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**JEROME AND HIS READERS: AUTHORITY, COMMUNITY,
AND THE IDEAL OF HUMILITY**

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JEROME AND HIS READERS: AUTHORITY, COMMUNITY, AND THE IDEAL OF HUMILITY

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Abstract

Analyzing letters as well as prefaces to biblical commentaries written by Jerome of Stridon, this article discusses four criteria which he considered to be necessary for orthodox exegesis to take place: 1) education and learning; 2) studying the Scriptures as part of an ascetic lifestyle; 3) divine help; and 4) learning in community. The article pays particular attention to the importance of community in Jerome's theory of exegesis, and argues that focusing on the reading community rather than the individual exegete was instrumental in claiming monastic humility. It is argued that according to Jerome, learning in community, and depending on a teacher, distinguishes orthodox from heretical exegetes. Jerome's readers are ascribed a particular importance in the production of allegorical exegesis: In order to reach the deeper meaning of the Scriptures, Jerome thought that divine help was needed, and his readers could, by their prayers, assist him in attaining such help. An important aspect in all of this is the ascetic lifestyle of the exegete and his readers: It is only through this way of life that a higher understanding becomes possible; an understanding unavailable to the non-ascetic as well as the heretic, who are not guided by the Spirit. The article concludes that Jerome's idea of exegesis was deeply communal, and while community was important in claiming humility, Jerome's theorizing about exegesis contributed to marking his textual community as an elite group of exegetes in the church.

Keywords

Jerome of Stridon – biblical exegesis – orthodoxy – asceticism – ideal of humility – reading culture – textual community

1. Introduction

Studies on reading and learning in antiquity have come to increasingly focus on cultural and social aspects, as scholars have examined the rhetorical functions of literature in constructing social reality. This has implied that the material and practical side of literacy has been acknowledged.¹ It has been argued that reading was a cultural phenomenon which mainly took place in community, had a central role in the social construction of

¹ E.g., Eckardt, Hella. 2018. *Writing and Power in the Roman World: Literacies and Material Culture*. New York: Cambridge University Press; Miller, Patricia Cox. 2009. *The Corporeal Imagination: Signifying the Holy in Late Ancient Christianity*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Katarina Pålsson, "Jerome and His Readers: Authority, Community, and the Ideal of Humility," *Journal for Late Antique Religion and Culture* 18 (2024) 74-94; <https://doi.org/10.18573/jlarc.147>

elite communities, and was not at all cut off from the world of politics.² This scholarly focus on the social side of studies in antiquity has been seen in scholarship on patristic exegesis as well, with increasing attention being directed towards the social contexts which such exegesis was informed by, and also informed.³ Scholars have realized that among early Christians, a writer's beliefs, morals, and way of life were seen as at least as important as exegetical skills.⁴ Exegesis was very much a social matter, and had the function of creating Christian identity and authority:⁵ 'scriptural interpreters perceived themselves as agents of religious transformation.'⁶

When it comes to one of the most important patristic exegetes, Jerome of Stridon, surprisingly little scholarly attention has been paid to his views of writing and reading *in community*. Hieronymian scholarship has rather highlighted Jerome's ways of promoting himself as an author and an authoritative voice in exegetical matters.⁷ It has been argued that he saw exegesis mainly as an individual, specialized effort,⁸ and that he had a strong idea about the authority and responsibility of the author.⁹ Although previous scholarship has paid attention to the importance of Jerome's patrons and disciples in his construction of exegetical authority,¹⁰ as well as their role in promoting and disseminating his works,¹¹ the role that he ascribes to them in the actual production of exegesis has been less examined. However, Thomas E. Hunt has brought attention to the relationship, expressed

² Johnson, William A. 2010. *Readers and Reading Culture in the High Roman Empire: A Study of Elite Communities*. New York: Oxford University Press.

³ Martens, Peter W. 2019. "Ideal Interpreters." In *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Biblical Interpretation*, edited by Paul M. Blowers and Peter W. Martens, 149–165. Oxford University Press, 150–152. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198718390.013.8>

⁴ Martens, "Ideal Interpreters;" Stefaniw, Blossom. 2010. *Mind, Text, and Commentary: Noetic Exegesis in Origen of Alexandria, Didymus the Blind, and Evagrius Ponticus*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.

⁵ Martens, "Ideal Interpreters," 153–155; DeCock, Miriam. 2020. *Interpreting the Gospel of John in Antioch and Alexandria*. Atlanta: SBL Press; Martens, Peter W. 2012. *Origen and Scripture: The Contours of the Exegetical Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Dawson, David. 1992. *Allegorical Readers and Cultural Revision in Ancient Alexandria*. Berkeley: University of California Press. Concerning exegesis supporting ascetic ideology, see Clark, Elizabeth A. 1999. *Reading Renunciation: Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

⁶ Martens, "Ideal Interpreters," 155.

⁷ Cain, Andrew. 2009. *The Letters of Jerome: Asceticism, Biblical Exegesis, and the Construction of Christian Authority in Late Antiquity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 168–196.

⁸ Vessey suggests a difference between Jerome and Augustine, according to which 'Jerome shows little interest in the theory of epistolary *amicitia*, or that of the *conloquium litterarum*:' Vessey, Mark. 2005. *Latin Christian Writers in Late Antiquity and Their Texts*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 190, n. 39. Catherine Chin has likewise seen Jerome as emphasizing individual over collaborative effort when it comes to exegesis: Chin, Catherine M. 2013. "Who is the Ascetic Exegete? Angels, Enchantments, and Transformative Food in Origen's *Homilies on Joshua*." In *Asceticism and Exegesis in Early Christianity: The Reception of New Testament Texts in Ancient Ascetic Discourses*, edited by Hans-Ulrich Weidemann, 203–218. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 203.

⁹ Chin, Catherine M. 2010. "Rufinus of Aquileia and Alexandrian Afterlives: Translation as Origenism." *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 18(4): 617–647. doi: [10.1353/earl.2010.a406758](https://doi.org/10.1353/earl.2010.a406758), 622–623: '... Jerome's crafting of his authorial position stands in high relief next to Rufinus's apparent self-effacement' (623).

¹⁰ Cain, *Letters of Jerome*; Cain, Andrew. 2021. "Polemic, Patronage, and Memories of Rome in the Prefaces to Jerome's Pauline Commentaries." In *Hieronymus Romanus: Studies on Jerome and Rome on the Occasion of the 1600th Anniversary of His Death*, edited by Ingo Schaaf et al., 485–508. Turnhout: Brepols; Rebenich, Stefan. 1997. "Asceticism, Orthodoxy, and Patronage: Jerome in Constantinople." In *Studia Patristica* 33, edited by Elizabeth A. Livingstone, 358–377. Leuven: Peeters.

¹¹ Williams, Megan Hale. 2006. *The Monk and the Book: Jerome and the Making of Christian Scholarship*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Katarina Pålsson, "Jerome and His Readers: Authority, Community, and the Ideal of Humility," *Journal for Late Antique Religion and Culture* 18 (2024) 74–94; <https://doi.org/10.18573/jlarc.147>

in Jerome's works, between exegesis and the formation of orthodox Christian readers, and has argued that for Jerome, the production of exegesis had an ethical dimension.¹²

Combining a self-image as teacher with claims to monastic humility was a difficult task for late ancient ascetic writers¹³ – an ascetic who presented himself as an author risked being suspected of heresy.¹⁴ In this article, I will examine the strategies used by Jerome to claim, on the one hand, exegetical authority and, on the other, humility, arguing that *community* was essential in both cases. This will be related to the orthodoxy/heresy discourse, as I ask under which circumstances, according to Jerome, *orthodox exegesis could take place, and how he presented himself and his readers as meeting these conditions*. I will argue that Jerome saw orthodox exegesis as being produced in community, in a joint effort of teacher and disciple.

From writings in which Jerome theorizes about exegesis, mainly in letters and in prefaces to biblical commentaries,¹⁵ I will argue that the following criteria for orthodox exegesis can be identified: 1) education and learning, 2) studying the Scriptures as part of an ascetic lifestyle, 3) divine help, and 4) learning in community. Understanding Jerome and his readers as a typical late antique elitist textual community, I argue that Jerome's rhetoric reflected, but also contributed to creating, a social reality marked by struggles over spiritual authority and Christian identity in the late fourth and early fifth century church.

