

JEROME AND EZRA AS *INSTAURATOR*: A STUDY IN TRADITION

A mistranslation of Jerome has had far-reaching consequences. It is high time to put paid to this error.

by Father Stephen De Young

In the field of biblical criticism, few figures of the early Christian centuries carry greater weight of authority than Jerome.¹ The enlistment of Jerome in the service of arguments against the traditional Mosaic dating of the Torah, at least at its earliest redactional layers, may, therefore, serve as a *locus classicus* of this form of argumentation. Jerome is presently named as an early proponent of late² dating of the composition of the Torah by scholars across the hermeneutical spectrum. An investigation of Jerome's comments in this regard in their original context reveals the weakness of this modern approach to the application of the fathers.

In the midst of his argumentation in *De Perpetua Virginitate Beatae Mariae*,³ Jerome makes the offhand comment regarding the authorship of the Pentateuch that, “whether one says that Moses was the author of the Pentateuch, or whether one considers that Ezra *instauratorem* the work, I will not argue it.”⁴ Typically, ‘*instauratorem*’ here has been translated into English as ‘edited’ or ‘re-edited’.⁵ Due to this translation, this commentary of Jerome has been cited, particularly beginning in the modern period, both to question the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, and to justify various critical theories of authorship through claims of antiquity.

This translation is misleading. While ‘*instauratorem*’ can refer to the act of editing, it is more accurately understood as ‘repairing’ or, even better, ‘restoring’.⁶ The term functions in this sense quite clearly, for example, in the title of Francis Bacon’s *Instauratio Magna*.⁷ Jerome is here referring to a

particular strand of hermeneutical tradition, existent in his time (the late-fourth century) regarding Ezra and the Pentateuch. This inquiry will attempt to outline this tradition and its major variants, and then show how that tradition has been revived, and in some cases distorted, by modern criticism through this reference by Jerome. By showing that Jerome is referencing a specific set of early Christian beliefs about Ezra without endorsing it, it will be demonstrated that his statement in no-wise constitutes a 'blank check' to modern critics; nor does it grant the legitimacy of antiquity to any view other than the one which Jerome is directly referencing.

Ezra the Restorer

Jerome spent much of his later life as a monastic in Bethlehem and from there engaged in a wide range of correspondence. At the behest of Pope Damasus, Jerome completed the considerable work of translating the Scriptures into a standardized Latin text, the Vulgate. He had the rare distinction, at the time, of having studied Hebrew,⁸ and was considered the foremost expert on the Scriptures of his day. Many of his later letters, therefore, deal with the clarification of various biblical *ambigua*, in which he frequently considers extra-biblical Rabbinical and early Christian traditions of interpretation.⁹

In this particular instance, Jerome remarks off-handedly in the midst of his discussion of the perpetual virginity of Mary that in addition to the belief in Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, there is a view, which he, here at least, chooses not to dispute, that Ezra restored the Pentateuch. We find traces of this idea in comments made by other early fathers. For example, Irenaeus of Lyons writes in the second century:

And there was nothing astonishing in God having done this,—He who, when, during the captivity of the people under Nebuchadnezzar, the Scriptures had been corrupted, and when, after seventy years, the Jews had returned to their own land, then, in the times of Artaxerxes king of the Persians, inspired Esdras the priest, of the tribe of Levi, to recast all the words of the former prophets, and to re-establish with the people the Mosaic legislation.¹⁰

Here, Ezra is understood as not only having restored the Pentateuch but as having repaired the remainder of the Old Testament Scriptures composed before his own era. Similarly, in the third century, Clement of Alexandria

makes the statement:

Since the Scriptures having perished in the captivity of Nabuchodonosor, Esdras the Levite, the priest, in the time of Artaxerxes king of the Persians, having become inspired in the exercise of prophecy restored again the whole of the ancient Scriptures.¹¹

Clement states here that the Pentateuch and the other Hebrew Scriptures were not only corrupted during the period of the Babylonian exile but were completely destroyed.

