


# The crown of virginity, paradise regained: A study of Jerome's ascetic exegesis in a selection of his works

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This article explores, in the first place, Jerome's creation of pro-virginal propaganda in a selection of his treatises and letters, through the employment of scriptural justification by means of ascetic exegesis and rhetorical strategies. The study focuses, in particular, on his *Epistulae* 22 and 130, both addressed to virgins, and his treatise *Adversus Iovinianum*. Jerome interpreted and deployed carefully selected biblical texts and employed classical rhetorical conventions to construct his ascetic ideal mainly based on sexual renunciation. The article argues that by extolling the virginal body through metaphorical figurations and careful textualisation, this 'apostle of virginity' aimed to create, in the first instance, for ascetically minded virgins, a means of achieving perfection and union with God, and receiving the awards of heaven. The analysis of the selected works and of Jerome's ascetic exegesis, however, also reveals some significant markers, indicating his own carefully disguised quest for personal redemption and regaining paradise.

**Keywords:** Virginity; Asceticism; Jerome; Crown of Virginity; Paradise; Redemption.

## Introduction

In his famous treatise on virginity (*Epistula 22: Libellus de seroanda virginitate*),<sup>1</sup> addressed to Eustochium in 384 CE, Jerome painted a vivid picture in words of his inner struggle between the sexual desires of his mind and body on the one hand, and the redemption, the ascetic ideal and paradise of virginity which he so passionately desired and pursued on the other hand:

How often, when I was living in the desert, in the vast solitude which gives to hermits a savage dwelling place, parched by a burning sun, how often did I fancy myself among the pleasures of Rome! ... although in my fear of hell I had consigned myself to this prison where I had no companions but scorpions and wild beasts, I often felt myself amid beves of girls. My face was pale and my frame chilled with fasting; yet my mind was *burning with desire*, and the fires of *lust* kept bubbling up before me when my flesh was as good as dead. Helpless, *I cast myself at the feet of Jesus*, I watered them with my tears, I wiped them with my hair: and then I subdued my rebellious body with weeks of *abstinence*. ... I used to make my way alone into the desert. ... There I made my oratory, ... I had shed copious tears ... I sometimes felt myself among angelic hosts, and for joy and gladness *sang*: 'because of the *savour of your good ointments* we will run after you'.<sup>2</sup>

In the desert, Jerome wept and groaned, filled with frustration and remorse, because the more he subdued his body, the livelier and more persistent his sexual desires and fantasies became. In his struggles, he discovered the intimate connection and interdependence between the body and soul (Brown 2008:236; Miller 1996:233), while he hoped to achieve holiness in body and spirit. While in the desert, Jerome asked Rufinus<sup>3</sup> to send him a copy of the commentary on the Song of Songs, written by Rhetitius, Bishop of Augustodunum.<sup>4</sup> Miller (1993:37) comments: 'It would seem that, burning with "heat" as he was at that time, he needed textual images of eroticism to gratify his own blazing body'. It later transpired that he found some diversion from his blazing body in the study of the Hebrew language.<sup>5</sup> The biblical Song of Songs provided Jerome with imagery to convey his exhortations to virgins and is an example of his intertextual exegesis aimed at promoting and justifying his ascetic ideal.

1. 'Letter 22: Little book on the preservation of virginity' (CSEL 54.143–211).

2. Jerome, *Epistula* 22.7 (CSEL 54.152–154), with a quotation from Canticles 1:3–4. My emphasis is indicated in italics. All references to and quotations from Jerome's *Epistulae* (Letters) and the *Adversus Iovinianum* (Against Jovinian) from *The principal works of St. Jerome*, 1983, translated by W.H. Fremantle, NPNF 2–06.346–386. Philip Schaff and Henry Wallace (eds.), W.M.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan. In instances where archaic English is used in this translation, the translation is slightly amended to reflect contemporary language, and indicated as such.

3. In *Epistula* 5.2 (CSEL 54.21–23).

4. Jerome criticises this commentary in *Epistula* 37 (CSEL 54.286–289).

5. Jerome, *Epistula* 125.12 (CSEL 56.131).

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*Epistula 22*<sup>6</sup> also contains Jerome's satiric picture of aristocratic Roman society in the latter half of the 4th century – the luxury, extravagance, profligacy and hypocrisy, with a stern warning to the consecrated virgin to be vigilant to maintain and preserve her virginity at all costs (*Epistula 22.1, 2, 31, 32*). As the bride of Christ, she has to resist the temptations of food and wine, luxurious living and male company. Jerome had personal experience of the dangers of sexual desire in spite of a strict ascetic regime and intellectual endeavours, and he skilfully applied his own experience to the problems and temptations lurking in Rome.

Although detailed information on the subject is sparse, it is evident from some of his letters<sup>7</sup> that Jerome was strongly sexed in his youth and that he was filled with shame and tortured with remorse for his enslavement to bodily passions and for having lost his virginity. He claimed that his retreat into the desert had partly been motivated by the desire to discipline himself and to make amends for his excesses.<sup>8</sup>

Jerome dreaded impurity and believed that physical indulgences should be suppressed as far as possible. In a very revealing confession, he admitted that his flight to the desert and his oratory was 'a house of correction for my unhappy flesh' (*Epistula 22.7* [CSEL 54.152–154]). With his warning to Eustochium to preserve her virginity came the counsel that, although God can do all things, he cannot raise up a fallen virgin when once she or he has fallen ('He may indeed relieve one who is defiled from the penalty of her sin, but He will not give her a crown').<sup>9</sup> One can almost feel his deep remorse for having lost the *crown of virginity* himself. His exaltation of virginity was not because he possessed it himself, but because he admired and yearned for what he had lost.

In his early letters written from Antioch and the Syrian desert, Jerome bitterly laments that he is the prodigal son who has squandered the whole of the portion entrusted to him by his father, who has been 'stained with every sin' and who lies in the sepulchre of his sins, bound with the stains of his iniquities, waiting for the Lord's command in the Gospel: 'Jerome, come forward'.<sup>10</sup> He yearns to be like his friend Bonosus, a hermit living on an island in the Adriatic, who already lives *in Paradise*, who already sees the glory of God and who 'looks for a crown' (*Epistula 3.4; 7.3*; Kelly 1975:29).

6. CSEL 54.143–211; the letter was negatively received by contemporary theological moderates and non-ascetic Christians, due to *inter alia* his insinuation that marriage is a necessary evil, some elitist-sounding comments and his satirising of their 'worldly' lifestyles. See Cain (2009b:133, n. 55).

7. *Epistula 3.1; 7.4; 14.6; 15.2; 22.7; 48.20; 52.1; 125.12. Epistula 14*, in particular, sheds light not only on Jerome's feelings of guilt and remorse (14.6), but also on his hope for redemption (14.10–11; CSEL 54.60–61).

8. Kelly (1975:20–21). *Epistula 14.6*, written in 376/7 CE seems to imply that Jerome had a recent sexual lapse.

9. *Epistula 22.5* (CSEL 54.149–150); *Epistula 130.9*; cf. Undheim (2019:180–183): '... it is exactly this characteristic that lends to its exclusiveness and thus potential for sanctity'.

10. *Epistula 2; 4.2; 7.3* (CSEL 54.28–29): 'To complete my contrast in a single sentence, while I pray for mercy, Bonosus looks for a crown'. Translation slightly amended.

Jerome maintained, as did the apostle Paul, that a true virgin is 'holy both in body and in spirit',<sup>11</sup> and he believed that 'virginity is consecrated in the persons of Mary and of Christ' (*Epistula 22.18* [CSEL 54.166–168]). According to Jerome, virginity could even be lost by a mere thought: 'Such are evil virgins, virgins in the flesh, not in the spirit; foolish virgins, who, having no oil, are shut out by the Bridegroom' (*Epistula 22.5* [CSEL 54.149–150]; Mt 25:3,10).

In a way, Jerome identified himself with the apostle Paul, who had revealed his own human struggles, weaknesses and limitations in his letters. Brown (2008:376) argues that Jerome, in his exegesis of the apostle's writings, 'contributed more heavily than did any other contemporary Latin writer to the definitive sexualisation of Paul's notion of *the flesh*'. Jerome held up Paul as an example to Eustochium:

... if after nakedness, fasting, hunger, imprisonment, scourging and other torments, he turns back to himself and cries: 'Oh, wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me from the body of this death?' The Nr<sup>12</sup>

If the apostle struggled, shouldn't the virgin (and Jerome himself) also be wary?

In 393 CE, Jerome chastised a certain Jovinian for, *inter alia*, arguing that married couples are on the same level as consecrated virgins of the church. The first book of the treatise *Adversus Iovinianum* is an elaborated refutation of Jovinian's first proposition, with particular attention to the apostle Paul's teaching in I Corinthians 7,<sup>13</sup> as well as Jerome's own teaching derived from his interpretation of various books in both the Old and the New Testaments. The treatise gives a remarkable specimen of Jerome's ascetic exegesis<sup>14</sup> and rhetorical skills. Space does not allow a detailed discussion of Jerome's rhetoric in the selected works, but reference will be made to relevant rhetorical strategies where applicable.

Jerome's excessive praise of virginity, his assertion that first marriages were regrettable, his references to the 'impurity' of marital sexual relations and his condemnation of second marriages and fallen virgins were derogatory and shocking to many Christians, to the extent that one of his friends, Pammachius, withdrew the treatise from circulation.<sup>15</sup>

11. *Epistula 22.38* (CSEL 54. 202–205); I Corinthians 7:34. 'The virgin is holy in body and in spirit. There are virgins in the flesh, not in spirit, whose body is intact, their soul corrupt. But that virgin is a sacrifice to Christ, whose mind has not been defiled by thought, nor her flesh by lust' (*Adv. Iov. 1.13*).

12. See *Epistula 22.5; Epistula 79.5* (CSEL 55.92–93) and *Adv. Iov. 11.3–4; Romans 7:23–24*.

13. The reception and interpretation of Paul's counsel in 1 Corinthians 7 are discussed by Hunter (2008:163–191) within a framework of a narrative of the development of 'orthodoxy' and 'heresy'. The second part of the article focuses on the Jovinianist controversy and identifies Jerome as a 'moderate to radical encratite' who regards marriage as the lesser of two evils and maintains that all sexual intercourse is unclean. *Encratites* was a technical name to denote ascetics who abstained from flesh, wine and marriage, and whose ideas were regarded as heretical.

14. 'Ascetic exegesis' in this article refers to Jerome's interpretive ingenuity in grounding his ascetic predisposition, and in particular his pro-virginal stance, in the Bible through the employment of various exegetical strategies. Cf. Clark (1999:87, 91, 127) and Hunter (2013:414).

15. *Epistula 48.2* (CSEL 54.352–354). This letter, addressed to Pammachius in 393/4 CE, is an 'apology' for the two books 'against Jovinian'. *Epistula 50* (CSEL 54.388–395) to Domnino contains a similar defence of his extreme statements. Some leaders in the Western Church, like Rufinus, Pelagius and Augustine, 'found Jerome's approach to asceticism problematic'; cf. Hunter (2013:413, 418).

