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Licet interdum confabulationis tale conuiuium doctrinae quoque sale condiatur:
Jerome's letters to Marcella, and biblical exegesis in epistolary form

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Abstract: In this paper we try to highlight the variety of epistolary 'topoi' found in the letters of the *Ad Marcellam Liber*, especially those of exegetical content, quickly comparing them with the (much more varied) typologies found in Jerome's only other epistolary *liber*, the *Ad diuersos epistularum liber*. We then attempt to focus on the first paragraph of *Ep.* 29, addressed to Marcella and of exegetical content, illustrating in their context the two metaphors of epistolary discussion and exegetical content as nourishment for the soul. Finally, comparisons for similar food metaphors in Jerome's other letters and with pagan and Christian Latin epistles are sought, highlighting Jerome's sobriety (compared to the refinement of Paulinus of Nola) but also his penchant for using such metaphors, which are apparently less numerous in Ambrose and Augustine, as well as in pagan epistles.

Keywords: Jerome, Marcella, letters, exegesis, food.

Letter 29. 1: overall presentation and epistolary commonplaces

In the first paragraph of Jerome's letter 29, the insertion of exegetical content in a familiar epistolary context is particularly evident. The main content of this epistle, directed to Marcella, is exegetical, as Jerome explains to her the meaning of the Hebrew words 'ephod' and 'teraphim'. Explanation of Hebrew words and extolling the innovative study of the Old Testament directly from the original Hebrew text, is one of the main themes of the *Ad Marcellam liber*¹. The exegetical letters to Marcella are written by Jerome in response to the exegetical questions that the pious and learned widow used to ask him, orally or via letters. The passage of our interest is the following:

"Epistolare officium est de re familiari aut de cotidiana conuersatione aliquid scribere et quoddammodo absentes inter se praesentes fieri, dum mutuo, quid aut uelint aut gestum sit, nuntiant, licet interdum confabulationis tale conuiuium doctrinae quoque sale condiatur. Verum tute in tractatibus occuparis, nihil mihi scribis nisi quod me torqueat, et Scripturas legere conpellat. Denique heri famosissima quaestione proposita postulasti ut quid sentirem statim rescriberem; quasi uero pharisaeorum teneam cathedram ut, quotienscumque de uerbis Hebraicis iurgium est, ego arbiter et litis sequester exposcar. Non sunt suaues epulae, quae non et placentam redoleant, quas non condit Apicius, in quibus nihil de magistrorum huius

¹The abbreviations used are those of the *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae* (ThLL).

Cain 2009, 68-98 about the *liber ad Marcellam*, to which we can trace back *Ep.* 23-9; 32; 34; 37-8; 40-4, all composed during Jerome's second and last residence period in Rome (382-5 AD).

*temporis iure suffumat. Sed quia uector et internuntius sermonis nostril redire festinate, rem grandem celerius dicto quam debeo, licet de Scripturis Sanctis disputanti non tam necessaria sint uerba quam sensus, quia si eloquentiam quaerimus Demosthenes legendus aut Tullius est, si sacramenta divina nostril codices, qui de Hebraeo in Latinum non bene resonant, peruidendi.”*²

We can observe an implicit contrast between the epistolary genre and the treatise genre with respect to scientific content: while in the former it should only serve to enliven and spice up the conversation, the true substance of epistolary communication, in the latter such content is instead the exclusive one, and it is precisely towards this kind of works that Marcella drags Jerome. It is no coincidence that Jerome never qualifies one of his own letters as *tractatus*: for particularly extensive discussions he can use, to indicate a certain type of letter, *liber* or *libellus*, or, for a short letter of exegetical or learned content, *commentariolus*, but never uses for this the term *tractatus*.³ Thus, Jerome’s awareness of employing the epistolary genre in a rather original and unconventional manner becomes evident: exegesis, and more broadly biblical and theological scholarship, presented in the form of a letter. This, however, was not an entirely unprecedented phenomenon in contemporary Latin literature. For instance, in the epistolary corpus of Ambrose – roughly contemporaneous – we also find numerous examples of conventional epistolary motifs, as well as several letters of exegetical content, in which the adaptation of scholarly material to the theoretical conventions of epistolography, including the familiar letter, is clearly observable: cf. e. g. especially Ambr., *Ep.*, 1. 1. 1, without date and of exegetical content; 5. 23. 1, written in 386 and of exegetical content; 6. 32. 7, without date; 7. 35. 5, written in 390 ca.; 7. 48. 1,⁴ without date (cf. for *caedere sermones* Ambr., *Ep.*, 2. 7. 1; 5. 23. 1; 6. 33. 1; classical models for the expression are Ter. Heaut., 242ss, Hor. *serm.*, 2. 3. 274).⁵ The typical epistolary theme of the letter as a conversation between absent friends (*sermo absentium*), as we see, is clearly represented, as well as other epistolary commonplaces, in Ambrose’s letters. Jerome also received these commonplaces from grammatical and rhetorical education.⁶ Without a doubt, however, Jerome was the first to exploit the potential of the epistolary form in relation to the exegesis of the Hebrew text, as well as the first to engage in such an extensive and dynamic correspondence

²See also Conring 2001, 64-70, 95-6 about this first paragraph of *Ep.*, 29.

³See e. g. *Ep.* 30. 2 to Paola, of exegetical content, where this short letter is defined as *commentariolum*; similarly, in *Ep.* 42. 3 to Marcella, also short and of exegetical content, Jerome says *latam disputationem breui sermone comprehendimus, ut non tam epistulam quam commentariolum dictaremus*; see also Arns 1953, 89-107; Conring 2001, 100-5.

