

The Life, Writings, and Thoughts of St. Jerome

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Introduction

The Church Fathers, of which Jerome is one, are considered to be the guardians of the faith. Each Father, as he responds to the question posed by Christ "who do you say I am?"¹, taps into the true waters to bear witness to the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit within the Church. In so doing, they receive both the pardosis and pleroma for their time and, as faithful servants, make real and present the living God to their generation. This essay will focus on the life and works of St Jerome within the milieu of his times, and from an Eastern Orthodox perspective, before seeking to assess his contribution to the believing Church.

A Cautionary Note

In reading Jerome, or indeed any of the Fathers, it is important to identify, to the extent possible, the circumstances that gave rise to each of their works, and also to treat each writing on its merits and within its historical context. To look at the work of a Father or the Fathers and to systematically seek quotations to bolster a personal view, discarding those that do not fit, is anachronistic and mischievous, as it distorts the views of the Fathers to meet our needs rather than entering the spirit of that Father.

Further, the Church Fathers in the fourth century had no interest in systematic theology. Each Father, whether from the East or West brought to their writings their own world view and cultural consciousness, whilst expressing the truth in relation to the particular issue confronting the Church. Accordingly, each Hierarch enlightened by the Holy Spirit acts as an interface between the Church and the world, thus becoming the incarnation of criteria of rule and thinking. Thus, according to McGinn, the term Father (or "Doctor" in the West) was used "to describe the task of all those who conveyed the message of salvation to others."² Jerome, was the epitome of the master communicator in this service to the Church.

The Life of St Jerome

Eusebius Hieronymus (Jerome) "was born in Stridon, Dalmatia, almost certainly in the year 331".³ Details relating to his early life are sparse. It is certain that Jerome was sent to Rome for his secondary education where he studied humanities, rhetoric and dialectics under Donatus, the most celebrated pedagogue of his time. There he learned considerable skills in polemics and satirisation. In 367 CE, after having been baptised in Rome, he went to Trier in

Gaul where he befell upon the work of Athanasius, "The Life of Anthony", translated into Latin by Evagrius of Antioch. Inspired by the piety of the work he resolved to travel East to find out for himself about monasticism, and travelled to Antioch via Athens and Constantinople. In 374 he went into the desert at Chalcis and lived as a monk. In 379 he returned to Antioch where he was ordained a priest after having lost his enthusiasm for monasticism. As Jerome put it, "what use is the robe of a penitent if it covers the pride of a King?"⁴ He then went to Constantinople for two years where he befriended and was instructed by Gregory of Nazianzus in the science of biblical exegesis as well as meeting Gregory of Nyssa. There he began his translation of Origen and Eusebius.

In 382 he returned to Rome at the request of Antioch to represent its position at the local Council against the Meletian Schism. There he impressed Pope Damasus who appointed him secretary to answer questions referred to by himself as well as the Eastern Churches. Whilst in Rome he began his long-term project of revision and translation of sacred scripture at the encouragement of Damasus.

In December 384 Damasus died and in 385 allegations then arose relating to Jerome's friendship with the circle of pious women who were to be his lifelong supporters. In July 385 Jerome was summoned to answer charges over his relationship with Paula and Marcella of that circle. After his acquittal Jerome was directed, as a priest of Antioch, to leave Rome and return to his diocese. Thus, Jerome perceived himself as "escaping Babylon,"⁵ and returned to the East establishing himself in Bethlehem in 386. There he settled into a monastery founded by Paula and her daughter Eustochium who followed him to Palestine. There these pious women formed three communities under the direction of Jerome. Eustochium herself, who made a vow of chastity, wrote Latin, Greek, and Hebrew and helped Jerome with his work by reading and writing for him when his eyesight began to dim. Jerome was a prolific writer until his death on the 30th September 420.

The Milieu of the Times

Jerome, like all Fathers, lived in his own times and was impacted and influenced by the circumstances surrounding his life. During his life Christianity went from a religion that had been accorded a right to exist in 313CE, to being the religion of the State by July 383 CE. In 330 the epicenter of the Roman Empire moved from Rome to Constantinople. The Church in Rome felt herself as becoming involved in problems that had a distinctly Eastern flavour. Bernardino holds the view, for instance, that "without the intervention of Constantine there is a strong probability that the Arian conflict would have been limited to the East"⁶. On the

other hand, the East had little time for problems such as Priscillianism, Donatism or Pelagianism that occasionally bedeviled the West.