Jerome emphasised that he was not a follower of Marcion or Manichaeus and that he did not disparage marriage because virginity is the offspring of marriage.<sup>16</sup> During this controversy with Jovinian, Jerome formulated a theory that a person's rewards<sup>17</sup> in heaven would be based on his or her level of ascetic renunciation and that there would be differentiated grades of punishment in hell.<sup>18</sup> Jerome vehemently criticised Jovinian's premise that *all the baptised*, whether they be virgins, widows, married or harlots, will be equally rewarded in heaven.

It is clear from three of Jovinian's 'propositions' that the efficacy of baptism was central to his thought.<sup>19</sup> Jerome himself was baptised not as an infant, but in 366 CE by Pope Liberius in Rome.<sup>20</sup> In letters to Damasus, Jerome proudly reminded the Pope that he had received 'the garb of Christ' (referring to the white garment worn by the newly baptised), yet he did not immediately receive the calling to make a dramatic gesture of renunciation – he only departed to the desert in about 374 CE, after staying at Trier, Aquileia and Antioch. Jerome's adamant refutation of Jovinian's propositions raises questions (for this researcher) about his perception of his own baptism.<sup>21</sup> I will return to this in the conclusion.

This article deals with one aspect of Jerome's ascetic ideal,<sup>22</sup> namely sexual renunciation, and focuses, in particular, on this 'apostle of virginity's' (Kelly 1975:108) pronounced preference for and exaltation of the state of virginity.

Jerome's concept of virginity seems to not only entail bodily integrity but rather *purity* and virtue of the soul, a likeness to God.<sup>23</sup> Virginity embodies the consecrated quality of the ascetic life and a spiritual fertility.<sup>24</sup> Jerome emphasises the

16. *Adv. Iov.* 1.3; *Epistula* 22.20 (CSEL 54.170–171): 'I praise wedlock, I praise marriage, but it is because they give me virgins'.

17. Jerome developed a formula from a phrase in the 'Parable of the Sower' to support his exaltation of the rewards of virginity. This will be discussed in detail below.

18. Jerome supports his theory with numerous metaphors of differentiation: instruments and building-material of gold, silver, precious stones, hay, wood and straw; grain, stalk and ears; hundred-, sixty- and thirty-fold harvests (*Adv. Iov.* 1.3).

19. Cf. Hunter (2007:9); Hunter's historical approach to the Jovinianist controversy brings new perspectives to the rise of asceticism and heresy in late antiquity and questions the perceived 'triumph' of asceticism.

20. Kelly (1975:7, 23, 29); *Epistula* 15.1; 16.2; these two letters significantly refer to 'the sealed fountain and garden enclosed' (see discussion below) and to his 'self-inflicted punishment'.

21. Kelly's (1975:181) observation is significant: '... What gave a theological basis and inner cohesion to these propositions was Jovinian's stress on the element of faith in baptism, and his conviction that the transformation effected by it not only rescued a man from the power of sin but created a unified, holy people in which considerations of merit were irrelevant'. The question remains whether Jerome was able or willing to appropriate this rescue for himself, and if not, why?

22. Ascetic renunciation also included aspects such as financial divestment, retreat from the world, fasting, sleep reduction, self-immolation, bodily neglect and defamilialisation, all for the sake of a closer relation to God.

23. *Adv. Iov.* 1.13: 'But that virgin is a sacrifice to Christ, whose mind has not been defiled by thought, nor her flesh by lust'.

24. Cf. Lillis (2016:12); and below. Undheim (2018) examines different conceptions of virginity in Rome and the Latin world in Late Antiquity, and convincingly demonstrates the place of borderline virgins in the tension between virginity's flexibility and fixity, and how stereotyping of virgins were challenged in the 4th and early 5th centuries.

role of *free choice*<sup>25</sup> and the idea of virginity as liberation, especially from the exigencies of earthly marriage to a celestial marriage with Christ.<sup>26</sup>

The aim of this article is to dissect the interpretive devices that were employed by Jerome in a selection of his letters<sup>27</sup> and his dialogue against Jovinian, within the framework of a narrative of the justification of the former's ascetic ideal and exaltation of virginity. An analysis of a selection of his works, written between 374 and 394 CE, reveals not only his passionate plea for the value and preservation of virginity but also his remorse over losing his own bodily virginity. I further argue that his works contain carefully 'hidden' markers of his own pursuit of redemption and regaining Paradise for himself.

Following this introduction and some notes on the selection of Jerome's *Epistulae* 22 and 130 as well as on his ascetic ideal and the crown of virginity, the main body of the article focuses on this 'apostle of virginity's' ideas on sexual renunciation and the crown of virginity and on his ascetic exegesis of the Bible to find scriptural justification for his arguments. The concluding part will focus on Jerome's identification with female virgins and his subtle and skilfully disguised quest for personal redemption and regaining Paradise.

## Notes on the selection of Jerome's *Epistulae* 22 and 130

The most personal part of Jerome's literary production, built between 370 and 419 CE, is contained in his letters. He was a prolific letter writer, and his letters and *Lives* offer the most significant corpus of ascetic literature in the West during the 4th century, as well as a large part of his own 'biography'. His correspondence lays bare the chronology of his life, the controversies in which he was embroiled and his personal struggles and ambitions.

He proclaimed that the primary purpose of any correspondence is to stay present through the letter, to speak to those you love and to hear them. In *Epistula* 8.1 addressed to Niceas, he referred to the comic poet Turpilius' statement that 'the exchange of letters ... makes the absent present'. And in a letter addressed to Chromatius and Eusebius, Jerome implored them to write letters to his recently converted sister:

You know yourselves how slippery is the path of youth – a path on which I have myself fallen, ... She ... must have the advice

25. Undheim (2018:60) also refers to other Church Fathers, for example, John Cassian, who stressed the idea of a virgin being chosen *by God* and the notion that chastity could be maintained not only by the virgin's determination, but by the grace and will of God.

26. Cf. Castelli (1986:77–78): 'Virginity is called liberation from the physical exigencies of life as a woman (marriage, sexuality, childbirth); it is also called another kind of marriage, a bond where sexuality is spiritualized, where the virgin gives birth to virtue or Christ himself, where loyalty to the Bridegroom must be absolute'.

27. In particular, *Epistulae* 22 (to Eustochium; CSEL 54.143–211) and 130 (to the virgin Demetrias written in 414 CE; CSEL 56.175–201), with references to other letters and works where applicable (e.g. *Epistulae* 48 [CSEL 54.350–387] and 123 [CSEL 56.72–95]). Epistolary exhortations to widows or married ascetics do not form part of this study.

and the encouragement of all, she must be aided by frequent letters from you, my reverend brothers. (*Epistula* 7.4 [CSEL 54.29])

Some of his letters can be considered as treatises, while Jerome refers to some as *libri* [books] and to others as *libelli* (little books, e.g. *Epistula* 22). Generally speaking, the epistles to both male and female recipients address Church dogmas, biblical exegesis, theological reflections on various issues, moral exhortations, funeral eulogies and family matters. Most of his friends were in fact aristocratic women, who asked him for advice on several aspects of a Christian life, as well as clarifications and interpretations of specific passages in the Bible. It was in letters that Jerome developed his ideas about asceticism. His letters are diffused with either his enthusiasm for sexual renunciation and those who practise it, or his anger and vitriolic reaction against those who dared to challenge his views.<sup>28</sup> Jerome's vast collection of letters to women was educational devices for scriptural instruction, containing hundreds of references to biblical texts (Clark 1979:47; Miller 1993:23, n.13).

Jerome's *Epistula* 22 to Eustochium<sup>29</sup> is generally considered to be one of the finest expressions of his ascetic doctrine, and in particular of his exaltation of virginity. The letter abounds with references to biblical texts and examples of his ascetic exegesis thereof to support his arguments and exhortations. His stated intention was not to praise virginity but to warn Eustochium about the dangers she would face to preserve her virginity in the context of Roman elite society, and about the possible efforts of family members to dissuade her from her chosen path.<sup>30</sup> Eustochium is exhorted to avoid sins of vainglory (*Epistula* 22.27) and covetousness (*Epistula* 22.31), and to devote herself to prayer without ceasing (*Epistula* 22.37), study and fasting (*Epistula* 22.17). The letter contains aspects of social critique, painted in pictures based on the rhetorical conventions of Roman satire and mimicry (Miller 1993:25, n. 22). Although the letter was, on its surface, meant as personal expression of pastoral care to his best friend's daughter, it is clear that it was also intended to be educational to a wider audience.<sup>31</sup> Miller comments: 'It seems significant that Jerome sent his thoughts on asceticism in a letter (he was, after all, literally "just across town" and presumably could have spoken with her in person)' (Miller 1993:32). Jerome's own physical

28. Jerome's extensive correspondence with women may have been a factor in him being asked to leave Rome. The major reasons for letter-writing were to display literary talent, make contacts, and request favours, and for this, male correspondents were more of use'. See Clark (1993:134).

29. The addressee is called by name in *Epistula* 22.2 (Eustochium), and Jerome refers in other letters (31.2; 48.18; 52.17; 123.17; 130.19) to the letter 'addressed to Eustochium'. Brown (2012:263) maintains that he wrote this letter 'to Paula about the ascetic grooming of her 20-year-old daughter, Iulia Eustochium'. The 'confusion' could be attributed to Jerome's words in *Epistula* 22.20 (CSEL 54.170–171), where he seems to address Paula: 'Your watchful affection has kept her a virgin. ... She has conferred on you a high privilege; you are now the mother-in-law of God'.

30. In *Epistula* 107.5, Jerome exulted over the failure of Praetextata and Hymettius, Eustochium's aunt and uncle, to interfere with Eustochium's upbringing and expectations. He attributed Praetextata's premature death to divine retribution for their attempt to subvert one of God's chosen virgins. This against the backdrop of comparatively youthful deaths of many Roman wives (e.g. all three of Eustochium's sisters): Cloke (1995:52). Cf. also *Epistula* 22.24; Castelli (1986:82).

31. As in the case of *Epistula* 108, also addressed to Eustochium. Cf. Lamprecht (2017:1–10).

presence is very strong in the letter (especially in the recounting of his own experiences and struggles in the desert of Nitria (*Epistula* 22.7 [CSEL 54. 152–154]), and of his nightmare concerning his interest in and devotion to classical authors, especially Cicero) (*Epistula* 22.30 [CSEL 54. 189–191]). I will argue that this was done intentionally. His affection for Eustochium is clearly, yet diplomatically, pronounced in *Epistula* 22.26.

Jerome used the letter as a platform for setting out his ascetic programme (Kelly 1975:101; Miller 1993:22) and for exposing the temptations lurking in the rotten Roman society and clergy. The letter is a masterly display of his rhetorical skills and subtle persuasion. He painted a positive yet perilous picture of virginity, ironically with erotic imagery borrowed from the Song of Songs,<sup>32</sup> to encourage Eustochium to devote herself to a life of virginity in preparation for her spiritual marriage with Christ and her gaining the *crown of righteousness* and the rewards awaiting her in Paradise.

