

ST JEROME, DOCTOR OF THE CHURCH (A.D. 4250)

Jerome (Eusebius Hieronymus Sophronius), the father of the Church most learned in the Sacred Scriptures, was born about the year 342 at Stridon, a small town upon the confines of Pannonia, Dalmatia and Italy, near Aquileia. His father took great care to have his son instructed in religion and in the first principles of letters at home and afterwards sent him to Rome. Jerome had there for tutor the famous pagan grammarian Donatus. He became master of the Latin and Greek tongues (his native language was the Illyrian), read the best writers in both languages with great application, and made progress in oratory; but being left without a guide under the discipline of a heathen master he forgot some of the true piety which had been instilled into him in his childhood. Jerome went out of this school free indeed from gross vices, but unhappily a stranger to a Christian spirit and enslaved to vanity and other weaknesses, as he afterward confessed and bitterly lamented. On the other hand he was baptised at Rome (he was a catechumen till he was at least eighteen) and he himself tells us that "it was my custom on Sundays to visit, with friends of my own age and tastes, the tombs of the martyrs and apostles, going down into those subterranean galleries whose walls on either side preserve the relics of the dead." After some three years in Rome he determined to travel in order to improve his studies and, with his friend Bonosus, he went to Trier. Here it was that the religious spirit with which he was so deeply imbued was awakened, and his heart was entirely converted to God.

In 370 Jerome settled down for a time at Aquileia, where the bishop, St. Valerian, had attracted so many good men that its clergy were famous all over the Western church. With many of these St. Jerome became friendly, and their names appear in his writings. Among them were St. Chromatius, then a priest, who succeeded Valerian; his two brothers, the deacons Jovinian and Eusebius; St. Heliodorus and his nephew Nepotian; and, above all, Rufinus, first the bosom friend and then the bitter opponent of Jerome. Already he was beginning to make enemies and provoke strong opposition, and after two or three years an unspecified conflict broke up the group, and Jerome decided to withdraw into some distant country. Bonosus, who had been the companion of his studies and his travels from childhood, went to live on a desert island in the Adriatic. Jerome himself happened to meet a well-known priest of Antioch, Evagrius, at Aquileia, which turned his mind towards the East. With his friends Innocent, Heliodorus and Hylas (a freed slave of St. Melania) he determined to go thither.

St. Jerome arrived in Antioch in 374 and made some stay there. Innocent and Hylas were struck down by illness and died, and Jerome too sickened. In a letter to St. Eustochium he relates that in the heat of fever he fell into a delirium in which he seemed to himself to be arraigned before the judgement seat of Christ. Being asked who he was, he answered that he was a Christian. "Thou liest," was the reply, "Thou art a Ciceronian: for where thy treasure is, there is thy heart also." This experience had a deep effect on him which was deepened by his meeting with St. Malchus, whose strange story is related herein under October 21. As a result, St. Jerome withdrew into the wilderness of Chalcis, a barren land to the south-east of Antioch, where he spent four years alone. He suffered much from ill health, and even more from strong temptations of the flesh.

"In the remotest part of a wild and stony desert," he wrote years afterwards to St. Eustochium, "burnt up with the heat of the scorching sun so that it frightens even the monks that inhabit it, I seemed to myself to be in the midst of the delights and crowds of Rome... In this exile and prison to which for the fear of Hell I had voluntarily condemned myself, with no other company but scorpions and wild beasts, I many times imagined myself witnessing the dancing of the Roman maidens as if I had been in the midst of them. My face was pallid with fasting, yet my will felt the assaults of desire: in my cold body and in my parched-up flesh, which seemed dead before its death, passion was able to live. Alone

with this enemy, I threw myself in spirit at the feet of Jesus, watering them with my tears, and I tamed my flesh by fasting whole weeks. I am not ashamed to disclose my temptations, but I grieve that I am not now what I then was. I often joined night to day crying and beating my breast till calm returned.” Thus does God allow His servants to be from time to time severely tried; but the ordinary life of St. Jerome was doubtless quiet, regular and undisturbed. To forestall and ward off the insurgence of the flesh he added to his corporal austerities a new study, which he hoped would fix his rambling imagination and give him the victory over himself. This was to learn Hebrew. “When my soul was on fire with bad thoughts,” says he writing to the monk Rusticus in 411, “as a last resource I became a scholar to a monk who had been a Jew, to learn of him the Hebrew alphabet; and, from the judicious rules of Qumtilian, the copious flowing eloquence of Cicero, the grave style of Pronto, and the smoothness of Pliny, I turned to this language of hissing and broken-winded words. What labour it cost me, what difficulties I went through, how often I despaired and left off, and how I began again to learn, both I myself who felt the burden can witness, and they also who lived with me. And I thank our Lord, that I now gather such sweet fruit from the bitter sowing of those studies.” However, he still continued to read the pagan classics from time to time,