2. Jerome's Textual Community

The present work does not deal so much with reconstructing Jerome's actual community of readers as with his understanding and representation of this community in constructing exegetical authority as well as ascetic humility. However, the one can certainly not be discussed without being related to the other: Jerome's description of his community as an elite of exegetes both depended on his actual relationships to readers, and would have resulted in a shared self-perception of these readers concerning their role in the church.

¹² Hunt, Thomas E. 2020. *Jerome of Stridon and the Ethics of Literary Production in Late Antiquity*. Leiden: Brill.

¹³ Krueger, Derek. 2004. *Writing and Holiness: The Practice of Authorship in the Early Christian East*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2–3: "Did writing [interpretation] displace the authorship of God or could it participate in it?"

¹⁴ Williams, *The Monk*, 167–168.

¹⁵ As argued by Hunt, commentaries had the function of limiting possible interpretations and thus shaping the reception of a work; they 'produced and ordered readers': Hunt, *Jerome of Stridon*, 44. Of course, they also had the function of promoting the exegete: Cain, Andrew. 2021. *Jerome's Commentaries on the Pauline Epistles and the Architecture of Exegetical Authority*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 48–53. Concerning apologetics in Jerome's prefaces, see Cain, Andrew. 2014. "Apology and Polemics in Jerome's Prefaces to His Biblical Scholarship." In *Hieronymus als Exeget und Theologe: Interdisziplinäre Zugänge zum Koheletkommentar des Hieronymus*, edited by Elisabeth Birnbaum and Ludger Schwiendhorst-Schönberger. Leuven: Peeters, 107–128. Jerome used commentaries and other exegetical texts for heresiological purposes: Cain, *Jerome's Commentaries*, 136–160; cf. Sághy, Marianne. 2011. "The Master and Marcella: Saint Jerome Retells the Bible to Women." In *Retelling the Bible. Literary, Historical, and Social Contexts*, edited by Lucie Dolezalová and Tamás Visi, 127–137. Peter Lang, 131–134. My focus in this article is not on how Jerome presents heretics in his works, but rather on the conditions that he finds necessary for orthodox interpretation to take place – that is, the lack of which makes interpreters fall into heresy.

Katarina Pålsson, "Jerome and His Readers: Authority, Community, and the Ideal of Humility," *Journal for Late Antique Religion and Culture* 18 (2024) 74–94; <https://doi.org/10.18573/jlarc.147>

Jerome's community of readers was one that centred on texts, both with regard to their common interest in studying the Bible, and with regard to their way of communicating and upholding relationships. As Kim Haines-Eitzen writes: 'we would do well to think of Jerome's circle of women friends, correspondents, and interlocuters as a veritable textual community, emerging in Rome in 382 CE and enduring well into the fifth century.'¹⁶ Jerome's relationship to his patrons was, above all, *textual*, revolving around the interpretation of the Scriptures.¹⁷ Thomas Hunt has spoken, in this connection, of 'the power of literary production to make reading communities, united by and through shared acts of literary production.'¹⁸ Jerome's patrons were also his readers, deeply engaged in his literary activity.¹⁹ It is clear that his disciples – some of them to a much higher degree than others – had a great influence on his literary productions,²⁰ but also an important function in the dissemination of them.²¹

This distribution of his works strengthened Jerome's authority as a writer, but would also have had the effect of strengthening the community. As becomes clear from Jerome's writings, readers borrowed his texts from the personal libraries of one another, as was common practice at the time: In ancient libraries, books were typically 'copied by or for their owners from originals borrowed from other participants in a network of literary exchange.'²² Part of the classical *paideia* was precisely the exchange of books.²³ A network of readers was thus created who all, to various degrees and in different ways, would have regarded Jerome as a teacher of asceticism and exegesis. Many of Jerome's correspondents may never have met each other in real life; they 'might only know one another through literary exchange ... yet the literature they exchange reveals a shared concern for shared aims and a shared identity.'²⁴

As Hunt has argued, the Christian community is, according to Jerome, created from a common way reading of the Scriptures. *What* to read, and *how* to read, has consequences

¹⁶ Haines-Eitzen, Kim. 2012. *The Gendered Palimpsest: Women, Writing, and Representation in Early Christianity*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 28. Cf. Cain, *Jerome's Commentaries*, 103–105.

¹⁷ Sághy, "The Master and Marcella"; Georgieva, Silvia. 2017. "Domina, Filia, Conserva, Germana: The Identity of the Correspondent in Saint Jerome's Letters." In *Studia Patristica* 97, edited by Markus Vinzent, 37–50. Leuven: Peeters.

¹⁸ Hunt, *Jerome of Stridon*, 197.

¹⁹ Haines-Eitzen, *The Gendered Palimpsest*, 45–46. Concerning language used in antique prefaces to indicate the writer's obedience to the demands of the one requesting the writing, see Janson, Tore. 1964. "Latin Prose Prefaces: Studies in Literary Conventions." PhD diss., Stockholm University, 117–120. About the importance of associates in Jerome's scholarly work: Fürst, Alfons. 2016. *Hieronymus: Askese und Wissenschaft in der Spätantike*. Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 75–79.

²⁰ Concerning the important role of women, particularly Paula, Eustochium, and Marcella, as Jerome's patrons, see Haines-Eitzen, *The Gendered Palimpsest*, 34–37; Canellis, Aline. 2021. "Pammachius et Marcella: Amis, ἐργοδιώκται et défenseurs de Jérôme à Rome." In *Hieronymus Romanus: Studies on Jerome and Rome on the Occasion of the 1600th Anniversary of His Death*, edited by Ingo Schaaf et al., 509–540. Turnhout: Brepols, 521–528; Hunt, *Jerome of Stridon*, 197–198.

²¹ Concerning the distribution of Jerome's works, see Williams, *The Monk*, 241f; van't Westeinde, Jessica. 2021. *Roman Nobilitas in Jerome's Letters: Roman Values and Christian Asceticism for Socialites*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 55–58, 219–238; Canellis, "Pammachius et Marcella," 523–524; Cain, "Polemic, Patronage," 489–490; Cain, *Jerome's Commentaries*, 54; Gamble, Harry Y. 1995. *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 137–140.

²² Williams, *The Monk*, 136. On women as owners of libraries, see Haines-Eitzen, *The Gendered Palimpsest*, 33–34. Concerning libraries in early Christianity: Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 144–202.

²³ van't Westeinde, *Roman Nobilitas*, 54.

²⁴ van't Westeinde, *Roman Nobilitas*, 54.

Katarina Pålsson, "Jerome and His Readers: Authority, Community, and the Ideal of Humility," *Journal for Late Antique Religion and Culture* 18 (2024) 74–94; <https://doi.org/10.18573/jlarc.147>

for who is considered to be a Christian and who is not: It is through a shared reading of the Scriptures that an orthodox reading community is formed.²⁵ This way of understanding the place of reading in community formation was shared by other literary associations in antiquity, not least philosophical schools, in which reading was seen as essential in the disciples' spiritual development.²⁶ Such religious and philosophical movements have sometimes been described as *textual communities*,²⁷ a concept associated mainly with Brian Stock's research,²⁸ and which has been explained as: '... a community whose life, thought, sense of identity and relations with outsiders are organised around an authoritative text.'²⁹ Stock, who studied heretical groups in the Middle Ages, argued that these used texts 'both to structure the internal behaviour of the group's members and to provide solidarity against the outside world.'³⁰ Through a common understanding of sacred texts, the members of the group perceived themselves as having a special understanding and way of communicating with the divine; a spiritual status that the outside world lacked.³¹

In Jane Heath's illustration of how the concept of *textual community* has been applied in studies on antiquity, she traces 'aspects emphasised in defining' textual communities, and among the aspects she enumerates, the following will be of particular importance in the present study: 1) *elitism (opposition to the religious mainstream)*; 2) *polemical/dialogical identity formation*; 3) *promoting the authority of the interpreter*, 4) *communication with the divine*; 5) *norms of reading*; 6) *forms of behaviour promoted by reading practices*.³² Studying Jerome and his readers as a textual community, I will first and foremost examine how he rhetorically distinguishes the community from outsiders by presenting his readers as superior both in terms of learning and in terms of ethics, by describing their reading as related to ascetic practices, and, ultimately, by understanding their reading as a communication with God. Characterizing his community in this way, Jerome, I argue, wished to demonstrate that they were in a unique position to mediate divine truth to the church.

