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***“NOT MY PUPIL, BUT AN EXPERT:”***  
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# “NOT MY PUPIL, BUT AN EXPERT:” LADY AMBROSIASTER MARCELLA

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## ABSTRACT

This article suggests that the anonymous fourth-century theologian known as Ambrosiaster was the Roman aristocrat Marcella, of the gens Caeonia. The context of communities for celibate women is presented, with their academic emphasis on Scriptural knowledge and wide theological reading. The textual relationship between Ambrosiaster and Jerome is investigated, showing both scholarly interaction and lively disagreement; this echoes the relationship between Jerome and Marcella, a well-known teacher and scholar of her day.

## KEY WORDS

Ambrosiaster, Jerome, Marcella, asceticism, Rome, Scripture commentary, fourth century

## Introduction

Ambrosiaster is the name given in modern times to the late fourth century author of *Commentarii* on the Epistles of Paul (around 190,000 words). The name arises because the work was often preserved in manuscripts with the works of Ambrose; the name Ambrosiaster translates roughly as “phony Ambrose,” “Ambrose-ish.” The main critical text is that of Vogels in the *CSEL* series. Ambrosiaster is also identified as the author of *Quaestiones* (around 100,000 words) which were preserved in manuscripts under the name of Augustine; *certo non Augustini est*, as its *CSEL* editor Souter stated.<sup>1</sup>

Critical editions are plagued by a complex textual history. The *Quaestiones* had at least two recensions, one with 127 “questions” and one with 150 or 151; these will be referred to hereinafter as *quaest.* and *quaest.b.* respectively. Similarly, the *Commentarii* seem to have had at least three recensions. In both cases, the recensions are thought to go back to the original author. This is due to evidence that the author is revising in light of ongoing theological debates, or honing the text to be more streamlined across the corpus.<sup>2</sup>

Ancient manuscripts do not record these two texts as coming from the same author. However, the Benedictine editors of *Patrologia Latina* identified the texts as coming from the same hand.<sup>3</sup> More recently, alongside his editorial work, Souter published a detailed philological and thematic analysis of the two texts. He showed that they share common features, such as the wording of scriptural citations, or use of *adubi* (= *at ubi*) and uncommon words like *baiolus* and *adaeque*.<sup>4</sup> In addition both texts share common

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<sup>1</sup> Souter 1908: viii (*CSEL* 50).

<sup>2</sup> Souter 1908: xi-xiii; Vogels 1956, referred to in Section 4 below; and see Section 7 on Ambrosiaster revising “his” work on the Holy Spirit.

<sup>3</sup> *PL* 35: 2205-9.

<sup>4</sup> Souter 1908: 62, 71, 79, 84.

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illustrations, such as the citation of an ancient Roman law forbidding wine to women, or an unusual interpretation of Ps 23.<sup>5</sup> Souter thus demonstrated that the two texts have the same author, and his work was sufficiently convincing that scholars have never questioned it.

At the turn of the twentieth century, other texts were also suggested as belonging to Ambrosiaster, particularly a fragment of Matthew (*Anonymi Chiliastae in Matthaeum Fragmenta*);<sup>6</sup> however, none has gained scholarly acceptance and the discussion below is agnostic as to whether these are by the same author.

There have been many attempts to identify Ambrosiaster, particularly around the earlier part of the twentieth century, but none achieved consensus. As Bussi eres points out, more recent fashion is to examine the Ambrosiaster’s text and context.<sup>7</sup> Still, none of the proposed candidates allowed us to answer two key questions: (a) Why would the author deliberately choose to be anonymous? (b) Why does Jerome never mention our author, despite the overwhelming number of textual connections between Ambrosiaster and Jerome? It will here be suggested that both questions are amply explained if we assume the writer is a female member of an ascetic community, who wishes her identity to be kept discreet.

In particular we suggest the aristocrat Marcella. Modern scholars have referred to her as “the foremost student of Scripture in Rome,” who was “called on for advice and recognized as an expert,” and whose teaching achieved “public prominence.”<sup>8</sup> She was widowed young after only seven months of marriage; she was pursued by another senator, but refused him; and her father died around the same time. Now an heiress and legally independent, she tried to give her goods to the poor but was prevented by her mother Albina. She formed an ascetic community, became a renowned scholar, and died shortly after Rome was sacked in 410.<sup>9</sup> She was probably in her fifties when Jerome came to Rome (since her sister Asella was),<sup>10</sup> and thus around twenty years older than him.

The first part of this paper sets the context by examining Ambrosiaster (Section 1) and “his” anonymity (Section 2); the celibate female communities of Rome with their emphasis on biblical study are then presented (Section 3). The central section of the paper presents internal evidence from Jerome’s writings: his *ep.* 27 to Marcella (Section 4) and his descriptions of Marcella’s work (Section 5). The last section assesses whether modern scholarly views on Ambrosiaster match those on Marcella with regard to asceticism (Section 6), and looks at Jerome’s relationships (Sections 7-8).

## 1. Who was Ambrosiaster?

We start by considering modern scholarly arguments for Ambrosiaster’s identity, and begin to see how far Marcella matches them. Recent excellent summaries of the literature may be found in Bussi eres (2007) and Lunn-Rockliffe (2000: 32-60).

<sup>5</sup> Souter 1908: 30, 154.

<sup>6</sup> See discussion in Souter 1908: xxiii. The *Clavis Patrum Latinorum* (Dekkers 1995: 58-9) suggests the Matthew fragments and two additional *dubia* by Ambrosiaster.

<sup>7</sup> Bussi eres 2007: 38-9.

<sup>8</sup> E. Clark 1986: 47; Eisen 2000: 95-6; Simpson 1988: 52.

<sup>9</sup> Jerome *ep.* 127.2-5 (Hilberg 1918: 146-150).

<sup>10</sup> Jerome *ep.* 24.4 (Hilberg 1910: 216).

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Ambrosiaster wrote mostly if not entirely in Rome; the corpus is peppered with references to things happening “here – that is, in Rome.”<sup>11</sup> For dating the work, there are a number of pointers. Ambrosiaster mentions Damasus as bishop of Rome (r. 366-384); refers to the period of the Emperor Julian (d.363) as “very recent” but now over;<sup>12</sup> refers to the fall of the Temple (70 A.D.) as “around three hundred years ago;”<sup>13</sup> and shows awareness of debates about the Holy Spirit occurring through the 370s and early 380s.<sup>14</sup> For these reasons scholars put the author’s *floruit* from the 360s to the 380s.

One set of theories arises from the fact that Augustine of Hippo identifies a text of Ambrosiaster as by “Hilarius noster.”<sup>15</sup> However, Augustine’s statement dates from 420, and we will see Ambrosiaster’s text was probably issued anonymously and later attributed to well-known writers. We therefore pass over this evidence, which does not fit with our other clues.

A more helpful idea about Ambrosiaster is that the writer may have been an aristocrat or senator. Souter points to the illustrations from imperial ritual, the duties of officials, the *programma* (edict or petition) of a praetorian prefect, and the fact that aristocrats should not be involved in trade or money-lending nor enter a tavern.<sup>16</sup>

Another suggestion is that our writer had a Jewish background. Scholars such as Speller (1982) following Morin (1899) point to Ambrosiaster’s interest in various aspects of Judaism, such as Hebrew words (e.g., “manna means ‘what is this,’ which in Hebrew is said *manni*”),<sup>17</sup> practices (“[the wedding blessing] remains in the synagogue and now is celebrated in church...”),<sup>18</sup> and observances such as the feast of Tabernacles.<sup>19</sup> Morin thus identified Ambrosiaster as the Christian convert Isaac the Jew, an opponent of Pope Damasus who was exiled to Spain by the emperor around 378. Morin later withdrew the identification, because Isaac cannot have been on location nor writing Christian texts when Jerome was in Rome. Most importantly, Ambrosiaster describes “himself” and “his” readership as Gentile.<sup>20</sup>

A final angle, the most important in the contemporary scholarly literature, suggests Ambrosiaster was a cleric or priest. The writer has an encyclopaedic knowledge of Scripture, and in addition also refers frequently to aspects of church ritual (e.g., the Eucharist) and hierarchy (e.g., deacons) as well as church politics in Rome.<sup>21</sup> What is more, some of the *Quaestiones* refer to the current *lectio*, which could refer to the Bible reading during Eucharist.

Certainly some of the texts have a supposed homiletic style,<sup>22</sup> including words which could designate oral delivery.<sup>23</sup> However, this is subjective with scholars being

<sup>11</sup> *ad Rom.* 16.5 (Vogels 1966: 479).

<sup>12</sup> *ad 2Thess.* 2.7 (Vogels 1969: 240).

<sup>13</sup> *quaest.* 44.15 (Souter 1908: 80).

<sup>14</sup> De Bruyn 2010.

<sup>15</sup> Lunn-Rockcliffe 2000: 33.

<sup>16</sup> *quaest.* 102.5 (Souter 1908: 203); Souter 1905: 177-179.

<sup>17</sup> *quaest.* 20.1 (Souter 1908: 46).

<sup>18</sup> *quaest.* 127.3 (Souter 1908: 400).

