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Jerome as an Ethnographer of the Jews

The recent interest in Late Antiquity has encouraged scholars to recognize the fluid character of the Greco-Roman Mediterranean World. Although it is heuristically convenient to compartmentalize various groups of this period, in actuality, boundaries were persistently transgressed. Jerome represents one such figure who traditionally receives treatment that isolates the Jewish, Christian and Classical worlds in which he traveled. For example, in his recent, excellent study (*Haironimus veba-Yehudim* 'Jerome and the Jews. Thesis [Ph.D.] Jerusalem: Hebrew University [in Hebrew], 1997) Hillel Newman has collected and analyzed Jerome's references to Jews, Judaism, and Jewish learning, primarily in order to illuminate rabbinic history. Newman does not, however, integrate this investigation of Judaica in Jerome with Jerome's well-documented training and interest in Classical Latin literature (H. Hagendahl, *Latin Fathers and the Classics*, 1958). This approach does not adequately solve crucial problems such as why Jerome has a positive attitude toward Jewish scholarship, but a negative attitude toward Jews and Judaism.

Two types of solutions to Jerome's inconsistent attitude toward Jews and Judaism have been offered: theological and historical. The most basic theological argument runs as follows: Jerome simply reflects the complex attitude that Christianity has towards Judaism—recognizing Judaism as its ancestor, but also as its opponent. A more sophisticated development of the theological explanation asserts that Jerome christianizes Jewish traditions, thus treating the Jewish traditions seriously enough to render them superfluous to the Christian audience. Historical explanations have also gained currency. Jerome could be responding to opponents, both Christians and Jews. To the Christian opponents, who castigate any Jewish element, Jerome argues that some Jewish traditions have value even if Judaism as a whole is mistaken. Or Jerome could genuinely value Jewish traditions, but must publicly denigrate Judaism in reaction to those who fault his interest in Hebrew and Hebrew traditions. Thus, Jerome basically respects and values Judaism, but historical circumstances compel him to overstate his hostility to Judaism. On the other hand, Jerome might overstate his knowledge of Hebrew traditions for other rhetorical purposes: he enhances his authority by emphasizing his Judaic knowledge. This approach then implies that his opposition to Judaism is serious and genuine while his attitude toward Jewish sources correspondingly lacks seriousness and genuine interest. As far as Jewish opponents are concerned, Jerome simply claims that the Hebrew text of the Bible and Hebrew traditions must be accurately transmitted in order to defeat Jews in disputes. Even if Jewish traditions are wrong, they must be reported accurately.

While it is possible to find evidence for these historical and theological explanations, they only provide a partial account for Jerome's contradictory attitude toward the Jews and Jewish learning. By recognizing that Jerome mediates his experience of Jews and Jewish learning through the Classical tradition of ethnography, we can make sense of Jerome's complex attitude. Positioning Jerome in the tradition of ethnography depends on three observations: 1) Jerome can be situated in the Classical historiographical tradition. 2) The information collected by Jerome fits traditional ethnographic categories. 3) Jerome

employs the traditional source of ethnographers, the native informant. Since Greeks and Romans viewed the other as either savage barbarian or wise sage, it comes as no surprise that Jerome represents Jews through a conflation of these antithetical categories. I further contend that Jerome has adapted to a Christian context a rationale associated with ethnography. According to Momigliano (*Alien Wisdom*), the Romans gathered accurate information about the "other" in order to achieve military success. Similarly, Christianity can "conquer" the Jews with accurate "intelligence."