The church of Antioch was at this time disturbed by doctrinal and disciplinary disputes. The monks of the desert of Chalcis vehemently took sides in these disputes and wanted St. Jerome to do the same and to pronounce on the matters at issue. He preferred to stand aloof and be left to himself, but he wrote two letters to consult St. Damasus, who had been raised to the papal chair in 366, what course he ought to steer. In the first he says: “I am joined in communion with your holiness, that is, with the chair of Peter; upon that rock I know the Church is built. Whoever eats the Lamb outside of that house is a profane person. Whoever is not in the ark shall perish in the flood. I do not know Vitalis; I disown Meletius; Paulinus¹ is a stranger to me. Whoever gathers not with you, scatters; he who is not Christ’s belongs to Antichrist... Order me, if you please, what I should do.” Not receiving a speedy answer he soon after sent another letter on the same subject. The answer of Damasus is not extant: but it is certain that he and the West acknowledged Paulinus as bishop of Antioch, and St. Jerome received from his hands the order of priesthood when he finally left the desert of Chalcis. Jerome had no wish to be ordained (he never celebrated the holy Sacrifice), and he only consented on the condition that he should not be obliged to serve that or any other church by his ministry: his vocation was to be a monk or recluse. Soon after he went to Constantinople, there to study the Holy Scriptures under St. Gregory Nazianzen. In several parts of his works Jerome mentions with satisfaction and gratitude the honour and happiness of having had so great a master in expounding the divine writings. Upon St. Gregory’s leaving Constantinople in 382, St. Jerome went to Rome with Paulinus of Antioch and St. Epiphanius to attend a council which St. Damasus held about the schism at Antioch. When the council was over, Pope Damasus detained him and employed him as his secretary; Jerome, indeed, claimed that he spoke through the mouth of Damasus. At the pope’s request he made a revision, in accordance with the Greek text, of the Latin version of the gospels, which had been disfigured by “false transcription, by clumsy correction, and by careless interpolations,” and a first revision of the Latin psalter.

Side by side with this official activity he was engaged in fostering and directing the marvellous flowering of asceticism which was taking place among some of the noble ladies of Rome. Among them are several of the most famous names of Christian antiquity; such were St. Marcella, who is referred to herein under January 31, with her sister St. Asella and their mother, St. Albiaa; St. Lea; St. Melania the

¹ Rival claimants to the see of Antioch

Elder, the first one of them to go to the Holy Land; St. Fabiola (December 27); and St. Paula (January 26) with her daughters St. Blesilhi and St. Eustochium (September 28). But when St. Damasus died in 384, and his protection was consequently withdrawn from his secretary, St. Jerome found himself in a very difficult position. In the preceding two years, while impressing all Rome by his personal holiness, learning and honesty, he had also contrived to get himself widely disliked; on the one hand by pagans and men of evil life whom he had fiercely condemned and on the other by people of good will who were offended by the saint's harsh outspokenness and sarcastic wit. When he wrote in defense of the fashionable young widow, Blesilla, who had suddenly renounced the world, he was witheringly satirical of pagan society and worldly life, and opposed to her lowliness the conduct of those who "paint their cheeks with rouge and their eyelids with antimony; whose plastered faces, too white for those of human beings, look like idols, and if in a moment of forgetfulness they shed a tear it makes a furrow where it rolls down the painted cheek; they to whom years do not bring the gravity of age, who load their heads with other people's hair, enamel a lost youth upon the wrinkles of age, and affect a maidenly timidity in the midst of a troop of grandchildren." In the letter on virginity which he wrote to St. Eustochium he was no less scathing at the expense of Christian society, and made a particular attack on certain of the clergy. "All their anxiety is about their clothes... You would take them for bridegrooms rather than for clerics; all they think about is to know the names and houses and doings of rich ladies;" and he proceeds to describe a particular individual, who hates fasting, looks forward to the smell of his meals, and has a barbarous and forward tongue. Jerome wrote to St. Marcella of a certain man who wrongly supposed that he was an object of attack: "I amuse myself by laughing at the grubs, the owls and the crocodiles, and he takes all that I say to himself... Let me give him some advice. If he will only conceal his nose and keep his tongue still he may be taken to be both handsome and learned."