<sup>19</sup> *quaest.b.* 82. (*PL* 35: 2276). Note this does not occur in all versions; see Souter 1905: 183.

<sup>20</sup> Jeremiah, prophet to the Gentiles, is “our” prophet: *quaest.* 44.12 (Souter 1908: 78).

<sup>21</sup> *quaest.* 20; *quaest.* 101 (discussed in Section 7).

<sup>22</sup> *quaest.* 100, 116, 118, 120, 121. It may be that the last four here were written together, as a collection of teaching material about Easter.

<sup>23</sup> “audistis”: *quaest.* 98.1, *quaest.* 100.1 (Souter 1908: 187, 191). For more examples see Souter 1905: 10.

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divided; Souter for example does not agree that the texts were for oral delivery.<sup>24</sup> In addition the textual tradition has always transmitted these as *Quaestiones* rather than *Sermones*.<sup>25</sup>

The following passage in particular is used by some scholars to identify Ambrosiaster as a priest.

Dearest brethen (*fratres charissimi*): it is appropriate for God's priest, the overseer of Christ's people, to encourage most devotedly the people placed in his care regarding wholesome doctrine... This is so that we may all carry out faith's requirement at the due time for observance with every care and diligence... (*quaest.* 120.1 *de ieiunio*, Souter 1908: 361)

The passage mentions the role of a priest (*sacerdotem*) and the result (*ut opus fidei faciamus*); scholars such as Hunter and Lunn-Rockliffe understand the first person *faciamus* as referencing the writer himself as a priest.

However, the author does not actually say "he" is a priest and the passage can be read just as naturally without this assumption. Indeed, Ambrosiaster often talks about priests and other clerical orders,<sup>26</sup> but only ever in the third person unlike say Chrysostom.<sup>27</sup> Hence not all theories about Ambrosiaster suggest he is a priest; Morin is notable here, and Bévenot likewise suggests that Ambrosiaster gently protests against concepts of *sacerdotium*.<sup>28</sup> Other scholars such as Bussièrès assume Ambrosiaster is clerical more because the pastoral and catechetical content of the opus, but she is cautious: "les opinions restent partagés."<sup>29</sup>

In fact, rather than hanging on this one clue, it would be more correct to state that Ambrosiaster has removed as much personal information as possible; as Lunn-Rockliffe points out, there is a "striking lack of things to identify him by."<sup>30</sup> As we shall see, even texts in the second-person singular had all identifiable details removed. This dovetails with the idea that Ambrosiaster is consciously trying to remain anonymous (Section 2).

How well does Marcella fit these theories? She was certainly in right time and place. She lived in Rome. Ambrosiaster's *floruit* (360s to 380s) would cover the period from her thirties to her fifties, although evidence from Section 5 could suggest she continued writing until her death in 410. But what of the other pointers: an aristocrat, Jewish birth, a cleric?

Marcella was certainly of high birth, belonging to the senatorial *gens Ceionia*,<sup>31</sup> which had produced consuls and praetorian prefects.<sup>32</sup> She was highly educated like other women of her class (Section 3), but unlike Paula's girls she did not read Greek

<sup>24</sup> Souter 1905: 177.

<sup>25</sup> Lunn-Rockliffe 2000: 67.

<sup>26</sup> E.g. *ad Eph.* 4.11, *ad 1Tim.* 3: 8-12 (Vogels 1969: 99-100, 267-269), *quaest.* 46, *quaest.* 101. For more examples see Bévenot 1977.

<sup>27</sup> Morin 1903: 118.

<sup>28</sup> Discussed in Lunn-Rockliffe 2000: 34-5, and more cautiously Bussièrès 2007: 38-40. See also Bévenot 1977: 163-4.

<sup>29</sup> Bussièrès 2007: 39.

<sup>30</sup> Lunn-Rockliffe 2000: 26-9.

<sup>31</sup> See *PLRE ad Albina*, Marcella's mother, who is thought to be the daughter of Caecionius Rufius Albinus, suffect consul and city prefect of Rome (Jones 1971.1:32).

<sup>32</sup> Jerome *ep.* 127.1 (Hilberg 1918: 145-6).

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fluently and Jerome translates Greek texts for her.<sup>33</sup> We may remark Ambrosiaster did not read Greek either, as when “he” relies on hearsay for textual interpretation (“apparently the Greek text reads ‘serving the Lord’...”).<sup>34</sup> Lack of Greek would be unusual for a man of this social class. Lunn-Rockliffe examines Ambrosiaster’s education; our writer shows impeccable grammar and keen intelligence, but does not frequently cite classical authors or use sophisticated rhetorical devices.<sup>35</sup> G. Clark suggests this is exactly what we would expect of women’s writing.<sup>36</sup>

Marcella was not Jewish, but she was fascinated by Jewish matters and the Hebrew language. At her request, Jerome writes many letters explaining Hebrew terms, such as the ten names for God or words like “amen” and “alleluia”.<sup>37</sup> This interest in Jewish matters was common enough in her circle,<sup>38</sup> as when Fabiola asks about the High Priest’s vestments. However, although Jerome taught Paula and Eustochium Hebrew,<sup>39</sup> there is no concerted linguistic Hebrew tuition described for Marcella. She never seems to have gone further than learning individual words and phrases; again this matches Ambrosiaster, and also tallies with the lack of Greek. Further, there are direct connections between Marcella’s requests and Ambrosiaster’s work. For example, Marcella asks about terms like *maranatha*<sup>40</sup> and *sela (diapsalma)*;<sup>41</sup> in turn these appear in Ambrosiaster’s writings, sometimes using Jerome’s interpretation but sometimes not.

What about the notion that Ambrosiaster was a priest or cleric – can Marcella fit with the evidence? She was a celebrated teacher of Scripture and theology (Section 5).<sup>42</sup> As it happens, women’s communities gathered for bible study groups (Section 3). This context is an alternative way of understanding Ambrosiaster’s so-called “homiletic” texts: they can address study groups rather than church congregations, with *lectio* referring to the text being studied. For example on Gen. 1.26 “Let us make man in our image and likeness,” Ambrosiaster says this can be understood from another part of the same *lectio* and then refers to Gen 11.7.<sup>43</sup> A jump of eleven chapters cannot come in a short reading in the context of a eucharistic service; however, it fits as a study series on Genesis. Ambrosiaster also tells us the Evangelist Mark knew Scripture well and was “not ignorant of *lectio*,” and elsewhere urges us to engage in the discipline of *lectio* during the Lent season;<sup>44</sup> all this suggests *lectio* refers to study rather than a liturgical context. Lastly, the majority of the *Quaestiones* are addressed in the second person singular, and these also were to be read rather than heard (from words such as *legendi, scribemus*).<sup>45</sup> This suggests the *Quaestiones* were also to be used for private

<sup>33</sup> Jerome *ep.* 97 (Hilberg 1912: 182-4).

<sup>34</sup> *ad Rom.* 12.11 (Vogels 1966: 404-5) in *Graeco dicitur sic habere...*; De Bruyn 2011: 466.

<sup>35</sup> Lunn-Rockliffe 2000: 58-60.

<sup>36</sup> G. Clark 1993: 136.

<sup>37</sup> Jerome *ep.* 25, 26, 28, 29 (Hilberg 1910: 218-223, 227-242).

<sup>38</sup> See Cain 2009: 83-84; Jerome also explains Hebrew terms to Damasus, *ep.* 20.3-4 (Hilberg 1910: 106-8).

<sup>39</sup> Jerome *ep.* 108.27(26) (Hilberg 1912: 344-5).

<sup>40</sup> Jerome *ep.* 26.4 (Hilberg 1910: 222); compare *ad 1Cor.* 16.22 (Vogels 1968: 194).

<sup>41</sup> Jerome *ep.* 28 (Hilberg 1910: 227-232); compare *quaest.* 111.12 (Souter 1908: 283).

<sup>42</sup> Eisen 2000: 95-96; Letsch-Brunner 1997.

<sup>43</sup> *quaest.* 45.1 (Souter 1908: 81).

<sup>44</sup> *quaest.* 57.1, 120.1 (Souter 1908: 103, 361).

<sup>45</sup> Souter 1905: 10.

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study as well as oral lessons or as a reference – which is precisely the work that the women in the semi-monastic communities were undertaking (Section 3).

In all, the reasons for attributing this authorship to an ordained priest (the pastoral tone, practical teaching style, topics chosen, desire for ecclesiastical order) all fit just as well in a semi-monastic community.

A final brief comment is necessary on the masculine forms used by Ambrosiaster (*fratres charissimi*, or masculine forms when using the first person plural). The women’s communities discussed in Section 3 could contain male servants, as shown by E. Clark;<sup>46</sup> in particular Marcella’s community was in fact her home, so it would thus be fitting to address a household grouping as *fratres*. But more importantly, Jerome tells us that Marcella passed off her work as that of a man for the sake of propriety (Section 5).

## 2. Anonymous authorship

The works of our author were attributed to Ambrose and Augustine because of the authoritative standing of the latter. Other writers consciously published under the names of better-known figures (for example, Pseudo-Methodius of Olympus and Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite). However, Ambrosiaster’s misattributions appear to be secondary; there is evidence that “his” works were originally issued anonymously rather than pseudonymously.