⁴Ambr., *Ep.* 7. 48. 1: *epistularum genus propterea repertum, ut quidam nobis cum absentibus sermo sit* (cf. Ambr., *Ep.*, 1. 1) *in dubium non uenit. Sed fit hoc usu exemploque pulchrius, si inter parentem ac filios crebra et iucunda alloquia caedantur*

⁵Thraede 1970, 183-91 discusses Ambrose’s role in shaping an epistolary context for exegetical content; at p. 188 he cites our passage from Jerome’s *Ep.*, 29. 1. This whole monography, devoted by Thraede to the study of ancient epistolary ‘topoi’ and epistolographic theory, is a reference work, also very rich in examples.

⁶Thraede, 180-3, where it is shown that these epistolary commonplaces were part of the higher scholastic education.

with women – such as Marcella – even on exegetical subjects. Returning now to our text, we offer only some very brief observations to the epistolary commonplaces of *Ep.*, 29. 1, other than food metaphors, on which we will focus on a little more in the next part of this paper.

The references to letter-writing theory, here especially related to family letters, are particularly elaborate: first, the merely informative function of the missive is highlighted, as it was already the case in Cicero (e.g. in *Cic.*, *Fam.*, 2. 4. 1⁷; *Q. fr.*, 1. 1. 37⁸). Remember that Cicero's letters were exemplary for the letter-writing short handbook of Iulius Victor (cf. *Iul. Vict.*, p. 447. 32 Halm: *multum ad sermonis elegantiam conferent...epistulae ueteres, in primis Tullianae*; also *Iul. Vict.*, p. 448. 29 Halm: *quod genus apud M. Tullium multa sunt*). So far, however, only a very little number of direct citations from Cicero's letters have been found in Jerome's epistles.⁹ This does not mean that Jerome did not read Cicero's letters: even if this topic merits more attention, it is possible that Jerome knew at least some of them directly (cf. e. g. the diminutive *pagella*, found only in Cicero, *Fam.*, 2. 13. 3; 11. 25. 2, and in Jerome, *Ep.*, 60. 19, 73. 1)¹⁰. The object of the epistolary exchange (the *res familiaris* and the *cotidiana conuersatio*) is presented as every day, so it implicitly follows that the language used must also be so, as is often repeated in the epistolary commonplaces (cf. e. g. *Cic.*, *Fam.*, 9. 21. 1: *epistulas cotidianis uerbis texere solemus*; *Ambr.*, *Ep.*, 6. 32. 7)¹¹; the reference to the *res familiaris* as an object of epistolary conversation is also reflected in Cicero's epistolography (*Cic.*, *Att.*, 7. 5. 5: *iam plane mihi deest quod ad te scribam; nec enim de re publica, quod uterque nostrum scit eadem, et domestica nota sunt ambobus*), but note that now the two objects of the epistolary discussion are no longer the public and private spheres, but rather the private sphere and the scientific discussion of an exegetical nature, since in some way the Christian faith – a celestial *res publica*, so to speak – has replaced the true *res publica* as the ultimate horizon of man's life. Fully classical and well codified in epistolary topic is the conception of the letter as a tool to make present

⁷ *Cic.*, *Fam.*, 2. 4. 1: *epistularum genera multa esse non ignoras, sed unum illud certissimum, cuius causa inuenta res ipsa est, ut certiores faceremus absentis, si quid esset quod eos scire aut nostra aut ipsorum interesset*.

⁸ *Cic.*, *Q. fr.*, 1. 1. 37: *illud, quod est epistulae proprium, ut is ad quem scribitur de iis rebus quas ignorat certior fiat, praetermittendum esse non puto*.

⁹ A reference to *Cic.*, *Att.*, 1. 12. 4 (and to similar places that show this idiomatic expressions) in Jerome's *Ep.*, 74. 6; 85. 1; 108. 12 (*quidquid in buccam uenerit*); to *Cic.*, *Fam.*, 9. 3. 2 (but the same proverbial expressions are in *Cic.*, *Acad.*, 2. 80 and in Tacitus, *Dial.*, 9) in *Ep.*, 84. 4. 1 (*domi nobis ista nascuntur*); more doubtful references to *Cic.*, *Att.*, 12. 28. 2 (*mea mihi conscientia pluris est quam omnium sermo*) in *Ep.*, 22. 13. 3 (*sufficit mihi conscientia mea*), to *Cic.*, *Att.*, 13. 20. 4 or *Fam.*, 7. 25. 2 (*transuersum unguem*, proverbial expression) in *epist.* 107. 9 (*ne transversum quidem unguem a matre discedat*). The same applies to Jerome's other works in general. For all this, Luebeck 1872, 157-8; the fundamental Hagendahl 1958 offers no parallels to Cicero's letters. For the above listed references to Cicero's epistles in Jerome's letters, see the *index auctorum* in Kamptner 1996, 137. The dubious examples are referred to the ancient authors' indexes in Adkin 2003, 407, Cain 2013, 303 and Lubian 2024, 304. These are no precise wordings which Jerome must necessarily have taken from Cicero's letters, even if the striking similarities suggest that, in at least some cases, maybe he did so.

¹⁰ Scourfield 1983, 429-30.

