identity, the integrity of Christ's humanity, and the enduring efficacy of his salvific work. The resulting text provided a coherent vocabulary through which Western theology would articulate doctrines of incarnation, sacrifice, grace, and sacrament.

The long-term reception of the Vulgate confirms the significance of these textual decisions. Through its liturgical monopoly, its central role in the *Glossa Ordinaria*, and its foundational status in scholastic theology, the Vulgate became the normative Christological text of the medieval West. Its stabilized terminology undergirded anti-heretical polemics, informed sacramental theology, and shaped the theological imagination of figures such as Thomas Aquinas. In this sense, the authority of the Vulgate was inseparable from its Christological content: the Christ confessed by the Latin Church was mediated through the text Jerome helped to fix.

Jerome's translation project thus exemplifies a model of biblical interpretation in which textual fidelity and doctrinal responsibility are not opposed but ordered toward one another. By privileging Christological coherence over rigid literalism in prophetic and fulfillment texts, Jerome articulated a hermeneutic in which Scripture functions as a unified witness to Christ across both Testaments. The Vulgate stands, therefore, not simply as a historical

artifact of late antique philology, but as a Christological canon whose textual form functioned as a stabilizing factor in the formation of Western Christian doctrine for over a millennium.

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