It cannot be matter of surprise that, however justified his indignation was, his manner of expressing it aroused resentment. His own reputation was attacked with similar vigour; even his simplicity, his walk and smile, the expression of his countenance were found fault with. Neither did the severe virtue of the ladies that were under his direction nor the reservedness of his own behaviour protect him from calumny: scandalous gossip was circulated about his relations with St. Paula. He was properly indignant and decided to return to the East, there to seek a quiet retreat. He embarked at Porto in August 385. Before he left he wrote a fine *apologia*, in the form of a letter to St. Asella. "Salute Paula and Eustochium," it concluded, "mine in Christ whether the world wills it or no... say to them, we shall all stand before the judgement seat of Christ, and there it shall be seen in what spirit each has lived." At Antioch nine months later he was joined by Paula, Eustochium and the other Roman religious women who had resolved to exile themselves with him in the Holy Land. Soon after arriving at Jerusalem they went to Egypt, to consult with the monks of Nitria, as well as with Didymus, a famous blind teacher in the school of Alexandria.

With the help of Paula's generosity a monastery for men was built near the basilica of the Nativity at Bethlehem, together with buildings for three communities of women. St. Jerome himself lived and worked in a large rock-hewn cell near to our Saviour's birthplace, and opened a free school, as well as a hospice, "so that," as St. Paula said, "should Mary and Joseph again visit Bethlehem there would be a place for them to lodge in," Here at last were some years of peace. "The illustrious Gauls congregate here, and no sooner has the Briton, so remote from our world, made some progress in religion than he leaves his early-setting sun to seek a land which he knows only by reputation and from the Scriptures. And what of the Armenians, the Persians, the peoples of India and Ethiopia, of Egypt, of Pontus, Cappadocia, Syria and Mesopotamia? ... They throng here and set us the example of every virtue. The

languages differ but the religion is the same; there are as many different choirs singing the psalms as there are nations... Here bread, and vegetables grown with our own hands, and milk, country fare, afford us plain and healthy food. In summer the trees give us shade. In autumn the air is cool and the fallen leaves restful. In spring our psalmody is sweeter for the singing of the birds. We do not lack wood when winter snow and cold are upon us. Let Rome keep its crowds, let its arenas run with blood, its circuses go mad, its theatres wallow in sensuality and, not to forget our friends, let the senate of ladies receive their daily visits.”

But Jerome could not stand aside and be mute when Christian truth was threatened. He had at Rome composed his book against Helvidius on the perpetual virginity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Helvidius having maintained that Mary had other children, by St. Joseph, after the birth of Christ. This and certain associated errors were again put forward by one Jovinian. St. Paula’s son-in-law, St. Pammachius, and other laymen were scandalised at his new doctrines, and sent his writings to St. Jerome who in 393 wrote two books against Jovinian. In the first he shows the excellence of virginity embraced for the sake of virtue, which had been denied by Jovinian, and in the second confutes his other errors. This treatise was written in Jerome’s characteristically strong style and certain expressions in it seemed to some persons in Rome harsh and derogatory from the honour due to matrimony; St. Pammachius informed St. Jerome of the offence which he and many others took at them. Thereupon Jerome wrote his Apology to Pammachius, sometimes called his third book against Jovinian, in a tone that can hardly have given his critics satisfaction. A few years later he had to turn his attention to Vigilantius Dormantius, sleepy, he calls him a Gallo-Roman priest who both decried celibacy and condemned the veneration of relics, calling those who paid it idolaters and worshippers of ashes. St. Jerome in his answer said: “We do not worship the relics of the martyrs; but we honour them that we may worship Him whose martyrs they are. We honour the servants that the respect which is paid to them may be reflected back on the Lord.” He vindicates the honour paid to martyrs from idolatry because no Christian ever worshipped them as gods, and in order to show that the saints pray for us he says: “If the apostles and martyrs while still living upon earth can pray for other men, how much more may they do it after their victories? Have they less power now they are with Jesus Christ?” He defends the monastic state, and says that a monk seeks security by flying occasions and dangers because he mistrusts his own weakness and knows that there is no safety if a man sleeps near a serpent. St. Jerome often speaks of the saints in Heaven praying for us. Thus he entreated Heliodorus to pray for him when he should be in glory, and told St. Paula, upon the death of her daughter Blesilla, “She now prays to the Lord for you, and obtains for me the pardon of my sins.” But the general tone of his reply to Vigilantius is even more vehement than that to Jovinian.