3. Education and Learning

Jerome's overall positive attitude toward secular learning, and his view that it could contribute to understanding the Scriptures and the Christian faith,³³ was not unique: Early

²⁵ Hunt, *Jerome of Stridon*, 42–45.

²⁶ As shown by Pierre Hadot, the works of an authority, e.g., Plato, should be read in a certain order: Hadot, Pierre. 1987. "Théologie, exégèse, révélation, écriture, dans la philosophie grecque." In *Les Règles de l'Interpretation*, edited by Michel Tardieu, 13–34. Paris: Cerf, 17.

²⁷ For an overview, see Heath, Jane. 2018. "'Textual Communities': Brian Stock's Concept and Recent Scholarship on Antiquity." In *Scriptural Interpretation at the Interface between Education and Religion*, edited by Florian Wilk, 5–35. Leiden: Brill. doi: https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004385696_003, 14–29.

²⁸ Stock, Brian. 1990. *Listening for the Text: On the Uses of the Past*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

²⁹ Heath, "Textual Communities," 5.

³⁰ Stock, Brian. 1982. *The Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

³¹ Stock, *Implications of Literacy*, 90.

³² Heath, "Textual Communities," 14–29.

³³ This positive attitude is expressed in *Epistula* 70, in which Jerome argues that it is legitimate for Christians to make use of pagan learning. For Jerome's ways of relating to secular education, see Brown, Dennis. 1992. *Vir Trilinguis: A Study of the Biblical Exegesis of Saint Jerome*. Kampen: Kok Pharos; van't Katarina Pålsson, "Jerome and His Readers: Authority, Community, and the Ideal of Humility," *Journal for Late Antique Religion and Culture* 18 (2024) 74–94; <https://doi.org/10.18573/jlarc.147>

Christian exegetes generally were formed by, and made use of, their secular education.³⁴ What we will focus on here is the extent to which Jerome saw secular learning as a *criterium* for orthodox exegesis. Previous scholarship has shown that according to Jerome, secular education is essential for understanding the Scriptures, but also for teaching others.³⁵ In his presentations of patrons/disciples, describing their character and their way of life, Jerome often enhances their education: These are classically trained persons possessing, not least, impressive language skills.³⁶ We have no reason to doubt such descriptions – as Roman aristocrats, Jerome’s addressees would have been well versed in the classical literature, and his writings convey a presupposition of such training on the part of his readers, with his many references to non-Christian authors.³⁷ Apart from reflecting ideals most certainly held by members of this group, Jerome’s writings, shared between members of the community, would have contributed to strengthening the sense of belonging to an elite. For all Jerome’s rhetorical efforts to mark secular literature as non-Christian, most famously expressed in his *Letter 22* to Eustochium,³⁸ nothing indicates that secular learning became irrelevant to the aristocratic converts to asceticism in this period.

Jerome’s very method of exegesis shows that he saw the reading of the Scriptures as an art, something that required training.³⁹ According to Catherine M. Chin, Jerome’s art of reading is close to the *ars grammatica*, to the extent that he analyses the text portion-by-portion with regard to, for example, philological, historical, and religious content.⁴⁰ The Scriptures, according to Jerome, cannot mean anything just by themselves: There are boundaries of interpretation, and training is necessary to acquire the skills that are needed.⁴¹ Christian reading is technical reading;⁴² we are dealing with a ‘*scientia scripturarum*.’⁴³

Westeinde, *Roman Nobilitas*. Fürst points to Jerome’s education as one essential factor that made his scholarly work possible; the others being books, associations, and knowledge of languages: Fürst, *Hieronymus*, 62–83.

³⁴ Martens, “Ideal Interpreters,” 155–157.

³⁵ van’t Westeinde, *Roman Nobilitas*, 101; for attitudes towards Graeco-Roman learning among early Christians, see Gemeinhardt, Peter. 2007. *Das lateinische Christentum und die antike pagane Bildung*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck; Elm, Susanna. 2012. *Sons of Hellenism, Fathers of the Church: Emperor Julian, Gregory of Nazianzus, and the Vision of Rome*. Berkeley: University of California Press; Jaeger, Werner. 1961. *Early Christianity and Greek Paideia*. Cambridge.

³⁶ The examples are numerous, see e.g. ep. 39,1 (about Blesilla) and 108,26 (about Paula). See also Moretti, Paola F. 2014. “Jerome’s Epistolary Portraits of Holy Women: Some Remarks About Their Alleged Multilingualism.” *Journal of Late Antiquity* 7(2): 280–297; Georgieva, Silvia. 2019. “Fiunt, non nascuntur christiani: Raising a Child According to St. Jerome’s Letters to Gaudentius and Leta.” In *Il bambino nelle fonti cristiane*. XLV Incontro di Studiosi dell’ Antichità Cristiana (Rome, 11–13 May 2017), Lugano, 305–316. For Jerome’s ideas about education in the upbringing of an ascetic girl, see ep. 107 and 128.

³⁷ van’t Westeinde, *Roman Nobilitas*, e.g., 52–54, 113–116.

³⁸ Ep. 22,30.

³⁹ Chin, Catherine M. 2007. “Through the Looking Glass Darkly: Jerome Inside the Book.” In *The Early Christian Book*, edited by William E. Klingshirn and Linda Safran, 101–116. Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 108.

⁴⁰ Chin, “Jerome Inside the Book,” 108.

⁴¹ Chin, “Jerome Inside the Book,” 109.

⁴² Chin, “Jerome Inside the Book,” 109–110, referring to ep. 53,7.

⁴³ Vessey, *Latin Christian Writers*, 179–185.

Katarina Pålsson, “Jerome and His Readers: Authority, Community, and the Ideal of Humility,” *Journal for Late Antique Religion and Culture* 18 (2024) 74–94; <https://doi.org/10.18573/jlarc.147>

This ideal of being well-educated would seem to go directly against contemporary ideals of the monastic as humble and unlearned. We may have a look at what Jerome has to say in his *Letter 53*, to Paulinus:

In his description of the righteous man, whom he compares to the tree of life in Paradise, David speaks, among other virtues, also of this one: ‘His will was in the law of the Lord, and he will meditate on His law day and night’ (cf. Ps 1.2). At the end of his most sacred vision, Daniel says that ‘the righteous shine like the stars, and the prudent, that is the learned, like heaven.’ You see how great the difference is between righteous simplicity and learned righteousness. The first are compared to the stars, the others to heaven...⁴⁴

Thus, ‘learned righteousness’ is clearly preferred over ‘righteous simplicity.’ In the same letter, Paulinus is told not to be deterred by the ‘simplicity of the holy Scriptures and its poor vocabulary.’⁴⁵ These are explained by Jerome as depending either on errors made by translators, or on the intention of the original writers to facilitate the teaching of an uneducated audience (*rusticam contionem*): While the educated person understands the Scriptures in one way, those who lack education will find another meaning.⁴⁶ This tells us two things: First, the idea that the biblical authors themselves did not possess literary skills was unthinkable to Jerome. Secondly, he makes clear that the Scriptures may be interpreted in different ways by the educated and the uneducated. Needless to say, the two kinds of interpretation are not of equal value – we will come back to this below, when discussing his views on allegorical interpretation.