Anonymous Latin works are not in themselves unusual; sundry Latin texts have been preserved whose authors are not known.<sup>47</sup> But it is hard to gauge whether these authors actually chose to be anonymous. Geue argues for the power of anonymity in the Early Principate, looking at works such as the play *Octavia* preserved with Seneca’s works. He finds that the play’s anonymity allows it to speak for Everyman in its subversive anti-Neronian message.<sup>48</sup> However, despite presenting literary and contextual hypotheses why this and other works might be anonymous, he admits that he has no certain evidence for the authors concealing themselves.<sup>49</sup> In the field of early Christianity, there are barely any biblical-apocryphal works that are *not* pseudonymous.<sup>50</sup> Ehrman suggests texts like the Gospels may originally have been deliberately anonymous as a ploy to look authoritative, in continuation with the authorless history books of the Old Testament. Again, there is no firm evidence for this; Ehrman merely presents it as a hypothesis.<sup>51</sup>

In most cases we can simply never know the author’s intention. In Ambrosiaster’s case however, there are strong suggestions the author was deliberately concealing “his” identity. Jerome receives a treatise through a friend, identifying Melchisedek as the Holy Spirit; we know this was by Ambrosiaster. Jerome comments on the anonymity: “You have sent an anonymous tract, with no author marked. I don’t know whether you

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<sup>46</sup> E. Clark 1979: 67.

<sup>47</sup> See for example Kayachev 2011. For other genres in the fourth century alone, consider the historical *Origo Constantini*; the comedy *Querolus*; or the Latin translation of the *Vita Antonii*.

<sup>48</sup> Geue 2019: 80, 113.

<sup>49</sup> Geue 2019:6 “I have no answer to the question ‘do you think some of these works were originally circulated anonymously’ other than ‘possibly’.”

<sup>50</sup> Bardy 1936, Ehrman 2011.

<sup>51</sup> Ehrman 2011: 424-8.

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removed the name yourself from the heading, or whether the writer wanted to conceal authorship to avoid the risk of an argument...”<sup>52</sup> Not only was this text already circulating anonymously, but Jerome’s comment implies that this is unusual. (Incidentally this is the only time where Jerome does not know Ambrosiaster’s work, since he usually knows the latter well; but he was in the East at this point.)

Recall that we know at least some of Ambrosiaster’s work was issued under Damasus (d. 384). The earliest datable attribution of one of “his” texts is in 405, where Augustine cites the Galatians Commentary as by Ambrose;<sup>53</sup> but around 420 Augustine cites the Romans Commentary as Hilary’s.<sup>54</sup> In other words early citations are attributed to a variety of different authors, again suggesting these were guesses.

The above evidence may be circumstantial, but another indication of the author’s desire for anonymity is the stunning lack of information within the text about the writer or “his” readers. For Pauline commentaries this could be expected, but the *Quaestiones* are more curious. They are mostly short texts of under a thousand words; many of them address individuals in the second person singular, answering questions put. Yet these short treatises have been shorn of any particulars; if there was any identifying material, it was deliberately removed. One may compare Jerome: Cain points out many of his letters belong to the genre of *quaestiones*, but were published as letters with warm personal dialogue.<sup>55</sup>

For these reasons scholars agree that Ambrosiaster deliberately chose to be anonymous.<sup>56</sup> But *why* would an author take this unusual step? Lunn-Rockcliffe<sup>57</sup> asks if Ambrosiaster wanted to avoid controversy, but Hunter<sup>58</sup> feels this would be at odds with “his” texts which tackle issues head-on (Arius, Photinus, Novatian, pagans, arrogant deacons).<sup>59</sup> Souter suggests that Ambrosiaster is showing humility and has no wish for personal glory.<sup>60</sup> This is indeed found in later religious orders,<sup>61</sup> but there is no evidence for such attitudes at the time.

And there is more to consider: not only does the author wish to remain anonymous, but others collude with this wish. One key example is Jerome.

There are innumerable points of connection between the two authors, who refer to each other’s thought and write on the same issues. But in that case, why does Jerome never mention his colleague? A century ago Souter tried to rationalise this: “perhaps... Jerome hated the author, who may have been a rival for Damasus’s favour.”<sup>62</sup> Other scholars build on this. Kelly suggests Jerome was angry about Ambrosiaster’s hostility

<sup>52</sup> Jerome *ep.* 73.1 (Hilberg 1912: 13).

<sup>53</sup> Baxter 1923; Augustine *ep.* 82.24 (Daur 2005: 114) cites Ambrosiaster’s opinion on the debate between Peter and Paul (*ad Gal.* 2.11, Vogels 1969: 25).

<sup>54</sup> Augustine *c. duas epistolas Pelagianorum* 4.4.7 (Urba & Zycha 1913: 528) cites Ambrosiaster *ad Rom.* 5.12,  $\beta$  recension (1966: 164).

<sup>55</sup> Cain 2009: 169.

<sup>56</sup> Lunn-Rockcliffe 2000: 26-9; Bussi eres 2007: 31.

<sup>57</sup> Lunn-Rockcliffe 2000: 26-29.

<sup>58</sup> Hunter 2009: 7-9.

<sup>59</sup> *quaest.* 97, 91, 102, 114, 101.

<sup>60</sup> Discussed in Hunter 2009: 7-9.

<sup>61</sup> Consider a recent volume: *The beginner’s book of chant: a simple guide for parishes, schools and communities*, by “Benedictine monk” (Farnborough, 2003).

<sup>62</sup> Souter 1905: 185.

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to his translations from Hebrew;<sup>63</sup> Vogels asks if Jerome was attempting a *damnatio memoriae*.<sup>64</sup>

This explanation, that Jerome hated Ambrosiaster, entirely misses the point that Jerome is colluding with Ambrosiaster's own desire for discretion.

For example, consider the five exegetical questions on Genesis that Damasus posed Jerome.<sup>65</sup> Due to similarities in wording and order, scholars agree that Damasus derived these from Ambrosiaster's *quaest.* 6, 9-12 (Souter 1908: 29-30, 33-37).<sup>66</sup> Yet neither Jerome nor Damasus mention the source; Volgers deduces that neither knew Ambrosiaster. But Volgers also points to the "light-hearted tone"<sup>67</sup> of this playful exercise (*quaestiunculis*): there is no suggestion that they fear heresy, and Jerome does not even bother answering them fully. This raises the possibility that both knew the author and belonged to the same environment of good-natured scriptural debate. They knew the source was orthodox, but also respected the source's wish not to be named in the published version of the letter.

Again, Jerome does not have an entry in his *De Viris Illustribus* for Ambrosiaster, despite the latter's magnificent output. This cannot be due to hatred, since Jerome includes those he dislikes. His comment on Ambrose is typically barbed: "Ambrose, bishop of Milan, still writes today. There is more but I shall keep my opinion to myself. One way or the other, I would be guilty of either flattery or telling the truth."<sup>68</sup> Maybe Ambrosiaster is absent from Jerome's *De Viris Illustribus* not because of Jerome's dislike, but because the author was not a *vir*.

The long-held hypothesis is that Jerome does not mention Ambrosiaster due to enmity; this simply cannot hold, since it colludes with Ambrosiaster's own wishes for anonymity. We must seek another explanation. The author's wish for anonymity, and Jerome's collusion, are well explained if they were for the sake of female propriety.

### 3. Celibate communities and women's literacy

Let us consider notions of female propriety, especially for consecrated women. Ambrose's *De Virginitate* advises them to be silent and avoid conversation or laughter, in order to avoid drawing attention to themselves: "If people ask about a virgin when they see her, she is not virtuous enough."<sup>69</sup> Jerome also advises consecrated women to avoid self-publicity:

Your clothes should be neither too neat nor too untidy; don't let them be remarkable so that passers-by notice them... Don't wish to appear very devout nor more humble than necessary, so as not to seek admiration by avoiding it. (Jerome *ep.* 22.27, Hilberg 1910: 83)

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<sup>63</sup> Kelly 1975: 149.

<sup>64</sup> Vogels 1956: 15.

<sup>65</sup> Damasus sets the questions at Jerome *ep.* 35, answered by Jerome *ep.* 36 (Hilberg 1910: 265-285).

<sup>66</sup> See e.g. Souter 1905: 21; Cain (2005); Volgers (2006).

<sup>67</sup> Volgers 2006: 533.

<sup>68</sup> Jerome *vir. ill.* 124 (*PL* 23: 751).

<sup>69</sup> Ambrose *De virginibus* 3.3.13 (*PL* 16: 223).