Further, the Church itself was in the process of change. The East became self-absorbed and Hellenised. Greek language and thought became ensconced in Constantinople, whereas in Rome Latin began to reassert itself as Rome lost touch with Hellenism. This led to a problem in communication whereby in 430 CE Pope Celestine I, in responding to Patriarch Nestorius, explained that his delay in reverting to him was the result of a need to find a cleric capable of translating the Greek text of his epistle into Latin. Although Bernardino claims that Jerome moved at ease in Greek culture and that "Jerome and Rufinus opened the West to Greek exegesis and theology" a different picture emerges from Jerome. Writing in 374 CE to Demasas, Jerome sought his guidance in relation to giving the word "hypostasis" content. Jerome lamented that from his understanding the Eastern Church interpreted "Hypostasis the right way, but when I say I also hold the doctrine they are setting forth, I am taken for a heretic."⁷ Demasas did not respond, which is not surprising as he had a limited grasp of esoteric nuanced words in a foreign tongue, which could for one wrong word in response mean he could be anathematised. This left him with little enthusiasm for Greek disputes. Little wonder Demasas appointed the brilliant polyglot Jerome as his secretary as well as appointing him to revise the various Latin texts of the Bible. Jerome thus lived his life in a world where there was "a chasm growing between East and West created by political events, by language and vocabulary and by intellectual and theological traditions."⁸

Jerome identified himself as a citizen of the West. In August 410 Rome was conquered by Alaric. Then living in Bethlehem, Jerome lamented "who will believe these things? ... Rome fighting ... not for glory but for survival"⁹. Jerome was aware of the split of the Empire into the East and the West, with the West being seen as expendable, which in turn began the effect the "Unum sanction" of Orthodoxy. However, his focus was on preserving the Church against her enemies whilst living his life by following the footsteps of Christ.

His Works

Jerome was a prolific writer and active in carrying out biblical and other translations, as well as being author to commentaries, hagiographies, and histories, as well as having undertaken numerous correspondences during his life.

His Controversies

Jerome also engaged in numerous theological controversies during his lifetime. In 379, in his work "Against Luciferians", he attacked the position of Lucifer, Bishop of Cagliari, who refused to enter into communion with Bishops who had previously adhered to Arianism and thereby threatened to split the Church. In 381, in his work "Against Jovinian", he dealt with the heresy that once baptised people remain saved, which questioned the gift of divine grace. In 383, in his work "Against Helvidius", he attacked the notion that Mary had other children, thereby producing the first Latin treatise on Mariology. In 404, in his work "Against Vigilantius", he defended the cult of martyrs, the veneration of relics, and the participation of vigils, thereby continuing the place of Saints in Orthodoxy. In 414, he entered the fray against Pelagius who proposed that man could achieve salvation on his own. In so doing, he assisted to maintain the Trinitarian nature of the Godhead and the saving nature of Grace as willed by God. Jerome also was embroiled in a dispute with his former friend Rufinus in 393 over Origenism. Rufinus, who had translated Origen's "Peri Archon", ameliorated the theology of Origen whilst linking Jerome to Origen. Thus, that "the most vigorous champion of Orthodoxy should be discovered to have unwittingly supported heresy came as a terrible shock to Jerome."¹⁰ Jerome's objection was that Origen taught a form of Greek philosophy which ran counter to the Bible, which Jerome was not prepared to countenance in his defense of the true Church.

His Biblical Translations

In 374CE Jerome had a conversion where in a vision of being accused of being a Ciceronian and not a Christian he exclaimed "O Lord, if ever again I possess worldly books or read them, I have denied thee."¹¹ Thereafter, Jerome turned his talents to translating the Holy Scriptures. Up to 392 CE Jerome considered the Septuagint as inspired. However, through his Hebraistic studies, he concluded that the Septuagint was incorrect and against criticism he resolved to give to the West a reliable Latin text. Problems arose, however, as Latin was a fixed language that resisted new vocabulary. This did not deter Jerome, who adopted Greek words into Latin or else formed new meaning into Latin words. Jerome used the principle of dynamic equivalence and strove in a conservative manner for sense rather than word for word in meaning. Jerome's works forming the basis of the Vulgate, and left a lasting legacy to the Latin Church.