Reading the Scriptures without a significant degree of learning may even be dangerous, since it involves the risk of developing heretical interpretations. In *Letter 130*, to the virgin Demetrias, we find the idea that heresy is a consequence of reading the Scriptures without sufficient knowledge. Jerome presents an idea about better and worse ways to teach and learn: ‘... if persons who lack secular learning read something from the works of eloquent people, they will only learn verbosity, and will not gain acquaintance with the Scriptures.’⁴⁷ Learning is seen as essential for reaching a fuller knowledge of the Scriptures, and Jerome warns of persons teaching to others the Scriptures that they do not understand themselves, thus becoming ‘teachers of the ignorant’ (*inperitorum magistri*).⁴⁸ Here, we see again the importance of secular learning for understanding the Scriptures and being able to teach others.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ *Ep.* 53,3 (CSEL 54, 448): *et in descriptione iusti uiri, cum eum arbori David, quae est vitae in paradiso, compararet, inter ceteras uirtutes etiam hoc intulit: in lege domini fuit uoluntas eius et in lege eius meditabitur die ac nocte. Danhiel in fine sacratissimae uisionis iustos ait fulgere quasi stellas et intellegentes, id est doctos, quasi firmamentum. uides, quantum distent inter se iusta rusticitas et docta iustitia? alii stellis, alii caelo comparantur...* (The translations in this article are my own unless stated otherwise.)

⁴⁵ *Ep.* 53,10 (CSEL 54, 463): *... nolo offenderis in scripturis sanctis simplicitate et quasi uilitate uerborum ...*

⁴⁶ *Ep.* 53,10 (CSEL 54, 463).

⁴⁷ *Ep.* 130,17 (CSEL 56, 198): *certe, si rudes saecularium litterarum de tractatibus hominum disertorum quippiam legerint, uerbositatem solam discunt absque notitia scripturarum ...*

⁴⁸ *Ep.* 130,17. For a discussion about “the simple” as a rhetorical category in Jerome’s heresiology, see Benoît Jeanjean. 1999. *Saint Jérôme et l’Hérésie*. Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 323–326.

⁴⁹ Cf. van’t Westeinde, *Roman Nobilitas*, e.g., 101–102, 224–225.

Katarina Pålsson, “Jerome and His Readers: Authority, Community, and the Ideal of Humility,” *Journal for Late Antique Religion and Culture* 18 (2024) 74–94; <https://doi.org/10.18573/jlarc.147>

While emphasizing the importance of secular education would have appealed to Jerome's readers, and would also have supported his critique of 'heretical' opponents, it came with a challenge: How could the ascetic ideals of humility and simplicity be upheld? In some texts, Jerome does not even try to claim simplicity for himself and his readers, but rather turns this ideal upside down, as we saw in the above quotation from *Letter 53*.⁵⁰ This does not mean that he did not realize the potential problem in relying, as an ascetic teacher, on secular education, and there are examples of him repudiating secular education as well. One is found in a preface to the *Commentary on Galatians*, in which he seeks to contrast his own biblical learning with another Galatians commentator, Marius Victorinus,' secular learning and rhetorical skills.⁵¹ Likewise, Jerome often points out that those looking for polished rhetoric will not find it in his works: What he is concerned with is explaining the meaning of the Scriptures.⁵²

Megan Hale Williams has remarked that in Jerome, 'scriptural study as a specialized discipline'⁵³ seems, on the one hand, to be opposed to secular study, but on the other, it becomes clear that secular study is seen as a prerequisite.⁵⁴ As one of the criteria for orthodox interpretation of the Scriptures which I examine in this article, education and learning, although essential, is of relative importance in comparison to the other criteria. As seen in Jerome's verdict of Victorinus, this kind of learning is supposed to be of limited use. It is important to stress that, although the aristocratic ideal of being well-educated, and the appreciative view on reading and writing, certainly were translated into the Christian ascetic context, we are dealing with a re-interpretation of ideals and an appropriation of them to a new milieu. If we, following Richard Valantasis, see asceticism as '... performances designed to inaugurate an alternative culture, to enable different social relations, and to create a new identity,'⁵⁵ and as making up a cultural system of its own,⁵⁶ this implies that when practices and symbols are transferred from a non-ascetic to an ascetic context, these are placed within a different system of meaning, and thus, they will *mean* something else than they did before. In relation to Jerome's understanding of exegesis, secular leaning only becomes important when it is translated into this new culture and takes on a new meaning – and when the practice of reading becomes an ascetic practice.

4. Studying the Scriptures as Part of an Ascetic Lifestyle

In late antique religious and philosophical schools, reading and learning were not set apart from other practices, but were deeply embedded in a social and material context. In his study of reading culture among the Roman elite, William A. Johnson has shown how reading, *together* with other practices – dinners, physical activities etc. – made up elite cultures, not as performed individually, but in communion with others. This social side

⁵⁰ Cf. *ep. 57,12* and *Commentarii in Epistolam Pauli Apostoli ad Ephesios* III pref.

⁵¹ Cain, *Jerome's Commentaries*, 69–71; cf. Hunt, *Jerome of Stridon*, 42–44.

⁵² *Commentarius in Amos prophetam* III pref.

⁵³ Williams, *The Monk*, 256.

⁵⁴ Williams, *The Monk*, 255–256, with reference to *ep. 53* and 58.

⁵⁵ Valantasis, Richard. 2008. *The Making of the Self: Ancient and Modern Asceticism*. Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 8.

⁵⁶ Valantasis explains, concerning ascetical acts that are performed, that these do not have a meaning in themselves, but assume a particular meaning in "a semiotic system" that makes up the ascetic culture: Valantasis, *Making of the Self*, 8.

Katarina Pålsson, "Jerome and His Readers: Authority, Community, and the Ideal of Humility," *Journal for Late Antique Religion and Culture* 18 (2024) 74–94; <https://doi.org/10.18573/jlarc.147>

of reading is found not least in the philosophical schools, concerning which Pierre Hadot has argued that they were occupied not only with systems of ideas, but most of all, with a way of life. Study and practice were closely related, and studies aimed not only at learning and understanding, but at transformation into a better human being.⁵⁷ Among early Christian exegetes, it was a commonly held view that performing the exegetical task was not only a matter of skill, but involved the whole person. A reader should not be defiled neither by moral nor doctrinal faults,⁵⁸ and the good exegete was thought to be marked by characteristics such as diligence and carefulness.⁵⁹ That is, exegetical work implied much more than applying technical skills to a material: It was directly connected to who the writer was, and how the writer lived his life.

Reading, as explained in Jerome's writings to ascetics, is an ascetic practice related to other ascetic practices that all contribute to the formation of the ascetic person. In this sense, reading can be said to be *ritualized* – taking place in a religious context, it is elevated above its everyday, profane meaning and function and invested with sacredness. It is not enough for Jerome's readers to *read* the divine books, but they have to "integrate" Scripture into daily life.⁶⁰ Jerome seems to have understood reading as an instance of manual labour, and he gives advice about how to make it a daily routine in the monastic life.⁶¹ In a context in which studies were sometimes seen as incompatible with the ideal of humility, investing reading with ascetic meaning could be instrumental in presenting it as a humble activity, in a way corresponding to what Derek Krueger has shown in the case of writing hagiography:⁶² 'Turning the writer's agency into ascetic performance resolved tensions between authorship and pride.'⁶³

An important example of this ascetic understanding of reading is found in the connection between reading and fasting. In *Letter 22*, Eustochium is told to read rather than to eat.⁶⁴ 'Read often and learn as much as you can,' Jerome instructs her. 'Let sleep come over you when you are still holding the book, and let your face fall down on the sacred page.'⁶⁵ As Kim Haines-Eitzen has written: '... reading has become yet another means by which the body can be disciplined.'⁶⁶ This connection between reading and eating is seen also in an early letter to Paula, and here, the ascetic cravings is set in sharp contrast to the non-ascetic, as Jerome juxtaposes fleshly people's delight in worldly things

⁵⁷ Hadot, Pierre. 2004. *What is Ancient Philosophy?* Transl. by Michael Chase. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap.

⁵⁸ Martens, "Ideal Interpreters," 158–159.

⁵⁹ Martens, "Ideal Interpreters," 160–161.

⁶⁰ van't Westeinde, *Roman Nobilitas*, 102.

⁶¹ Patrick Laurence points out how the *lectio divina* is alternated with prayer and psalmody, referring for example to *ep.* 22,25 and *ep.* 130,15: Laurence, Patrick. 1997. *Jérôme et le nouveau modèle féminin: la conversion à la vie parfaite*. Paris: Institut d'Études Augustiniennes, 398–399. Concerning reading and meditating on the Scriptures as an integral part of the ascetic life, see also Cain, *Jerome's Commentaries*, 107–108.

