

strictly as an allusion to the book of Exodus (as our eighth-century glossator pointed out), does this mean that Patrick was not taken captive? This is a possibility, although the proposition that his captivity was merely an alibi also rests on other forms of evidence, outlined in chapters 1 and 3.

Patrick's prose can be interpreted in a range of ways. Like any late antique text with an agenda, it cannot be read simply as a factual account of his career and of the historical circumstances in which he lived. That Patrick wrote with an agenda, which included redeeming his own reputation, does not diminish the fact that he had other, higher motives, such as conveying a didactic message about the impending end of times, the need for a mission in anticipation of it, the ideal course of a mission, the righteous way of Christian living, and the behaviour expected of the newly converted. Nevertheless, it cannot be ignored that a central objective of his *Confessio* was to mount a defence against accusations that pursued him, the details of which will be considered in the following chapters of this book. In combining all these different objectives, we see Patrick employing rhetorical tactics that, as I have attempted to argue here, drew on principles of classical rhetoric and of biblical exegesis that gave him license to depart from a factual account.

A famous example of the exegetical recognition of the gap between text and reality comes from the giant of Christian theology, Saint Jerome, whom we have already encountered in another context. In his *Adversus Helvidium*, written in the 380s, he observed in regard to the question of Christ's paternity in the New Testament, "Therefore, except Joseph, and Elizabeth, and Mary herself, and a few others besides—if we can believe that we hear them from these [words]—everyone believed that Jesus was Joseph's son, so much so that even the Evangelists, expressing

the common opinion (*opinio vulgi*), which is the true rule of narration (*vera lex historiae*), said that he is the Saviour's father.³²

The question that vexed Jerome was the difficulty of reconciling the idea of Mary's virgin birth with the text of the genealogies of Christ in both the Gospel of Matthew and Luke, according to which Joseph was Christ's father. Jerome's solution was that the Gospels were merely expressing a 'common opinion' (*opinio vulgi*). But does this not imply that the Gospels are being deliberately mendacious? Not according to Jerome, who explains that their narrations are framed according to what he styles the 'true rule of narration' (*vera lex historiae*), an enigmatic expression that attracted considerable attention from scholars (especially for the way in which it was employed in the eighth century by the Northumbrian historian Bede), which I take to mean that an author can claim to have been operating in good faith so long as he or she faithfully reiterated a received narrative, irrespective of whether it was true or false. By the seventh century the idea will have developed such that an Irish biblical exegete could even say that the six days of creation should not be understood literally, but that 'the *narrator historiae* ("biblical narrator") afterwards divided in his account that which God did not divide in the perfection of his work.'³³

Patrick cannot be shown to have followed Jerome directly. However, both examples from Jerome (on the metaphor of slavery and the virgin birth) illustrate a central feature of the Christian exegetical mind-set—namely, that a text can be made to convey different meanings to different readerships, who may be distinguished from one another by such criteria as their level of learning, religiosity, partisanship with the author, or proximity to the events that are being described. Following principles of interpretation of the kind that Jerome applied to the Gospels, Patrick was at liberty to address his words to different readerships

simultaneously and to position his narrations at varying degrees of separation from the truth. This was not deceit, but a way of tightly controlling what was being said and of directing the reader towards what the author believed to be a higher truth.

Notes

1. Letter § 1.
2. *Confessio* §§ 62, 48.
3. *Confessio* § 23.
4. *Confessio* §§ 52, 53.
5. *Confessio* § 10.
6. Muirchú, Life of Patrick I.11(10), in Bieler, *Patrician Texts*, 76.
7. Aldhelm, Letter 5, to Heahfrith, in D. R. Howlett, ed. and trans., 'Aldhelm and Irish learning', *Bulletin de Cange* 52 (1994): 50–75, lines 59–70.
8. On the deprecatory reflection on his own education, see *Confessio* § 13.
9. This and the following quotations are from Cicero, *De Inventione* 1.19.27, trans. H. M. Hubbell (Cambridge, MA, 1949), 54–57.
10. See especially Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* 2.17.19–29, 36; 3.8.63, trans. Donald Russell, in *Quintilian: The Orator's Education*, 5 vols. (Cambridge, MA, 2001), 1: 384–90, 392; 2: 146.
11. *Confessio* § 27.
12. The account that follows is based on Letter §§ 1, 2, 10, 21.
13. Letter § 2: 'Non dico civibus meis neque civibus sanctorum Romanorum' (I do not say to my fellow citizens, nor to the citizens of the holy Romans).
14. Letter § 10: 'Vendidi enim nobilitatem meam, non erubescio' (For I have sold my nobility, I am not ashamed [of it]). The expression 'fellow citizens' in Letter § 2 implies, by association, that he himself was Roman.
15. See, respectively, *Confessio* §§ 12, 9.
16. *Confessio* § 9. Translation is by Jean-Michel Picard, 'The Latin language in early medieval Ireland', in *The Languages of Ireland*, ed. Michael Cronin and Cormac Ó Cuilleánáin (Dublin, 2003), 44–56, at 46n17.
17. E.g., *Confessio* §§ 44, 54, 61.
18. Origen, 'Commentary on the Gospel of John' 13:3, in *Commentary on the Gospel according to John*, trans. Ronald Heine (Washington, DC, 1993).
19. *Confessio* § 9.
20. *Confessio* § 18.
21. *Confessio* § 18.

22. *Confessio* § 17.
23. The scholar was a glossator of Fiacc's Hymn, an edition and translation of which is W. Stokes and J. Strachan, *Thesaurus Palaeohibernicus*, 2 vols. (Dublin, 1901–3), 2:307–
21. The gloss is on p. 309, lines 13–14.
24. *Confessio* §§ 4, 8.
25. *Confessio* § 17.
26. *Confessio* § 20.
27. *Confessio* § 47.
28. *Confessio* §§ 34, 36, 40.
29. Letter § 10.
30. Jerome, *Commentarii in iv epistulas Paulinas*, in PL vol. 26, cols. 307–618, at col. 592.
31. Matthew 24:45.
32. Jerome, *Adversus Helvidium*, in PL vol. 23, cols. 183–206, at col. 187: 'Denique excepto Ioseph, et Elisabeth, et ipsa Maria, paucisque admodum, si quos ab his audisse possumus aestimare, omnes Iesum filium aestimabant Ioseph, intantum, ut etiam Evangelistae opinionem vulgi exprimentes, quae vera historiae lex est, patrem eum dixerint Salvatoris.'
33. Augustinus Hibernicus, *De mirabilibus sacrae scripturae libri tres*, PL 35:2149–2200, at 2151: 'post namque historiae narrator divisit in sermone, quod Deus non divisit in operis perfectione.'

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