



FOUNDATIONS THE LIFE, TIMES, & THEOLOGY OF THE EARLY CHURCH

Jerome c.347 – 420 A.D.

We conclude our ten-part series with a very unique figure in the Early Church. The fourth century blossomed with theological and political complexity, and was filled with notable leaders from Augustine to Chrysostom. Many of these Church Fathers, like Ambrose, had a direct and significant influence on the nature of the Church's life and theology into and through the Middle Ages. In the midst of all this was the life of an interesting and complex man, Jerome, who corresponded with Augustine, rejected Arianism and Pelagianism, and learned from the Cappadocians.

The Life of Jerome

- With such a character as Jerome, a proper introduction is necessary, and there are few better than that found in Gonzalez, worth reading in full (The Story of Christianity, p. 201).
- Eusebius Heironymus was born around 347 at Stridon, near Aquileia, in northern Italy, to a prosperous middle-class Christian family. Said Jerome of his own heritage, "I was born a Christian, of Christian parents...from my cradle I was fed with catholic milk."
- About 12 years of age he was sent to Rome for his education, and although his moral life was far from exemplary, he never strayed from his Christian faith and was baptized on Easter, c. 366.
- He was well schooled in grammar, classical literature, and rhetoric, and had a deep love of the classical world and its writings. However, when on a trip to the court of Emperor Valentinian, presumably to petition for a job, he came into contact with the monastic life of Christians. Athanasius had been in that region, and his writings on the desert hermits had been well received. Jerome was intrigued and vowed to eventually live an ascetic life.
- Around 373 he moves to Antioch, to the East where the ascetic life originated. However, it is in Antioch that he has a dream, which he recounts later in a letter: "Suddenly I was in the spirit and caught up into heaven and brought before the Judgment seat. I was asked my condition and I said that I was a Christian. 'Thou liest', said the Judge. 'Thou art a Ciceronian, not a Christian. For where thy treasure is, there will thy heart be also.' ...Henceforth, I read God's books with greater zeal than I had ever read men's books" (22:30).
- Shortly thereafter he was ordained a presbyter in Antioch, and then moved to Constantinople where he studied theology and the Bible under Gregory of Nazianzus, through whom Jerome came into contact with the Greek Fathers, particularly Origen. Jerome was in the city during the Second Ecumenical Council of Constantinople in 381 and got to know Gregory of Nyssa.
- The following year he moved back to Rome, where he worked as a scholar and spiritual director advocating the ascetic life. He was taken in as the secretary of Damasus, the Bishop of Rome, who encouraged Jerome to undertake translating the Bible into a uniform Latin translation. He began with the NT, translating the Gospels and the Pauline Epistles from Greek, as well as the Psalms from the Greek Septuagint, not their original Hebrew.
- As a spiritual director, he gained a significant following especially among many wealthy ladies of Rome, including one Marcellina, sister of Ambrose. This was due partly to the fact that many wealthy Roman Christians were introduced to the ascetic life when Athanasius had been in Rome in 340. Another notable woman in Jerome's circle was Paula, who joined him when he returned East to Jerusalem in 385, and founded with him two monasteries, one of which was at Bethlehem. The year before he left, Damasus had died and many thought Jerome a likely successor, including Jerome.

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However, as Greenslade points out, he would "have made a poor bishop and impossible pope" (see full quote on p. 287")

- Although the monastic life they set up was not of extreme asceticism, but rather moderate austerity, life as a monastic was a tortuous one for Jerome. He was constantly obsessing about sex, and even learned Hebrew to help keep his mind off the memories of the dancing girls he knew in Rome. However, his new found knowledge of Hebrew enabled him to begin translating the OT into Latin from the original texts, not just from the LXX. This resulted in his great and lasting gift to the Church, the Latin *Vulgate* (405) a standard Latin text of the whole Bible from the original Greek and Hebrew.
- His translation took many years, and was not readily received by the Church. The LXX was in the view of many an 'inspired' translation, and his own Latin translations differed from many other versions. Augustine himself wrote to Jerome encouraging him to not finish the translation (Letter 28). Jerome dismissed the young Bishop of Hippo, but years later became indebted to his theology when he needed to refute Pelagius and his followers, many of whom had moved to Jerusalem.
- Although a brash and often rude, Jerome did possess a deep sensitivity, reflected especially in the lives of the many women he taught and led. Paula died in 404, and in 410 Rome fell to the Gothic armies, leaving Jerome and most of the Western world distraught. He lived another 10 years, filled with pain, loneliness, and controversy, until at last he was laid to rest in 420.

