

THE *INTERPRETATIO ROMANA*
AS A PRINCIPLE OF TRANSLATION IN JEROME

Michael Fieger¹, Brigitta Schmid²

ABSTRACT How does Tammuz become Adonis and a monument become a triumphal arch? Based on the *Interpretatio Romana*, this article shows how Jerome stylises the ancient Babylonian shepherd deity Tammuz into the popular Roman Adonis. Another example of this approach is the depiction of King Saul memorialising himself on Mount Carmel with a triumphal arch for his victory over the Amalekites in 1 Sam 15:12. Both verses show a time-critical translator Jerome, who at the same time ironically exaggerates the biblical as well as his contemporary social and power relations.

KEYWORDS Vulgate, Jerome, Interpretatio Romana, Tammuz, Adonis, Saoul, roman emperor, triumphal arch, ancient deities

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG Wie wird aus Tammuz Adonis und aus einem Denkmal ein Triumphbogen? Ausgehend von der *Interpretatio Romana* wird in diesem Artikel aufgezeigt, wie Hieronymus die altbabylonische Hirtengottheit Tammuz zum beliebten römischen Adonis stilisiert. Ein weiteres Beispiel dieser Vorgehensweise ist die Darstellung des Königs Saul, der sich auf dem Karmel mit einem Triumphbogen für seinen Sieg über die Amalekiter in 1 Sam 15,12 ein Denkmal gesetzt hat. Beide Verse zeigen einen zeitkritischen Übersetzer Hieronymus, der zugleich die biblischen wie auch seine zeitgenössischen Gesellschafts- und Machtverhältnisse ironisch überzeichnet.

SCHLAGWORTE Vulgata, Hieronymus, Interpretatio Romana, Tammuz, Adonis, Saul, römischer Kaiser, Triumphbogen, antike Gottheiten

1. Professor of Old Testament Science and Hebrew at the Theological Faculty in Chur, Switzerland. Editor of the Vulgate Tusculum German and member of the director's board of the Vulgate Institute • michael.fieger [at] thchur.ch  120145340  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8220-3383>

2. Lic phil I Brigitta Schmid Pfändler MTh, Member of the director's board of the Vulgate Institute • brigitta.schmid [at] thchur.ch  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1027-9194>

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From Tammuz to Adonis in Ez 8:14

Jerome, a profound connoisseur of late antique culture, moved back and forth in his texts between the different cultural spheres of his time. This can be seen particularly well where he follows in the footsteps of the *Interpretatio Romana*.

This can be observed exemplarily in the transmission of verses 8:5-18 of the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel, where the beginning of the vision of the desecrated temple is described. The Hebrew verse Ez 8:14 describes women sitting at the entrance of the gate of the temple weeping for Tammuz. The Roman Christians were probably not familiar with Tammuz, a shepherd god from the Babylonian-Assyrian culture, although he was inscribed in the LXX, the inspired text of their time.

This passage contains a sharp cult critique that Jerome had to bring into late antiquity in his translation. Jerome was well acquainted with the technique of the *Interpretatio Romana* (Latin for “Roman translation”), which was common in antiquity. The *Interpretatio Romana* refers to the Roman custom of incorporating foreign deities into one’s own religion by identifying them with Roman deities, that were considered comparable. This inculturation appears to be a continuation of the tendency, already present in Greek culture, to identify local deities with supra-regional ones, which gave rise to a unified Greek religion in the first place.

And so Jerome formulates in Ez 8:14:

And he brought me in by the gate of the house of the Lord, which faced north,
and behold, there sat women mourning Adonis
(... *et ecce ibi mulieres sedebant plangentes Adonidem*).

For practical reasons he probably chooses the better-known Greek-Roman god Adonis as a translation variant for “Tammuz” as it appears in the Hebrew Bible and the Greek LXX. It may be assumed with a fair degree of certainty that this is a characteristic expression of Jerome’s pragmatic and idiosyncratic approach to cultural and religious questions of his time.

His choice of words was probably not intended to draw the attention of his early Christian readers to the subtleties of the pre-Christian cult. Rather, he was concerned with bringing the imagery of the biblical account close:

Instead of Tammuz, which would be a foreign, barbaric name to the Roman Christian, with which he could not associate any concrete idea, he names that figure of Hellenistic Roman mythology which is most closely related to the Babylonian vegetation god.³

Last but not least, in Jerome's time—on the threshold of the transition of paganism to Christianity in the Roman Empire—the Roman spring festival of “Adonis and Aphrodite” was certainly well known.

A triumphal arch in the ancient world (1 Sam 15:12)

Another example showing a free extension of the *Interpretatio Romana* far beyond the divine and the divine attributes is found in verse 1 Sam 15:12. In chapter 15 the dramatic development between the prophet and last judge Samuel and King Saul is described. In verse 12 Saul stages the climax of his power with the victory over the Amalekites on Mount Carmel with the gesture of erecting a monument. Before this campaign, which Saul carried out on God's behalf, there was also God's demand for the complete destruction of the people and their possessions. Saul, however, brings cattle and valuable objects of the Amalekites with him. With this disobedience to God's will, Saul's downfall as king of Israel begins from verse 13 onwards—over the relentless judgement of God, which is carried out by Samuel.

In the *Biblia Hebraica*, in 1 Sam 15:12, for a more precise characterisation of Saul, there is the expression “and behold standing (Hifil Part m Sg) before him [a] hand”, which can inevitably be interpreted as “he has erected a monument to himself”.⁴ The Septuagint takes over this expression almost literally with “he raises (conjugated verb in the 3rd P.Sg.) his hand”, thus dropping the description of the demonstration of power over the erection of a monument. The NETS (the Septuagint English) also adheres to this literalness, which is still strongly coloured by power politics, with “Saoul came to Carmel and raised a hand for himself”.

The Vulgate, for its part, reproduces this verse with *venisset Saul in Carmelum et erexisset sibi fornicem triumphalem*. With this “triumphal arch” Jerome sets an independent exaggeration of Saul's demonstration of power. In doing so, he brings him close to a Roman emperor. “Saul im Gewand eines römischen

3. Stummer, Friedrich: “Griechisch-römische Bildung und christliche Theologie in der Vulgata des Hieronymus”, ZAW, 1941; 254.

4. Cf. Gesenius, Wilhelm, 516 (1962).

Kaisers” as Stummer puts it.⁵ Interesting is the most likely connotation of the negative accumulation of power on both sides, the biblical and the Roman. This unique choice of words is a strong indication of this, for he does not say *erexit sibi monumentum*—as he also uses the literal equivalent for “monument” elsewhere, e.g. in 2 Sam 18:18.

His updating of the text can be read as an indirect criticism of the Roman emperor cult and an allusion to the decline of these emperors. Which is credible, because in his lifetime he experienced the division of the Roman Empire after Theodosius I in 395 AD and the reign of the weak ruler of the Western Roman Empire that followed, Honorius. With the attribution of the triumphal arch, a typical ruler, victor attribute of his time, to the ancient king Saul, he clearly shows his valuation. This passage thus either reflects the power of Jerome’s linguistic creativity and irony, or at least shows how people in late Roman antiquity were creators of language in order to be understood by their contemporaries.

More about Jerome and his time, as they appear to us in the text of the Vulgate, can be found in the publication “Language and World of the Vulgate”, which will be published by de Gruyter Verlag Berlin in 2023. In it, numerous authors deal with the interdisciplinary breadth and depth of this Bible, which is groundbreaking for Christianity.

5. Stummer, “Griechisch-römische Bildung”, 1941; 255.