

William L. Krewson
Jerome and the Jews:
Innovative Supersessionism

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The fourth-century C.E. is a fascinating period. As a liminal moment during a time of increasing Christianization of the Roman Empire and of flourishing Christian, Jewish, and pagan cultures, scholars of the period face exciting questions about the interactions between these worlds. It is a time of both defining and simultaneously transgressing boundaries. This especially applies to the Christian scholar Jerome (ca. 348-419), who famously translated the Bible from Hebrew to Latin (“according to the Hebrew Truth”), later known as the Vulgate. He had unique encounters with the Hebrew text, Jewish traditions of interpretation, actual Jews, and the promised land. In a new monograph, William L. Krewson addresses these subjects in great detail by directly confronting a long-standing scholarly crux: How can we explain Jerome’s positive assessment of Jewish scholarship with his hostile statements about Jews and Judaism? According to the author, the answer lies in his radical engagement with Jewish texts, biblical exegesis, and the land of Israel, all of which shape an innovative theology of supersessionism. In contrast to the prevailing view that his inconsistent portrayal of Jews can be attributed to rhetorical positionings, *ad hoc* contingencies, or personal idiosyncrasies, Krewson argues that “Jerome’s ambivalence [toward the Hebrew text and canon, and more broadly, toward Jews and Judaism] is not a problem to be solved but a reflection of his agenda” (p. 63). Krewson extends the historical argument even further to suggest that Jerome’s approach to supersessionism offers a basis for contemporary approaches to Christian-Jewish relations. The work is well-written, and his study of supersessionism in terms of text, interpretation, and geography is useful. While claims for the unique impact of Jerome’s approach to supersessionism are disputable, his giving prominence to this issue and connecting Jerome to contemporary narratives of Christians as the “true Israel” should be applauded.

The book consists of an introduction and five chapters. In addition to summarizing the main arguments of the book, the introduction describes R. Kendall

Soulen's three types of supersessionism: "economic" (Jewish tradition is preparatory and dispensable), "punitive" (Jews receive divine retribution for rejecting Jesus Christ), and "structural" (Jews are ignored in ecclesiastical discourse) (pp. 2-3). Krewson argues that Jerome is an economic and punitive supersessionist, not a structural one, since he also embraces Jewish elements in his work. Considering Jerome's thought according to the rubrics of text, exegesis, and land, he asks three corresponding questions: How does Jerome's dependence on the Hebrew Scriptures relate to his claims of Christian superiority? Why does he advance certain contemporary Jewish biblical interpretations while maintaining the "christological fulfillment of the Old Testament" (p. 4)? Why does Jerome settle in the Jewish homeland and continue his study of Hebrew and Jewish traditions?

Before delving into these topics, however, Krewson offers a brief literature review, relying heavily on English-language scholarship. In chapter one, "A Survey of Recent Scholarship," he traces the evolution of scholarly models regarding ancient Judaism and Christianity, and especially Christian supersessionism, by looking first at scholarship on the so-called "parting of the ways," and then looking at those who question whether "parting" and "ways" are even adequate terms. Krewson says that Daniel Boyarin, in his book *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), exemplifies the recent scholarly turn from a "parting of the ways" model, with his preference for a metaphor of waves that may diverge or converge. This better accounts for a fluid understanding of Judaisms and Christianities which cannot be described as "ways" and therefore cannot have "parted." Then he briefly surveys recent developments in Hieronymian scholarship, highlighting the character and rationale of Jerome's use of the Hebrew text and of Jewish traditions. Jerome's justifications for such use reflect a sophisticated approach to Hebrew sources, literary attempts to construct an authoritative identity, and / or a colonialist assertion of power over Jews by controlling their texts and traditions. Missing in Krewson's account is adequate attention to Jerome's background in classical (non-Jewish) texts, a feature that cannot be separated from his relationship to Jewish traditions.

The subsequent chapters explore Jerome's ambivalence toward Jewish traditions, studying topics previously covered by others, although without the same detail and orientation. In chapter 2, "Return to the Source: Jerome's Ambivalent Pursuit of Jewish Scriptures," Krewson catalogues Jerome's positive and negative views concerning the Hebrew biblical text, the Septuagint, and the Hebrew and Greek canons, thereby highlighting his inconsistency. Krewson, in chapter 3, "'Back to the Hebrew Truth': Jerome's ambivalent Quest for Jewish Truth," traces his praises of and derogatory references to the "Hebrew Truth" in his letters, prologues, and commentaries to show how he reshapes "Christian supersessionism into a more relational model of appropriation and appreciation" (p. 71). More specifically, Jerome acts as an iconoclast, traditionalist, and gatekeeper between Jewish and Christian traditions.