From 395 to 400 St. Jerome was engaged in a war against Origenism, which unhappily involved a breach of his twenty-five years friendship with Rufinus. Years before he had written to him the doubtful statement that “friendship which can perish has never been a true one,” as Shakespeare would write twelve hundred years later:

... Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds
Or bends with the remover to remove;

and now his affection for Rufinus was to succumb to his zeal for truth. Few writers made more use of Origen’s works and no one seemed a greater admirer of his erudition than St. Jerome; but finding in the

East that some had been seduced into grievous errors by the authority of his name and some of his writings lit joined St. Epiphanius in warmly opposing the spreading evil. Rufinus, who then lived in a monastery at Jerusalem, had translated many of Origen's works into Latin and was an enthusiastic upholder of his authority; though it does not appear that he had any intention of upholding those heresies which are undoubtedly contained, at least materially, in Origen's writings. St. Augustine was not the of the good men who were distressed by the resulting quarrel, which, however, he the more easily understood because he himself became involved in a long controversy with St. Jerome arising out of the exegesis of the second chapter of St. Paul's epistle to the Galatians. By his first letters he had unintentionally provoked Jerome, and had to use considerable charitable tact to soothe his easily wounded susceptibilities. St. Jerome wrote in 416: "I never spared heretics and have always done my utmost that the enemies of the Church should be also my enemies;" but it seems that sometimes he unwarrantably assumed that those who differed from himself were necessarily the Church's enemies. He was no admirer of moderation whether in virtue or against evil. He was swift to anger, but also swift to remorse, even more severe on his own shortcomings than on those of others. There is a story told that Pope Sixtus V, looking at a picture of the saint which represented him in the act of striking his breast with a stone, said: "You do well to carry that stone, for without it the Church would never have canonised you."

But his denunciations and controversies, necessary as most of them were, are the less important part of his activities: nothing has rendered the name of St. Jerome so famous as his critical labours on the Holy Scriptures. For this the Church acknowledges him to have been raised by God through a special providence, and she styles him the greatest of all her doctors in expounding the divine word. Pope Clement VIII did not scruple to call him a man divinely assisted in translating the Bible. He was furnished with the greatest helps for such an undertaking, living many years upon the spot where the remains of ancient places, names, customs which were still recent, and other circumstances set before his eyes a clearer representation of many things recorded in holy writ than it is possible to have at a greater distance of place and time. Greek and Aramaic were then living languages, and Hebrew, though it had ceased to be such from the time of the captivity, was not less understood and spoken among the doctors of the law. It was thought that he could not be further instructed in the knowledge of Hebrew, but this was not his own judgement of the matter and he applied again to a famous Jewish master, called Bar Ananias, who came to teach him in the night-time, lest the Jews should know it. Above other conditions it is necessary that an interpreter of the Bible be a man of prayer and sincere piety. This alone can obtain light and help from Heaven, give to the mind a turn and temper which are necessary for being admitted into the sanctuary of the divine wisdom, and furnish the key. Jerome was prepared by a great purity of heart and a life spent in penance and contemplation before he was called by God to this undertaking. We have seen that while in Rome under Pope St. Damasus he had revised the gospels and the psalms in the Old Latin version, followed by the rest of the New Testament. His new translation from the Hebrew of most of the books of the Old Testament was the work of his years of retreat at Bethlehem, which he undertook at the earnest entreaties of many devout and illustrious friends, and in view of the preference of the original to any version however venerable. He did not translate the books in order, but began by the books of Kings, and took the rest in hand at different times. The only parts of the Latin Bible called the Vulgate which were not either translated or worked over by St. Jerome are the books of Wisdom, Ecclesiasticus, Baruch and the two books of Machabees. The psalms he revised again, with the aid of Origen's *Hexapla* and the Hebrew text, and this is the version included in the