The clearest elaboration of this tradition comes in the apocryphal work, 4 Ezra.¹² Though Jerome did not list this book amongst the canonical books of the Old Testament, he did produce a Latin translation due to its popularity among the faithful.¹³ There is general scholarly agreement that the work dates to the end of the first century, as it seems to contain direct references to the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem.¹⁴ Fourth Ezra, as an example of the apocalyptic genre, consists of a series of conversation and accompanying visions from God, mediated to Ezra through the archangel Uriel.¹⁵ Ezra questions God's justice with regard to the destruction that has ravaged His people, and in return receives a series of visions that interpret the present suffering, point to the end of this age, and the beginning of the age to come.

Ezra's seventh encounter in this book comes in the form of the Lord speaking to Ezra out of a bush, hearkening back to Moses' original call.¹⁶ Ezra is told that he is about to depart this earthly life, and in response, he states what he considers to be the great problem facing his people:

'May I speak in your presence, Lord?' I replied. 'I am to depart, by your command, after giving warning to those of my people who are now alive. But who will give warning to those born hereafter? The world is shrouded in darkness, and its inhabitants are without light. For your law was destroyed in the fire, and so no one can know about the deeds you have done or intend to do. If I have won your favor, fill me with your holy spirit, so that I may write down the whole story of the world from the very beginning, everything that is contained in your law; then men will have the chance to find the right path, and, if they choose, gain life in the last days.'¹⁷

Ezra here adds to the difficulties facing his people, in that not only has the temple been destroyed, but the Scriptures, in particular, the Torah, have been destroyed, leaving the world in darkness as to what they should do and how they should live.

In response, Ezra is told to return the following day and to bring with him writing materials and five other ready scribes. Ezra does as instructed, and the following occurs:

On the next day, I heard a voice calling me, which said: 'Ezra, open your mouth and drink what I give you.' So I opened my mouth and was handed a cup full of what seemed like water, except that its color was the color of fire. I took it and drank, and as soon as I had done so my mind began to pour forth a flood of understanding, and wisdom grew greater and greater within me, for I retained my memory unimpaired. I opened my mouth to speak, and I continued to speak unceasingly. The Most High gave understanding to the five men, who took turns at writing down what was said, using characters which they had not known before. They remained at work through the forty days, writing all day, and taking food only at night. But as for me, I spoke all through the day; even at night I was not silent. In the forty days, ninety-four books were written. At the end of the forty days the Most High spoke to me. 'Make public the books you wrote first,' he said, 'to be read by good and bad alike. But the last seventy books are to be kept back and given to none but the wise among your people. They contain a stream of understanding, a fountain of wisdom, a flood of knowledge.' And I did so.¹⁸

Through Ezra's dictation, the 24 canonical books¹⁹ of the Old Testament are rewritten, as well as 70 secret books, the contents of which are unattested.

Taking the account in 4 Ezra to be at minimum one fleshed-out version of the tradition reflected in the fathers of the second and third centuries and finally by Jerome, there are two elements involved: first, a loss of at least the Torah and possibly the whole of the Old Testament Scriptures; second, a restoration of those Scriptures associated with the person of Ezra, in addition to his role as a scribe and promulgator of the Law in the canonical Scriptures. The nuances reflected in various references to this tradition thereby reflect variations on these themes, and other possible references come into view. For example, the *Epistle of Barnabas* associates the loss of the original books of Moses and corresponding *lapsus* of the Hebrew nation not with the time of the Exile, but

with the worship of the golden calf.²⁰ With regard to the second element of the tradition, certain Christian authors allege alteration and distortion of the text when it was later restored, generally in some way which obscures Christological interpretation.²¹ These allegations, however, are directed not toward the person of Ezra but to some later stage of transmission.