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As Lunn-Rockliffe points out,<sup>70</sup> Ambrosiaster is more conservative here than either Ambrose or Jerome. Women must wear veils because woman is not in God’s image, unlike man: “[It] would be unfitting for she who is subjected to her husband to be called God’s image.”<sup>71</sup> Both sexes have the same *substantia* but man is superior by dint of his reason and because woman came out of man.<sup>72</sup> Elsewhere Ambrosiaster states that woman “...should not be allowed any presumption but should stay humble, because death entered the world through her.”<sup>73</sup> In fact, Ambrosiaster’s position on women seems to be the only area where “he” is more conservative than the hyperbolic Jerome. This is possibly because Ambrosiaster was influenced by Tertullian, as Bussières and Hunter show.<sup>74</sup>

In this conservative atmosphere, the exception is women’s literacy. A growing range of modern scholarship points to the growth in literacy among elite women in the fourth century, with evidence ranging from the upper-class preference for educated wives and daughters,<sup>75</sup> to the increase in women depicted in literary activities on sarcophagi,<sup>76</sup> to high-status men such as Ausonius and Sidonius Apollinaris being educated by female relatives.<sup>77</sup>

It was already possible for women to teach and write at advanced level, especially in philosophical circles: Hypatia in Alexandria is most famous, but others are known including in Rome.<sup>78</sup> In Christian circles the best-known is Proba. Although not securely identified, Proba belonged to the aristocratic Anicia family in the mid or late fourth century. Her *Cento* superseded Virgil himself in Christian education and led to her “ranked among the doctors of the church,” and she wrote at least one other historical work (not extant).<sup>79</sup>

The Christian ascetic movement as experienced in Jerome’s circle placed highest emphasis on literacy, as when for example he recommends Laeta’s daughter should be tutored by a “learned man” and have an education including Greek (*ep.* 107). Literacy was so fundamental for communities of elite celibate women that study and prayer were seen as their predominant activities.

Kelly describes the women’s community founded and funded by Paula in Bethlehem. There were three households, divided by social rank, who came together every three hours for divine office. The rest of the time depended on their status. All might help with manual labour, but the upper-class ones could have servants and their time was predominantly spent in literary activities;<sup>80</sup> indeed literacy was the basis for the split households. We do not know the extent to which Marcella’s community matched Paula’s. However, we know that was more moderate than Paula; she was vegetarian,

<sup>70</sup> Discussion in Lunn-Rockliffe 2000: 91-96.

<sup>71</sup> *ad Col.* 3.11 (Vogels 1969: 196).

<sup>72</sup> *ad 1Cor.* 11.5 (Vogels 1968: 121).

<sup>73</sup> *ad 1Tim.* 2.15 (Vogels 1969: 264), cf. *ad 1Cor.* 11.5-10 (Vogels 1968: 121-3).

<sup>74</sup> Bussières 2002; Hunter 1992: 457-8.

<sup>75</sup> Stevenson 2005: 62.

<sup>76</sup> Huskinson 1999.

<sup>77</sup> Stevenson 2005: 63.

<sup>78</sup> G. Clark 1993: 130-133.

<sup>79</sup> Stevenson 2005: 64-71.

<sup>80</sup> Jerome *ep.* 22.29, 66.13, 108.20 (Hilberg 1910: 186, 664; Hilberg 1912: 335); Kelly 1975: 131-4. Isabella Image, “Not My Pupil, but an Expert: Lady Ambrosiaster Marcella,” *Journal for Late Antique Religion and Culture* 19.1 (2025) 55-79; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18573/jlarc.149>

but did drink alcohol for her health. She rarely left home, but if she did she was attended by “serious women” (*graves feminas*).<sup>81</sup>

Study was the main activity for women’s communities in the West. Ambrose compared them to bees: “The virgin’s dew is [to feed on] the divine word.”<sup>82</sup> To this end women’s communities had libraries holding texts, commentaries and sermons. Marcella, for example, held a library;<sup>83</sup> Jerome dedicates many of his works to Paula and Eustochium; and advises a young virgin to read “Cyprian..., letters of Athanasius and treatises of Hilary.”<sup>84</sup> G. Clark shows these women had access to a bewildering range of Christian literature.<sup>85</sup> A few decades later Augustine’s rule confirms women’s communities had libraries, because a sister was required to be in charge of it.

Scripture study did not just mean solitary work in one’s chamber. Bible study groups appear to have been commonplace, where young women were taught by those more senior.<sup>86</sup> There is even evidence of women teaching men, cited with paraphrase or embarrassment (Section 5).<sup>87</sup> In fact, E. Clark shows that the reason these women were called “virile” was precisely because they had the freedom to engage in the same activities as men on equal terms – referring in particular to travel and literary pursuits.<sup>88</sup> But they were hampered by the requirement for discretion. As Stevenson states, “Marcella... is said to have credited her writings to male authorities so as not to appear to be preaching, which raises the interesting possibility that some women’s writing from late antiquity survives in a concealed form.”<sup>89</sup>

So it should not be surprising to find a consecrated women writing, initially only for herself and for other members of her community in the course of study. Such a woman may wish to preserve anonymity out of a perception that women should be self-effacing and avoid publicity. This would also fit with the way Ambrosiaster’s work has come down to us in several recensions. De Bruyn<sup>90</sup> suggests the author held a personal version, to which “he” added marginalia and notes through time. Anyone sending a scribe to copy the work would have ended up with slightly different versions as time progressed. This means also that, each time the text was copied from its source, there was collusion in keeping the writer’s name discreet.

So far this merely sets the context. We must now see if there is any textual support for the idea that Marcella may have been Ambrosiaster.

#### 4. Jerome’s *ep. 27 to Marcella*

Jerome’s *ep. 27 to Marcella*, written early 384, has long been known to reference Ambrosiaster. However, modern scholars have taken it as *about* Ambrosiaster,

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<sup>81</sup> Jerome *ep. 127.3-4* (Hilberg 1918: 147-8).

<sup>82</sup> Ambrose *De virginibus* 1.8.40 (*PL* 16: 200).

<sup>83</sup> Jerome *ep. 37.4, 47.3, 49.4* (Hilberg 1910: 288-9, 346, 349).

<sup>84</sup> Jerome *ep. 107.12* (Hilberg 1912: 303).

<sup>85</sup> G. Clark 1993: 137-138.

<sup>86</sup> E. Clark 1986: 138-139. For the east, compare Elm 1994: 75.

<sup>87</sup> G. Clark 1993: 134-7.

<sup>88</sup> E. Clark 1981, e.g. 251-2.

<sup>89</sup> Stevenson 2005: 61.

<sup>90</sup> De Bruyn 2010: 67.

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although this is nowhere stated in the letter. Here it is suggested that the letter is written to Ambrosiaster.

Pope Damasus asked Jerome to revise the existing translation of the Scripture (the “Old Latin” version) given his knowledge of Greek and Hebrew. This letter, fewer than five hundred words in Latin, complains about opponents to this project. In the first part Jerome tells Marcella that he has just heard that opponents (“donkeys”) claim he is changing Scripture. In the second part he anticipates Marcella telling him to calm down, and in the third part he gives three specific examples of translations, one from Romans and two from 1 Timothy (cited below).

Modern scholars agree that these three translations were a cause of intense disagreement between Jerome and Ambrosiaster. The Old Latin versions all appear in Ambrosiaster’s own commentaries. By comparing the three recensions, Vogels (1956) shows Ambrosiaster later revised “his” commentary to justify using the Old Latin versions.<sup>91</sup>

[Another translation] is based on the Greek manuscripts, as if they agreed with each other – but this is highly debatable! ... A while ago Latins translated ancient Greek manuscripts, and this preserved a reliable text from more innocent times... Even the Greeks have different readings in their manuscripts. I consider the correct reading to be the one backed up by reason, history and authority. The reading of the Latin manuscripts today is found in Tertullian, Victorinus and Cyprian. (Ambrosiaster *ad Rom.* 5.14, Vogels 1966: 176)

Ambrosiaster is responding directly to Jerome’s notion that the Greek text had priority over the Latin. For this reason, scholars since Vogels have seen Jerome’s key donkey opponent in *ep.* 27 as Ambrosiaster specifically. If only we knew who the donkey was, under this theory, then we would know who Ambrosiaster is, and our work would be done.

But we *do* know the opponents, or at least have clues. Jerome and Ambrosiaster both enjoy punning on the names of their opponents;<sup>92</sup> here in *ep.* 27 we find puns on donkeys. Jerome starts by calling his opponent a donkey (*asinus*), passes *en route* with the diminutive *aselli* (they are two-legged donkeys or donkey-men) and ends up with the scathing term *cantherius* or gelding, used by Terence and others to refer to an impotent old man.

In the same year as Vogels’ article (1956), Antin noted that this *cantherius* of *ep.* 27 matches one in Jerome’s translation of Jonah c. 396/7:

A certain gelding (*cantherius*) of the ancient Cornelii<sup>93</sup> family – who claims to be descended from Asinius Pollio! – recently accused me of sacrilege for [my translations]... (Jerome *Commentary on Jonah* 4.6, Duval 1985: 297)

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<sup>91</sup> Note also De Bruyn 2011: 465-466, fn8.

<sup>92</sup> Consider Ambrosiaster’s reference to an opponent “with the name of a false god” (*quaest.* 101.2, Souter 1908: 194), subsequently identified as a deacon called Mercury (Turner 1096: 281-2). On Jerome’s side note his merciless barbs on a nasal theme, about the unfortunate Onasus (*ep.* 40.2, Hilberg 1910: 310).

<sup>93</sup> The reference to the Cornelii is likely to be a historical reference rather than an actual name. Antin 1956: 109a-110b; Duval 1985: 419.