A careful reading of the letter, however, reveals that it is not only 'an expression of pastoral care for the moral well-being of its recipient'<sup>33</sup> but also a careful articulation of Jerome's own ascetic desire and ultimately of his desire for the rewards of Paradise, and of a closer union with God. This will be explained in more detail below.

*Epistula* 130 was written 30 years later in 414 CE to Demetrias, an aristocratic lady of Rome who embraced the vocation of a virgin and whom Jerome did not know personally. The letter contains rules and principles on ascetic practice and the duties attached to a virgin's profession and is a fine example of Jerome, the classically trained rhetorician, at work.

He stated:

It is the practice of the rhetoricians to exalt him who is the subject of their praises by referring to his forefathers and the past nobility of his race, so that a fertile root may make up for barren branches and that you may admire in the stem what you have not got in the fruit. (*Epistula* 130.3 [CSEL 56.177–178])

Yet, he praised Demetrias for being 'a professed virgin' who is to be praised 'less for what she is than for what she gives promise of being' (*Epistula* 130.1.2). In a similar way, he also praised Paula's noble descent in *Epistula* 108.4, but only to emphasise the nobility of her choice of familial renunciation for the Saviour's sake.

His high esteem for Demetrias and her virginal virtues is clear in his words of praise and adulation:

The speed of racehorses is quickened by the applause of spectators; prize fighters are urged to greater efforts by the cries of their backers; and when armies are drawn up for battle and swords are drawn, the general's speech does much to fire his soldiers' valour. (*Epistula* 130.2 [CSEL 56.176–177])

32. Cf. *Epistula* 22.25–26; Castelli (1986:72); Shuve (2016:17–18; 177–178; 183–191) and the discussion below under 'Intertextual exegesis and commentary'.

33. Miller (1993:23): She argues that Jerome attempted to 'erase' the literal body and its dangerous sexual passions by 'rewriting' it with Scriptural tropes.

And it seems that he attempted to increase her virtues with his words. In fact, he regarded this chaste virgin, and by implication, his letter to her, as 'a living offering acceptable to God and free from all stain' even though the bishop had already, with words of prayer, 'covered her holy head with the virgin's bridal-veil' and presented her as 'a chaste virgin to Christ'. He emphasised the fact that he interrupted his commentary on Ezekiel's description of the temple ('the hardest piece in the whole range of scripture') to write this letter as 'a brief rest' from that tedious task, even though he confessed that the task at hand is 'more difficult than that' which now occupies him (*Epistula* 130.1). This is because of the fact that he had to carefully balance 'language adequate to describe her virtue', details which 'might appear incredible' and the danger of him being accused to be self-seeking.

In *Epistula* 130.8, Jerome implied that asceticism, and voluntary virginity as in the case of Demetrias, offered women unprecedented freedom and exemption from the curse of Genesis 3:16:

When Jesus was crowned with thorns and *bore our sins and suffered for us*, it was to make the roses of virginity and the lilies of chastity grow for us out of the brambles and briars which have formed the lot of women since the day when it was said to Eve, 'in sorrow you will bring forth children; and your desire will be for your husband and he will rule over you'. (*Epistula* 130.8 [CSEL 56.186–188]; *author's own italics*)

It is important to note Jerome's identification with Demetrias in this passage, and especially in *Epistula* 130.19. This will be discussed in more detail below.

## Some notes on Jerome's ascetic ideal

Jerome's influence on Western asceticism was far-reaching:

At the heart of his teaching lay the conviction that chastity was the quintessence of the gospel message, and that its supreme exemplification and proof was Mary, the virgin mother of the virgin Saviour. (Kelly 1975:335)

For Jerome, bodily restraint and the virtue of renunciation in a context of worldly licentiousness were not only a matter of conviction and religious commitment but also a way for ascetics to transcend the common social ranking. A new hierarchy based on degrees of ascetic renunciation was established (Cooper 1996:82–83). Jerome, for example, advised his spiritual protégé Eustochium: 'Learn in this respect a *holy pride*; know that you are better than they' (*Epistula* 22.16).<sup>34</sup> His works are interspersed with this *topos* of ascetic superiority.

For Jerome, all sexual intercourse is unclean in view of the purity of the body of Christ.<sup>35</sup> After being criticised for leaning towards Manichaeism, he changed his stance, arguing that he would not deny the goodness of marriage

34.CSEL 54.163. With these words Jerome also validated his own spiritual authority.

35.*Adv. Iov.* 1.7, 1.8, 1.20, 1.31; *Epistula* 48. 21.

(*Epistula* 48.11) – it is only heretics who condemn marriage. He, however, continued his argument that marriage is subordinated to virginity and widowhood (*Epistula* 48.11).

Jerome's friendship with a group of Roman ladies seemed strange in view of his ascetic ideal and prevalent patristic perceptions of women as inferior members of the church, based on biblical exhortations to women to be silent and submissive, the perception that women were the occasion of leading others to sin (cf. Clark 1986:23–60) and the notion that women were imperfect participants in the *imago Dei*: the idea that man alone had been made in the image of God and woman derived only from man, thus an imitation of an imitation (cf. Gn 1:26; 2:7; 2:21; Cloke 1995:25). These women accepted Jerome as their spiritual and ethical guide and scriptural teacher. Kelly (1975) observed:

Strongly sexed but also, because of his convictions, strongly repressed as well, his nature craved for female society, and found deep satisfaction in it when it could be had without doing violence to his principles. (p. 91)

In the spiritual realm of the time, with the emphasis on celibacy and a 'new' status for women, friendship based on acknowledged spiritual equality was possible.<sup>36</sup>

## The crown of virginity

Women's commitment to asceticism and their dedication to God were perceived in a heightened awareness of their sexual condition. Jerome treated pious women on the basis of stratification and adopted a formula from a phrase in the Parable of the Sower, to fit their commitment to abstinence into categories of mathematical progressions of acquired virtue. Adopting the idea of 'the thirty-fold, the sixty-fold, the one hundred-fold' harvest, Jerome referred to married women (in particular those committed to abstinence) as the 30-fold, widows as the 60-fold and those who choose the *crown of virginity* as the *hundred-fold* (*Adv. Iov.* 1.3) – volition further sanctifies it.<sup>37</sup> In this way, some legitimacy was given to the so-called celibate married women, in the wider context of total devoutness. Jerome pronounced his preference for virginity in *Epistula* 22.15 to Eustochium:

Your sister Blaesilla ... has lost, at once, the crown of virginity and the pleasures of wedlock ... as a widow, the second degree of chastity is hers ... The fruit which is an hundredfold and that which is sixtyfold both spring from one seed, and that seed is chastity.<sup>38</sup>

Jerome believed that sexual intercourse was not part of God's original plan for humanity and that sexual relation in all its forms and consequences (marriage, divorce, digamy, polygamy, incest) and the command to 'reproduce and

36.Ranfitt (1998:43, 70): 'Asceticism was a socially liberating and spiritually elevating movement, particularly for women, since women had fewer areas in which they could exercise their free will, raise their status, and control their destinies'.

37.This will be discussed in more detail below. Clark (1999:87–103) refers to figurative exegesis and Jerome's 'prurient interpretation' of the Song of Songs and the Parable of the Sower as a 'stock example' of Jerome's pro-virginal stance.

38.Paula's virgin daughter Julia Eustochium is represented by Jerome as superior to her widowed elder sister Blaesilla: 'Your sister Blaesilla is superior in age, but inferior in firmness of will' (*Epistula* 22.15; CSEL 54.162–163).

multiply' (Gn 1:28) only followed after the first sin and the expulsion from Eden (*Adv. Iov.* 1.3, 16). Jerome therefore gave an ascetic interpretation to the creation story by arguing that the original human condition in Paradise was virginity (Gn 1 and 2) – a status that can, according to him, be regained with the advent of the new Dispensation of ascetic celibacy:

For the more rigorously ascetic writers, the coming of virginity as a new way of life is *the* distinctive feature separating the Old Testament and the New. Thus Jerome pitted passages commanding childbearing (Gn 1:28; Ex 23:26) against the praise of I Corinthians 7 for virginity and sexual abstinence within marriage. (*Adv. Helv.* 20) (cf. Clark 1999:151)

The rewards of virginity deserve some attention. Jerome stated: 'My seed produces fruit a hundredfold' (*Epistula* 22.19 [CSEL 54.168–170]). In ascetic discourse, the relationship between a virgin and Christ culminates in the marriage that will occur in heaven, after the Judgement. Through her or his divine spouse, the virgin will then obtain not only eternal life but also the heavenly kingdom and other heavenly rewards (*Epistula* 22.41). Chastity implies infertility, yet virginity as a fertile state is bound to yield plentiful fruits and abundant offspring both in the world to come and in this world: 'Virgins are fruitlessly barren in flesh but fruitfully chaste in spirit' (Lillis 2016:12; Vuolanto 2015:84). Adam and Eve were immortal virgins in Paradise and had no need for posterity. But their mortality after the Fall resulted in the inevitability of marriage and sexuality, to ensure succession. In the Old Testament, the blessing of children was necessary for mortal human beings to make their memory immortal. In the New Dispensation, the fertility of ascetics – spiritual children, the inheritance of the heavenly kingdom and the succession of heavenly rewards<sup>39</sup> – renders void the need for biological children.<sup>40</sup>

Jerome admitted that, according to the apostle Paul, virginity was not given as a commandment but only as a counsel (I Cor 7:25,26). He maintained that virginity is *voluntary*<sup>41</sup> (*Adv. Iov.* 1.31) and 'a hard matter, and therefore rare' (*Adv. Iov.* 1.36: "Many are called, few chosen". Many begin; few persevere. And so the reward is great for those who have persevered. If all were able to be virgins, our Lord would never have said: "He that is able to receive it, let him receive it" (Mt 19:12) and the Apostle would not have hesitated to give his advice'). Even in view of these qualifications,<sup>42</sup>

39. *Adv. Iov.* 1.39: 'Great and precious are the promises attaching to virginity which He has given to us, that through it we may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world through lust'.

40. *Epistula* 22.21 (CSEL 54.171–172): '... for instead of sons and daughters you have a place forever in heaven'.

41. The choice of virginity could be made by parents at the birth of the daughter (the daughter of Melania the Younger, cf. Gerontius, *Life of Melania the Younger*), or by the family in her infancy (Paula's grand-daughter Paula the Younger), or by the girl herself, as in the case of Asella when she was very young (10 years old) (Jerome, *Epistula* 24.2), or at puberty (advice of Tertullian *On the Veiling of Virgins* 11; Augustine *Epistula* 254); or by a girl in her later teens (as advocated by Basil of Caesarea *Epistula* 199.18), or a virgin could be dedicated at birth by her parents, and vows were only taken in a public ceremony when the girl was in puberty (Ambrose *On Virginity* 1.57). According to Jerome, Asella, already before her birth, was virgin-like, 'delivered to her father in a dream in a bowl of shining glass brighter than a mirror' (*Epistula* 24.2; CSEL 54.214).