The Times of Jerome

- Greek East and Latin West
- There had been many translations of both Testaments into Latin; the NT from its original Greek, but the OT from the Greek Septuagint, not its original Hebrew. Such translations were numerous and often inaccurate, and for the Latin student of the Bible studies were difficult.
- The heresy of Origen. During the latter part of the fourth century, not for the first time, the orthodoxy of Origen was called into question. Jerome was very well versed in Origen and utilized his hermeneutic model. However, when a certain Athanasius and the Epiphanius, Bishop of Salamis, came to Jerusalem to call for the denunciation of Origen. Although the Bishop of Jerusalem did not denounce Origen, Jerome, anxious to remain orthodox, ended up siding with Epiphanius, mainly because he recognized and deeply respected his devout adherence to a holy and ascetic life.
- Pelagianism and Arianism

The Theology of Jerome

Extant works

- In addition to his Latin translation of the Bible (*Vulgate*) he translated two versions of the Psalter and one of Job from the Septuagint Greek into Latin. His *Vulgate* became the standard text in the West until just before the Reformation. Note on the Apocrypha: Although Jerome did translate the extra-canonical books such as Bel and the Dragon, Susanna, The Three Children, etc., which he termed "apocryphal" (from the Greek, 'hidden'), he did not consider them canonical, since they were not found in the Hebrew texts, although they were included in the LXX. Thus the Apocrypha was not included in the original *Vulgate*, and his rationale for this is referenced in our Articles of Religion, Article VI, (BCP p. 868). However, his views did not prevail and later the apocrypha was included in later editions of the *Vulgate*, which is why Roman Catholic Bibles still have them today.
- Commentaries on all the prophets, the Psalms, Ecclesiastes, as well as Matthew, Galatians, Ephesians, Philemon and Titus. These vary in length and nature, the earlier ones representing the influence of Origen, the later ones following a more literal/historical hermeneutic (see "Times" above).
- Treatises against Pelagianism, against Luciferians, and against the anti-ascetic Helvidians and Jovinians; he also wrote a few Anti-Origen works
- Historical works: a number of biographies on desert hermits, a Latin translation of Eusebius' *Chronicon*, and *De Viris Illustribus*, a significant collection of Christian bio-bibliographies.

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- 154 Letters of his are extant as well and although Jerome never completed his 'history' of his own times, his letters provide much historical information about the man and his times.

Theology

- Upheld and taught with a strong value of moral rigorousness and admired the ascetic life. His moral theology with emphasis on merits and rewards is "demoralizing and false to the Gospel" (Greenslade, 288), but alas, not very different from the views of Ambrose. However, his strong emphasis on self-sacrifice and simple purity is commendable and helped guide the Church as it grew from the shadows to a central place in the empire and tempted at every turn.
- "do penance": it is interesting to note, in light of his personal reverence for the ascetic life and holy living, that when he translated *metanoia*, the Greek word used for 'repent', he used the Latin word for 'do penance'. Thus when Jesus said (originally in Aramaic), "Repent for the Kingdom is at hand," the original word meant to do an about face and walk the other way. The Greek word used for this, *metanoia*, meant to have a change of mind. Although this carried a heavier weight than simply a change in personal preferences (I like chocolate now instead of vanilla) it carried a sense of a change in mindset that comes from a recognition of truth. Jerome rendered this "Do penance for the kingdom is at hand" which is a fairly significant change in meaning, which again aided in the trajectory of the formation of the medieval penitential system and was not corrected until the Reformation. Ironically, against much opposition, Jerome was an advocate of studying and working with texts in their original language, something that was largely lost until the humanist movement (post-Renaissance) in the fifteenth century and the Reformation in the sixteenth.
- Jerome's strengths were not so much in being an able or original theologian, but an able scholar. He contributed in no small way to the systematic methods of learning which came to characterize later scholars.