His Hagiographies

Jerome wrote three hagiographies, namely the life of St Paul (375 - 379), the Life of St Hilarion (circa 391), and the Life of Malchus (circa 391). Each vita reflects different aspects of the interests of Jerome. St Paul reflects, against a background of centaurs and satyrs, "that all things are possible to them that believe."¹² St Hilarion represents a thaumaturgic monk who teaches the virtues of monastic life and service to God. Malchus recounts the virtue of perfect chastity in a relationship and that "chastity is never a captive, and that a man consecrated to Christ may die but never be conquered."¹³

His Commentaries and Other Works

Jerome translated Eusebius, the Homilies of Origen, Didymus the blind, the Coptic Pachomion documents, as well as writing biblical commentaries. He also wrote in 393 "Famous Lives" as well as producing an Onomasticon which focused on the etymological significance of the names found in the Old Testament.

However, it is in his letters that we come closest to the man. His letters disclose that in any matter effecting the Church he considered all means of attack and defence legitimate and he showed unflagging enthusiasm in championing the Church. His works also reveal him to be a lover of extremes. He could be exceedingly sensitive yet vitriolic and unsparing in his criticism whilst being frank about himself. In short, Jerome is revealed as flawed and real, and as a person who can attain closeness to God whilst at the same time retain the character of a man struggling within himself and with the world.

Conclusion: An Assessment of Jerome

Jerome was not a creative theologian. He was suspicious of novelties and abhorred heresies. He walked the narrow path of Orthodoxy. His greatest gift was, through his skills as a writer, to make present to the world of his generation the Tradition of the Church.

Jerome was acutely sensitive to translate the canon of scripture to meet the needs of the West and sought to make plain that the Bible is the book of the Church which could only be proclaimed in power within the Church. Hence, as a servant of the Church, he received, interpreted, and responded to the Word of God whilst returning to the Church the fruit of his talents.

Jerome, in Letter 23 to Eustochium the daughter of Paula, made plain that he developed an antipathical relationship with the pagan culture in which he was steeped in his youth. "What is

Horace doing with the Psalterion, Virgil with the Gospel and Cicero with the Apostle"¹⁴ he exclaimed. Yet, despite this, it was the gifts from such education that endowed him with his skills as a polemist for the Church. Jerome was familiar with Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Aramaic, Syriac and Arabic. Together with his training in Latin classes, he was correctly placed to carry out this sacred task. Although he was an accomplished translator he was not a dogmatic one. He always sought to capture the beauty, truth and inner dynamic of the original - hence his three attempts to translate the Psalms. Jerome saw that "the principle of a good translator is to render the idioms of a language by appropriate expression of his own."¹⁵

During his time in Constantinople Jerome was befriended by Gregory of Nazianzus. Jerome, who later described Gregory in his *De Vitusci* as "an extremely eloquent man and my master in the study of Holy Scripture"¹⁶ was influenced by Gregory as to his position on the Trinity. He also made the acquaintance of Gregory of Nyssa, and through him his work "against Eunomios." He also met Amphilochus of Iconium who lent him his book on the Holy Spirit. He thus was sympathetic and emphatic to the Greeks and able to conduit Greek ideas to the West.

To Jerome, the understanding of revelation is actualised with the Church by the Holy Spirit. He certainly was familiar with the working of Didymus "On the Holy Spirit", having translated the work. Jerome saw the Spirit as the light that opens hearts and illuminates the truth. Although the Church manifests truth, it is tradition that "is the unique mode of receiving"¹⁷ that truth in the Spirit to his Church. Jerome was fortunate to be the intersect between the receipt of the Divine Word and the Spirit to manifest that message though his life work back to the Church. Thus, through the Spirit, Jerome was able to clarify the truth and power to the Catholic Church in accordance with the will of the Spirit. Jerome followed the rule of Paul to "test everything, hold onto the good"¹⁸ to come to the spirit of truth in his works.