42. Jerome held up as example Asella, a virgin enclosed in her own home, who followed a regimen of fasting, combined with mean clothes and harsh living conditions, visits to *martyria*, long prayer, till her knees were 'hardened like a camel', and strict isolation, rarely seeing even her sister Marcella, 'much as she loved her', and thus 'found herself a monkish hermitage in the centre of busy

Jerome passionately advocated for devout Christians to make the choice for virginity – a choice made possible by the love of Christ, and Mary has made this choice possible for women. After sin has entered the world through a woman, salvation came through a virgin woman.

Jerome, himself 'a eunuch by choice',<sup>43</sup> argued and emphasised that those who are eunuchs and virgins *willingly through own free choice* (they to whom it is given) are more worthy to be received in the Kingdom of heaven and into the bosom of Christ than those who were eunuchs 'by nature' (so born from their mother's womb) or by the 'violence of men' (being castrated by others or by themselves):

And therefore Christ loves virgins more than others, because *they willingly give* what was not commanded them. ... Those eunuchs please Me who are such not of necessity, but of *free choice*. Willingly do I take them into my bosom who have made themselves *eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake* and in order to worship Me. (*Adv. Iov.* 1.12; *author's own italics*)

Jerome's figurative interpretation of Matthew 19:12 therefore promotes ascetic exhortation and subtly paves the way for *his own* heavenly rewards.

Jerome and his opponent Jovinian deployed and manipulated scriptural passages (e.g. Gn 1:28; I Ki 11:3; Pr 6:24–28; I Cor 7; Tt 1:5; I Tim 4:1–4) in their verbal sparring with each other concerning the topic of marriage and virginity.<sup>44</sup> Jovinian argued that the apostle Paul's statement that he has 'no commandment from the Lord' concerning virginity (I Cor 7:25) proves that marriage is acceptable. Jerome, on the other hand, argued that the apostle's own virginity was because of his free choice (*Epistula* 22.20) and that the verse implies that virginity receives a higher blessing, but one which Jesus declared that 'not all could receive' (Mt 19:11). The onus was on every Christian to freely choose which mode of life he or she will follow and which degree of reward he or she will obtain (*Adv. Iov.* 1.12). He stated that:

If the Lord had commanded virginity He would have seemed to condemn marriage, and to do away with the seed-plot of mankind, of which virginity itself is a growth. If He had cut off the root, how was He to expect fruit?

The striking metaphor (workmen searching for gold and the person ultimately wearing the golden jewel) illustrating this argument seems to be a carefully veiled reference to Jerome's own struggle and personal choice:

Do not marvel then if, placed as we are, amid temptations of the flesh and incentives to vice, the angelic life be not exacted of us, but merely recommended. ... And therefore Christ loves virgins more than others, because they willingly give what was not commanded them.

.....  
Rome' (*Epistula* 24.3–4; CSEL 54.214–216). Castelli (1986:88) argues that the choice for virginity does not only entail freedom of choice and the opportunity to avoid constraints and suffering (as in marriage), but also extracts a profound price: the denial and even loss of identity and self.

43. Cf. *Epistula* 22.19 and *Epistula* 130.19. Undheim (2018:127, 132) argues that since Jerome could not claim the complete intactness of a virgin, he found the zeal of the voluntary eunuch 'a more appropriate marker of his commitment to celibacy'. In the end Jerome could only 'imitate virgins'.

44. *Adv. Iov.* 1.5, 7, 12; 1.24, 28; 2.5; Hunter (2007:27).

The argument for 'free choice' attending the counsel for virginity was deemed important.

Jerome warned against the so-called virgins and widows who pretend to practise chastity, but use contraception or undergo abortion (*Epistula* 22.13), or those who lived with the unmarried clergy professedly as spiritual sisters, but who were in fact mistresses (*Epistula* 22.14) (cf. Cain 2009a:119–143; Castelli 1986:80) – the dangers of 'loose' and 'foolish' women referred to in Proverbs 6:27,28. For Jerome, all sexual intercourse was unclean in view of the purity of the body of Christ (*Adv. Iov.* I.21).

Because of the limitations of word count, I cannot, in this article, pay attention to Jerome's ascetically nuanced translation of certain words and passages from the Greek Bible, for example, his translation of *hagiasmos* [holiness] as *castitas* (as in *Ep* 130.11), as a special quality of virgins and one of the steps necessary to win the *virgin's crown*.

Virgins brought more glory and advantage to their families by giving consecrated service to Christ than when men in the families were called to consulship. The virgins' observances reputedly had the power to 'ennoble' their mostly noble families still further.<sup>45</sup> Some families, however, resisted the pietistic impulses of their females. Jerome also implied (in *Ep* 66.3 [CSEL 54.649–650]) that Eustochium:

... by resolving to be a virgin had breached the gates of nobility and broken down the pride of a consular house. The first of Roman ladies, she has brought under the yoke the first of Roman families.

Even in her withdrawn circumstances, the virgin should 'do battle' to convert family members to Christ. Outside the family environment, the virgins were called to exert more power than could be expressed in contemplation – building convents and churches, service to humbler communities – a household virgin's solitude and scruples should not preclude her serving her community.

Earthly glory was, however, not the ultimate reward. What Jerome campaigned and strived for was the heavenly rewards, to be 'taken into the bosom of Christ' after the Judgement, when the virgin will obtain not only eternal life but will move into the heavenly bridal chamber of her husband. Christ is the bridegroom not only for the Church or for virgins in general, but the bridegroom for every single virgin – even for male virgins (Undheim 2018:134; Vuolanto 2015:82).

## Scriptural justification and ascetic exegesis

Jerome often repositioned biblical verses and liberated them from their historical setting and from their original authorial intention to, on the one hand, fit his ascetic agenda, and on the other to seek his own vindication and redemption.

45. Jerome *Epistula* 130.6: the example of Demetrias.

He performed his exegesis on carefully selected biblical passages to bring them into accord with his ascetic predisposition and ideal. He made use of ingenious hermeneutical, exegetical and rhetorical strategies in the works selected for this study: intertextual and figurative exegesis, textual implosion, the use of typology and allegory, gender-bending, the de-contextualisation of biblical texts and a concatenation of verses from Scripture.<sup>46</sup> His interpretive ingenuity to ground his ascetic ideal and renunciation programme in the Bible rested on his comprehensive knowledge of Scripture, his knowledge of Hebrew and his classical training in rhetoric.

Jerome found many ways to produce ascetic meaning or to wrest ascetic meaning from biblical passages. Ironically, he accused Jovinian of being a crafty opponent, who twisted passages from Holy Scripture to support his own views, with a perverse ingenuity (*Adv. Iov.* II.21).

He was keenly aware of the balancing act he had to perform between promoting his ascetic program and protecting himself from allegations of heretical disparagement of the Creator and his commandments, and of Scripture. He expressed his (and other church fathers') predicament in his apologetic letter to Pammachius:

We turn to the left if, following the lust of Jews and Gentiles, we burn for sexual intercourse; we turn to the right if, following the error of the Manichaeans, we under a pretense of chastity entangle ourselves in the meshes of unchastity. But we keep to the King's highway if we aspire to virginity yet refrain from condemning marriage. (*Epistula* 48.8 [CSEL 54.361–363])

Jerome frequently faced the problem that the Bible does not necessarily support his ascetic ideals, and he often had to resort to creative interpretive strategies to find and produce Scriptural justification for his own agenda. He therefore had to apply his comprehensive biblical knowledge and acumen, his rhetorical skills and ingenuity to advance and defend his ascetic enterprise (Clark 1999:39–42).

As translator of and commentator on the Bible, and as prolific letter writer and exegete, Jerome frequently employed intertextual exegesis when he wanted to press an ascetic exhortation or message from the Bible. His works are often a mosaic of skilfully chosen quotations from the Bible, appeals to biblical examples (such as Elijah, Jeremiah and John), interspersed with his own commentary and even references to classical works, with the result that almost every text is absorption and transformation of another text. Jerome's employment of intertextual exegesis in his writings mostly resulted in a random citation and reproduction of biblical texts, often treated as synchronous (on the same temporal plane as the passage-at-hand), and without due acknowledgement of authorial purpose and context (Clark 1999:122–123, n.114, 118, 119).

46. With due recognition of the study by Clark, who broadly explores 'the exegetical problem confronting early Christian ascetic writers who wished to ground their renunciatory program in the Bible' (1999:3). She analyses the early Church Fathers' textual exegesis within the categories of post-modern literary theory without regard of historical contexts and authorial intention. This present study focuses on Jerome's exegetical strategies in service of his ascetic programme.

Some of his exegetical strategies will now be discussed in more detail.

Intertextual exegesis and commentary:

Jerome developed a Midrashic style of intertextual exegesis, invoking one text to constrain another. His technique of intertextual exegesis rests on the general principle that meaning is produced by reading texts in conjunction with other texts that are either explicitly or implicitly placed next to (or 'inside') them, with power to constrain, expand, reinforce or explain. 'Through an intertextual exegesis, Jerome has claimed the Bible for the ascetic cause' (Clark 1999:65, 169).

One example will suffice, albeit not pertaining to virginity. In an appeal to a highborn Gallic widow, Ageruchia, not to remarry (*Epistula* 123, written in 409 CE), Jerome as it were 'explained away' the apostle Paul's advice to widows (1 Tm 5) with the help of two intertexts that constrain the message of the Timothy text. Already in the first paragraph he announced that he will in this instance give counsel in a different way<sup>47</sup> than in previous letters to widows – he advised both Furia (*Epistula* 54) and Salvina (*Epistula* 79) to devote their energies to the care of their children and to guarding their own reputation, instead of entering into a second marriage. In both those instances, he sought out relevant examples from scripture for their instruction. Jerome stated that he will now not deviate from the apostle's pronouncement (that digamy is preferable to fornication), and that he will examine the context of the whole passage and comment on it clause by clause (*Epistula* 123.3, 4). Jerome explicitly stated that he did not condemn second marriages, but that he urged widows to lives of continence (*Epistula* 123.9).

Immediately thereafter he reminded Ageruchia that the Ark of Noah, a type for the Church (I Pt 3:20–21; *Ep* 123.12), contained both unclean and clean animals (Gn 7:2): the one pair of unclean animals shows 'that digamy has no place even among brutes, creeping things, ...' (*Epistula* 123.12), implying that a widow can still be called a member of the Church if she remarries, but then an 'unclean' one (*Epistula* 123.9,12; *Adv. Iov.* I.16) – 'In a great house there are vessels of different kinds, some to honour and some to dishonour' (*Epistula* 123.9; 2 Tm 2:20). In the treatise against Jovinian, Jerome stated that it is the unclean animals that entered Noah's ark two by two, in other words, as sexual mates (*Adv. Iov.* I.16; *Ep* 22.19). Jerome interpreted the seven pair of clean animals, an uneven number, as God's provision for procreation and for sacrifice to him (Gn 8:17, 20) – the sacrifice being virginal chastity (*Epistula* 123.12).<sup>48</sup> His long citation

47. I must look for a new track on the old road and devise a natural treatment, the same yet not the same, for a hackneyed and well-worn theme. It is true that there is but one road; yet one can often reach one's goal by striking across country. I have several times written letters to widows in which for their instruction I have sought out examples from scripture, weaving its varied flowers into a single garland of chastity' (*Epistula* 123.1; CSEL 56.72–73).