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Other cryptic clues follow. The Asinii Polliones had died out by this point; but armed with appropriate prosopographies, we can create a list of viable candidates for the identity of Ambrosiaster. For example Arnheim's stemma 2B identifies a third century proconsul (C. Asinius Nicomachus Julianus)<sup>94</sup> who was directly descended from Asinius Pollio, and whose daughter married into the Anicii. Triangulation with *PLRE*<sup>95</sup> tells us the City Prefect of Rome around the time of *ep.* 27 was a sole surviving member of this gens, Anicius Auchenius Bassus. Bassus was Christian and involved in church debates. So Jerome's target in *ep.* 27 may be Bassus (other potential candidates can be identified); if so, under Vogels' theory, we have identified Ambrosiaster. Hurray!

But not so fast: *contra* Vogels, the donkey cannot be Ambrosiaster. The donkey is portrayed as a dim-witted opponent of Jerome's translation project, not as a literary figure with his own output. So when Jerome cites Ambrosiaster's readings, it is not because the donkey has used them in writing – it is merely because he is so stupid he *would* use them.

Let me return to our donkey-men (*bipedes asellos*), and blow a trumpet in their ear rather than a harp!

They would read (*illi legant*) “rejoicing in hope, serving the time;” let me read “rejoicing in hope, serving the Lord” (Rom. 12.11-12).

They might think (*illi putent*) that a presbyter can be accused unconditionally; let me read “don't accept an accusation against a presbyter except with two or three witnesses; rebuke sinners before all” (1Tim. 5.19).

They would prefer (*illis placeant*) “a human saying, deserving to be accepted by all.” Let me err on the side of the Greeks – that is, of the Apostle: “a trustworthy saying, deserving to be accepted by all” (1Tim. 1.15). (Jerome *ep.* 27, Hilberg 1910: 225-6)

Here Jerome refers to the donkey-men and gives a rising tricolon of examples all found in Ambrosiaster. But he uses subjunctives (*legant*, *putent*, *placeat*), not indicatives. The donkey-men do not actually use the Old Latin readings in writings of their own; it is merely the case that idiots like that prefer such variants. Rather, Jerome is insisting on his textual variants *to Marcella herself*. It is her that Jerome is trying to persuade: “That's the type of ass who would use readings like X, the ones you defend!”

This is supported elsewhere in the letter. He states early on that it is futile to argue against the donkey-men (“it's pointless playing the harp for a donkey...”): we are left to deduce that his argument is directed at her. And the text makes clear that they have already argued on the matter.

I know you will scowl when you read this; you're worried my bluntness is going to cause more quarrels. You would put your finger over my mouth if you could. (Jerome *ep.* 27.2, Hilberg 1910: 224-5)

So Marcella and Jerome disagree on these biblical texts. The sense of the letter thus proceeds as follows: (a) “I've just heard about those donkeys who complain about my translation project;” (b) “I know we've already argued about this, but what am I doing

<sup>94</sup> Arnheim 1972, stemma 2B (end matter after p.246).

<sup>95</sup> Jones 1971(1):152-3 and 1133 (stemma).

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wrong?” (c) “That ass is exactly the type who would use the Old Latin version you use!”

Let us consider things from Ambrosiaster’s viewpoint. De Bruyn implies that recension  $\alpha$  of the *Commentarii* was written in the 370s,<sup>96</sup> so Ambrosiaster had been using the Old Latin version for several years by the time Jerome landed in Rome. Even if they were friends, it is only natural that Ambrosiaster would defend “his” version when Jerome comes along and presents another; after all, “he” had written a considerable amount by this point (at very least the commentaries on Romans and 1 Timothy, and some *Quaestiones*). Moreover, “his” arguments are extremely reasonable. First “he” argues that the Old Latin readings are justified by tradition,<sup>97</sup> then “he” also points out that the Greek manuscripts vary amongst themselves just as much as the Latin ones do, and thus cannot be said to be better. If Marcella was Ambrosiaster, she had reason enough to scowl.

In conclusion then, the donkey-men mentioned in the letter can be partly identified (as Bassus or anyone else) but are not Ambrosiaster. Instead, modern scholars should consider that *ep.* 27 could be Jerome defending himself against Marcella specifically, since she supports these readings.

## 5. Marcella’s literary output

We have mentioned Marcella’s library and bible study groups. This is all very well, but can Marcella be shown to have any literary output?

Her scholarship at least was undeniable. Jerome tells us her passion for Scripture was “unbelievable” (*incredibilis*)<sup>98</sup> and she was Rome’s leading expert: “If any debate arose about some Scriptural text, she was the person who was approached to settle the matter ...”<sup>99</sup> (although, ever jealous, he cannot resist declaring that she only became Rome’s top expert after he had left for Bethlehem). She was also a renowned teacher. Paula and Eustochium greet her as *magistra* and count themselves her *discipulae*;<sup>100</sup> indeed Eustochium’s own impeccable learning reflects Marcella’s glory: “we can easily guess what a *magistra* Marcella must have been, when she had pupils like that!”<sup>101</sup>

But Marcella was also cautious about appearances.

She was extremely discreet (*prudens*), and understood well what philosophers call “to prepon,” that is, what is becoming (*decere*). So when she was questioned, she gave her opinion not as her own but as mine or someone else’s, so that even in the act of teaching she claimed she was only a student. She knew that the Apostle had said *I do not allow a woman to teach*, and she did not want to appear to undermine the male sex – including priests – when they sought her advice (*sciscitantibus*) on thorny or controversial issues. (Jerome *ep.* 127.7, Hilberg 1918: 151)

<sup>96</sup> De Bruyn 2010, e.g. p. 56.

<sup>97</sup> *ad Rom.* 5.14 (Vogels 1966: 165, 166).

<sup>98</sup> Jerome *ep.* 127.4 (Hilberg 1918: 148).

<sup>99</sup> Jerome *ep.* 127.7 (Hilberg 1918: 151).

<sup>100</sup> Jerome *ep.* 46.1 by Paula and Eustochium, to Marcella (Hilberg 1910: 329). See also textual variants on *ep.* 65.2 (Hilberg 1910: 619).

<sup>101</sup> Jerome *ep.* 127.5 (Hilberg 1918: 149). Other pupils are mentioned or implied at *ep.* 65.2, 127.8 (Hilberg 1910: 619, 1916: 151-2).

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This passage is revealing in a number of ways. Firstly Marcella is cautious about female propriety, to the point of tactfully pretending she is only passing on the knowledge of others; this exactly suggests someone who might pass her work off anonymously.

Secondly, not only is she a renowned teacher, but her knowledge is also sought out widely – even by priests. The word *sciscito* is used by Jerome and his contemporaries regarding tricky theological or philosophical problems set to an expert teacher (e.g. when he questions Didymus of Alexandria).<sup>102</sup> What is more, Jerome uses the term *sciscitationes* not only for oral questions, but also for written ones. The final sentences here, then, could refer just as well to written texts. If so, they could well match the text known as Ambrosiaster’s *Quaestiones*, often addressed in the second person singular: Why does it say *No-one has seen God*, when Jacob did? Did day or night come first? Was the serpent a real snake or actually the devil? (and what language did it use to talk to Eve? – snake-language, of course!)<sup>103</sup>

Interestingly, Ambrosiaster too is coy about women teaching. “His” commentary agrees that women should be silent in church. But on the key verse forbidding women to teach (1Tim 2: 12), “he” says absolutely nothing: “he” reminds women to submit to their husbands and moves on.<sup>104</sup> Still, we need to be aware of the disjunction between theory and reality here. As Eisen shows, there is disparity between theory and practice with women teachers of this period.<sup>105</sup> For example Melania the Younger and Nyssen’s sister Macrina are also thought to have taught men.<sup>106</sup> An anonymous Pelagian author tells us he has found an aristocratic woman in Sicily whom he hopes to bring to Rome “by whose instruction I am desirous of being taught” (although he does reassure his reader that he has checked her references with the local clergy).<sup>107</sup> Jerome says there was no shame for the Apostle Paul to be taught by a woman, Prisca.<sup>108</sup> So although Jerome quotes 1 Timothy in *ep.* 127 above, this is in the context of a paragraph that is exactly doing the opposite: it is actually justifying that Marcella did in fact teach men.

In other regards Marcella was no shrinking violet, and got involved in controversy when she wished to. We will see her engage with the Montanists (Section 8); this puts her in a different category from Paula, who ran to Jerome to fight her corner when challenged.<sup>109</sup> Another of Marcella’s combatants was a member of the Novatianist church, and she corresponds with Jerome on Novatianism; as it turns out Ambrosiaster also writes at length against Novatianism. Marcella’s greatest battle, however, was possibly the one she waged against the Origenists. She published *litteras* against her opponents, and publicly denounced Rufinus’s translation of *De Principiis*. Rufinus was summoned to defend himself against Eusebius of Cremona in Milan. He is angry with Eusebius, but his main rancour is for the matron who orchestrated the campaign; he

<sup>102</sup> Jerome *comm. Eph.*, praef. (PL 26: 440). See also *ep.* 41.3, 48.14, 51.2, 59.1, 92.4 (Hilberg 1910: 314, 371, 399, 541; 1912: 152).

<sup>103</sup> *quaest.* 31.3 (Souter 1908: 60): *in qua, putas, lingua serpens locutus est ad mulierem? serpentis utique ore.*

<sup>104</sup> *ad* 1Tim. 2.12 (Vogels 1969: 263).