As a translator and commentator, Jerome manifested the will of the Spirit, as the Church has never regarded the Bible as a self-explanatory work. Although in the Bible, the Word of God became human language, Jerome's preoccupation was to make the Word true. If that meant creating difficulties for the inspired translator so be it. Jerome was not to be deviated from his course. To Jerome it became apparent that to keep the truth pure it was necessary to engage and defeat the sullyng impurity of heresy. This Jerome did without fear. "As one of the Sons of Light"¹⁹ he saw it as his sacred duty to expand, explain, defend, and otherwise bear true witness to the Word of God.

Jerome, as an exegete, was a special man who had the Spirit of Truth and the vision of God to not only receive the message of God but to interpret and transmit that message for the benefit of the faithful. His purpose, as indeed for all exegetes, was to undertake the theandric

exercise of proclaiming the living word by participation in the process of revelation in order to proclaim the Word in power. Jerome thus saw God working out the economy of salvation within the created order in historical time and within the Church. Jerome recognised the Bible as a continuation of salvation history that offered the power to enter into communion with God the Father, through God the Son and in the Holy Spirit. This is not to say that Jerome fell into the heresy of Arianism or Sabellianism but rather gave proper witness by preserving the full faith as revealed by the Spirit to meet the living Christ. Jerome, with his literary gifts, granted by Grace, was able to give the voice of the Word authentic voice and not impose his own preconceptions. His hermeneutic was to arrive at a proper understanding to the text as the written word is parent to the interpreted meaning.

Jerome saw the ontological relationship between the Old Testament and the New as actuated in Christ. He realised the nexus between promise and fulfillment and clearly realised that truth of Cyprian's sentiment that one who no longer had the Church as Mother cannot have God as Father. Hence, as true son of the Church, Jerome was strictly orthodox and he saw any person who theologised outside the Church as creating their own theology. Jerome through his life moved from the interpretive level to the transformative level and went from bearer of the word to doer of the word as he grew as image and as likeness of God in his later life.

For all that, Jerome was also a 'real' person. His work revealed him not only as a pugnacious defender of orthodoxy but also as a man who had human flaws such as vanity in claiming he was more widely read than he was. Also, his work was sometimes rushed and careless. However, when it mattered to the Church, he was careful. Jerome significantly contributed to the establishment of monasticism in the West and he clearly influenced Latin asceticism as well as the Mariology of the West. Thus, Jerome saw himself as following the living tradition of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church in giving back to the Church the fruit of the talents given to him by God.

ENDNOTES

1 Matt 16:15

2 Bernard McGinn. *The Doctors of the Church*. (Crossroad, New York, 1999) p. 4

3 J.N.D Kelly. *Jerome*. (Harper & Row, New York, 1975) p. 1

4 Letter 17 to the presbyter Marcus

5 Jean Steinman. *St Jerome*. Trans. R Matthews. (Deacon Books, London, 1959) p. 318

6 *Patrology. The Golden Age of Latin Patristic Literature from the Council of Nicea to the Council of Chalcedon, Vol 4*. Angelo Di Bernardino, trans. P Solaru (Christian Classics, Allen: Texas) p. 3

7 Jean Steinman. *St Jerome*. Trans. R Matthews. (Deacon Books, London, 1959) p. 76

8 Bernard McGinn. *The Doctors of the Church*. (Crossroad, New York, 1999) p. 189

9 Jean Steinman. *St Jerome*. Trans. R Matthews. (Deacon Books, London, 1959) p. 318

10 David S. Wiesen. *St Jerome as a Satirist: A Study in Christian Latin Thought and Letters* (Cornell University Press, New York, 1964) p. 225

11 Charles Christopher Mierow. *Saint Jerome: The Sage of Bethlehem*. (Bruce Publishing Co., Milwaukee, 1959)

12 *The Life of St Paul the First Hermit* by St Jerome. Translated M L Elwald in "The Fathers of the Church: Early Christian Biographies." Ed. R Deferraire. (Catholic University of America Press, Washington DC 1964) p. 229

13 *Ibid.*, p. 229.

14 Jean Steinmann. *Saint Jerome*. Translated R Matthews. (Geoffrey Chapan, London 1959), p. 130

15 *Ibid.*, p. 237

16 *Ibid.*, p. 90

17 Vladimir Lossky. *In the Image and Likeness of God*. Edited by J E Ruckson & T Bird. (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1985) p. 151

18 1 Thess 5:21

19 Jn 12:36

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