48. And of the clean animals there are seven taken of each kind, that is, an uneven number; this points to the palm which awaits virginal chastity. For on leaving the ark Noah sacrificed victims to God not of course of the animals taken by twos for

from a pagan work *On Marriage*,<sup>49</sup> with which he concluded the first book against Jovinian, makes this work 'one of the most virulently anti-marital pieces in the patristic corpus' (Clark 1986:361). Then, Jerome summoned up the Parable of the Sower, accompanied by his famous interpretation of the seed sown in the good ground which brings forth fruit, some a hundred-fold, some 60-fold and some 30-fold (Mt 13:8), referring, according to him, to virgins, widows and married women, respectively.<sup>50</sup>

This interpretation clearly leaves no room for remarriage if a Christian wishes to be present in Christ's Kingdom. Jerome regarded second marriages as 'weeds [that] do not grow in good ground but among briars and thorns, the favourite haunts of those foxes to whom the Lord compares the impious Herod' (*Epistula* 123.9; Mt 13:7; Lk 13:32). 'By interlarding his exegesis of 1 Timothy 5 with such passages, Jerome sought to ensure that his readers comprehend the lowly status of second marriage' (Clark 1999:169).

His interpretation of the Parable of the Sower here in *Epistula* 123.9 (as well as *Adv. Iov.* I.3 and in *Epistula* 22.15 and 48.2) deserves attention. Jerome apparently relied on the ancient Romans' way of counting units and tens by positions of fingers of the left hand, and hundreds and thousands by corresponding positions of fingers on the right hand.<sup>51</sup>

In *Adv. Iov.* I.3, he wrote:

Although the hundred-fold, the sixty-fold and the thirty-fold spring from one earth and from one sowing, yet there is a great difference in respect of number. The thirty-fold has reference to marriage. *The very way the fingers are combined – see how they seem to embrace, tenderly kiss, and pledge their truth either to other – is a picture of husband and wife.* The sixty-fold applies to widows, because they are placed *in a position of difficulty and distress.* Hence the upper finger signifies their depression, and the greater the difficulty in resisting the allurements of pleasure once experienced, the greater the reward. Moreover (give good heed, my reader), to denote a hundred, the right hand is used instead of the left: a circle is made with the same fingers which on the left hand represented widowhood, and thus the *crown of virginity* is expressed. (*author's own italics*)

He again wrote in 394 CE:

The yield thirtyfold signifies wedlock, for the joining together of the fingers to express that number, suggestive as it is of a *loving gentle kiss or embracing*, aptly represents the relation of husband and wife. The yield sixtyfold refers to widows who are placed *in a position of distress and tribulation.* Accordingly, they are typified by that finger which is placed under the other to express the number sixty; for, as it is extremely trying when one has once tasted pleasure to abstain from its enticements, so the reward of

..... these were kept to multiply their species, but of those taken by sevens some of which had been set apart for sacrifice'.

49. According to Jerome possibly written by Theophrastus (*Adv. Iov.* I.47).

50. Augustine rejected Jerome's interpretation with the comment that the gifts of God's grace are too abundant to be compressed into three categories (*De Sancta Virginitate* 45.46; *PL* 40:423); Clark (1986:368).

51. See Bede, *De Temporum Ratione* Ch. 1.1 (*De computo vel loquela digitorum – 'About the counting or language of the fingers'*) and Rabanus Maurus in his *Liber de computo*, *PL* 107.669–728.



doing this is proportionately great. Moreover, a hundred – I ask the reader to give me his best attention – necessitates a *change from the left hand to the right*; but while the hand is different the fingers are the same as those which on the left hand signify married women and widows; only in this instance the circle formed by them indicates *the crown of virginity*. (*Epistula* 48.2; CSEL 54.351–354; *author's own italics*)

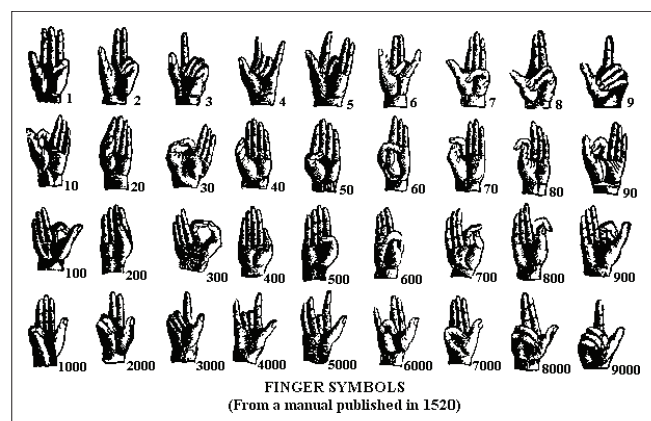
And in *Epistula* 123.9 (written in 409 CE; CSEL 56.84), he said:

In the gospel parable the seed sown in the good ground brings forth fruit, some an hundredfold, some sixtyfold, some thirtyfold. *The hundredfold which comes first betokens the crown of virginity*; the sixtyfold which comes next refers to the work of widows; while the thirtyfold – indicated by joining together the points of the thumb and forefinger – denotes the marriage-tie. What room is left for double marriages? (*author's own italics*)

According to the Roman counting system, the number 30 was indicated by joining the tips of the thumb and forefinger of the left hand, 60 was indicated by curling up the forefinger of the same hand and then doubling the thumb over it, and one hundred was expressed by joining the tips of the thumb and forefinger of the right hand (see Figure 1 – <http://www.math.wichita.edu/history/topics/num-sys.html>).

Note the way that Jerome here described, in gentle loving terms, the marriage-bond, in striking contrast to his vitriolic and obnoxious attack against Jovinian and his apparent disesteem of marriage. *Epistula* 48 to Pammachius is an 'apology' for the two books 'Against Jovinian' and contains several extracts from the treatise. In the letter to Pammachius, Jerome defended his 'praise of virginity' and 'depreciation of marriage', stating that he 'allows marriage' because 'virginity comes from wedlock' just as 'apples come from the tree and grain from the straw' (*Adv. Iov.* I.2).

Jerome (in *Adv. Iov.* II.20) draws a (rather hidden) parallel between the typological interpretation of Christ as the second Adam, the 'difference in time' argument and the indication of the number 'hundred' with the right hand (to indicate the virginal hundred-fold): 'There is one Adam of the earth, and another from heaven. The earthly Adam is on the left hand,



Source: Dantzig, T., 1954, *Number: The language of science*, Macmillan Company, p. 2, viewed 08 October 2019, from <http://www.math.wichita.edu/history/topics/num-sys.html>.

FIGURE 1: Finger symbols.

and will perish: the heavenly Adam is on the right hand, and will be saved'. He did this after he had pronounced that 'spiritual persons differ from carnal'.

Through intertextual argumentation Jerome understood Song of Songs as a depiction of Jesus' relation with virgins, and even produced a rather prurient interpretation of Song of Songs 3.1 and 5:2, 4 in his *Epistula* 22.17, 25 addressed to Eustochium, that Jesus will visit her on her bed at night (Clark 1999:87, 128). Miller (1993:21–45) regards this as a 'peculiar form of "de-sexualisation" that simultaneously eroticizes the relationship of Christ and the virgin'. He interpreted the 'garden enclosed, fountain sealed' of Song of Songs 4:12 as applying to virgins in general (*Epistula* 22.25 and 48.21) and to the Virgin Mary in particular. He referred to Song of Songs 5:6–7 (the fate of the beloved who went out to seek her lover and was beaten by the watchmen) and the story of Dinah in Genesis 34 as a warning to a virgin to remain at home in her protected seclusion (*Epistula* 22.25) and to rather secretly pray in her closet at home (Mt 6:6), so that Jesus will come to her (*Epistula* 22.26). Song of Songs 4:12 was often cited to refer to the 'sealed virginity' of ascetic women (*Epistula* 22.25).<sup>52</sup>

In *Epistula* 22, Jerome cited the Song of Songs 25 times to support his ascetic agenda because he believed that the book contains practical and spiritual advice for the virgin: ascetic seclusion (*Epistula* 22.25), the assurance of Christ's impartation of wisdom and redemption for sins (*Epistula* 22.1: 'He will miraculously change your complexion so that it shall be said of you, "Who is this that goeth up and hath been made white?"' [Can 8:5, LXX]). Jerome's exegesis here reveals his knowledge of Origen's exposition of this passage. His exegesis of Song of Songs is also apparent in other letters counselling ascetic renunciation – *Epistula* 107.7 pertaining to the education of Laeta's daughter Paula; *Epistula* 130.2, 7 to the virgin Demetrias and in *Epistula* 108.28, 31 to commemorate Paula.

In his 'debate' with Jovinian, Jerome employed an ascetic interpretation of the Book, against Jovinian's claim that it is an exaltation of marriage. Jerome argued that it 'contains the mysteries of virginity' (*Adv. Iov.* I.30), and that the passing of winter, the arrival of spring and the voice of the turtle-dove (Can 2:11–13) refer to the passage from the Old to the New Law (the Gospel), which brings with it the advent of virginity, the Virgin Son:

Then the bridegroom makes answer to the bride, and teaches her that the shadow of the old law has passed away, and the truth of the Gospel has come. 'Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away, for look, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone.' This relates to the Old Testament. Once more he speaks of the Gospel

<sup>52</sup> Song of Songs is for Jerome a resource in his articulation of ascetic identity. Concerns for purity are central to his exegesis and appropriation of the poem. He identifies the consecrated virgin with the bride of Song of Songs. The virgin needs to remain enclosed and separated from consort with others. Jerome endeavours to create a link between holiness and complete sexual renunciation. Cf. Shuve (2016:13–20; 173–208): Shuve *inter alia* refers to Jerome's quotations from the Song to praise the ascetic endeavours of the widows Marcella and Paula, and to Jerome's intentions of creating ascetic communities. This is, however, not the focus of this article.

and of virginity: ... And more plainly does he herald chastity: 'The voice', he says, 'of the turtle is heard in our land'. The turtle, the chastest of birds, always dwelling in lofty places, is a type of the Saviour.<sup>53</sup> (Slightly amended)

#### Intertextuality and male virgins:

Jerome held up some male characters in the Bible, for whom there is no mention of wives, as exemplars of Christian asceticism. Their (allegedly) virginal status was regarded as the reason for their ability to perform heroic or miraculous deeds. Jerome's attention to these biblical examples should be carefully considered in view of his own lost virginal status and his desire to regain Paradise.