¹¹ For the ancient sources about letter-writing theory and principles, the texts are usefully collected by Cugusi 1983, 27-41.

those who are absent (cf. e. g. Cic., *Fam.*, 15. 14. 3: *utemur bono litterarum et eadem fere absentes quae si coram essemus consequeremur*)¹²: this is especially evident in the echo, showed by *Ep.*, 29. 1 of a fragment of the comic poet Turpilius (Turp., *inc. fab.*, Fr. 1 Ribbeck: *sola res est* [sc. litterae] *quae praesentes homines absentes nobis faciat*). The citation of this *sententia* of Turpilius is found, elsewhere in Jerome and in general, only in *Ep.*, 8. 1: *Turpilius comicus tractans de uicissitudine litterarum 'sola', inquit, 'res est quae homines absentes praesentes faciat'*. Jerome is the only testimonium for this fragment. The fact that this very explicit *sententia* on the power of letters is expressly cited in *Ep.*, 8 and echoed only in our passage is not coincidental, since these are two passages contained in the only two *epistularum libri*, that is, collections of letters, that we know were collected by Jerome himself (*Vir. ill.*, 135): the first, containing the missives written immediately before and then during the anchoritic experience in the desert near Chalcis, is the so-called *Epistularum ad diuersos liber* (c. 373-7, probably containing *Ep.*, 2-16; *Ep.*, 14 perhaps circulated separately);¹³ the other is the afore-mentioned *Epistularum ad Marcellam liber* (c. 382-5; composed in Rome, containing *Ep.*, 23-9; 32; 34; 37-8; 40-4). In both these collections, the familiar character of the letters is well accentuated, and the sharing of the same quotation, aimed at underlining the friendly aspect of the epistle as a means of communication, seems to highlight this fact. We should remember, moreover, that also in Ambrose's letters the epistolary exchange was defined by words and expressions taken from comedy, as *sermonem caedere* (found, as we have seen, in Terentius), inasmuch the language of comedy was exemplary with respect to friendly and cultivated oral communication.¹⁴ Likewise, it is no coincidence that references to letter-writing theory are particularly numerous, more than elsewhere, precisely in the epistles that make up the *Ad diuersos liber* and in those of the *liber ad Marcellam*. As Canellis has already noted,¹⁵ in the letters relating to the *Ad diuersos liber*, which are not by chance essentially familiar in nature, we find the greatest number of references to epistolary '*topoi*' as they are linked to the affection and bond between the correspondents. After this strong initial concentration, such references will recur less and less frequently in the subsequent letters: basing ourselves, indicatively, on the index of the masterly study on ancient epistolary practice and theory by Thraede, and considering the Hieronymian places recorded there, 17 references to commonplaces of the epistolary genre appear considering only the books *ad diuersos* and, to a lesser extent, *ad Marcellam* (31 letters in total), against 25 other references

¹² See on this Thraede 1970, 162-4, about the epistolary communication as *sermo absentium* in Late-Antique writers.

¹³ On this *liber*, Cain 2009, 13-42.

¹⁴ Thraede 1970, 184.

¹⁵ Canellis 2002, 325-7.

found in the rest of the letters (94 letters in total): a particular concentration of these epistolary 'topoi' is evident in the two collections just mentioned.

Let us simply enumerate these themes, without discussing them¹⁶: theme of the letter as a way of making the correspondents present (*Ep.*, 3. 1. 1. 1-3; 5. 1. 1. 6-7; 7. 2. 1. 6-10; 8. 1. 1. 10-2, cf. also *Ep.*, 71. 7, 76. 1); the theme of the letter as a means to make up for the absence (*Ep.*, 3. 1. 2. 11-2; 3. 6. 1. 13-5; cf. *Ep.*, 44. 1, to Marcella and part of the *Ad Marcellam liber, ut absentiam corporum spiritus confabulatione solemur*); the theme of the letter as a conversation with the other and with oneself (*Ep.*, 5. 1. 1. 10-3; 7. 2. 1. 4-5); the theme of the letter that cements the friendship in Christ (*Ep.*, 4. 1. 2. 14-5; 7. 1. 1. 3; cf. 53. 1); the theme of the letter as consolation (*Ep.*, 8. 1. 3. 2-4); the theme of the disorder in the letter as caused by affection (*Ep.*, 7. 6. 3. 4-5); the metaphor of the soul's wings (*Ep.*, 4. 1. 2. 14-5; cf. 71. 1, 143. 1). Confronting this number of epistolary themes with the ones which we find in the places of the *Ad Marcellam liber* containing examples of epistolary 'topoi', we note less variety in this last one: the brevity-topos is the most common (*Ep.*, 26. 2. 1. 5-6; 26. 5. 1. 3-5; 28. 1. 1. 5-6); elsewhere in this *liber* (excluding the illustration of the main finality of letters, *Ep.*, 29. 1: *quid uelint aut gestum sit nuntiant*) only the themes of letters as a means to make present the absent recipient (*Ep.*, 29. 1: *absentes inter se praesentes fieri*), the theme of letter exchange as conversation, enriched with the metaphor of conversation as nourishment for the soul (*Ep.*, 29. 1: *confabulationis tale conuiuium*; *Ep.*, 32. 1. 1. 5-7: *quaeras, quidnam illud sit tam grande, tam necessarium, quo epistolicae confabulationis munus exclusum sit*), and the theme of letter as a consolation to the longing for the friend (*Ep.*, 44. 1. 1. 3: *ut absentiam corporum spiritus confabulatione solemur*). The minor variety could be explained with the fact that, while in the *Ad diversos liber* the letters were addressed to various recipients, corresponding to a variety of different situations, the epistles of the *Ad Marcellam liber* were directed only to her, and they were more tied to the 'question and answer' structure often imposed by the exegetical or scientific themes of the correspondence, absent from the letters which make up the *Ad diuersos*.