Ezra's Restoration and Modern Criticism

In the centuries following late antiquity, this tradition regarding Ezra's connection to the Pentateuch fades into the background behind a general acceptance of Mosaic authorship. It resurfaces, however, in the modern period. The earliest known reference to this tradition comes not through a reference to Jerome's comment on the tradition, but a direct reference to 4 Ezra by Thomas Hobbes, quoting portions of the text cited above in his *Leviathan*.²² His contemporary, Baruch Spinoza, shortly thereafter, cited this same tradition, though he did so by a claim that it was the veiled opinion of the medieval rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra.²³

With regard to critical studies of the Scriptures proper, the idea of Ezra as a restorer is brought back into discussion by Cardinal Robert Bellarmine who, in his controversies, explicitly uses the testimony and authority of Jerome to introduce Ezra as the compiler and editor of the Pentateuch in particular, as well as the other early historical books of the Old Testament.²⁴ Bellarmine's use of Jerome here begins a modern trajectory. Though as seen above, Jerome's statement came not in the context of discussing the authorship of the Pentateuch per se, nor even his opinion of the relative merits of the tradition of Ezra as restorer of the text, but as an aside that, whether one accepted that tradition or not, had no direct bearing on the merit of his position on the life history of Christ's mother. Jerome thereby begins to be used to provide authority and antiquity to what is actually a newly emerging theory.²⁵

The identification of Ezra as final editor of the text is then picked up by Julius Wellhausen, who grafted Ezra in as the final compiler and redactor of all of the source material that made up the Pentateuch in particular, as well as Joshua and the other early historical books.²⁶ Further, he theorizes that the earlier documents that were edited into Ezra's final product held no real authority as such until they were promulgated by Ezra. Ezra ceased thereby to be the restorer of the text and became instead the source of the text. It was therefore

only a very small step for Eduard Meyer to simply assert that Ezra had written the Torah, and it was solely his product.²⁷

Emerging from this point are numerous theories regarding Ezra, or other post-exilic origins for the Pentateuch, including Ezra as the creator of Judaism,²⁸ and others similar. Scattered throughout are to be found references to the comment of Jerome regarding Ezra as the Pentateuch's restorer. While these references may give an appearance of venerable and patristic warrant to the critical project, the dissonance between that to which Jerome refers and the theory being promulgated is rarely, if ever, addressed.

Conclusion

In discussing another matter, Jerome makes reference to an already centuries-old tradition involving Ezra and the Pentateuch. At the core of this tradition is the idea that God so superintends the transmission of the Scriptures that even were they to be destroyed utterly, he would, through one of his prophets, be able and ready to restore them in full. The citation, therefore, of Jerome's comment to call into question the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, to question its abiding authority, or to advance a modern critical theory of the origins of the Old Testament texts is not only illegitimate but is a direct contradiction to what Jerome himself was communicating by his reference.

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Notes

1. Origen standing as the possible exception.
2. Post-exilic.
3. This work is sometimes referred to by its subtitle, *Adversus Helvidium*, or simply as the *Letter to Helvidius*.
4. Migne, PL Vol. 23, 212c. This is, indeed, an offhand comment made casually. The central theme of this letter of Jerome is to argue that Mary, the Lord's mother, was a virgin both before and after the birth of her Son. In the section from which this comment is taken, Jerome is addressing the argument that Matthew 1:25, the statement that Joseph did not know his wife until she had given birth, implies that the marriage was consummated after the birth of Jesus. Jerome points to passages in the Pentateuch, specifically the episode in Genesis in which Jacob hides the household gods and gold jewelry under the tree at Shechem and at the end of Deuteronomy the burial place of Moses, neither of which have been found 'until this day'. Jerome is

here saying that whether you think those words were written in the time of Moses or the time of Ezra, in neither case had the respective objects been found even in Jerome's own day, and so the 'until' did not necessarily imply a change of state at time of writing, or marriage in the case of Matthew's Gospel.

5. See, for example, Schaff in NPNF2-06, 338.

6. Lewis and Short, *A Latin Dictionary*, s.v. "instaurator."

7. The English title, *The Great Instauration*, maintains the cognate. Bacon dedicated this work in 1620 to James I in his preface as "the regeneration and restoration of the sciences."