⁶² Krueger, *Writing and Holiness*, 94–109.

⁶³ Krueger, *Writing and Holiness*, 104.

⁶⁴ Cf. the discussion about reading as a supplement for eating, in writings to early Christian women, in Haines-Eitzen, *The Gendered Palimpsest*, 39–52; cf. van't Westeinde, *Roman Nobilitas*, 102–103.

⁶⁵ *Ep.* 22,17 (CSEL 54, 165): *crebrius lege et disce quam plurima. tenenti codicem somnus obrepat et cadentem faciem pagina sancta suscipiat*. Cf. *ep.* 54,11, where Furia is instructed that after eating, she must pray and read.

⁶⁶ Haines-Eitzen, *The Gendered Palimpsest*, 51.

with the pleasure that ascetics find in reaching the inner meaning of the Scriptures and obtaining a spiritual wisdom:

What honey is sweeter than to know the wisdom of God? Others may possess riches, drink from jewelled cups, glow in silk clothing, delight in peoples' approval, and are, despite a variety of pleasures, unable to exhaust their riches. Our delight is to meditate on the law of the Lord day and night...⁶⁷

However, scriptural study is not only an ascetic practice in itself, but it is also the case that a spiritual understanding of the biblical words *presupposes* ascetic practice. In the epitaph of Marcella, Jerome relates how she meditated on the law of the Lord day and night (cf. Ps 1.2),⁶⁸ and did not understand such meditation as a practice of repeating written words, but in terms of action. She is said to have remembered the words 'I gain understanding through your precepts'⁶⁹ (cf. Ps 119.104); that is, she knew that only by fulfilling these precepts, living according to the will of God, could she understand the Scriptures.⁷⁰ It has been argued that, according to Jerome, Marcella's understanding 'depended on a certain practice, which is also a prerequisite for her teaching ... there is no such thing as a purely intellectual approach to Christian teachings, but Biblical knowledge is available only by the method of acting.'⁷¹ This may be compared to a preface of his *Commentary on Ezekiel*, in which Jerome makes clear that if Eustochium finds his writing hard to grasp, the fault is not hers: 'By your special status as a virgin and by your continent way of life, you live with God as your guest.'⁷² Purified and holy through her asceticism, Eustochium stands in a relationship with God which implies spiritual discernment.

Jerome's textual community is formed through sharing practices which all make up an ascetic reading culture and have their particular significance as parts of that culture. These practices have the function of transforming the individual, making a new person with abilities not achievable for others. At the same time, a very clear divide is created between this group and the outsiders – that is, non-ascetic Christians. Only in the ascetic life may the Scriptures be read in such a way that the reader is taught by God Himself.

5. Divine Help

Despite sometimes criticizing allegorical interpretation, in the context of anti-Origenist polemics, it makes sense that Jerome would prefer spiritual exegesis. After all, if the

⁶⁷ Ep. 30,13 (CSEL 54, 248): ... *quae mella sunt dulciora dei scire prudentiam ... habeant sibi ceteri suas opes, gemma bibant, serico niteant, plausu populi delectentur et per uarias uoluptates diuitias suas uincere nequeant: nostrae deliciae sint in lege domini meditari die ac nocte...*

⁶⁸ Ep. 127,4.

⁶⁹ Ep. 127,4 (CSEL 56/1, 148).

⁷⁰ Cf. ep. 64,20.

⁷¹ Munkholt Christensen, Maria and Gemeinhardt, Peter. 2019. "Holy Women and Men as Teachers in Late Antique Christianity." *Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum* 23(2): 288–328, 316. Cf. van't Westeinde, *Roman Nobilitas*, 103–104, 138–142.

⁷² *Commentariorum in Hiezechielem XIII* pref. (CSEL 75, 606): ... *tertium acumen ingenii tui et desiderium scripturarum facile renuit, quae priuilegio uirginali et uictus continentia, non dicam frequentem sed iugem hospitem possides Deum*. Transl. Thomas P. Scheck, *St. Jerome: Commentary on Ezekiel*, Newman Press 2017, 488.

Katarina Pålsson, "Jerome and His Readers: Authority, Community, and the Ideal of Humility," *Journal for Late Antique Religion and Culture* 18 (2024) 74-94; <https://doi.org/10.18573/jlarc.147>

meaning of the Scriptures was clear to everyone, it would be difficult to claim a hierarchy of Christians, based on different degrees of understanding. As he writes in *Letter 65*: ‘For where the meaning is simple and open, what necessity is there to admonish the hearer about the understanding and say to him or her: “whoever has ears to hear with, let them hear” (Matt 13.9)?’⁷³ In his *Commentary on Nahum*, Jerome writes that the Holy Scriptures are difficult to understand, especially the prophets, ‘so that what is holy may not be easily available to dogs, nor pearls to swine, nor the holy of holies to the profane’ (cf. Mt 7,6).⁷⁴ The Pauline words ‘Walk in the Spirit and you will not fulfil the desire of the flesh’ (Gal 5.16) are said to have the potential meaning of exhorting the reader to acquire a spiritual understanding instead of following ‘the fleshly law’ and ‘the letter.’⁷⁵

In *Against Jovinian*, the work in which Jerome presented his most elaborate argument for the superiority of asceticism, he also touches on the topic of spiritual discernment as he comments on Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 3: ‘I could not speak to you as to spiritual, but as to carnal’:

The one who is in the animal state, and does not receive the things that are of the Spirit of God (for they seem like stupidity to such a person, who cannot understand what is spiritually discerned) – such a person is not fed with the food of perfect chastity, but with the raw milk of marriage.⁷⁶

This does not mean that Jerome disregarded the historical meaning; rather, he saw the allegorical interpretation as a further step, and sometimes he expressed the idea that the history, or the literal sense, was the foundation upon which he placed a spiritual roof.⁷⁷ The spiritual understanding is, for Jerome, an understanding according to the Holy Spirit. The Spirit has informed the works of the biblical authors, and thus He also reveals what is written. Here, we come to the importance of divine help in exegesis. Asking for the help of the Holy Spirit pertains to what Peter W. Martens has called the ‘inspired interpreter’ trope in exegesis, aiming to show humility.⁷⁸ The importance of revelation in reaching the truth was expressed also by members of philosophical schools – philosophers

⁷³ *Ep.* 65,4 (CSEL 54, 620): *ubi enim simplex et apertus est sensus, quid necesse est audientem intelligentiae praemoneri et dici ad eum: qui habet aures audiendi, audiat?*

⁷⁴ *Commentarius in Naum* 3.8–12 (CCSL 76A, 566): *Et dicemus, ideo scripturam sanctam his difficultatibus esse contextam, et maxime prophetas qui aenigmatibus pleni sunt, ut difficultatem sensuum, difficultas quoque sermonis inuoluat, ut non facile pateat sanctum canibus, et margaritae porcis, et profanis sancta sanctorum.* Transl. Thomas P. Scheck, *Jerome: Commentaries on the Twelve Prophets*, vol. 1. IVP Academic 2016, 31.

⁷⁵ *Commentarii in Epistolam Pauli Apostoli ad Galatas* III 5,16; III 5,17 (CCSL 77A, 177–182). The idea that particular interpretation skills were needed in order to reach the deeper meaning of the Scriptures, and that the exegete in many ways paralleled the biblical writer in revealing the divine truth, was also found in earlier exegetes, not least Origen of Alexandria by whom Jerome was heavily influenced; cf. Stefaniw, *Mind, Text, and Commentary*, 86–96, 221–297.

⁷⁶ *Adversus Iovinianum* 1.37 (PL 23, 263): *Qui animalis est, et non recipit ea quae spiritus Dei sunt (stultitia enim illi est, nec potest intelligere, quia spiritualiter dijudicatur), iste non perfectae castitatis cibo, sed rudi nuptiarum lacte nutritur.*

⁷⁷ *Commentariorum in Esaiam* VI pref. See the discussions of Jerome’s view on the relation between historical and allegorical meaning in Fürst, *Hieronymus*, 128–135; Brown, *Vir Trilinguis*, 121–165; Canellis, Aline. 2016. “Jerome’s Hermeneutics: How to Exegete the Bible?” In *Patristic Theories of Biblical Interpretation*, edited by Tarmo Toom. Cambridge University Press, 71–75.