The food metaphors for epistolary and exegetical discussion in *Ep.*, 29. 1: tasty knowledge

Returning to the opening of letter 29, after having mentioned the full awareness shown by Jerome with respect to the non-immediate relationship between form and content of an exegetical epistle, we note the use of the metaphor of conversation as a banquet, flavoured with the salt of science. The metaphors of the banquet to indicate conversation and that of salt to indicate science are certainly not new in themselves, being part of the metaphorical topic of 'spiritual nourishment' already present in

¹⁶ Canellis 2002, 326-7.

the classical world but developed above all by Christian authors starting from biblical references such as, in relation to the seasoning offered by salt to a figurative food, *Col.*, 4. 6: *sermo uester semper in sale sit conditum* (cf. Job, 6. 6: *numquid... poterit comedi insulsum quod non est sale conditum?*; IV *Reg.*, 2. 20, for waters healed by salt on God's order; *Matth.*, 5. 13; *Mk.*, 9. 49; *Lk.* 14. 33 as a metaphor of salt which, if it does not give flavour, is of no use).¹⁷

As for the expression *confabulationis conuiuuium*, we note that, in Jerome and in general, it seems to occur elsewhere, in a partially similar form, only in another letter, of similar exegetical content and probably composed in Rome in the same years as the *liber ad Marcellam*, that is, *Ep.*, 21. 2 to pope Damasus: *itaque hinc omnis inuidia, cur, quos* [scil. publicans and sinners] *legis praecepta damnarent, eorum confabulationem atque conuiuuium dominus non uicaret*. The noun *confabulatio*, synonymous with *colloquium*, is not found before the *Itala* and is therefore late and mainly used by Christian authors, and most of all Jerome, almost always not by chance in the epistles (*Ep.*, 9; 11; 21. 2; 29. 1; 32. 1; 39. 5; 44; 82. 7; 108. 19; 124. 3. 8; 128. 3; 130. 8; in *Matth.*, 15. 32)¹⁸. It should be noted that the term *confabulatio*, in relation to the epistolary communication, is used by pope Damasus itself in one of his letters (to which we will return shortly), in which he requested exegetical explanations from Jerome (and which has therefore been handed down to us by the manuscripts together with the Jerome's missives), namely *Ep.*, 35. 1.¹⁹ The term *confabulatio*, however, is never used in the epistolary collections of Cyprianus (only one occurrence with concrete and not figurative meaning), Ambrose, Augustine and Paulinus of Nola. With respect to the epistolary communicative reality and to his own friendly contacts, *confabulatio* in Jerome is found not by chance in a letter of the *ad diuersos liber*, *Ep.*, 11. 1 (*minutae quidem litterae sed confabulatio longa est*; cf. also another letter from the *ad diuersos*, *Ep.*, 9. 1: *Heliodorus tibi potuit fideliter nuntiare...ut ad primam quamque confabulationem iucundissimi mihi tui consortii recorder*) and in another letter to Marcella, 32. 1: *epistolicae confabulationis munus*. We see another time, then, a peculiar affinity between the only two epistolary collections of Jerome in relation to the presence of clearly stated epistolary themes and commonplaces.²⁰

¹⁷ Curtius 1953, 134-6.

¹⁸ ThLL 4. 169. 38-66.

¹⁹ Jerome, *Ep.*, 35. 1: *neque uero ullam puto digniorem disputationis nostrae confabulationem fore, quam si de scripturis inter nos sermocinemur*.

²⁰ Symmachus, among the pagans, refers this term to the letters (*Ep.*, 9. 89 *saepius ad me commeent* [sc. *litterae tuae*] *et confabulationem praesentis imitentur*), while among the Christians we will later have Sulpicius Severus, *Ep.*, 2. 19 (*ut...tibi ex quadam nostri confabulatione praestaret charta solacium*) and Ennodius of Pavia, *Ep.*, 2. 26 (*confabulatio epistularis*). The affective value of *confabulatio* in situations of family or friendship relationships is clear, for example, from a passage in the letter of consolation sent to Paola for the death of her daughter Blesilla, *Ep.*, 39. 5 (*redit tibi in memoriam confabulatio eius* [sc. di Blesilla], *blanditiae, sermo, consortium et, cur his careas, pati non potes*).

In authors preceding Jerome, or strictly contemporary, there do not seem to be references to the 'salt of doctrine', so the expression could be a Jerome coinage (cf. Hil. Pict., in Matth., 4. 10²¹; Paul. Nol., *Ep.*, 9. 1²²), but the connection between salt and a pleasant banquet with friends is certainly not unusual (Catull., *Carm.*, 13. 1-5 *cenabis bene, mi Fabulle, apud me...et uino et sale et omnibus cachinnis*). More generally, salt as an idiomatic metaphor for the 'bon esprit' typical of the *urbanitas* and therefore of the *humanitas*, is often found in Cicero, who in an epistolary context already says it is a '*topos*' in rhetorical formation: *Att.*, 1. 13 (cf. e. g. Cic., *Tusc.*, 5. 19. 55; *De Or.*, 1. 159).²³ The *sal* is poetic and useful for conveying concepts otherwise suited to the *gravitas* of moral contents in Ambr., *de Virg.*, 18. 117 (*nam, licet grauitas dictorum absit, poetice tamen sale declarare uoluerunt* [scil. the ancients with the myth of Icarus]). As for the metaphor of the *sal doctrinae* that seasons and flavours the *confabulationis conuiuium*, one can therefore observe, in *Ep.*, 29. 1, an overlap, highlighted by the union of familiar epistolary '*topoi*' of classical origin and the new Christian metaphorical content of Scripture as food for the soul, between the value of *sal* as a fundamental ingredient of the discussion between friends (*confabulatio*) characterised by *humanitas* (a Ciceronian, therefore classical element), and the Christian and biblical value of the same term, to indicate precisely the *doctrina* (*sal doctrinae*) and the science of the Scriptures, nourishment for the Christian soul. In Jerome's epistles, considering also the letters external to the *Ad Marcellam liber* and of a strictly exegetical content, we find three other occurrences of the metaphor of scientific discussion as food: another place in the first paragraph of letter 29 (*Ep.*, 29. 1. 2. 15-6 : *non sunt suaues epulae, quae non et placentam redoleant, quas non condit Apicius, in quibus nihil de magistrorum huius temporis iure suffumat*); 120 praef²⁴; 121 praef²⁵. In the non-exegetical epistles, the widespread and common image of religious teaching or doctrine as food for the soul recurs several times (*Ep.*, 15. 1; 30. 37. 4; 84. 3; 120. 1; 121. 4; 122. 4; 133. 11), but there is no lack of more relevant places, in which

²¹ Hil. Pict. in Matth., 4. 10 *merito igitur sal terrae sunt nuncupati* [scil. the Apostles] *per doctrinae uirtutem sallendi modo aeternitati corpora reseruantes*.