- Joshua was allowed to enter the Promised Land because he was a *virgin* (according to Jerome), while Moses, who signifies the Law and was a *married man*, was not allowed to enter (Dt 34:5; *Adv. Iov.* I.22). Joshua, son of Nun, was also called *Ause*, or in Hebrew *Osee*, that is 'Saviour'.<sup>54</sup> 'According to the epistle of Jude it was he who saved the people of Israel and led them forth out of Egypt, and brought them into the Promised Land' (Jud 5; *Adv. Iov.* I.21). According to Deuteronomy 34:9, Joshua was 'full of the Spirit of Wisdom', just as Yeshua, the Messiah (Is 11:1–2). Joshua:

[W]as buried in *Thamnath Sare*, that is *most perfect sovereignty*, or among those of a *new covering*, to signify the crowds of virgins, covered by the Saviour's aid on Mount Ephraim, that is the *fruitful mountain*. (*Adv. Iov.* I.22)

Timnath-Serah was the original name of Joshua's inheritance (Jos 19:50). Jerome refers to Joshua's tomb in *Epistula* 108.13: During her pilgrimage, Paula was surprised that Joshua had selected for himself an uneven and rocky spot when he distributed the land. Jerome was, however, looking at this same piece of land with the eyes of a *controversialist* when he describes it as 'the fairest spot in the division of the land of Judah' (*Adv. Iov.* I.22). In sharp contrast, he refers to the burial place of Moses in Moab as 'in a valley over against the house of Phogor, which is, being interpreted, *reproach*' (*Adv. Iov.* I.22) and then Jerome makes an interesting statement:

And in the simple expressions of the sacred Scriptures there is always a more subtle meaning. The Jews gloried in children and child-bearing; and the barren woman ... was accursed. ... Therefore his [= Moses'] grave is described as placed in a valley over against the house of an idol which was in a special sense *consecrated to lust*.<sup>55</sup> But we who fight under Joshua our leader, even to the present day know not where Moses was buried. For we despise Phogor, and all his shame, knowing that they *who are in the flesh* cannot please God. And the Lord before the flood had

53. *Adv. Iov.* I.30.

54. 'Joshua' is the original Hebrew form of the Greek name 'Jesus'. Both names are derived from the root verb *yasha*, meaning 'to save or deliver'; also Numbers 13:16; Judges 2:6–9; Nehemiah 8:17–18. Joshua is often regarded as a type of Jesus (Ac 7:45 and Heb 4:8), on the following grounds: the names, the meaning of 'saviour' – Joshua led the Israelites into the Promised Land, while Jesus leads the faithful into the heavenly Canaan, and Joshua succeeded Moses, just like the Gospel succeeds the Law.

55. The Hebrew Phogor corresponds to Priapus, who was regarded as the promoter of fertility in vegetables and animals and worshipped at Lampsacus on the Hellespont.

said 'My spirit shall not abide in man for ever, for that he is also flesh' (Gn 6:3). Wherefore, when Moses died, the people of Israel mourned for him; but Joshua like one on his way to victory was unmourned. For marriage ends at death; *virginity thereafter begins to wear the crown*. (*Adv. Iov.* I.22; *author's own italics*)

It is important to note that Jerome began this passage in *Adv. Iov.* I.22 with the words: 'But is now time for us to *raise the standard of Joshua's chastity*'.

- Jeremiah was commanded 'not to take a wife in this place' – Jerome interpreted this as counselling lifelong abstinence, and that Jeremiah was a virgin (*Adv. Iov.* I.33; Jr 16:2; Clark 1999:107). The fact that Jeremiah was not taken captive to Babylon (Jr 40:1–4) was a sign of the freedom and blessings accorded to virgins (*Adv. Iov.* I.33) – an example of Jerome's *decontextualisation of a biblical passage* to serve his ascetic programme. Jeremiah is held up as exemplar to Eustochium (*Epistula* 22.21).
- Elijah's bodily ascent to heaven when he was walking with Elisha (2 Ki 2:11) is credited by several Fathers (e.g. Ambrose, Athanasius and John Cassian) to his virginity. Jerome did the same in *Adv. Iov.* II.15 where, in the context of a discussion on fasting, he states: '... by Moses is signified marriage, by Elias virginity ... Moses died and was buried, but Elias was carried off in a chariot of fire and entered on immortality before he approached death'. Jerome also reacted to Jovinian's mistake to include Elijah and Elisha in a list of married men (*Adv. Iov.* I.25) and referred to the relationship between John the Baptist and Elijah:

For, since John Baptist came in the spirit and power of Elijah, and John was a virgin, it is clear that he came not only in Elijah's spirit, but also in his bodily chastity.

In *Epistula* 22.21 he stated: 'Elijah lived a virgin life, so also did Elisha and many of the sons of the prophets'.

- Elisha was granted power to raise the widow's son (2 Ki 4:18–37) – *Epistula* 22.21 – because of his virginal status. He also made a suspiciously 'poisoned broth' sweet with meal (2 Ki 4: 38–41; *Epistula* 22.9).
- John the Baptist, like Elijah, confined and mortified his loins with girdles of skin (2 Ki 2:8 and Mt 3:4) and is said to have come in the spirit and power of Elijah as the forerunner of the Lord (*Epistula* 130.4).<sup>56</sup>
- John the disciple: *Adv. Iov.* I.26: Jerome argued that John's virginity was the cause of (1) the special love that Christ had for him; (2) the fact that he was both an Apostle (because he wrote to the Churches as a master) and an Evangelist (because he composed the Gospel of John) and a Prophet (because he saw on the island of Patmos, to which he had been banished by the Emperor Domitian as a martyr for the Lord, an Apocalypse containing the boundless mysteries of the future); (3) his ability to expound more mysteries as a writer than a married writer (like Peter) could; (4) him being able (according to Tertullian) to emerge fresher and more active from a jar of

56. Demetrius admired their severe fasting, rough clothing and frugal living.

boiling oil into which he had been plunged and (5) that the Virgin Mother was entrusted by the Virgin Lord to him as the Virgin disciple at the crucifixion scene (Jn 19:26, 27). The apostle Peter, who was married (Mt 8:14, 15; Lk 4:38, 39) and therefore does not compare favourably (in Jerome's opinion) to John (*Adv. Iov.* I.26), was nevertheless acknowledged elsewhere (*Epistula* 15.2) by Jerome as the rock on which the church is built (Mt 16:18).

- James the disciple, and brother of Jesus: *Adv. Iov.* I.39:  
... a man of such sanctity and righteousness, and distinguished by so rigid and perpetual a virginity, that even Josephus, the Jewish historian, relates that the overthrow of Jerusalem was due to his death.<sup>57</sup>

In *Epistula* 24.2, Jerome stated that the virginity of Jeremiah (Jr 1:5), John the Baptist (Lk 1:41) and the Apostle Paul (Eph 1:4) had been preordained out of the grace of God (Rm 11:6) even before they were born. Jerome's numerous references to these male virgins were included in his letters and in the *Adversus Iovinianum* on purpose.

Textual implosion:

Jerome's exegetical strategy also involves textual implosion:

Scriptural discussions on such diverse (and seemingly asexual) topics as food,<sup>58</sup> slavery,<sup>59</sup> and circumcision,<sup>60</sup> all stand in for discourse on sex and the body. Thus Jerome's exegesis effectively enlarges the number of Biblical passages that can be claimed as pertinent to discussions of sexuality and ascetic renunciation. (Clark 1999:163)

He believed that fasting, one of the ascetic observances, helped to preserve chastity in the struggle against the lusts of the flesh. Like Basil of Ancyra (in his *De vera virginitate integritate*), Jerome employed the Galenic model of the four qualities of heat, cold, moisture and dryness, to the effects of food and drink on the human body. He recommended cooling and drying regimens to ascetics, with the rationale that through fasting a person could control the build-up of heat and moisture associated with sexual desires (Shaw 1998:238). He maintained that a virgin and widow should avoid wine and warm dishes because 'the heat of the body must be tempered with cold food' (*Epistula* 54.9, 10) and 'Wine and youth between them kindle the fire of sensual pleasure' (*Epistula* 22.8, 9). He then referred to biblical examples such as Noah and Lot who, intoxicated by wine, gave in to lust (Gn 9:20, 21; 19:30–38), to Elijah, Elisha and Daniel who preferred bread or vegetables and water (1 Ki 19:4–6; 2 Ki 6:18–23; Dn 1:8–16) and to Adam and Jesus

57. The passage is not found in existing copies of Josephus.

58. Cf. *Adv. Iov.* II.5–7: 'The eating of flesh, and drinking of wine, and fullness of stomach, is the seed-plot of lust'.

59. *Epistula* 48.6: Paul's words on slavery are read as pertaining to marriage, while freedom attends the life of virginity. See Clark (1999:168).

60. Cf. *Epistula* 48.6; 128.3: Jerome argued that the apostle Paul's references to circumcision serve as a code for virginity and to uncircumcision as a code for marriage (1 Cor 7:17–24); see Clark (1999:168).

Christ in whose cases Satan used hunger to tempt them (Gn 3:6, 17; Mt 4:2–3). Jerome then warned: 'Care must be taken, therefore, that abstinence may bring back to Paradise those whom satiety once drove out' (*Epistula* 22.10 [CSEL 54.157–158], *author's own italics*).

Typology and allegory:

Figurative exegesis proved beneficial in the Church Fathers' efforts to 'de-sexualise' the Old Testament, as can be seen in, *inter alia*, Jerome's interpretation of Song of Songs.

Clark (1999:70) states that typology and allegory were 'underutilized interpretive tools in the Church Fathers' production of ascetic meaning from Biblical texts'. Ascetically inclined Church Fathers, like Jerome, however, employed 'spiritual' or 'figurative' interpretation of Scripture on the one hand to argue for the retention of the Old Testament (especially the pro-reproductive passages like Gn 1:28 and Ps 128:3–4 against the recommendation to become eunuchs and virgins for the Kingdom of Heaven, as in Mt 19:12 and 1 Cor 7:25), and on the other hand to 'de-sexualise' the Old Testament (e.g. in the interpretation of the Song of Songs).

Jerome's figurative and allegorising reading of the Parable of the Sower (Mt 13:3–8, 18–23; Mk 3:31–35; Lk 8:19–21) with the 30-fold, 60-fold and 100-fold harvest became a stock example of his assessment of the rewards due, respectively, to married women, the widowed and virgins, on the basis of their varying degrees of sexual renunciation.<sup>61</sup>

In his *Epistula* 66.2, 15, Jerome used striking metaphors to refer to three specific women from one family who personify his distinction between the 30-fold, 60-fold and hundred-fold harvest of the Parable: Paula and her two daughters Paulina and Eustochium:

In this threefold yield I recognize an emblem of the three different rewards of Christ which have fallen to three women closely united in blood and moral excellence. Eustochium culls the flowers of virginity.<sup>62</sup> Paula sweeps the toilsome threshing floor of widowhood. Paulina keeps the bed undefiled of marriage. A mother with such daughters wins for herself on earth all that Christ has promised to give in heaven.

In this way, Jerome produced ascetic meaning from a scriptural text. He extended the metaphor describing a four-horse team in a chariot race, to include Pammachius<sup>63</sup> – brother-in-law to Eustochium, son-in-law to Paula and husband to Paulina – a fit companion and a cherub such as Ezekiel describes in Ezekiel 10:8–22:

Of this team Jesus holds the reins, and it is of steeds like these that Habakkuk sings: 'ride upon thy horses and let thy riding be

61. *Epistula* 48.2,3; 22.15, 19; 66.2 and 123.8; *Adv. Iov.* I.3; Clark (1999:90).