8. The study of Hebrew was seen at the time as, at best, obscurantist. There is, in fact, no discussion in Jerome's own *Introduction to the Pentateuch* of authorship. Rather, the entire text is devoted to an apology for having returned to the Hebrew text rather than simply translating from the Septuagint into Latin.

9. See, for example, his Ep. 64 on the priesthood in the Pentateuch and Ep. 78 on the 42 places at which the Israelites made camp in the wilderness.

10. *Adversus Haereseis*, iii, 21. ANF-1, 453.

11. *Stromata*, I, 22. ANF-2, 335.

12. This book is also sometimes named II Esdras. It was numbered II Esdras in Latin versions as Ezra and Nehemiah were combined into a single book, I Esdras. In the Septuagint, I Esdras consists of a conglomeration of material from the books of II Chronicles and Ezra, while II and III Esdras are the books of Ezra and Nehemiah respectively, making this book IV Esdras.

13. Jerome was not alone in his evaluation of 4 Ezra as apocryphal. It is found in the Old Testament canons of the Ethiopian Orthodox church, and through its presence in the early Slavonic translations came to be regarded as canonical by the Georgian and Russian Orthodox churches. It is universally considered apocryphal by Protestant, Roman Catholic, and all other Orthodox churches.

14. Fried, Lisbeth S.. *Ezra and the Law in History and Tradition*, p. 66. Though there are no known Hebrew manuscripts, it is generally believed to have been originally written in Hebrew, in Palestine, based on comparisons to similar apocalyptic literature of the Second Temple period. Dating and authorship are somewhat complicated by the first two and last two chapters of the Latin versions of the text, which are generally regarded as later Christian additions, based on their content and non-inclusion in earlier Armenian manuscripts. The sections relevant to the topic at hand, however, are found in the earlier, uncontroversial section of the text.

15. Uriel is something of a fixture in early Christian apocryphal literature, appearing in stories of John the Baptist and his mother's rescue from Herod's murder of infants, and in works such as the *Life of Adam and Eve* and the *Apocalypse of Peter*.

16. Exodus 3:1-22.

17. 4 Ezra 14:19-22, tr. Jeremy Kapp.

18. 4 Ezra 14:38b-48, tr. Jeremy Kapp.

19. This numbering is based on the canon of the Hebrew Scriptures with Samuel, Kings, Chronicle, Ezra-Nehemiah, and the Twelve Prophets being each counted as a single book.

20. *Barnabas* 4:7-8.

21. See, for example, Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, LXXI-LXXIII. ANF-1, 235-6.

22. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ch. 33, 42.

23. Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, 8. Neither Hobbes nor Spinoza are interested in the question of the authorship of the Pentateuch per se. Each is seeking to make a political point, albeit an opposite one. Hobbes seems to wish to connect Ezra's authorship of the Law with its promulgation to combine spiritual and secular authority in one man. Spinoza, on the other hand, seems to be deliberately trying to undermine Mosaic authorship with the intent of thereby undermining religious authority in the legal sphere.

24. Bellarmine, *Controversies*, Book 1, 1166. As a leading figure in the Roman Catholic Counter-Reformation, Bellarmine, for whom Jerome is an uncontested authority as a doctor of the church, appears to be using the idea of the text of Scripture as a product of a long process of traditioning to undermine the concept of *Sola Scriptura*.

25. For example, Bellarmine specifies in his treatment that he doesn't believe that any of the Scriptures were destroyed, but that some might have become corrupt, and that Ezra generally re-edited and improved them. This is already a marked change from the tradition as held in earlier centuries.

26. Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*, 110-112.

27. Meyer is the first modern scholar to make this direct assertion in *Die Entstehung des Judentums*, published 1896.

28. Generally following Peter Frei's Persian authorization theory, as argued in P. Frei, "Zentralgewalt und Lokalautonomie im Achämenidenreich," in P. Frei and K. Koch, Eds., *Reichsidee und Reichsorganisation im Perserreich* (OBO, 55; Fribourg: Univesritätsverlag, 1984).