²² Paul. Nol., *Ep.*, 9. 1: *est enim et ipse sal terrae uiuidum referens apostolicae doctrinae saporem*.

²³ Cic., *Att.*, 1. 13: *accepi tuas iam tris epistulas... quae fuerunt omnes, ut rhetorum pueri loquuntur, cum humanitatis sparsae sale tum insignes amoris notis*; *Tusc.*, 5. 19. 55 : *in quo mihi uidetur specimen fuisse humanitatis, salis, suauitatis, leporis*; *De Or.*, 1. 159 *libandus est etiam ex omni genere urbanitatis facetiarum quidam lepos, quo tamquam sale perspargatur omnis oratio*.

²⁴ Jerome, *Ep.*, 120 praef. : *ignota uultu fidei mihi ardore notissima es...ora igitur ut uerus Helisaeus...apostolorum sale, quibus dixerat 'uos estis sal terrae', meum munusculum condiat, quia omne sacrificium quod absque sale est, Domino non offertur*.

²⁵ Jerome, *Ep.*, 121 praef. : *habes ibi sanctum uirum Aletheium presbyterum...nisi forte peregrinas merces desideras et pro uarietate gustus, nostrorum quoque condimentorum te alimenta delectant. Aliis dulcia placent nonnullos subamara delectant horum stomachum acida renouant, illorum salsa sustentant...nostram amaritudinem illius nectareo melle curato...ut possis laeta cantare 'quam dulcia gutturi meo eloquia tua, super mel ori meo'*.

the banquet indicates the exegetical and scriptural discussion, or in which it is combined with the *sermo* and the conversation situations on biblical or spiritual topics.²⁶

In *Ep.*, 29. 1. 2. 15-8 (*non sunt suaues epulae, quae non et placentam redoleant, quas non condit Apicius, in quibus nihil de magistrorum huius temporis iure suffumat*) the culinary metaphor is used both in reference to the epistolary topic of the letter as conversation and, therefore, of exegetical conversation as nourishment for the soul by virtue of its contents, and as a polemical tool against the still too pagan customs and literary tastes of late 4th-century Rome. This second food metaphor in *Ep.*, 29. 1 takes up the image of the epistolary discussion as a banquet²⁷ and is explained in contrast to the unappealing content, as it relates to the exegesis of the Hebrew Bible, of our letter, with a consideration that could obviously be extended to the rest of the exegetical epistles of the *liber ad Marcellam*. This arduous and uninviting content, in fact, is not particularly suitable for the exchange of letters (the nature of which is explained in the passage we talked about, *Ep.*, 29. 1. 1. 10) but is almost extorted from Jerome by Marcella (29. 1. 2. 10-2), who takes him as the highest authority in terms of biblical exegesis and especially of the Hebrew Bible (29. 1. 2. 13-5). In short, some considerations on scientific topics, such as exegetical ones, are permitted in the exchange of letters, but they should not be taken beyond their proper bounds (the *confabulationis conuiuium* which, at times, can be spiced up with the *sal doctrinae*), as Jerome instead complains of being forced to do due to Marcella's requests, worthy of true exegetical tractates. In addition to indirectly highlighting himself as a great expert in exegesis, these words of Jerome also have another purpose, that is to oppose the literary value of writings on a more pleasant subject and form, such as the classics, to works relating to biblical science (whether epistolary in nature or not), indirectly taking a stand in favour of the full legitimacy (and indeed superiority) of the latter: the haste determined by the need to send the letter to Marcella, who had requested exegetical explanations, in addition to the topic of Jewish exegesis, did not allow Jerome to offer a product with particular literary ambitions (*Ep.*, 29. 1. 2. 15-3. 1); but this was not even necessary, because the topic was biblical, and as such it was worthy of the utmost consideration even regardless of the elaborateness of the form (*Ep.*, 29. 1. 3. 1-5).²⁸ It should be noted how here Jerome puts on the same level, implicitly leaning towards the latter, the models of classical eloquence (Demosthenes and Cicero), where the formal element dominates,

²⁶ Jerome, *Ep.*, 49. 19: *si autem non disserunt, quod a me expositum est, uelint nolint, suscipient, aut profer meliores epulas et me conuiua utere, aut qualicumque nostra cenula contentus esto* (where the talk is about exegetical explanations, whether satisfactory or not); 60. 10. 8. 8-9 *sermo eius* [scil. of the deceased Nepotianus] *et omne conuiuium de scripturis aliquid proponere*.

²⁷ Cf. for *epulae* the afore mentioned *Ep.*, 49. 19: *aut profer meliores epulas et me conuiua utere, aut qualicumque nostra cenula contentus esto*, in reference to exegetical explanations sent by letter.