62. The same image was used re. Paula the Younger in *Epistula* 107.9.

63. Jerome thought highly of Pammachius, a Roman senator, who became a monk and was living a life of severe self-denial. In a letter of consolation on the death of Paulina written in 397 CE, Jerome approvingly referred to the Hospice for Strangers which Pammachius had established at Portus, in conjunction with Fabiola.

salvation'. With like resolve if with unlike speed they strain after the victor's palm. Their colours are different; their object is the same. They are harnessed in one yoke, they obey one driver, not waiting for the lash but answering the call of his voice with fresh efforts. (*Epistula* 66.2 [CSEL 54.648–649])

Later in the same letter (*Epistula* 66.15), Jerome added Blaesilla, Paula's daughter, a childless widow, who died within 3 months of her conversion because of excessive fasting (cf. *Epistula* 39), to the team. In *Epistula* 22.15, he referred to Blaesilla as having attained 'the second degree of chastity' (CSEL 54.665).

#### Gender-bending:

One extraordinary and distinguishing aspect of Jerome's teaching on a life of virginity is his belief that virgin men and women became, in some sense, equal. Women became manly and practised manly virtues. Perhaps that was why he put so much emphasis on scholarship for women. He did not, however, hesitate at times to lambast women for thinking that they could be equals of men (as seen in the writings against Helvidius and Jovinian).

Jerome, in an example of gender-bending, also depicted his friend Pammachius as the female lover of the Song of Songs (*Epistula* 66.10 [CSEL 54.660–661]; Clark 1999:140; Shuve 2016:5). In the same vein, he even cast himself (*Epistula* 22.7) as the bride of Song of Songs 1:2–4 and as the sinful woman of Luke 7:37–38, who washed Jesus' feet with his tears and dried them with his hair (*Epistula* 11; 22.7).

In the eyes of male authors of the 4th century, asceticism offered a woman the opportunity to overcome the negative perceptions and misogynous views of women (her subordinate status at creation, her guilt for the original sin [Jerome, *Epistula* 130.8], the dangers she posed for men, her light-mindedness and vanity). Jerome argued that, once a woman prefers Jesus to a husband and children, she ceases to be a woman and is called a man; she is considered a man's equal (*Epistula* 71.3). He quoted Paul's words (Gl 3:28) that in Christ 'there is no male and female' as proof of a woman's new-found equality (*Epistula* 75.2).

It is ironic that the ascetic movement, often perceived as a denigration of women and marriage, provided a degree of 'liberation' for women. Their freedom to exercise their own choices concerning their bodies, families and property inducted them into a new status that elevated them above the deficiencies of the female condition (Clark 1986:43). Asceticism provided a new opportunity to women to demonstrate their 'manliness' and 'manly courage'<sup>64</sup> and to hold positions of religious leadership.

#### 'Close' reading of problematical texts:

Jerome sometimes lent an ascetic tenor to some biblical verses by scrutinising the chronology or sequence of events: In his

64. Jerome, *Epistula* 130.5; 108:7–14.

attempt to warn Christians against marriage, he implied that Ezekiel only received the gift of prophesy (Ezk 24:18) after his wife had died (*Adv. Iov.* 1.33), whereas Jeremiah's predestined blessing of virginity enabled his prophetic inspiration from before his birth (Jr 1:5) and ensured that he was not captured by the enemy (Jr 39:11). In his treatise to Eustochium (*Epistula* 22.19), Jerome argued that Adam and Eve only received the command to reproduce (Gn 1:28) after their expulsion from Eden (Gn 3:20 and 4:1–2) and that they enjoyed their 'natural' condition (= virginity) before their sin.<sup>65</sup> Eustochium was exhorted to preserve her 'natural' condition, in the same way as her Bridegroom, Christ, 'is to be born a virgin of a virgin' (Clark 1999:118–122).

Jerome the ascetic exegete and commentator claimed that Isaiah 54:1 ('Sing, O barren one, who did not bear ... For the children of the desolate one will be more than the children of her that is married') describes the situation of Paula's barren daughter Paulina, who, although she had died without producing children, nonetheless bore a 'spiritual offspring' in the form of her husband Pammachius. She was therefore allowed to 'sing' with other barren women (*Epistula* 66.4 [CSEL 54.651–652]: 'He [Pammachius] and others like him are the offspring which Paulina desired to have in her life time and which she has given us in her death ... for in a moment you have brought forth as many sons as there are poor men in Rome' [translation slightly amended]). He thus appropriated an Old Testament text to advance his renunciatory cause.

In the context of expectation of an imminent arrival of God's Kingdom, and the displacement of traditional family values with an ethic of radical allegiance to God alone, Jerome often had to apply himself to creative hermeneutical strategies to advance his ascetic programme, especially when confronted with 'un-ascetic' Old Testament texts. God's first commandment to the human race ('Reproduce, multiply, and fill the earth' – Gn 1:28) does not, according to Jerome, apply to the Christian or Gospel era, which is the time for the 'axe to be laid to the root' (Mt 3:10) – the 'root' being 'reproduction' (*Epistula* 123.13). Jerome elsewhere pronounced that 'Marriage replenishes the earth, virginity fills Paradise' (*Adv. Iov.* I.16).

Likewise, Abraham, who had three wives,<sup>66</sup> was praised by Jerome<sup>67</sup> for his hospitality and for his willingness to renounce family and home. Despite making these concessions regarding Abraham, Jerome's aversion over his three wives is obvious in his remark in *Adv. Iov.* I.19: 'If we follow him in the number of his wives, let us also follow him in circumcision. We must not partly follow, partly reject him'.

In his counsel to Christian ascetics, Jerome often referred to the example of Abraham who abandoned his homeland in

65. An argument which was also upheld by Gregory of Nyssa in his *De Virginitate* 12.4. See Clark (1999:120).

66. Jerome's pro-marriage opponent Jovinian argued that the blessedness of Abraham was linked to his marital status (*Adv. Iov.* I.5).

67. In *Epistula* 66.11, 125.20 and 108.31.

obedience to God (Gn 12:1, 4). In *Epistula* 22.1, he encouraged Eustochium to renounce her home and family (Ps 45:11, 12) to dwell 'in the land of the living' (Ps 27:13) and to 'cling to the bridegroom in a close embrace' (*Epistula* 22.1). According to Jerome, Abraham was 'the first to receive a promise of Christ' (*Epistula* 46.2), the bridegroom, when he forsook his relatives. In his consolatory letter to Paula after the death of her daughter Blaesilla, he also urged Paula to leave her country and family, like Abraham (*Epistula* 39.5), to 'enter into the promised land'. Likewise in his eulogy to Paula, he praised her for forsaking her country and kin like Abraham (*Epistula* 108.32), and in *Epistula* 125.20, he counselled a young Gallic monk, Rusticus, to imitate the example of Abraham in obedience to God's will and to go to a place which he does not know (Heb 11:8), if he wishes to be 'perfect'. Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac, in complete obedience to God, served as another useful example to ascetics to renounce even their children, as we can see in *Epistula* 39.6, where Jerome urged Paula not to mourn excessively for the death of Blaesilla.

#### Focus:

Jerome's interpretation of the Old Testament often compelled him to focus on certain aspects of persons and happenings that serve his ascetic programme: instead of focusing on Solomon as the one whose love for women caused him to forsake the love of God, he centred on Solomon, the author of Proverbs, who teaches the dangers that women pose to men (*Adv. Iov.* I.28; *Epistula* 22.12); and instead of dwelling on Abraham's marriage and his desperate plan to procreate, Jerome was more interested in Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son, thereby demonstrating the ascetic choice to renounce family and home (*Epistula* 39.6; 108.32).

#### The 'difference in time' argument:

Jerome often appealed to the 'difference in times' argument when he was faulting the sinful behaviour of Old Testament figures such as Jacob, David and Solomon. Christians are called to a different command under the Gospel: '... the intimacies of Mesopotamia died in the land of the Gospel' (*Adv. Iov.* 1.19).

Jerome emphasised the 'difference in times' and employed intertextual exegesis to support his views on marriage and renunciation. In his arguments, he concentrated on the sexual dimensions of marriage with carefully chosen texts which signal the *defilement* of married sexual relations, unlike John Chrysostom who rather stressed the 'cleanness' and 'protective asylum for continence' of the married state.

Jerome believed that the Old Testament law with its different ideal of blessedness (e.g. the command to reproduce and fill the earth, the curse of childlessness, and the virtue of continence which was formerly bestowed on men – see the examples of Elijah, Elisha, Jeremiah) has passed or was

broken. But after the miraculous conception of Christ in the womb of the virgin Mary, the curse was broken:

Death came through Eve, but life has come through Mary. And thus *the gift of virginity* has been bestowed most richly upon women, seeing that it has had its beginning from a woman. (*Epistula* 22.21, CSEL 54.171–172)

In the spirit of his time, Jerome argued *against* the 'carnal mores' of the Old Testament times and Hebrew past (the time of the Law)<sup>68</sup> and *for* the ascetic ones of the new Christian Dispensation (the time of the Gospel) and the context of eschatological expectation. He frequently employed a number of Scriptural verses to reinforce 'the difference in times' and to serve his ascetic ideal (Clark 1999:162–169). These verses include Ecclesiastes 3:5 ('a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing' – *Adv. Iov.* 1.29; *Epistula* 22.19; 107.13), 1 Corinthians 10:11 (we 'upon whom the end of the ages has come' – *Epistula* 123.11–13; *Adv. Iov.* II.4) and 2 Corinthians 5:17 ('old things have passed away, all has become new' – *Adv. Iov.* 1.37).

In *Adv. Helv.* 22, he wrote in about 383 CE:

... I beseech my readers not to suppose that in praising virginity I have in the least disparaged marriage, and separated the saints of the Old Testament from those of the New, that is to say, those who had wives and those who altogether refrained from the embraces of women: I rather think that in accordance with the *difference in time* [author's own italics] and circumstance one rule applied to the former, another to us upon whom the ends of the world have come.