⁷⁸ Martens, “Ideal Interpreters,” 161–162; Cain, “Polemic, Patronage,” 503–504; Cain, *Jerome’s Commentaries*, 62–63. Cf. Janson, *Latin Prose Prefaces*, 144–145.

Katarina Pålsson, “Jerome and His Readers: Authority, Community, and the Ideal of Humility,” *Journal for Late Antique Religion and Culture* 18 (2024) 74–94; <https://doi.org/10.18573/jlarc.147>

considered themselves in need of divine help in order to gain understanding and be transformed.⁷⁹

It is essential that Jerome did not only regard the spiritual understanding of the Scriptures as more advanced than the literal, and as being accessible to *ascetics* as opposed to *non-ascetics*, but he also specifically associated it with *orthodoxy*, while he regarded *heretical* interpretations as lacking the Spirit. In the *Commentary on Galatians*, Jerome explains that the Gospel is not the words of the Scriptures, but their meaning, ‘and not the surface meaning, but the innermost.’⁸⁰ He makes clear that the presence of God is essential if the interpreter shall be able to reach the spiritual, and orthodox, meaning. Heretics are without the Holy Spirit, and therefore, the Gospel for them becomes human rather than divine. Heresies are understood by Jerome as ‘works of the flesh,’ spoken of in Galatians 5,⁸¹ and he declares that the one who does not understand the Scriptures according to the understanding of the Holy Spirit can be called a heretic.⁸²

We understand that interpretation of the Scriptures requires much more than the technical skills that one may attain through education: Allegorical understanding is prophetic understanding, and this is required for orthodox interpretation to take place. In a preface of his *Commentary on Ezekiel*, Jerome expresses the hope that the Lord will ‘unfold his own meaning from my mouth, and by the same Spirit’s grace by which the things we read as written down were revealed to the prophets, may they be revealed to us too who discuss them.’ He then refers to the words ‘I opened my mouth and drew breath (*spiritum*)’ (Ps 119.131).⁸³ Jerome could compare his exegetical endeavours to Moses entering the cloud in Exodus 24, and refer to the veil covering Moses’ face in Exodus 34 (cf. 2 Cor 3.13). In the *Commentary on Zechariah*, he writes: ‘From obscure things we move on to obscure things, and with Moses we enter into the cloud and thick darkness.’⁸⁴ He asks for prayers of his reader, so that the ‘veil of Zechariah’ will be removed from his face, ‘which was drawn before the eyes of Moses, because the unworthy common crowd was not able to bear the splendor of his countenance.’⁸⁵

It is the allegorical, more advanced understanding that requires support – while Jerome does not seem to question his ability to interpret the Scriptures according to the historical sense, he makes clear that in passing from this to the spiritual sense, the help of the

⁷⁹ This was particularly common among Neo-Platonists; see Hadot, “Théologie, Exégèse,” 23–34.

⁸⁰ *Comm. Gal.* I 1,11–12 (CCSL 77A, 25): ... *non in superficie sed in medulla* ...

⁸¹ *Comm. Gal.* III 5,19–21; cf. *Comm. Abd.* 7.

⁸² Cf. *Comm. Gal.* I 1,11–12. Concerning the function of commentaries in marking orthodox from heretical exegesis, cf. Hunt, *Jerome of Stridon*, 40–45: ‘Commentaries demarcate the limits of what one can do and still remain “Christian” and in so doing they consign to silence other modes of being Christian’ (43).

⁸³ *Comm. Hiez.* pref. book 6 (CCSL 75, 225): ... *meo ore suo sensu Dominus explicet, eiusdemque Spiritus gratia, qua prophetis reuelata sunt quae scripta legimus, nobis quoque disserentibus reuelentur, ut possimus dicere: Os meum aperui et attraxi spiritum.* Transl. Scheck 2017, 198. The same reference is made in *Comm. Hiez.* X pref.

⁸⁴ *Commentarium in Zachariam* II pref. (CCSL 76A, 795): *Ab obscuris ad obscura transimus, et cum Moysse ingredimur in nubem et caliginem.* Transl. Thomas P. Scheck, *Jerome: Commentaries on the Twelve Prophets*, vol. 2. IVP Academic 2017, 35.

⁸⁵ *Comm. Zach.* II pref. (CCSL 76A, 795): ... *ut auferatur a facie mea uelamen Zachariae, quod ante oculos obtendebatur Moysi, quia fulgorem uultus eius, uulgus ignobile ferre non poterat...* Transl. Scheck 2017, 35. Cf. *Commentarius in Osee* I pref.

Katarina Pålsson, “Jerome and His Readers: Authority, Community, and the Ideal of Humility,” *Journal for Late Antique Religion and Culture* 18 (2024) 74–94; <https://doi.org/10.18573/jlarc.147>

Spirit,⁸⁶ and the prayers of his readers to obtain this help,⁸⁷ is needed. Referring to the story about the battle between the Israelites and Amalek in Exodus 17, in which the Israelites were victorious as long as Moses lifted his hands, the addressee Eusebius is asked to raise up his hands to heaven together with Moses, so that Amalek will be destroyed and poisonous bites will lose their power, as Jerome expresses it in a preface in his *Commentary on Jeremiah*.⁸⁸ Interestingly, while Jerome describes himself as the active part in this instance, Eusebius is the one taking on the role of Moses.⁸⁹ It is because of their purity and holiness, achieved through asceticism, that his readers and patrons are able to do so: In one place, he writes to Eustochium that with the help of her prayers – ‘you who day and night meditate on the law of God (Ps 1.2) and are a temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6.19)’ – he will imitate the householder bringing forth new and old things from his treasury (cf. Mt 13.52) and the bride saying ‘I have saved new and old things for you, my kinsman’ (Cant 7.13).⁹⁰

When it comes to the perceived contradiction between authorship and ascetic humility, it has been argued that, framed in the right way, authorship may become a specifically Christian practice,⁹¹ and even an expression of piety.⁹² This discussion of Jerome’s criterium of divine help shows that he saw exegesis as a collaborative effort – the writer depends on God, but in order to obtain help from God, he also needs the prayers of his readers. In his *Commentary on Malachi*, Jerome describes the importance of humility and gratitude on behalf of the interpreter, both in relation to God and in relation to teachers of the church.⁹³ Turning to our final criterium, *reading in community*, I will argue that Jerome ascribes to his community members a role that extends beyond praying for him: The persons for whom he writes are typically seen as co-teachers rather than students, and this, I argue, is another essential aspect of Jerome’s claim to ascetic humility.

⁸⁶ *Comm. Mic.* 7,8–13: ‘Now let us come to the spiritual understanding, and with the Holy Spirit himself explaining the things which are written, let us exert ourselves vigorously over these actually very difficult passages.’ *Nunc ueniamus ad intelligentiam spiritalem, et ipso Spiritu sancto exponet qua scripta sunt, in locis uel difficilimis desudemus.* (CCSL 76, 516). Transl. Scheck 2016, 107.

⁸⁷ E.g. *Comm. Mic.* II 6,10–16 (to Paula and Eustochium); *Comm. Am.* II pref.; *Comm. Hiez.* IX pref.; *Comm. Hiez.* XI. pref. (480); *Comm. Hiez.* XIV pref. (677); *In Es.* III pref.

⁸⁸ *In Hieremiam prophetam* V pref.

⁸⁹ Other examples are found in *Comm. Hiez.* X pref. and *In Es.* II pref.

⁹⁰ *In Es.* I pref. (CCSL 73, 1): *Vnde orationum tuarum fultus auxilio, quae diebus ac noctibus in Dei lege meditaris et templum es Spiritus sancti, imitabor patremfamilias, qui de thesauro suo profert noua et uetera; et sponsam dicentem in Cantico canticorum: noua et uetera, fratruelis meus, seruauit tibi...* Transl. Thomas P. Scheck, *St Jerome: Commentary on Isaiah; Origen: Homilies 1–9 on Isaiah*, Paulist Press 2014. See Cain, “Polemic, Patronage,” 502–503, concerning the *Commentary on Ephesians*: ‘Jerome represents his exegesis not as a private enterprise executed in a vacuum but as a corporate effort sustained by the prayers of Paula, Eustochium, Marcella’ as well as Paul himself.