²⁸ Jerome, *Ep.*, 29. 1 : *licet de scripturis sanctis disputanti non tam necessari sint uerba quam sensus, quia, si eloquentiam quaerimus, Demosthenes legendus aut Tullius est, si sacramenta diuina, nostri codices, qui de Hebraeo in Latinum non bene resonant, peruidendi*.

and the Bible, where instead it is not the form that counts, admittedly ugly in Latin translation (*codices...in Latinum non bene resonant*), but the divine content of salvation: the explicit and antithetical opposition between *eloquentia* and *sacramenta diuina* repeats here the theme of Jerome's famous dream, which, leading him to consider biblical study far superior to traditional rhetoric and literature, had made him overcome his initial disgust for the uncultured form of the Latin versions of the *Bible*²⁹ and had consequently encouraged him to practice, with a somewhat ascetic intent, the study of a language often defined as strongly repulsive from an aesthetic point of view, such as Hebrew,³⁰ at the same time pushing him to abandon, with the famous oath sworn in a dream, the reading of pagan classics, at least for a time.³¹

This is the conceptual framework within which Jerome worked in Rome, and the compromises and adaptations of the familiar epistolary form, of classical and traditional origin, with the new exegetical content should also be seen in this light. This passage from *Ep.*, 29 has been cited also to highlight the implicit polemical value of the culinary metaphor *suaues epulae quae* etc., consistent with the frequency with which, in the letters composed in Rome (382-5 AD), Jerome contrasts classical literature and its values with Christian literature, preferring the latter because of its content of truth and salvation. Among the letters composed in Rome, in fact, we find this point expressed in two exegetical letters sent to pope Damasus (*Ep.*, 21. 13³²; 36. 14³³). The first of these two passages is related, for the analogous criticism of excessive love towards classical literature (experienced first-hand by Jerome before his famous dream) and as evidenced by the recurrence of the identical connection *summo studio ac labore*, to *Ep.*, 22. 30³⁴; the second, for the similar list of pagan authors whose splendid style is however empty of content compared to the biblical richness, is the aforementioned *Ep.*, 125. 12. 1. 13-4. In the letters composed in Rome, not all of which belong to the *Liber ad Marcellam*, we find polemical remarks against gluttony and luxury, widespread in Rome even

²⁹ Adkin 2003, 283-5.

³⁰ Jerome, *Ep.*, 125. 12 : *dum essem iuuenis et solitudinis me deserta uallarent, incentiua uitiorum ardoremque naturae ferre non poteram; quae cum crebris ieiuniis frangerem, mens tamen cogitationibus aestuabat, ad quam edomandam cuidam fratri, qui ex hebraeis crediderat, me in disciplinam dedi, ut post Quintiliani acumina Ciceronisque fluuios grauitatemque Frontonis et lenitatem Plinii alphabetum discerem, stridentia anhelantiaque uerba meditarer*; cf. *Ep.*, 29. 7 : *nos, ut scis, hebraici sermonis lectione detenti in latina lingua rubiginem obduximus in tantum, ut loquentibus quoque nobis stridor quidam non latinus interstrepit*

³¹ Kelly 1975, 41-4.

³² Jerome, *Ep.*, 21. 13 : *possumus autem et aliter siliquas interpretari. Daemonum cibus est carmina poetarum, saecularis sapientia, rhetoricorum pompa uerborum...nihil aliud nisi inanem sonum et sermonum strepitum suis lectoribus tribuunt...at nunc etiam sacerdotes Dei omissis euangelis et prophetis uidemus comoedias legere, amatoriam bucolicorum uersuum uerba cantare, tenere Vergilium, et id quod pueris necessitatis est crimen in se facere uoluntatis.*

³³ Jerome, *Ep.*, 36. 14 : *scio haec molesta esse lectori sed de Hebraeis litteris disputantem non decet Aristotelis argumenta conquirere nec ex flumine Tulliano eloquentiae ducendus est riuulus, nec aures Quintiliani flosculis et scolari declamatione mulcendae...alii...laudentur ut uolunt, et inflatis buccis spumantia uerba trutinentur; mihi sufficit sic loqui ut intellegar, et ut de Scripturis disputans Scripturarum imiter simplicitatem.*

³⁴ Jerome, *Ep.*, 22. 30: *bibliotheca, quam mihi Romae summo studio ac labore confeceram, carere non poteram. itaque miser ego lecturus tullium ieiunabam*; see Adkin 2003, 288.

among the clergy (see *Ep.*, 21.13, cited above), which are connected to what has been said about the opposition between classical literature and the *Bible*. This should be noted since it is also on this level that the second food metaphor of *Ep.*, 29. 1 can be read: the polemic against the excessively greedy and refined culinary tastes of the detractors, which metaphorically indicates the contempt towards a form of literature aesthetically less dazzling than the traditional one, such as that of Christian exegesis (*non sunt suaues epulae* etc) presents clear analogies with the similar polemical motifs contained in other letters written in Rome, namely (in addition to *Ep.*, 21 and 36 to Damasus, cited above) *Ep.*, 27. 1. 3. 12-9³⁵; 30. 3. 1. 3-9.³⁶ Given these parallels, we should understand the polemical references addressed to the *magistri huius temporis*, that is, to people who are learned only in luxuries and vices, and to the form of the topics to be discussed: according to Jerome, this form should not be succulent and empty like Apicius's banquets. It is no coincidence that the name of *Apicius* occurs, throughout the entire whole of Jerome's writings, only in the two cited passages of *Ep.*, 29 to Marcella and 33 to Paola, with the same polemical and satirical function. *Suffumare*, moreover, seems to be an 'hapax', attested only here, in this satirical context, where *de iure* ('broth') *suffumare* ('to reek a little') referred to the *magistri huius temporis* is clearly an implicit ironical antithesis between their lowly occupations and their high-sounding titles. For a similar polemical use of *epulae* against adversaries, cf. Jerome's polemical pamphlet *Contra Vigilantium* 1.³⁷ It should also be noted that *placenta*, considering the Christian Latin letter-writers of IV century, recurs only in Jerome, three times (*Ep.*, 29. 1; 84. 5; 128. 1).³⁸ The term recurs elsewhere, considering the other Latin letter-writers, only in Sen., *Ep.*, 63. 6 (*amicos incolumes cogitare melle ac placenta frui est*).

