

CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

Lesson 28

St. Jerome

There is a famous story about St. Jerome that mimics an ancient Greek fiction. The story centers on a lion with a thorn in its paw. Jerome supposedly pulls the thorn out of the paw, earning the dedication of the lion. The fiction about Jerome was present in the late middle ages. How it became affixed to Jerome, we do not know. That the story became affixed, we certainly understand. Jerome was a giant in the early church. The Catholic church recognizes Jerome as one of the four great “Doctors” of the church. Protestant scholars likewise see Jerome as a principle in the growth and development of the church. Why? That will be the thrust of our lesson! We will look at Jerome from a biographical perspective and then consider the work of his life and its impact on the church both in his day and historically.

While many have written about Jerome, we get our direct knowledge from his own letters. Jerome was a prolific letter writer, and we have 121¹ of his letters still today. These letters give us great insight not only into Jerome, but also into the church and society in his day.

BIOGRAPHY

Jerome was born somewhere around 345 to 347 in “Strido, which is on the border of Dalmatia and Pannonia,”² a town most likely modern Grahovopolje in what is now Bosnia and Herzegovina, formerly Yugoslavia. At the time of his birth, Strido was a Roman town near the border of what we would consider Northeast Italy and the Roman province of Dalmatia.³ Jerome’s parents were quite well to

¹ In most editions, we have 154 letters, but letter 18 most scholars reckon to be two combined letters, making a total of 155 letters embodied in a collection of Jerome’s correspondence. Of these 155, 32 are written *to* Jerome instead of from him, leaving 123 letters. Two of these letters (numbers 148 and 149), most scholars consider falsely attributed to Jerome leaving us with 121 (or 120 if one doesn’t count letter 18 as two!) letters.

² Jerome, *Lives of Illustrious Men*, 135. Translation by W. H. Fremantle, published by Eerdmans in its series *Nicene & Post-Nicene Fathers*. In this work, Jerome included 135 men of the church who had written “memorable writings.” The last of the 135 men Jerome chose to include and write on was Jerome himself! Quite a bold and confident fellow!

³ Strido was a major Roman city and an early Christian city. Saint Mark was considered the founder of the church in that area. De Hamel, *The Book. A History of the Bible*, (Phaidon 2001 at 14).

do and ensured him a top-flight education. He started school in his town, but he and his best friend were sent to Rome at the age of 12 to continue school.

In Rome, Jerome spent much of his teenage years studying under one of the best Latin scholars/teachers, Aelius Donatus. Donatus wrote the basic Latin textbook used for the next 1,000 years (throughout the Middle Ages).⁴ In addition to gaining great proficiency in Latin grammar, Jerome also used this time to study Koine (Biblical) Greek. Jerome was baptized at age 19 while in Rome. Shortly thereafter, somewhere around the age of 20, Jerome left Rome (again traveling with his boyhood friend Bonosus) and went to Treves (modern Trier Germany) on the “semibarbarous banks of the Rhine.”⁵

While at Treves, Jerome put his language skills to work making copies of certain commentaries (remember, no copy machines!).⁶ Jerome had experiences there with monasticism and learned a bit about the hermits of Egypt. The impressions left on Jerome brought about his joining a movement of ascetics living with strict regimens that carefully monitored any indulgences of the body! There was one indulgence, however, that Jerome had trouble giving up! It was his love for pagan literature. Cicero’s writings seemed to have especially appealed to Jerome.

Around 372 (age 27ish), Jerome left for parts of what are now Turkey, visiting the areas Peter wrote to in his epistles and Paul in Galatians. Jerome settled in Antioch, where the first major church outside Jerusalem was established. While at Antioch, a life changing experience occurred to Jerome. Jerome related the events later in a letter, writing:

While the old serpent [Satan] was thus having sport with me, in about Mid-Lent, a fever attacked my enfeebled body and spread to my very vitals, what I say is almost beyond belief.... Preparations for my funeral were being made... Suddenly I was caught up in the spirit and dragged before the tribunal of the Judge...I cast my self on the ground and dared not look up. Upon being asked my status, I replied that I was a Christian. And he who sat upon the judgment seat said: “Thou liest.

⁴ Rather interesting that the writer of the major book to teach Latin for the next 1,000 years was the Latin teacher of the man who translated the Bible into the Latin version that was used by the church for the same 1,000 years!

⁵ Letter 3.5.2. The translations of the letters used in this paper are those of Charles Mierow, *The Letters of St. Jerome* (Newman Press 1963) for the first 22 letters.

⁶ Jerome copied commentaries of Hilary, bishop of Poitiers, who had likely just died (Hilary probably died 367-368).

Thou art a Ciceronian [devotee of Cicero], not a Christian. Where thy treasure is, there is thy heart also.' I was struck dumb on the spot."⁷

From that time on, Jerome spent his time and energy reading and working on his faith rather than indulging in pagan literature! In fact, while at Antioch and in the neighboring desert, Jerome worked not only on his Greek skills, but he also studied Hebrew from a Jewish rabbi turned Christian.