⁹¹ As Krueger has shown, by certain rhetorical strategies, Christian authors presented themselves as engaged in pious practices, in what he calls ‘the textual performance of humility’: Krueger, *Writing and Holiness*, 10.

⁹² Krueger, *Writing and Holiness*, e.g., 63–93.

⁹³ *Comm. Mal.* 3.8–12.

6. Learning in Community

6.1. Dependence on a Teacher

While one way of claiming humility, as an exegetic writer, was by reference to divine help, another strategy was to present oneself as dependent on the exegetical work of others.⁹⁴ Jerome sought to demonstrate that he had learned from previous exegetes,⁹⁵ and this reliance on tradition helped support his self-presentation as a humble commentator.⁹⁶ Presenting himself as relying on a tradition of exegetes was not only instrumental in claiming humility, but also in claiming orthodoxy, and to clearly distinguish *his* type of study from heretical practices. Jerome saw heresy as the result of following one's own mind, rather than listening to those more learned and experienced. In a text that we have already referred to above, *Letter 130*, Jerome writes the following about teachers who lack education:

... They teach the Scriptures that they do not themselves understand, and when they convince others, they arrogantly claim to be erudite, being teachers of the ignorant before they have been students of the learned. It is therefore a good thing to obey those who are more advanced, to pay attention to those who are perfect, and to, after the rules of the Scriptures, learn from others one's way of life, and not to follow the worst of teachers, that is, one's own arrogance.⁹⁷

It is essential that this passage in *Letter 130* is found directly after a discussion about the benefits of life in solitude and community respectively, in which Jerome shows a clear preference for the latter and reflects on the dangers of the solitary life. Living as a hermit involves a risk of being exposed to unclean thoughts, but also of becoming arrogant, looking down on others, and seeing one's own knowledge and skills as sufficient.⁹⁸ Also in other writings, Jerome describes heretics as being without teachers, trying to teach from the Scriptures using 'their own judgment,' without actually understanding the words.⁹⁹ Life in community, and under a teacher, will prevent a young ascetic from losing his/her way, and from developing a sense of pride.¹⁰⁰ The heretical arrogance, being formed in solitude,¹⁰¹ is clearly contrasted to orthodox humility, and to learning and teaching that

⁹⁴ Martens, "Ideal Interpreters," 159–160, about exegetes referring to and reusing the works of others.

⁹⁵ Williams, *The Monk*, 197–199. As Williams remarks, Jerome did not follow previous exegetes slavishly, but was selective and critical: Williams, *The Monk*, 195–197.

⁹⁶ As Cain has shown, there is, in the *Commentary on Galatians*, an implicit critique of Marius Victorinus' neglect of the Greek exegetical tradition: Cain, *Jerome's Commentaries*, 67–68: 'Jerome conceptualizes the act of biblical exegesis ... as a cross-generational *colloquium*, which really amounts to an intellectual extension of the notion of the *communio sanctorum*.'

⁹⁷ *Ep. 130,17* (CSEL 56, 198): ... *docentque scripturas, quas non intellegunt, et, cum aliis persuaserint, eruditorum sibi adsumunt supercilium prius inperitorum magistri quam doctorum discipuli. bonum est igitur oboedire maioribus, parere perfectis et post regulas scripturarum uitae suae tramitem ab aliis discere nec praeceptore uti pessimo, scilicet praesumptione sua.*

⁹⁸ *Ep. 130,17.*

⁹⁹ *Comm. Mic. II 7,5–7* (CCSL 76, 513): ... *qui absque magistro et gratia Domini, scientiam scripturarum suo iudicio promittentes, inflati sunt et nihil sciunt; et languent circa questiones, et contentiones pugnasque uerborum, qui uere consistentes in domo, inimici sunt ueritatis.*

¹⁰⁰ *Ep. 125,9* (CSEL 56/1, 128): *in solitudine cito subrepat superbia.* Although solitary life is not condemned, Jerome asserts the importance of being trained in the monastic school (*ludus monasteriorum*).

¹⁰¹ *Comm. Mic. II 7,14–17.*

Katarina Pålsson, "Jerome and His Readers: Authority, Community, and the Ideal of Humility," *Journal for Late Antique Religion and Culture* 18 (2024) 74–94; <https://doi.org/10.18573/jlarc.147>

takes place in community. In order to become a good teacher oneself, one is dependent on the example of others.¹⁰²

Jerome, of course, presents himself as a teacher who has learnt from others. In prefaces to commentaries, he assures his readers that he has made use of the work of previous exegetes, presenting different interpretations for the reader to judge between.¹⁰³ Self-assurance is to be avoided, and Jerome expresses that he has been careful not to learn from that worst of teachers, that is, his own arrogance (*praesumptio*),¹⁰⁴ but from men of the church.¹⁰⁵ Thus being taught, Jerome has become capable of teaching others, and this is a role that he often assumes in his writings to ascetics.¹⁰⁶

Importantly, the aim with this teaching is that his ascetic disciples, in their turn, will be able to teach others.¹⁰⁷ In his epitaph of Marcella, Jerome writes: ‘... whatever in me was the result of long study ... this she tasted, learned and made her own, so that, after my departure [from Rome], if a dispute arose concerning the testimony of Scripture, her judgment was asked for.’¹⁰⁸ Marcella, of course, followed Jerome also in her modesty:

And so wise was she, and so aware of what the philosophers call τὸ πρέπον – that is, doing what is proper – that she answered questions in such a way that what she said did not come from herself, but from me or someone else, so that even in teaching she declared herself to be a disciple.¹⁰⁹

As we continue our examination of this final criterium, reading in community, it will become even clearer that Jerome did not see his readers as passive recipients of his knowledge, but as teachers in their own right. Teaching takes place in community, and it is only in community that orthodoxy may be expressed and defended.

6.2. Co-Teaching Within the Textual Community

While certainly claiming responsibility for the learning and understanding of others, Jerome also expects such responsibility from his readers. An often-used concept in Jerome’s writings is that of the *prudens lector*:¹¹⁰ The reader is expected to determine which of the interpretations presented by Jerome is the most correct, and, not least, be

¹⁰² Following the examples of others and becoming examples themselves was an important aspect of the Graeco-Roman *paideia*, and thus an ideal that Jerome’s readers would share; cf. van’t Westeinde, *Roman Nobilitas*, 100–101, 118–119.

¹⁰³ Hunt, *Jerome of Stridon*, 41; Williams, *The Monk*, 102–104.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. *ep.* 130,17, n. 97 above.

¹⁰⁵ *Ep.* 108,26 (CSEL 55, 344): ... *ut docerem, quod didiceram non a memet ipso, id est a praesumptionis pessimo praeceptore, sed ab illustribus ecclesiae uiris.*

¹⁰⁶ E.g., *ep.* 52 (Nepotian); *ep.* 108 (Paula and Eustochium); *ep.* 127 (Marcella). Concerning the importance of guidance, see also *Commentarius in Aggaeum* 2.11–15; *ep.* 58,8–9; *ep.* 125,18.

¹⁰⁷ *Comm. Hier.* I pref.

¹⁰⁸ *Ep.* 127,7 (CSEL 56/1, 151): *quicquid in nobis longo fuit studio congregatum et meditatione diuturna quasi in naturam uersum, hoc illa libauit, hoc didicit atque possedit, ita ut post profectionem nostram, si aliquo testimonio scripturarum esset oborta contentio, ad illam iudicem pergeretur.*

¹⁰⁹ *Ep.* 127,7 (CSEL 56/1, 151): *et quia ualde prudens erat et nouerat illud, quod appellant philosophi τὸ πρέπον, id est decere, quod facias, sic interrogata respondebat, ut etiam sua non sua diceret, sed uel mea uel cuiuslibet alterius, ut et in ipso, quod docebat, se discipulam fateretur...*

¹¹⁰ Williams, *The Monk*, 192–193, 235–240.