The second food metaphor in *Ep.*, 29. 1, therefore, moves on a dual track, containing at the same time a reference to epistolary communication, even of an exegetical nature, as nourishment for the soul, and a polemic against the luxury of the table, which symbolizes, within the metaphor, the

³⁵ Jerome, *Ep.*, 27. 1: *quibus* [scil. to the detractors of Jerome's revision of the Gospel, accused of excessive freedom and arbitrariness compared to the traditional Latin text] *si displicet fontis unda purissimi* [scil. the Greek original of the Gospels], *caenosos riuulos bibant, et diligentiam qua auium saliuas et concarum gurgites norunt, in scripturis legendis abiciant; sintque in hac tantum re simplices, et Christi uerba aestiment rusticana*.

³⁶ Jerome, *Ep.*, 30. 3: *at e contrario saecula nostra habent homines eruditos, sciuntque pisces in quo gurgite nati sint, quae concha in quo litore creuerit. De turdorum saliuas non ambigimus; Paxamus and Apicius semper in manibus; oculi ad hereditates, sensus ad patinas, et si quis de philosophis, vel de Christianis qui uero philosophi sunt, trito pallio et sordida tunica lectioni uacauerit, quasi uestanus exploditur*. Wiesen 1964, 24 notes similar polemics against food luxury as a sign of moral decay in epist. 52. 6.

³⁷ *C. Vigil.*, 1: *inter phialas philosophatur et ad placentas ligurriens psalmorum modulatione mulcetur, ut tantum inter epulas Dauid et Idithun et Asaph et filiorum Chore cantica audire dignetur*.

³⁸ From Hilberg's apparatus, one gets the false impression that *et placentam* is the reading of recent manuscripts and printed editions, but thanks to Vallarsi's note (PL 22. 1 col. 436 note h) we know that *placentam* was also a lesson from the ancient and authoritative *codex Veronensis*: this variant reading, certainly right in comparison with *et placeant*, is attested in tradition already at an early date. This applies also for *epulae*, clearly right variant reading which is not only found in recent manuscripts but may also be present in the tradition from an earlier date, judging from the notes in the printed editions on this place.

merely external splendour of pagan literature, which (at least in his intentions and for a certain period) Jerome had renounced after the terrible and famous dream described in *Ep.*, 22. 30, dating back to the period of his stay in Syria.

Moving on to other Latin Christian letter collections contemporary with Jerome, we find, not by chance, a very notable reference to exegetical discussion in an epistolary context as a form of tasty spiritual nourishment in a letter of pope Damasus, transmitted to us by the manuscripts together with Jerome's letters, *Ep.*, 35. 1³⁹. It can be briefly noted that in this letter, whose authorship has been rightly reaffirmed by Cain in light of attempts to ascribe it instead to Jerome himself,⁴⁰ pope Damasus was asking Jerome, in the same way of *quaestiones* and *responsiones* adopted for example with Marcella, to clarify some points of the Scripture, using references to the epistolary commonplaces even of a friendly nature, such as the reference to epistolary brevity (*Ep.*, 35. 2. 1. 6-8: *accingere igitur et mihi, quae subiecta sunt, dissere seruans utrobique moderamen, ut nec proposita solutionem desiderant nec epistula breuitatem*), the presence of ironic jokes (*dormientem te et longo iam tempore legentem...excitare disposui*), friendly communication via letter as *sermo absentium* and, specifically, as *confabulatio* between friends and, in the specific case of the Christian letter, the reference to exegetical discussion as a privileged theme and 'nourishment for the soul' for the epistolary exchange, even of a familiar nature.⁴¹ The juxtaposition of biblical and classical quotations, moreover, shows affinities between the literary tastes of Damasus and Jerome.⁴² For example, considering the epistles written in Rome by Jerome, we find an echo of *Psalm* 118. 103 only in the afore mentioned epistle 30, directed to Paola and not by chance of exegetical content, indeed a praise of exegesis.⁴³ Note the similarity with the contemporary Damasus' letter (e. g. *quid iocundius*, cf. *nihil hac luce puto iocundius*). It is also notable the absence of evident classical echoes, in the epistolary passages of other Latin Christian authors containing the image of epistolary discussion, even but not always of exegetical content, as food for the soul (and therefore, often, the reference to *Psalm* 118. 103), which will be reported immediately below. The recurrence of these motifs in the opening of Damasus' letter is not accidental but corresponds to the common epistolary use of the

³⁹Jerome, *Ep.*, 35. 1: *dormientem te...excitare disposui...neque uero ullam puto digniorem disputationis nostrae confabulationem fore, quam si de scripturis inter nos sermocinemur...qua uita nihil in hac luce puto iocundius, quo animae pabulo omnia mella superantur. 'quam dulcia...guttur meo eloquia tua, super mel ori meo [Ps. 118. 103]; nam cum idcirco, ut ait praecipuus orator, homines bestiis differamus, quod loqui possumus [cf. Cic. de orat 1. 32ss], qua laude dignus est, qui in ea re ceteros superat, in qua homines bestias antecellunt?*

⁴⁰ Cain 2005, 257-63.

⁴¹ Cain 2005, 260 note 15.

⁴² On the juxtaposition of biblical and classical touches in Jerome, Antin 1968, 47-57.