<sup>105</sup> Eisen 2000: 89-115 (Chapter 4 “Teachers of Theology”).

<sup>106</sup> Eisen 2000: 97-9.

<sup>107</sup> *Epistula “honorificentiae tuae”* 5.2-3 (Rees 1991: 154-5).

<sup>108</sup> Jerome *ep.* 65.1 (Hilberg 1910: 618).

<sup>109</sup> Jerome *ep.* 108.23 (Hilberg 1912: 340-5).

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calls her Jezebel and blames her for the whole debacle.<sup>110</sup> Marcella’s literary campaigns thus had repercussions across Italy.

Yet although he criticizes her, Rufinus knows she likes to be anonymous, and even he does not name her explicitly. This coincides with Jerome’s silence – more evidence that Marcella actively asked for discretion. Ambrose may also refer to her anonymously, although this is less secure.<sup>111</sup> This anonymous woman was quite a celebrity.

We have mentioned her *sciscitationes* and her involvement in polemic; but there are even clues pointing to Marcella doing commentary work. There are passing hints in Jerome’s letters: “While you are entirely engaged with your treatises...” (*dum tota in tractatibus occuparis*).<sup>112</sup> So far this is ambiguous as to whether she is reading or writing these treatises.

A next clue occurs in Jerome’s *Ephesians* commentary, where he complains how hard it is to find time to fulfil Marcella’s request for another translation of Origen’s commentary.

I have now reached the book “To the Ephesians”... and I am also about to send some new little gifts [texts] to Rome... as holy Marcella demanded of me in her letters. Whenever I remember her studies, her acumen, her hard work (*studiorum, ingenii, laboris*), I curse myself for being so unproductive. I find myself in a lonely monastery... but I cannot achieve what this noblewoman accomplishes in her spare time (*explet operis succisivis*), amid a noisy home and the management of a household. (Jerome *Commentary on Ephesians* 2.1, PL 26: 477)

What is it that Marcella is accomplishing, in addition to her household management – a woman who rarely goes out? If her “studies” and “acumen” are not enough of an indication, we may note her *opera*, which suggests a tangible output, not mere reading. *Opera succisiva* (= *subsiciva*) classically refers to literary work achieved in one’s leisure time (e.g. Cicero *Or.* 2.89.364). Marcella’s *opera succisiva*, it appears, are considerable enough to make Jerome feel challenged. Specifically, Jerome is struggling to find time for his commentaries; for the comparison to work, this suggests her *opera* are something similar.

The *Ephesians* commentary was not the only work Jerome carried out for Marcella. In his prologue to *Galatians* (387) he again claims he is writing for her, since no Latin writers have written a *Galatians* commentary. In his biography of Jerome, Kelly is baffled by this: how can Jerome be unaware of the commentary of Ambrosiaster, whose writings are so closely intertwined with his own? Like others, Kelly assumes Jerome’s silence is due to enmity between the two writers.<sup>113</sup> Jerome could of course be protecting Marcella’s identity again, but it is better to take Jerome at face value here and assume that Ambrosiaster’s work on *Galatians* is not yet available. If Ambrosiaster

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<sup>110</sup> Jerome *ep.* 127.10 (Hilberg 1918: 153), Rufinus *apologia* 1.19 (Simonetti 1957: 123). See also Laurence 1996: 282-292; E. Clark 1992: 29-30.

<sup>111</sup> Ambrose describes a nameless young aristocratic “virgin” who escapes marriage due to her father being dead (*de virginibus* 1.11.65-6, *PL* 16: 206-7); compare Jerome *ep.* 127.2 (Hilberg 1916: 146). However Marcella had been briefly married before these events, so not technically a virgin unless the marriage had been chaste.

<sup>112</sup> Jerome *ep.* 29.1.

<sup>113</sup> Kelly 1975: 148-149.

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is indeed Marcella, this extends the writer's possible date range: we know she lived until 410, and the text cited above suggests she may be currently working on commentaries at the same time as Jerome.

Why would Marcella want commentaries from Jerome if she is already working on them herself? Precisely because she needs material, and Jerome can provide something that she would not have access to because of her weak Greek: the views of Origen. Jerome himself says his commentary is merely a translation of Origen's;<sup>114</sup> modern scholars have studied Jerome's translations and his technique at length, and concur this is a fairly accurate description.<sup>115</sup> Jerome frequently helps Marcella out with Greek and Hebrew translations, particularly Origen. For example Pammachius asks Jerome to translate Origen's *De Principiis*, so that he and Marcella can be more aware of what Origen's views were (heretic or not). On the other hand, Jerome is arguably both collaborating and competing, and she may have found this distasteful, as Section 8 will consider.

It has long been known that Marcella was a consummate biblical scholar, dedicated teacher, and eager campaigner; but there is more than her library and her Scriptural knowledge. We have demonstrated three pointers to her literary activity. Firstly we have her polemical *litterae*, although they do not appear to be extant. Secondly, Ambrosiaster's *Quaestiones* fit well as responses to the *sciscitationes* of those wishing Marcella to solve problems. And thirdly, we even have possible evidence of her writing commentaries.

## 6. Celibacy

In this section we examine whether the views which scholars attribute to Ambrosiaster on asceticism and marriage are the same as those attributed to Marcella. It will be shown that both Ambrosiaster and Marcella advocate celibacy, but are more moderate than Jerome.

In 393 Jerome in Bethlehem wrote the treatise *Against Jovinian*, in which he defends virginity and disparages sex even within marriage: "[A married man] should govern his lustful urges, and not rush into intercourse. Nothing is filthier than loving one's wife as if she were an adulteress."<sup>116</sup> This caused uproar back in Rome. Jerome was forced to write *ep.* 48 to retract,<sup>117</sup> protesting repeatedly that he is misunderstood: "With my last breath, I protest that I do not now and have not ever condemned marriage!"<sup>118</sup>

Let us consider Ambrosiaster's position. Hunter (1989) discusses Ambrosiaster's *quaest.* 127 "On the Sin of Adam and Eve,"<sup>119</sup> which states that sex and procreation existed in Eden and therefore marriage is a blessing. Ambrosiaster says that it is wrong to denounce marriage: "Who would claim that something blessed by God is actually

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<sup>114</sup> *Origenis commentarios sum secutus*. Jerome *comm. Gal.*, praef. (Raspanti 2006: 6). Heine (2002: 1-2) shows that Jerome closely follows Origen on Ephesians, and suggests the same must have held for Jerome's other Origenistic commentaries.

<sup>115</sup> Heine 2002: 5-22.

<sup>116</sup> Jerome *adv. Jovinianum* 1.49 (Savoye 2023: 479).

<sup>117</sup> Sequence of events deduced from Jerome *ep.* 48.2 (Hilberg 1910: 347).

<sup>118</sup> Jerome *ep.* 48.20 (Hilberg 1910: 385).

<sup>119</sup> Souter 1908: 399-416.

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cursed, unless driven by another spirit?” For Hunter, Ambrosiaster is deliberately targeting Jerome, and belongs to a party that criticizes excessive asceticism in Rome.

Due to such comments, and because Ambrosiaster believes women should submit to men, Hunter believes that Ambrosiaster wrote *against* the ascetic women’s communities.<sup>120</sup> However, someone who expresses negative views about women does not have to be a man. We should not be surprised at a woman holding these views; E. Clark also finds them “disappointingly” present in Proba’s Virgilian *cento*.<sup>121</sup>

More importantly, despite this *quaestio* defending marriage, Ambrosiaster still sees celibacy as the superior form. Elsewhere Ambrosiaster suggests that there was no sex in paradise, and it is part of the Fall;<sup>122</sup> and states that “the entire body is soiled by sexual activity... therefore it is a serious offence.”<sup>123</sup> Bussi eres shows that this refers even to sex within marriage; as she notes, Ambrosiaster’s position on sexuality in these passages “does not seem that far from... [authors] such as Ambrose, Zeno of Verona and Jerome.”<sup>124</sup>

So Ambrosiaster’s defence of marriage in *quaest.* 127 should only be considered in context: it merely responds to a specific *quaestio* or *sciscitatio* about whether marriage is acceptable. When push comes to shove, Ambrosiaster prefers celibacy. Likewise when commenting on 1Cor. 6-7, Ambrosiaster states virginity is a better way of life but still allows marriage.<sup>125</sup>

So Jerome and Ambrosiaster agree on the priority of celibacy; they differ on how far marriage is reasonable. As ever Jerome is hyperbolic and theatrical. Ambrosiaster is more pragmatic and moderate, and concedes that sexual state does not make one a better person: “We see virgins who think about the world, and married women zealous for God’s works.”<sup>126</sup>

Now we consider Marcella. There is no direct evidence for her views on marriage. She was a consecrated celibate, so could she have written a text defending marriage like Ambrosiaster’s *quaest.* 127? We do not know.