Katarina Pålsson, “Jerome and His Readers: Authority, Community, and the Ideal of Humility,” *Journal for Late Antique Religion and Culture* 18 (2024) 74–94; <https://doi.org/10.18573/jlarc.147>

able to distinguish between orthodoxy and heresy.¹¹¹ This relates, of course, to Jerome's self-presentation as a compiler of the works of previous exegetes: He presents different interpretations from others and leaves the judgment to the reader. Certainly, Jerome was not uncritical in his use of previous authors – as Williams writes: 'in practice, Jerome was far from shifting the burden of judgment onto his readers.'¹¹² Hunt has brought attention to how Jerome saw the commentator as responsible for the reader's understanding. While readers had to determine the right interpretation, the commentator had the responsibility of limiting these choices, and thus, of securing an orthodox understanding of the Scriptures.¹¹³

This being said, we have no reason to doubt either the actual engagement from Jerome's readers in the production of his exegesis, or his wish to present them as being deeply engaged. The involvement of his patrons went beyond ordering books: In some letters, Jerome deals directly with questions posed by the reader.¹¹⁴ Jerome's patron/disciple, as he/she emerges in these writings, poses specific exegetical questions and is a zealous student, thirsty for knowledge. Although Jerome presents himself as studious and diligent, he sometimes gives the impression that it is because of pressure from his readers that he continues his work. In *Letter 77*, he relates how he and Fabiola met to study the Scriptures, and how he was overwhelmed by her questions: 'I replied to the best of my ability and tried to satisfy her inquiry.'¹¹⁵ Fabiola's promptings resulted in Jerome promising her a work in which he would deal with the issues they had discussed (this was done in *Letter 78*). Here, we find Jerome confessing ignorance (claiming humility), and also expressing the idea that his exegetical work results from his readers' requests. Similarly, in the *Commentary on Ezekiel*, he describes his reluctance to interpret what is written about the temple, but explains that Eustochium's prayers and the promises of the Lord ('Ask, and it will be given to you,' Matt 7.7; Lk 11.9) have made him overcome.¹¹⁶

Claiming obedience to persons making requests, and degrading one's capabilities while, at the same time, presenting oneself as diligent, are all common tropes in late ancient Latin prefaces.¹¹⁷ Jerome was certainly influenced by these literary conventions. However, this does not imply that such expressions are without value in understanding how Jerome actually viewed his community. It would have been in Jerome's interest to emphasize activity on the part of his students. Presenting them as able exegetes in their own right would not only mirror his excellence as a teacher, but would also enhance the authority of his community in a time of contestation over the authority to interpret the Scriptures as well as over the value of asceticism. Understanding Jerome and his readers as a textual community of the same sort as many philosophical and religious schools at the time, who perceived themselves as an elite and claimed a more advanced understanding of a textual canon due to their superior way of life, we should not explain away his habit to diminish himself in relation to his readers by referring to literary tropes

¹¹¹ Williams, *The Monk*, 236–238.

¹¹² Williams, *The Monk*, 189.

¹¹³ Hunt, *Jerome of Stridon*, 40–45.

¹¹⁴ Eg. *epistulae* 25, 26, 28, 29, written to Marcella during Jerome's time in Rome. Concerning Jerome's exegetical letters, see Canellis, "Jerome's Hermeneutics," 56–66.

¹¹⁵ *Ep. 77,7* (CSEL 55, 44): ... *respondi, ut potui, et uisus sum interrogationi eius satisfacere.*

¹¹⁶ *Comm. Hiez. XII* pref.; cf. *In Es. X* pref.; and *In Es. XVIII* pref.

¹¹⁷ Janson, *Latin Prose Prefaces*, 116–149.

– and we should not be surprised that Jerome could describe himself as co-student rather than a teacher.¹¹⁸

Jerome's reader does not only ask questions, but is also a judge of his answers. In a preface to his *Commentary on Galatians*, Jerome relates that when he was in Rome, Marcella never visited him except for interrogating about the Scriptures, and that she examined everything he said, so that he perceived her as a judge (*iudex*) rather than a student (*discipula*).¹¹⁹ As Silvia Georgieva has argued, Jerome appears to have viewed his female ascetic friends as fellow-servants in studying the Scriptures. This goes beyond a teaching and learning relationship to one that involves shared effort, but also shared joy.¹²⁰

Thus, teaching and learning within the community is not described as a one-way communication, but Jerome's patrons/disciples take on the role of co-producers of exegesis. The members of the community are presented as improving each other's expertise. While being secluded from the world is an important characteristic of Jerome's ascetic reader, being part of a community is equally important in the construction of ascetic identity and authority which we find in his works. We have seen that Jerome did not recommend a solitary ascetic life, and what emerges in these writings is, I argue, an idea of a mutual dependence and a simultaneous construction of authority of writer and reader, teacher and disciple.

7. Conclusion

'Who is wise, and he shall understand these things? Prudent, and he shall know these things?,' Jerome asks in a preface of his *Commentary on Hosea*.¹²¹ Jerome devoted most of his career to the study of the Scriptures, and an aspect of this work was answering the question here posed, which in his context could be expressed as: Who is the orthodox exegete?

I have discussed four criteria which I argue that Jerome saw as necessary for orthodox exegesis to take place: 1) education and learning; 2) studying the Scriptures as part of an ascetic lifestyle; 3) divine help; and 4) learning in community. Teaching, according to Jerome, takes place within a community, after having learned from those more advanced than oneself. For being a good teacher, secular learning is required; however, it is not sufficient – in order to develop a spiritual discernment, and distinguish orthodox from heretical interpretation, the help of the Holy Spirit is needed. This help is given to those who have merited it, that is, those who live an ascetic life in which meditation on the Scriptures has a central place. This ascetic life is not one that should be lived in solitude, but in community and in imitation of one's superiors. Thus formed by their community, the ascetics will be able to carry out what is their duty: Defending the orthodox faith in the church.

While my focus in this article has been on the rhetoric involved in marking a group of readers as superior to others, such rhetoric, as we have seen, cannot be separated from social reality. I have drawn parallels between Jerome's descriptions of his reading com-

¹¹⁸ *Ep.* 53,10 (CSEL 54, 464): *magistrum rennuens comitem spondeo*.

¹¹⁹ *Comm. Gal.* pref. (CCSL 77A, 5–6).

¹²⁰ Georgieva, "Domina, filia, conserva, germana," 44–48, focusing on his exegetical letters to Marcella.

¹²¹ *Comm. Os.* I pref. (CCSL 76, 1): *Quis sapiens et intelleget ista, intellegens et cognoscet ea?* (quote from Hos 14.10).

Katarina Pålsson, "Jerome and His Readers: Authority, Community, and the Ideal of Humility," *Journal for Late Antique Religion and Culture* 18 (2024) 74–94; <https://doi.org/10.18573/jlarc.147>

munity and similar associations in antiquity, with members gathering around authoritative texts, joined together by a common way of life as well as an idea of how to pass knowledge on from teacher to disciple; thus distinguishing themselves as an elite group in society.

Peter W. Martens has written concerning ancient Christian exegetes: ‘As brokers of salvation, intermediaries who stood between the cryptic words of God and the people of God, interpreters fashioned themselves as agents who extended and clarified the original revelation for the benefit of new communities of faith.’¹²² Jerome does not only use his readers to enhance his own authority as an exegete; rather, it is their authority *as a community* which is most central. It is this community – the ascetic elite of the church – who are the “brokers of salvation,” according to Jerome. Only they embody the criteria necessary to guarantee an orthodox exegesis and, thus, an orthodox theology. His readers are not cut off from the church, but have a mediating role in it. Thus, although exegesis in community may seem to support the ascetic ideal of humility, what we end up with is the construction of an elite group on which the orthodoxy of the church depends.

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¹²² Martens, “Ideal Interpreters,” 162.

Katarina Pålsson, “Jerome and His Readers: Authority, Community, and the Ideal of Humility,” *Journal for Late Antique Religion and Culture* 18 (2024) 74–94; <https://doi.org/10.18573/jlarc.147>

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