⁴³ Jerome, *Ep.*, 30. 13: *quid hac uoluptate [it speaks of the mysticus intellectus of the Scripture] iocundius? qui cibi, quae mella sunt dulciora dei scire prudentiam, sensum creatoris inspicere et sermones domini tui, qui ab huius mundi sapientia deridentur, plenos docere sensu spiritali?*

theme of nourishment for the soul (and in general of epistolary ‘*topoi*’) at the beginning of letters (as for example in Jerome, *Ep.*, 29. 1; 120 Praef.; 121 Praef.; cf. also the epistolary examples of Ambrose and especially of Paulinus of Nola, immediately below). The use of similar language (e.g., *confabulatio*, which recurs, within Christian IV century Latin letter-writers, in Jerome and Damasus but not in Ambrose, Paulinus, or Augustine) and of similar metaphorical images (exegetical discussion as nourishment for the soul) shows – if any were needed – that Jerome, in his letters, including his exegetical ones, uses a language shared with at least some of the exponents of his world – in this case, in the lively environment of the Roman church, the equally learned and literate Damasus.

In Ambrose’s letters, in addition to two references, very in keeping with the biblical image, to celestial wisdom as food of the soul (*Ep.*, 1. 1. 5) and to Paul’s teaching as milk offered to the Corinthians, still immature to receive solid food, that is, a more advanced teaching (*Ep.*, 7. 36. 5), there is only an implicit reference to epistolary conversation as food, not by chance with reference to its familiar characteristics (*Ep.*, 6. 28. 16). However, in this regard, numerous very elaborate metaphors and similes (much more than those of Jerome) are found in the epistolary of Paulinus of Nola (*Ep.*, 1. 1. 4-7; 2. 1. 5-9; 4. 1. 19-4 p. 19; 9. 1. 6-10; 15. 1. 11-5; 19. 1. 22-2; 19. 3. 27-4; 36. 1. 14-5; 37. 1. 10-6; 44. 1. 20-2 p. 371; 44. 2. 14-21; 45. 1. 3-13; 49. 15. 18-20; cf. also *Ep.*, 39. 4. 17-9).⁴⁴ Noteworthy is the frequency of the theme of the letter as spiritual nourishment, especially at the beginning of letters, along with the frequent reuse of the motif of God’s words which are sweeter than honey, taken from *Psalms* 118 – the same motif found not coincidentally in both Paulinus and Damasus. In Augustine’s letters, however, metaphors of epistolary discussion as a banquet or similar are not found.

Looking at the classical and pagan epistolary works of Cicero, Seneca, Pliny, Fronto, and Symmachus, it seems that food metaphors relating to epistolary communication are much more limited than in Christian epistolary writers. This is likely explained by reference to the biblical images of knowledge as nourishment for the soul, listed above. In pagan Latin epistolary writers, in fact, we find clear enunciations of the connection between friendly discussion, *sermo familiaris*, and *convivium* (especially Cic., *Fam.*, 9. 24. 3),⁴⁵ but food metaphors are rarely found in friendly discussions and their contents as spiritual nourishment are rarely inserted into the epistolary topic; sometimes we find similes and comparisons in which a literary work is compared, but not

⁴⁴ The numeration of letter, paragraph and lines is that of Von Hartel’s CSEL edition (CSEL 29; 1894). Due to their number, Paulinus’ citations are not reported in full form.

⁴⁵ Cic., *Fam.*, 9. 24. 3: *nec id ad uoluptatem refero sed ad communitatem uitae atque uictus remissionem que animorum, quae maxime sermone efficitur familiari, qui est in conuiuio dulcissimus, ut sapientius nostri quam Graeci; illi 'συνπόσια' aut 'σύνδειπνα', id est compotationes aut concenationes, nos 'conuiuia', quod tum maxime simul uiuitur.*

metaphorically, to banquets (Plin., *Ep.*, 2. 5. 8),⁴⁶ sometimes there are metaphorical uses, however little developed, relating to the semantic field of taste applied to letters, speeches or books (e. g. Cic., *Att.*, 15. 13. 4; Sen., *Ep.*, 2. 4; 40. 2, Plin., *Ep.*, 4. 3. 3; 4. 27. 5; 1. 10. 5). Similes with food and nourishment are also found in relation to other objects, such as thought, daily routine and lifestyle (e. g. Sen., *Ep.*, 63. 6; 84. 4-5; Plin., *Ep.*, 7. 3. 5). In Symmachus, however, the only Late-Antique pagan Latin letter-writer considered here, there are some metaphors of the classical type which identify a literary work with food (*Ep.*, 1. 23: *siquidem breuis...adponeres*) and others which represent the joy for the letters of a friend and of the good news about him as nourishment for the soul (*Ep.*, 2. 47: *amabiles litteras tuas...nobis esui mox fuere*); the letters of a friend are a sweetening for indignation (*Ep.*, 7. 19: *iterum tibi indignatio mea litterarum tuarum melle placanda est*); the writings of a friend can be as sweet and as literary polished as honey (*Ep.*, 1. 31: *erat quippe in his oblita Tulliano melle festiuitas*; 1. 91: *tu quoque ita paginam melle eruditissimi oris obleueras* etc); we find the same opposition between the bitterness of one's own intellectual products and the sweetness of those of others that we saw in Jerome's letter 121, with the difference that there the gustatory qualification was referred to the exegesis and the quality of the person (*nostram amaritudinem illius* [scil. of the priest Alypius, who Jerome is recommending to the recipient] *nectareo melle curato senilemque pituitiam iuuenili ardore conpesce*), while here, more classically, to the stylistic workmanship of the letter (*Ep.*, 1. 32: *... ubi uero chartulam pono et me ipsum interrogo, tum absinthium meum resipit et circumlita melle tuo pocula deprehendo*; cf. also *Ep.*, 9. 89).

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⁴⁶ Plin., *Ep.*, 2. 5. 8: *nam et in ratione conuiuiorum, quamuis a plerisque cibis singuli temperemus, totam tamen cenam laudare omnes solemus, nec ea, quae stomachus noster recusat, adimunt gratiam illis, quibus capitur.*

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