In chapter 4, “Bethlehem...Now Ours’: Jerome’s Ambivalent Remapping of Jewish Land,” Krewson demonstrates that his ambiguous attitude toward the Jewish text and Jewish exegesis within the framework of supersessionism parallels his attitude toward the holy land. This is evident in his advocacy of Christian pilgrimage as a way to displace Jewish attachment to the land. Further, he seeks to elevate the status of Bethlehem over Jerusalem. Similarly, his supersessionism is evident in his translation and update of Eusebius’ *Onomasticon*, seen for example in his addition of references to events in Christian history at many sites. Krewson notes parallels in Jerome’s writings between literally living in the holy land and metaphorically inhabiting Jewish texts and traditions, though otherwise much in this chapter has been presented by Brouria Bitton-Aschkelony, Andrew Jacobs, Andrew Cain, and others.

Krewson makes the case in chapter five, “Ask the Jews!’: Transforming Jerome’s Supersessionism into a Basis for Christian-Jewish Relations,” for using Jerome as a foundation for Christian-Jewish relations. He argues that Jerome provides “useful paradigms for insights into contemporary Christian and Jewish interaction” (p. 139). In his efforts to apply Jerome as a model for contemporary Jewish-Christian relations, Krewson has to repeat previous material, but this enables the chapter to stand by itself.

The author does a competent job laying out the evidence for Jerome’s ambiguous attitude toward Jews and Judaism. His claim, however, that these ambiguities represent an innovative supersessionism is not convincing largely because Krewson gives insufficient attention to the ways classical thought influenced Jerome. This can be seen, for example, in his description of Jerome as a “complex mixture of an iconoclastic Christian Hebraist, a traditional Christian supersessionist, and authoritative dispenser of Hebrew truth for the Christian Church” (p. 98). His continuous engagement with his beloved Cicero, Virgil and the rest of the formative authors from his early education are literally absent from the mix. A specific illustration of why neglect of his classical learning is problematic can be found in his mistranslation of Jerome’s prologue to Daniel. It is not his Jewish instructor who says “by his language ‘Persistent work conquers all’,” but rather the Hebrew interlocutor repeats “that saying [from Virgil’s *Georgics* 1:146] ‘Persistent work conquers all’ in his own tongue” (p. 77). It has long been accepted by scholars that Jerome was drawn to the Hebrew language and traditions because of his studies in the classical philological tradition, and so it is the similarity of a Hebrew adage to a classical text by Virgil that gave him (in Krewson’s words) “personal solace from one of his Hebrew instructors.” By not addressing the classical background, Krewson overstates Jerome’s iconoclasm. In his fourth century context, with flourishing Jewish, Christian, and classical cultures and the Christianization of the Roman elites, his attempt to improve the Latinity and authority of the Bible based on sound philological principles would not be iconoclastic or controversial. In fact, Jerome had many supporters of his work. What primarily provoked controversy were the extreme effects of Jerome’s asceticism on Roman women and his brush with Origenist theology, not his biblical studies.

Krewson's omission of Augustine's views of Jews and Judaism is especially acute. He does appear in the book, but as a defender of the Septuagint. However, his argument that the Jews should remain a protected but degraded minority under Christian rule (a position later encoded in Roman law) and thereby serve as a cautionary illustration of unfaithfulness to God is not much at odds with Jerome's views. A similar overstatement of Jerome's iconoclasm is Krewson's description of him as a self-proclaimed translating "prophet" (p. 65); Krewson later seems to reject this claim, noting that Jerome portrays himself as a scholar who "has no need to promote himself as a divine prophet" (p. 96).

For Krewson, the usefulness of Jerome for contemporary Christian-Jewish relations depends on his claim that Jerome has a systematic theology of supersessionism that can account for his ambiguous characterization of Jews, Judaism, and Jewish tradition. However, he does not make a convincing case for the coherency of this position because the evidence suggests that Jerome's initial interest was in Hebrew and biblical studies with the need to assert his supersessionism so enthusiastically emerging as a by-product. Nevertheless, there is much to recommend an attempt to connect Jerome to contemporary Christian-Jewish dialogue. After all, he surely had an interest in Jewish traditions and the Hebrew Bible, and his residence in the holy land put him in dialogue with actual Jews. Even so, using Jerome as a paradigm is somewhat of a stretch, since as the author himself argues, Jerome believes that the covenant with the Jews has been abrogated, "a version...of 'strong supersessionism'" which is still found among some contemporary Christians and which "has changed little since Jerome's time" (p. 151). Since Jerome did not support such a theological dialogue, I wonder if it is the *study* of Jerome rather than the content of his arguments that ultimately might benefit the Jewish-Christian conversation. Perhaps the real lesson from Jerome is that Christians who legitimize Jewish texts, biblical interpretations, and the claim to the holy land might open up a valuable dialogue regarding supersessionism.