Jerome was in this part of the world during the significant years when the Trinity issues met final resolution at the Council of Constantinople in 381 (see the earlier lesson on the Trinity). In fact, Jerome went to Constantinople around 379 for his ordination as priest, returning for the Council in 381.

Following the council, Jerome returned to Rome around 382. For several years, he served as the secretary to the Bishop of Rome/Pope Damasus. In addition to his duties as secretary, Jerome spent this time continuing his ascetic lifestyle and concentrating on scholarly work on scripture.

In December 384, Damasus died and Jerome left Rome for good.⁸ Jerome went back East, including a visit to Egypt, and finally settled in Palestine (around 386 at age 41 or so). Jerome found his role as supervisor of a religious community in Bethlehem and a writer/Bible translator. Jerome continued to live in Bethlehem until his death, which is thought to be around 419–420 around the age of 75.

Church leaders have called Jerome a “Father” of the church since the 700’s. Councils and Popes have recognized Jerome as a Doctor in Sacred Scriptures, a saint, and an “indispensable witness to the mind of the Church in dealing with the Word of God.”⁹ Yet, one cannot read Jerome’s writings without being struck by certain passages that seem to reek with almost arrogant self-confidence and self-

⁷ Letter 22 at 30.

⁸ The Catholic Encyclopedia asserts that Jerome left because his “hopes” of becoming the successor pope to Damasus were destroyed by his harshness in writing about the laxity of the Romans clergy as well as his teaching about rigid asceticism. Jerome, never one to leave alone his own considerations of his personal merit or lack thereof, does note while writing from a ship the next year (385), “all Rome resounded with my praises. Almost everyone concurred in judging me worthy of the episcopate (bishop/pope). Damasus, of blessed memory, [the recently dead bishop/pope to whom Jerome served as secretary] spoke no words but mine. Men called me holy, humble, eloquent.” *Letter 45.3*, translated by Fremantle in the Eerdmans series. We would do well to remember that when we work in positions of power and influence, the praises of men are not always as genuine or long lasting as they might seem! Likewise, a little extra humility never hurt anyone!

⁹ *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 7, p. 759.

righteousness, while other passages effuse humility. It is clear from some passages that Jerome could fly off the handle and answer matters with more than a little anger. Other times, his love and patience are equally evident and compelling. Some passages evoke the picture of a man biting and sarcastic, while others show one who is both understanding and compassionate. Yet in all his writings, there is never any doubt about his scholasticism and intellect, nor is there ever a hint of anything less than full devotion to God as Jerome understood him.

WRITINGS

Rather than approach Jerome's writings chronologically, we are going to consider his major work first, and then his other writings.

Jerome is responsible for the Latin version of the Bible that the church used from his day and for the next 1,000 years. As a first-rate Latin scholar, a very good Greek scholar, and later in life, a solid Hebrew scholar, Jerome was uniquely gifted for translating the scriptures.

While in the service of Damasus, Jerome likely first received his commission to translate the scriptures into Latin. There were already a number of Latin copies of scriptures. The copies available, however, had a number of variations and errors. There was no "accepted translation" which the church could recognize as authoritative.

To best understand this, we would do well to recount lessons we have learned about scripture from earlier lessons in either Biblical Literacy or Church History Literacy. Of course, the Bible itself was written in Hebrew/Aramaic (Old Testament) and Greek (New Testament).¹⁰ The Jews of Alexandria had already translated the Hebrew Old Testament into Greek hundreds of years earlier (what we call the "Septuagint"), and church leaders had used the Greek version of the Old Testament since the very start of the church.

Somewhere, likely in the mid-100's, we find that the Greek New Testament (and the Greek Old Testament) were translated into Latin (what we would call "Old Latin"). Neil Lightfoot suggests that the earliest translations into Latin were likely informal translations by missionaries or local Christians to assist the congregations in worship.¹¹ For while Greek was the common language, enough so that Paul wrote to the church at Rome in Greek fully expecting his letter to be understood, by the mid-second century, Latin was the preferred language in the west and

¹⁰ Actually, there is Latin in the New Testament but only in the gospel account of the Latin written on the placard atop the cross of Christ.

¹¹ N. Lightfoot, *How We Got The Bible*, (Baker 2003 at 70).

Greek was not commonly known among the masses. The Latin versions of the Old Testament were translations of that Greek text.

As one would expect from the process of informal translations for the use of local congregations, there were many different “versions” of the Bible floating around in Latin. There was no “official” version that the church could use or rely on.

Now we return to the commission of Damasus. Damasus charged Jerome to prepare a good consistent translation of the gospels. Jerome seems to have finished that while Damasus was still alive. In his preface to the gospels, Jerome writes a dedication to Damasus noting, “You urge me to revise the Old Latin version....The labor is one of love...”