Still, she could have. To start with, we recall that she was more moderate in practice than Paula’s community (Section 3). And while we do not know her own views, we do know of the views in her circle. When Jerome wrote the hard-line *Adversus Jovinianum* causing uproar in Rome, it upset his friends as much as his enemies. His friend Pammachius made a concerted effort to remove copies from circulation, and wrote to tell Jerome to write a second treatise moderating his position.<sup>127</sup> Pammachius was married at this point, but shortly afterwards became a celibate on his wife’s death.

But Pammachius was also Marcella’s cousin, and the two acted closely on doctrinal matters, for example in the Origenistic controversy.<sup>128</sup> It is highly possible, then, that Marcella was one of those prompting Pammachius to demand Jerome’s retraction. Letsch-Brunner shows that Marcella also wrote to Jerome objecting to certain

<sup>120</sup> Hunter 1992: 468.

<sup>121</sup> E. Clark 1986: 132-134.

<sup>122</sup> *quaest.b.* 40 (Souter 1908: 423).

<sup>123</sup> *quaest.b.* 58.1 (Souter 1908: 452).

<sup>124</sup> Bussi eres 2015: 63.

<sup>125</sup> *ad* 1Cor. 7.26-28 (Vogels 1968: 81-3).

<sup>126</sup> *ad* 1Cor. 7.35 (Vogels 1968: 88).

<sup>127</sup> Jerome *ep.* 49.1-2 (Hilberg 1910: 347).

<sup>128</sup> E. Clark 1992: 27-35.

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sentences in *Adversus Jovinianum*.<sup>129</sup> Jerome was quickly brought to his senses after this slap on the wrist from Marcella and Pammachius, and wrote the public *ep.* 48 to admit that marriage was permissible.

In fact, even celibates thought that Jerome was too hard-line in rejecting marriage. Hunter also shows that Jerome's position was too rigid even for Pope Siricius or Ambrose;<sup>130</sup> like Ambrosiaster they preferred celibacy but defended the option of marriage. It is Jerome who was isolated here, out on a limb.

In summary, we cannot be sure of Marcella's views on marriage. However it is quite reasonable to hypothesize that she had the same as the views expressed literarily by Ambrosiaster.

## 7. Jerome's relationship with Ambrosiaster

Here we examine Jerome's relationship with Ambrosiaster; we temporarily leave Marcella aside.

Many Ambrosiaster scholars (Kelly, Vogels, Hunter)<sup>131</sup> see resentment or even enmity between Jerome and Ambrosiaster; however others such as Lunn-Rockliffe are more circumspect.<sup>132</sup> This section will show that there are indeed tensions and competitiveness, but the scholarly narrative of enmity goes beyond the evidence. Mere enmity simply does not explain the many similarities between the two authors, which point to a working relationship.

Let us consider an example of contact between Jerome and Ambrosiaster, and how it is interpreted by modern scholars. In winter 383/4 Jerome published *Adversus Helvidium*, stating that the Virgin Mary was a perpetual virgin. Ambrosiaster agrees with this, and they overlap on a number of details. At Gal. 1.19, Ambrosiaster glosses the reference to "James the Lord's brother:" James is child of Joseph but not of Mary. "He" then argues against Helvidius's prooftexts. Cooper and Hunter show that Ambrosiaster's phrases relate grammatically to Jerome's, and suggest that Ambrosiaster may have had Jerome's text in front of "him".<sup>133</sup>

Ambrosiaster here adopts a textual revision that comes from Jerome's argument. In his argument against Helvidius, Jerome cites 1Cor. 7.33-4:

[Paul says: ] "*there is a difference between a woman and a virgin*". See how blessed she is, who has lost the label for her sex. A virgin does not get called a "woman"! (Jerome *adv. Helvidium* 20, PL 23: 213-4)

In the  $\alpha$  recension of 1Corinthians, Ambrosiaster used the Old Latin reading at 1Cor. 7.33 describing a married man: *sollicitus est... quomodo placeat uxori, et divisus est...* But in the  $\gamma$  recension Ambrosiaster has moved the last few words to the following verse, to match Jerome's text: *...Divisa est mulier et virgo*. Ambrosiaster accepts Jerome's textual change, but insists a virgin is still a woman. As ever "he" moderates

<sup>129</sup> Letsch-Brunner 1997: 194-7.

<sup>130</sup> Hunter 2007: 207-241.

<sup>131</sup> Vogels 1956, Kelly 1975: 148-9, Hunter 1992.

<sup>132</sup> Lunn-Rockliffe 2000: 20.

<sup>133</sup> Cooper and Hunter 2010: 75.

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Jerome’s exaggeration with pragmatic realism: the difference between a woman and a virgin “is in activity and not in nature.”<sup>134</sup>

Due to this comment Cooper and Hunter<sup>135</sup> suggest Ambrosiaster is directly undermining Jerome. In all we have Ambrosiaster (a) agreeing with Jerome that Mary was perpetually virgin and (b) using Jerome’s textual variant; but (c) disagreeing with Jerome on whether a virgin is sexless. There are two points of agreement, but Cooper and Hunter deduce enmity from the one point of disagreement. This is typical of scholarship suggesting a negative relationship between Ambrosiaster and Jerome, highlighting only disagreements; in fact the interplay between the two is more nuanced. The relationship between Ambrosiaster and Jerome represents the dialogue of two brilliant and knowledgeable biblical scholars with independent minds. The fact there are such close correspondences on such a wide range of matters simply cannot be understood as enmity, although they were certainly competitive.

In fact, Jerome and Ambrosiaster seem to agree just as much as they disagree, if not more. Not only do they agree on the Virgin Mary. They hold similar ideas on church hierarchy, advocating clerical celibacy,<sup>136</sup> seeing deacons as ranking below presbyters,<sup>137</sup> and reproaching young widows who behave improperly because they have no guardian.<sup>138</sup> Both condemn a wide range of heresies, including those of Arius, Novatian, Montanus. They both share a fascination with the text of scripture and tricky “questions”; for example they both mention the disparity between the Gospel genealogies,<sup>139</sup> and use similar *exempla* even though they use these examples in different ways (e.g. individuals who had married multiple times<sup>140</sup> or the case of Abraham and Sarah to illustrate marital relations<sup>141</sup>).

Other overlaps appear throughout this paper. One or two points of contact between our two authors might suggest they are responding to each other; a sizeable handful would suggest that they are working in the same milieu. But what we have here is an avalanche of connections. The sheer volume means that we can envisage them meeting and discussing these issues regularly, from orthodox doctrine through ecclesiastical practice to the detailed nitty-gritty of the Scriptural text.

Let us examine another example, the interaction between Ambrosiaster and Jerome in their texts stating that deacons should not come above presbyters. Scholars have questioned which writer discussed this first. Souter suggests that Ambrosiaster’s *quaest.* 101 has priority: “he” is personally acquainted with the deacon “he” is opposing, unlike Jerome. Lunn-Rockliffe, on the other hand, points to indications that Ambrosiaster is responding to Jerome’s *ep.* 146, and apparently softening Jerome’s wording. Jerome accuses his opponent of putting deacons before presbyters; Ambrosiaster says the problem is only that deacons are being held equal (“I would not claim he puts deacons first”).<sup>142</sup> The solution here is surely that we do not need to see

<sup>134</sup> *ad* 1Cor. 7.34 (Vogels 1968: 86).

<sup>135</sup> Cooper and Hunter 2010: 77-8.

<sup>136</sup> *quaest.* 127; Jerome *adv. Jovinianum* 1.7 (Savoye 637: 227).

<sup>137</sup> *quaest.* 101; Jerome *ep.* 146 (Hilberg 1916: 308-12).

<sup>138</sup> *ad* 1Tim. 5.6 (Vogels 1969: 280); Jerome *ep.* 22.16 (Hilberg 1910: 163-4).

<sup>139</sup> *quaest.* 56 (Souter 1908: 101-3); Jerome *ad* Titus 3.9 (*PL* 26: 595).

<sup>140</sup> *quaest.* 115.72 (Souter 1908: 313); Jerome *ep.* 123.10(9) (Hilberg 1916: 82-3).

<sup>141</sup> *ad* Eph. 5.22-4 (Vogels 1969: 118); Jerome *adv. Helv.* 22 (*PL* 23:213-4).

<sup>142</sup> *quaest.* 101.2 (Souter 1908: 194); discussion in Lunn-Rockliffe 2000: 20-21, Hunter 2017.

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Ambrosiaster and Jerome as responding to each other textually. They may have discussed the issue together, whether in person or through some correspondence which is not preserved.

Another example of how they work is Ambrosiaster's exegesis of the "spirit over the waters" in Gen. 1.2.<sup>143</sup> De Bruyn (2010) shows Ambrosiaster revising some of "his" comments on the Holy Spirit in line with the Councils of Chalcedon 381 and Rome 382 – and these are councils which Jerome has attended in person. So Jerome and Ambrosiaster are possibly collaborating. But at the same time Bussi eres (2010) shows Ambrosiaster enforcing "his" interpretation that the "spirit above the waters" of Gen. 1.2 refers to something created, a soul or the wind; this is contrary to Jerome, who says it refers to the Holy Spirit. Again Ambrosiaster is aware of Jerome's work, but is independent.

In conclusion, there are as many agreements between them as there are differences; any theory about the relationship between them must be able to explain both. Likewise, any assumptions about Ambrosiaster's identity must explain why Jerome never mentioned the author, if they belonged to the same milieu and seemed to dovetail so closely on so many matters.

