



Tongues and Transformation in Jerome, *Ep.* 108: Tired Cliché or Rare Allusion?

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Jerome's 108th epistle (the *Epitaphium Paulae*) begins with a grotesque fantasy, in which the author imagines all his limbs transforming into tongues and resounding with speech. This motif has been interpreted by notable scholars, including Pierre Courcelle and Andrew Cain, as an expression of the "many mouths" motif employed by Homer, Virgil, and subsequent authors. This paper compares the opening of *Ep.* 108 to standard uses of the "many mouths" motif by Jerome and other authors, and sets the letter in its historical and literary context. A constellation of required elements belonging to the traditional "many mouths" motif is established, and the opening of *Ep.* 108 is shown to deviate significantly from the classical image of the poet possessing some 10n mouths. Ultimately, a parabiblical text is proposed as the source for Jerome's fantasy: an apocalypse that once circulated in Greek, Latin, Syriac, and (probably) Hebrew, although of the Greek and Latin versions, only two fragments have survived. The nature of this text, its suitability for the occasion of Paula's eulogy, and the way Jerome may have encountered it are discussed. Minor differences between the apocryphal text and Jerome's potential use of it are noted, and a speculative explanation is offered for these deviations. If indeed this apocryphal text represents the source of Jerome's imagery, the first sentence of *Ep.* 108 may preserve a rare surviving remnant of this text in the Latin language.

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