

BOOK REVIEW

Jerome: Vita Malchi. By CHRISTA GRAY. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015. Pp. x + 365. Hardcover, \$115.00. ISBN 978-0-19-872372-1.

Christa Gray has produced a text, translation, and commentary on Jerome's *Vita Malchi*, a hagiographical text written between 388–392 CE (5–6). The *Vita Malchi* is not Jerome's first work on the life of a holy man (he had written the *Vita Pauli* earlier and his *Vita Hilarionis* is contemporary), but it is unique in that it lacks supernatural elements. Nor does it directly respond to the *Vita Antonii*, his clear inspiration. Jerome states that he met Malchus as a younger man, and proceeds to recount Malchus' life, which is told in the first person. The story itself is brief and vivid, a rich text for those interested in Jerome, his style, and use of classical works. Moreover, this is a *fun* text (a sham marriage, goat skin-bags, a cave, and a lioness!) and Gray's edition allows the reader to fully appreciate the work on numerous levels.

The introduction makes up a large portion of the book (1–77). Gray tackles a broad range of topics to help familiarize the reader with Jerome. She pays great attention to the “literary form and texture” (14–41) of the text, with a discussion of Jerome's Latinity; sections on rhetorical devices and prose rhythm follow, in which Gray shows enthusiasm and expertise in equal measure.

This updated edition builds off of the large research project of William Abbott Oldfather et al.¹ Gray collates five of the most reliable manuscripts and compares her text with the independent edition of Charles Mierow² and the *Sources chrétiennes* edition by Edgardo Morales (who used Oldfather as well).³ She provides a table of divergences (75–76) and discusses her choices in the commentary. The changes themselves are minor, but together form a more readable text. The translation is also very clear and a welcome update to Rebenich's 2002 translation.⁴

¹ Oldfather, W.A., Cherf, J.F., Corey, K.S.T., McNeil, M.D., Strout, R.C.F., James, H.C., and Steiner, G. 1943. *Studies in the Text Tradition of St. Jerome's Vitae Patrum*. Urbana, IL.

² Mierow, C.C. 1946. “Vita Malchi Monachi Captivi,” in R.E. Arnod (ed.), *Classical Essays Presented to James A. Kleist*. St. Louis: 31–60.

³ Leclerc, P., Morales, E.M., and de Vogüé, A. 2007. *Jérôme: Trois Vies de Moines (Paul, Malchus, Hilarion)* (Paris). Although Gray finds this edition problematic, she takes it as a model for her own chapter and section divisions.

⁴ Rebenich, S. 2002. *Jerome*. London and New York.

The remainder of the book is the commentary (95–308). Gray states that her primary focus is “to be attentive to the text above all, and to contextualize it as fully as possible” (3). She maintains her focus for the most part, but the goal of some of the individual notes remains unclear. Gray often lists parallels found in Classical authors, contemporary authors, and Jerome’s own corpus. For example, in her early note on “navali proelio” (99), Gray writes that Jerome does not repeat the phrase elsewhere and lists the places where similar phrasing occurs from Caesar to Nepos to Orosius. The reviewer is left to wonder why this is relevant other than the fact that similar phrasing occurs.

The scope of any modern commentary does not permit a broad treatment in every instance; however, when Gray offers more exegesis and explication of literary or historical context, the commentary becomes far more valuable to the reader. An excellent example is Gray’s note on the evolution of the Greek practice of *proskynesis* to the Greco-Roman *adoratio* in a Christian context (189–192). She includes not only the historical background of this practice, but also Jerome’s own opinion of it, using evidence from his biblical commentary and contrasting it with evidence from the Vulgate. A missed opportunity, perhaps, is the relevant charge of *adoratio* against select Christians because of their behavior toward relics. For instance, Augustine defends relic veneration, making a distinction between honor and worship: “the holy martyrs do have an honorable place ... but they are not worshiped in place of Christ” (*Serm.* 273.7). Jerome, too, defends himself against Vigilantius who asked, “Why is it necessary not only that you honor [a saint’s relics] with such great honor, but also that you worship that something or other which you revere while carrying it around in a little vessel?” (*Contra Vigilantium* 4.4).

Overall, Gray’s book will certainly make the *Vita Malchi* more accessible to students and scholars alike. Her commentary is informative and helpful and the book itself is produced well with few typos and infelicities.

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