## 8. Jerome's relationship with Marcella

The previous section showed the relationship between Jerome and Ambrosiaster was a subtle balancing act: close working on occasions and mutual theological outlook, combined with competitiveness or direct tension. Can the same be said of the relationship between Jerome and Marcella?

Modern scholars point to the positive friendship between Marcella and Jerome. Jerome tells us – with his usual lack of modesty – that she begged him, famous as he was, to meet and join her study groups. She would plague him with questions about Scripture every time she saw him, even if the meeting was only brief.<sup>144</sup>

However, she was no meek pupil, and he never uses the word "docile" for her as he does for Paula.<sup>145</sup> He tells us several times that Marcella questioned everything he said, and did not respect his authority. To the contrary, her first reaction was always to disagree:

She never accepted [my explanations] immediately, but on the contrary would argue with me. She did this not to be disputatious, but so that her probing would help her gauge solutions to objections which might be made. (Jerome *ep.* 127.7, Hilberg 1918: 151)

Elsewhere he adds: "She questioned everything, and weighed up everything in her keen mind, so that I saw her not as a student but as an expert (*judex*)."<sup>146</sup> The term *judex* means a connoisseur or scholar, and also a critic.

Jerome's respect for Marcella's judgment is also reflected in his letters to her. When she asks him his opinion on the Montanists he tells her, but finishes the letter admitting that her knowledge on the matter is as good as his own: "You know Scripture

<sup>143</sup> See also Vogels 1956; Hunter 1992; De Bruyn, Cooper and Hunter 2017.

<sup>144</sup> Jerome *comm. Gal.*, praef. (Raspanti 2006: 5); *ep.* 127.7 (Hilberg 1918: 151).

<sup>145</sup> Jerome *ep.* 108.27(6) (Hilberg 1912: 344).

<sup>146</sup> Jerome *comm. Gal.*, praef. (Raspanti 2006: 5-6).

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backwards (*apprime*); I assume you asked not because [the Montanists] bothered you, but because you wanted to set me a teaser (*a me volueris sciscitari*).”<sup>147</sup> All this coincides with the character we have posited for Ambrosiaster, as someone who will collaborate and debate with Jerome but at the same time knows “his” own mind and is equally quick to critique him.

We should be aware that this narrative is all one-sided, since we only have what Jerome chooses to portray. In fact Nautin suggests that a rift arose between the two, perhaps occasioned by Jerome’s misbehaviour before leaving Rome or Marcella’s support for Siricius over Jerome. Letsch-Brunner rejects this, but tensions certainly existed.<sup>148</sup> Despite his many letters to her when he is in Rome, there are no personal letters after he leaves for Bethlehem in 384. The first letter he publishes is not before 396 – and it is highly defensive.<sup>149</sup> Letsch-Brunner shows that Marcella has challenged him to justify statements he makes in his written works, such as his *Adversus Jovinianum*.<sup>150</sup> Jerome responds in *ep.* 59, and his manner is grovelling: “If I did say that, I won’t persist in the error!”<sup>151</sup> Moreover the letter as published only addresses the scriptural questions, and does not have any personal interchange apart from the opening sentence which acknowledges her challenges are acute and fair (*dum interrogas, doces*).<sup>152</sup> But what was Marcella upset about?

If we assume Marcella was Ambrosiaster, we can suggest an answer. At 1Cor. 2.9 Ambrosiaster stated that Paul is quoting an apocryphal work, the Apocalypse of Elijah.<sup>153</sup> But in 395 Jerome writes the following to Pammachius:

Some writers track down (*sectari*) this verse to the craziness (*deliramenta*) of apocryphal books, and say the citation comes from the Apocalypse of Elijah. But actually it is from the Hebrew text of Isaiah... (Jerome *ep.* 57.9, Hilberg 1910: 519-20)

Cutting indeed, especially as the word “sectari” also implies unorthodoxy. Ambrosiaster would have had reason to be infuriated at this insult. Now, if Ambrosiaster is Marcella, this explains her indignation. It is no surprise she would write to object furiously. Shame-faced, Jerome does not dispute the textual variants when he answers her in *ep.* 59, but merely states that the meaning of the verse is mysterious.

The hypothesis that Marcella is Ambrosiaster also could explain other interactions, where the letters between Jerome and Marcella match discussions in the texts of Jerome and Ambrosiaster.

Jerome’s *ep.* 29 describes Marcella asking about the Hebrew phrase “ephod bad,” and whether it means “a belt, or an incense-burner, or a garment and what type;” Jerome answers that it is a garment. Further, Marcella has apparently suggested that an ephod can be worn by those who are not priests. We know this because Jerome emphatically refutes her (“Listen! In a nutshell, [the ephod] is only mentioned in connection to the priesthood!”). Why would Jerome insist on this so emphatically?

<sup>147</sup> Jerome *ep.* 41.3 (Hilberg 1910: 314).

<sup>148</sup> Citation and discussion in Letsch-Brunner 1997: 172-174.

<sup>149</sup> For dating see Letsch-Brunner 1997: 195.

<sup>150</sup> Letsch-Brunner 1997: 194-7.

<sup>151</sup> Jerome *ep.* 59.2 (Hilberg 1910: 543).

<sup>152</sup> Jerome *ep.* 59.1 (Hilberg 1910: 541).

<sup>153</sup> *ad* 1Cor. 2.9 (Vogels 1968: 26).

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For an answer we can look to Ambrosiaster's *quaest.* 46 on Samuel. A key argument here is that Samuel was not a priest despite having worn the ephod. But Ambrosiaster knew no Hebrew and would have appreciated Jerome's expertise on the ephod. If we assume Marcella was Ambrosiaster, this explains the interaction. She writes to ask Jerome's advice on the Hebrew, explaining the Samuel context. Jerome helps with the Hebrew word, but cannot agree with her conclusion that it implies Samuel was a priest.

Other examples occur where topics discussed with Marcella are also found reflected in Ambrosiaster, such as the use of Hebrew phrases or discussion on the Montanists and Novatianists. But Ambrosiaster's texts do not necessarily agree with Jerome's responses, for example on Novatian. If this is Marcella, why should she dismiss Jerome's opinion?

But then again, why shouldn't she? She had her own mind. She was twenty years older than him, richer, celebrated, and socially superior. When he arrived in Rome she was known and established. Jerome tries to imply that he was the superior academically ("I saw her not as my student but as an expert" insinuates she is more naturally the former). But he was tactless in asserting his preference for different biblical texts and scriptural versions. Given her older age and recognized erudition, she might have found him a touch presumptuous. And indeed when he writes to her, she seems to be the one calling the shots: he complains that she is his slavedriver, torturing him for information about Hebrew.<sup>154</sup>

Jerome's collection *Ad Marcellam epistularum liber* was published in the wake of his ignominious departure from Rome; as Cain shows,<sup>155</sup> its whole purpose may have been an attempt to "claim" the influential Marcella as one of his circle. This was Jerome's careful and deliberate propaganda to imply the famous Marcella was on his side – but that does not mean she really was.

### Closing remarks

Let us summarize the reasons why Marcella may have been the author known today as Ambrosiaster.

Firstly Marcella meets the criteria hypothesized by scholars for Ambrosiaster: late fourth century Rome, aristocratic background, pastoral and biblical context. Her discussions with Jerome show the same interests as Ambrosiaster: Judaism, sexuality, doctrinal orthodoxy.

The second reason is that Ambrosiaster and Marcella alike have an unusual desire for anonymity. Moreover this desire is supported by several people colluding in the anonymity in both cases. Jerome, Damasus and several iterations of copyists all avoid naming Ambrosiaster. Jerome, Rufinus, and possibly Ambrose avoid naming Marcella.

Lastly and most importantly, we have textual evidence from Jerome regarding Marcella's work. This includes hints to Marcella's *studium* and literary outputs, including potential *quaestiones* and commentary work. We have firm evidence of Marcella's academic activity: her library, her teaching, her celebrity as a biblical scholar who engaged in doctrinal controversy. And we have Jerome's *ep.* 27 to

<sup>154</sup> Jerome *ep.* 28.1, 29.1 (Hilberg 1910: 227, 232).

<sup>155</sup> Cain 2009: 68-98.

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Marcella, anticipating her displeasure at three biblical citations; citations that we know displeased Ambrosiaster.

Marcella fits into the hypothesized relationship between Ambrosiaster and Jerome, sometimes collaborative and sometimes competitive and tense. But she was selective with Jerome’s ideas and remained fiercely independent, if not superior. We should not see her as a meek pupil, a mere follower and one of Jerome’s “coterie of women:”<sup>156</sup> despite his barbs she has the upper hand in the relationship, not just as an impeccable biblical scholar but also with the influence she wields socially in Rome and the patronage she can provide.

This would put Marcella squarely among the women who wrote at a period of growing female literacy: Perpetua, Egeria, Proba. In fact, this would make her one of the most prolific woman authors of antiquity. Modesty may not be much in keeping with modern feminism; but at very least when considering options for Ambrosiaster’s identity, we should keep open the possibility that “he” could have been a “she”.

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<sup>156</sup> Hunter 2007: 76.

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