

Classical Etymology as Christian Practice in Jerome's *Epistulae*

Christians in the fourth-century Roman Empire grappled with the issue of whether—and how—they might integrate elements of pagan literary and scholastic culture into their way of life. While some Christians distanced themselves from this culture more than others, what ultimately unfolded, as one scholar writes, was a complex process of “negotiation, accommodation, adaption, transformation” (Scourfield 1993: 4). Even when Christians rejected pagan literature, as other scholars observe, they showed “profound acceptance of classical culture and education” (Van Hoof and Van Nuffelen 2014: 5). St. Jerome is one figure who illustrates such adaption, transformation, and acceptance of pre-Christian erudition in various fields. One of these is etymology. Jerome’s use of etymology in his exegetical work and studies of Scripture has received attention previously (e.g., Amsler 1989: 101-117). But he also believed that etymology had a place in the intellectual life of ordinary Christian men and women. Using several letters from Jerome’s epistolary collection, this paper will argue that Jerome incorporated etymology into models of Christian holiness. He thereby demonstrates that this reappropriated aspect of Roman education and intellectual culture remains fitting for the Christian life. Examining such arguments can provide new insight for scholars of Late Antiquity, Patristics, and etymology into how Christians in Late Antiquity interacted with the literary heritage of Rome and made it part of their vocation and way of life.

I will present three different letters to illustrate the various means by which Jerome makes his case for incorporating etymology into the Christian life. In each example, Jerome begins within the ancient etymological tradition, especially that of Varro. Varro, influenced by the Stoic tradition of etymology, believed that etymology was an important means of

understanding the world, especially in matters of religion (Blank 2008: 61-69; O'Hara 2017: 48-49). Jerome, too, found etymology an important tool for studying religion, though his subject matter was not paganism, but Christianity. First, in *ep.* 52, Jerome illustrates for Nepotian—and his broader audience—how etymology fits into his image of the ideal priest. Etymology can help the priest to understand both Scriptural allegory (Cain 2013: 102-103) and what his own title, *clericus*, means. In *ep.* 69, to his disciple Oceanus, Jerome's brief digression on the etymology of the Hebrew for "heaven" takes cues from both Varro and Quintilian. Jerome's discussion in this section of the letter centers around a Christian theme—Baptism. By mentioning the etymology of "heaven," however, he nods to Varro's own etymology of *caelum* (*ling.* 5.18-20). His use of etymology in an extended rhetorical *laudatio* of the role of water in the Old and New Testaments also pays heed to Quintilian's suggestion to use etymology to elaborate or explain a point (*inst.* 1.6.29). Finally, in *ep.* 77, an *epitaphium* on his disciple Fabiola, Jerome cites her zeal to learn about the meanings of place names in the Israelite Exodus to demonstrate that women, too, could and should pursue the study of etymology. By promoting his own work about these place names (*ep.* 78) within this *epitaphium*, Jerome encourages his audience of intellectually-minded Christians to imitate Fabiola and use etymology as a tool for their own study of Scripture. Such an intent becomes still more probable if we accept that Jerome circulated *ep.* 77 and 78 together (Cain 2009: 175-178).

Thus, by encouraging and teaching etymology through his own example and the example of others, Jerome presents to his contemporaries a means of adapting and transforming this tool of classical scholarship into a means of Christian sanctification.

Works Cited

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