## Jerome: the crown of virginity, Paradise regained

The virginal bodies of Eustochium and Demetrias were pure representations of that which Jerome himself desired, but which he had lost. In his letter to Eustochium, Jerome identified himself with her by using female metaphors from Scripture which he applied to himself in a very skilful way:

- In *Epistula* 22.7, he pictured himself as similar to a *black Ethiopian* ('I used to sit alone because I was filled with bitterness. Sackcloth disfigured my unshapely limbs and my skin from neglect had become as black as an Ethiopian's'). In *Epistula* 22.1, he employed imagery from the Song of Songs to refer to the sinful nature of humankind ('Born, in the first instance, of such parentage we are naturally *black*, and even when we have repented, so long as we have not scaled the heights of virtue, we may still say: 'I am *black but comely*, O ye daughters of Jerusalem' (Can 1:5) ... Your bridegroom is not haughty or disdainful; he has 'married an *Ethiopian woman*' (Nm 12:1). When once you desire the wisdom of the true Solomon and come to him, he will avow all his knowledge

68. He was, however, careful not to criticise the sexual exploits of Old Testament characters openly, as he did not wish to incriminate himself. See, for example, *Adv. Iov.* II.4: 'But who does not know that under the other dispensation of God all the saints of past times were of equal merit with Christians at the present day? As Abraham in days gone by pleased God in wedlock, so virgins now please him in perpetual virginity. He served the Law and his own times; let us now serve the Gospel and our times, ...'

to you; he will lead you into his chamber with his royal hand (Can 1:4); he will miraculously change your complexion so that it shall be said of you, 'Who is this that goes up and has been made *white*?' (Can 8:5, LXX; translation slightly amended)'.<sup>69</sup>

- Jerome's identification with the virgin Demetrias in *Epistula* 130 should also be noted. In *Epistula* 130.19, he explicitly referred to his *choice* for the virginal life and the reward which he envisaged for himself and others who shared his convictions: 'but I and those to whom I write have made *our choice*; and our one object is to remain constant to it. ... that so we may come to the sweet waters of the *true Jordan*, and enter *the land of promise* and go up to the house of God'.<sup>69</sup>
- Jerome's physical presence in *Epistula* 22 is very strong (Miller 1993:31). While describing to Eustochium his struggles with the 'bubbling fires of lust' in the desert, he cast himself in the *role of the sinful woman* of Luke 7:35–50: 'Helpless, I cast myself at the feet of Jesus, I watered them with my tears, I wiped them with my hair ...'<sup>70</sup> – an example of *gender-bending*, and a step in his identification with the female virgin. By juxtaposing passages referring to fallen virgins<sup>71</sup> with a passage picturing his own erotic struggles (*Epistula* 22.7), and passages referring to the dangers tempting a virgin<sup>72</sup> with a passage recounting his dream about the temptation of classical literature (*Epistula* 22.30), Jerome skilfully developed the process of his *identification with the female virgin*.<sup>73</sup>
- While warning Eustochium against the temptations of the devil, Jerome clearly identified with her: '... should *we* not weep and groan when the serpent invites *us*, as he invited *our* first parents, to eat forbidden fruit, and when after expelling *us* from the paradise of virginity he desires to clothe *us* with mantles of skins such as that which Elijah, on his return to paradise, left behind him on earth? (2 Ki 2:13)' (*Epistula* 22.18, *author's own italics*). Jerome here implicitly also identified himself with both Elijah and Elisha, male virgins (see above).

Jerome's skilful oratory to establish this female or male identification in a large part of *Epistula* 22 deserves closer, yet brief, attention. Eustochium is presented as 'the Lord's bride' who renounced her own land and people, just like Abraham, to 'cling to the bridegroom in a close embrace' (*Epistula* 22.1–2). Jerome's warning to her concerning the temptations and dangers presented by the adversary (*Epistula* 22.3–5)<sup>74</sup> is interspersed with examples of *male persons* in the Bible who had been kept safe amid dangerous attacks (Elisha, Elijah,

69.CSEL 56.199–201. The words 'the sweet waters of the true Jordan' and 'the land of promise' are referring to baptism and read together with Jerome's *Epistula* 69.5–7 (CSEL 54.686–694; written c. 397 CE) are an indication of his possible change of mind concerning baptismal transformation.

70.*Epistula* 22.7 (CSEL 54.152–154); the image of prostitution served to remind him of his own loss of virginity.

71.For example, *Epistula* 22.6 and 13.

72.For example, *Epistula* 22.8, 16, 20, 27, 29, 31.

73.Miller (1993:33) refers to shifts of focus and language. The theme and purpose of my article, however, differ from hers.

74.'We are hemmed in by hosts of foes, *our* enemies are upon every side' (*Epistula* 22.3, CSEL 54. 147; *author's own italics*).

David, Daniel's three friends in the furnace, Job, the disciples, the apostle Paul). His description of fallen virgins, presented with a concatenation of biblical verses (*Epistula* 22.6, 13, 14), is interrupted by the description of his own struggle in the desert, including the example of gender-bending mentioned above (*Epistula* 22.7) and examples of the temptations of men (Noah, Lot, Elijah, Elisha, Daniel, Jesus Christ, Sampson, David, Solomon; *Epistula* 22.8–12). This whole section of the letter is furthermore enclosed between imagery from the Song of Songs (*Epistula* 22.1) and the explicit references to the 'crown of virginity' and the 'fruit which is a hundredfold' (*Epistula* 22.15):

- Jerome referred to himself as a eunuch out of free will (*Epistula* 22.19), whose seed 'produces fruit a hundredfold' (as in the case of virgins) – 'The fruit which is a *hundredfold* and that which is sixtyfold both spring from one seed, and that seed is *chastity*' (*Epistula* 22.15 [CSEL 54.162–163]). It seems that for Jerome, the 'manly eunuch' is similar to the 'male virgin' (cf. also Kuefler 2001:139–143; Vuolanto 2015:82; Paulinus of Nola, *Letters* 41.1), and through skilful identification, to the female virgin.
- According to Jerome, virginity was not only a condition of the body but also of the inner self, and he characterised loss of virginity in the inner self with metaphors from Scripture – images of prostitution from the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel (*Epistula* 22.6; Jr 13:26; Ezk 16:25; Miller 1993:25, 26). Could the body not likewise be 'restored' by virginity of the inner self and ascetic desire, to an idealised body (as in the case of a eunuch by choice) in an imaginal way? Couldn't the desire and transformation of the soul result in the ideal union with God? Jerome wrote in *Epistula* 22.17: 'The love of the flesh is overcome by the love of the spirit. Desire is quenched by desire'. Erotic desire of the body is replaced or quenched by spiritual desire for union with God.<sup>75</sup> Harpham (1987:45) states: 'asceticism is essentially a meditation on, even an enactment of, desire. ... While asceticism recognizes that desire stands between human life and perfection, it also understands that desire is the only means of achieving perfection, and that the movement towards ideality is necessarily a movement of desire'.
- For Jerome union with God was the ideal.<sup>76</sup> He wrote in *Epistula* 22.40 (CSEL 54.207–209): '... the flesh desires to be as God and ascends to the place whence angels have fallen to judge angels'.

Therefore, Jerome encouraged Eustochium, and by implication also himself:

As often as this life's idle show tries to charm you; as often as you see in the world some vain pomp, transport yourself in mind to *Paradise*, essay to be now what you will be hereafter, and you will hear *your Spouse* say: 'Set me as a sunshade in

75.Ranft (1998:71) states: 'The soul was saved through the body, be it male or female. ... ascetic practices were ... exercises in holiness'.

76.Miller (1993:29) refers to his 'amatory law'.

thine heart and as a seal upon thine arm'. And then, strengthened in body as well as in mind, you, too, will cry aloud and say: 'Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it'. (*author's own italics*)

In his letter to Demetrias, some 30 years later, he repeated that the love of and for Christ is the key to Paradise:

Happy is the soul, happy is the virgin in whose heart there is room for no other love than the *love of Christ*. (*Epistula* 130.19 [CSEL 56.199–201])

## Conclusion

This study of selected *Epistulae* and the *Adversus Iovinianum* by Jerome, and of his skilful ascetic exegesis of the Bible, reveals his focused preoccupation with the protection of the virginal state. His near-obsession seems to go beyond propaganda for his ascetic ideal and the protection of the sacred integrity of the virgins and ascetic community, or his need to defend himself from charges of improper relations with ascetically minded noble ladies, or his self-imposed mentorship of the latter.

Kelly closes his biography of Jerome with these words: 'The deeper springs of his psychology elude us, and for all his readiness to talk about himself there is an unresolved enigma about the real Jerome' (Kelly 1975:336). He then refers the reader to a study of Jerome's personality done by Charles Favez in the 1950s of the previous century.<sup>77</sup> Scholars frequently refer to Jerome's irascible, complex and ambivalent personality, his vanity and conceit, to his intellect and his literary achievement, and to his passionate devotion to Christ and to world-renouncing asceticism.

This researcher wants to pose one other perspective on Jerome's complex personality and his obsession with the preservation of virginity, especially during the period 374–394 CE.

His passionate exhortations to the virgins Eustochium and Demetrias, his verbal sparring with Jovinian, and his skilful application of ascetic exegesis and rhetorical strategies seem to be interspersed with carefully disguised markers, calling attention to his deep remorse, his personal quest for redemption and his yearning to receive the heavenly rewards, even though he had lost his virginity:

I will say it boldly, though God can do all things He cannot raise up a virgin when once she has fallen. He may indeed relieve one who is defiled from the penalty of her sin, but He will not give her a crown. (*Epistula* 22.5 [CSEL 54.150])

In the works studied, he subtly identified himself with the virgins Eustochium and Demetrias, as well as with male virgins in the Old and New Testaments, especially with the apostle Paul, and with the 'hundred and forty-four thousand before the throne in the heavenly Jerusalem'. As an 'eunuch

77.C. Favez, 'Saint Jérôme peint par lui-même', *Latomus* 16.4 (1957), 655–671; 17.1 (1958), 81–96; 17.2 (1985), 303–316.

out of free will', dedicated to a life of humble and complete ascetic renunciation, he, as it were, 'painted before his eyes the rewards of his present toil' and appropriated for himself the hundred-fold fruit, 'the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, shall give (him)' in Paradise, where he too will 'sing the new song' together with 'those for whom it is appointed' (*Epistula* 22.40–41). What remained for him was only 'the imperfect strive for perfection' (Undheim 2018:134).

Jerome was convinced that the original human condition in Paradise was virginal and that this status could be regained with the advent of the new Dispensation. He therefore hoped, even believed, that he, too, would come to the 'sweet waters of the true Jordan, and enter the land of promise and go up to the house of God'.<sup>78</sup>

His hope and conviction had been voiced already in his letter to Heliodorus, written in 374 CE:

Does the boundless solitude of the desert terrify you? In the spirit you may walk *always in paradise*. ... To all your objections the apostle gives this one brief answer: 'The sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the *glory*' which shall come after them, 'which shall be revealed in us.' ... It shall come, it shall come, that day when this corruptible *shall put on incorruption*, and this mortal shall put on immortality. (*Epistula* 14.10–11 [CSEL 54.60–61])

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## Competing interests

The author has declared that no competing interests exist.

## Ethical consideration

The ethical exception is granted to research project as submitted to the Department of Biblical and Ancient Studies and is granted for the duration of the project. Any adverse circumstance arising in the undertaking of the research project that is relevant to the ethicality of the study, as well as changes in the methodology, should be communicated to the Department's Ethical Review Committee.

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78. *Epistula* 130.19 (CSEL 56.199–201); The Jovinianist controversy seems to create the impression that, according to Jerome, baptismal transformation and regeneration, grace and restoration, were subordinate to his idea of personal merit and the crown of virginity. Jovinian's propositions provided a 'solution' to Jerome's struggles and personal quest, yet he chose the ascetic way. This may be explored in a follow-up article.

## Data availability statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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