Later in life, Jerome made the decision to translate the rest of the New Testament into a consistent Latin as well. Importantly, Jerome was not translating into “Old Latin” but into the common Latin spoken in his day. The Latin word for “common” is *vulgata*. The translation Jerome made was and still is called the “Vulgate.”

Jerome made his translation by looking not only at the various Latin versions, but also by going back to the original Greek. This upset a number of Jerome’s critics who thought that he should stick to the Old Latin and the “Bible of their fathers!” When news of this criticism came to Jerome’s attention, he reacted quite stridently! In a letter to Marcella written around 384, Jerome writes,

A report suddenly reached me that certain contemptible creatures were deliberately assailing me with the charge that I had endeavored to correct passages in the gospels, against the authority of the ancients and the opinions of the whole world. Now, though I might – as far as strict right goes – treat those persons with contempt...yet let them take my answer as follows: ...the Latin manuscripts of the Scriptures are proved to be faulty by the variations which all of them exhibit, and my object has been to restore them to the form of the Greek original.... If they dislike water drawn from the clear spring, let them drink from the muddy streamlet!¹²

Jerome finished his translation of the New Testament as well as the Old Testament. The Old Testament Jerome took straight from the Hebrew instead of the Septuagint (Greek) version. As a result, Jerome did NOT include the works we refer to as the Apocrypha in his Bible.

¹² Letter 27.1

The greatest scholastic value Jerome brought to the Bible is from his careful examination of the available manuscripts to determine what the original texts would have been prior to his translation. In this vein, Jerome excluded not only the Apocrypha but also some other passages he deemed later additions to the originals. These decisions were not fully followed by the church after his death. In fact, over time, the church re-added the Apocrypha as well as other passages Jerome removed. Because Jerome had not translated that which he thought unscriptural, the later additions were actually in Old Latin rather than the common Latin of Jerome's day.

The Latin Vulgate (Jerome's translation with the later additions) was the first book of importance that Gutenberg would print once he had perfected his movable type. The 1456 edition would continue to influence the church for centuries.

The Vulgate has remained the official Bible of the Roman Catholic Church (as a result, the English versions of the Catholic Bible are really translations of a translation!). It is, and has been for over a century, the Vulgate that the Roman Catholic Church has used for its liturgy and public reading.

From the Vulgate, we get a number of words that have become common parlance in our English Bibles. This is not surprising when one understands that many early English Bibles were taken, at least in part, from the Vulgate rather than from Greek and Hebrew manuscripts. We have words like "congregation," "consecration," "conversion," "exhortation," "justification," "ministry," "sanctification," "testament," even "Calvary" from the Vulgate.¹³

In addition to his translation work, Jerome wrote both letters and exegetical commentaries on scripture. His commentaries were not only on New Testament books but also Old Testament. Jerome's good Hebrew knowledge, along with his location in Palestine for most of his later life, allowed great insight into understanding the Hebrew Scriptures. Jerome did not limit himself to certain narrow approaches to scripture that considered, for example, the Old Testament as only an allegory to be explained in Christian terms. Instead, he saw it and explained it in literal, Rabbinical, and allegorical terms, seizing each approach as he deemed it proper.

Reading the letters of Jerome offer insight not only into his life, but also into the life of the church and society in general. Moreover, they are simply interesting! For example, there is a decades long interchange between Jerome and Augustine, whom we studied several lessons back.

¹³ Lightfoot at 73.

Augustine originally wrote Jerome around 394. Augustine was a church leader in Hippo, North Africa; Jerome was living in Palestine. The two had never met face to face, but knew each other through reputation and mutual friends. Augustine had read a commentary by Jerome on Galatians and disagreed with how he perceived Jerome wrote about the dispute between Paul and Peter in Galatians chapter 2. The letter evidently never reached Jerome, so Augustine wrote Jerome again raising the same issues about 3 years later.

This second letter failed to reach Jerome, at least initially. Ultimately, Jerome does respond to the idea that Augustine may have written a letter with an interesting letter of his own. Jerome tells Augustine that he hopes the letter was not actually from Augustine, but from an imposter, even though the “style and the method of argument appeared to be yours” (Letter 68.1). Jerome then upbraids Augustine in a real left-handed fashion. Jerome tells Augustine, “do not because you are young challenge a veteran in the field of Scripture. I have had my time, and have run my course....It is but fair that I should rest, while you in your turn run.... At the same time...let me remind you ... ‘The tired ox treads with a firmer step’” (68.2).

In other words, “Look out, Augustine, I may be old, but I am deliberate. Be careful of crossing me!”

As we go through the long time period these two giants wrote each other, we can see a deep admiration, respect, and even friendship grow. By the end of their days, they wrote wonderful letters of encouragement and love to each other.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. “All scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16-17).
2. “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15).
3. “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth...for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matt. 6:19-20).
4. “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God” (Mat. 5:9).