Vulgate and used in the Divine Office.² The first revision, called the Roman Psalter, is still used for the invitatory psalm at Matins and throughout the Missal, and for the Divine Office in St. Peter's at Rome, St. Mark's at Venice, and in the Milanese rite. St. Jerome's Vulgate was declared by the Council of Trent to be the authentic or authoritative Latin biblical text of the Catholic Church, without thereby implying any preference of this version above the original text or above versions in other languages. In 1907 Pope Pius X entrusted to the monks of St. Benedict the duty of restoring so far as possible St. Jerome's text of the Vulgate, which during fifteen centuries of use has become considerably modified and corrupted. The version of the Bible ordinarily used by English-speaking Catholics is the translation of the Vulgate made at Rheims and Douay towards the end of the sixteenth century, as revised by Bishop Challoner in the eighteenth; and the English version officially made by Monsignor Ronald Knox was also from the Vulgate.

In the year 404 a great blow fell on St. Jerome in the death of St. Paula and a few years later in the sacking of Rome by Alaric; many refugees fled into the East, and he wrote of them: "Who would have believed that the daughters of that mighty city would one day be wandering as servants and slaves on the shores of Egypt and Africa? That Bethlehem would daily receive noble Romans, distinguished ladies brought up in wealth and now reduced to beggary? I cannot help them all, but I grieve and weep with them, and, completely given up to the duties which charity imposes on me, I have put aside my commentary on Ezekiel and almost all study. For today we must translate the words of the Scriptures into deeds, and instead of speaking saintly words we must act them." Again towards the end of his life he was obliged to interrupt his studies by an incursion of barbarians, and some time after by the violence and persecution of the Pelagians who sent a troop of ruffians to Bethlehem to assault the monks and nuns who lived there under the direction of St. Jerome, who had opposed them. Some were beaten, and a deacon was killed, and they set fire to the monasteries. In the following year St. Eustochium died and Jerome himself soon followed her; worn out with penance and work, his sight and voice failing, his body like a shadow, he died peacefully on September 30, 420. He was buried under the church of the Nativity close to Paula and Eustochium, but his body was removed long after and now lies somewhere in St. Mary Major's at Rome. He is often represented in art habited as a cardinal, because of the services he discharged for Pope St. Damasus, and also with a lion from whose paw he was said to have drawn a thorn. This story has been transferred to him from the legend of St. Geminus, but a lion is a far from inapt emblem of this fearless and fierce defender of the faith.

During recent years much advance has been made in the study of the life of St. Jerome* Of special value is the volume *Miscellanea Geronimiana* which was published at Roma in 1920 to do honour to the fifteenth centenary of his death. In this a number of eminent scholars, including Duchesne, Batiffol, Lanzoni, Zeiller and Bulic, contribute studies on moot points of particular interest in connection with the saint. Then in 1922 appeared the best modern life, that of F. Cavallera, *Saint Jérôme, sa vie et son oeuvre* (1922, 2 vols.), though the criticisms of Father Peeters in *Analecta Bollandiana*, vol. xlii, pp. 180-184, claim careful attention. At an earlier date we have the discovery by G. Morin of Jerome's *Commentarioli* and *Tractatus* on the psalms, with other finds (see his *Études, textes, découvertes*, pp. 17-25). Further, a very full article on St. Jerome by H. Leclercq figures in DAC. vol. vii, cc. 2235-2304; and another by J. Forget in DTC, vol. viii (1924), cc. 894-933. In the eighteenth century we have the painstaking labours of Valiant, and of the Bollandists (September, vol. viii). The early accounts of St. Jerome, with the exception perhaps of the chronicle of Marcellinus (edited by Mommsen in MGH., *Auctores antiquissimi*, vol. ii, pp. 47 seq.), do not offer much of value. Jerome's correspondence and works must always remain the principal source for a study of his life. See also P. Monceaux, *St. Jerome: the Early Years* (1935); J. Duff, *Letters of St. Jerome* (1942); A. Penna, *S. Girolamo* (1949); P. Antin, *Essai sur S. Jérôme* (1951); and *A Monument to St. Jerome* (1952), essays ed. by F. X. Murphy.

Source

<http://www.archive.org/details/butlerslivesofth013830mbp>

² Since 1945 there is an alternative Latin version for this purpose, made principally from the Hebrew Masoretic text.