

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expository Times* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expository-times_01.php

pdfs are named: [Volume]_[Issue]_[1st page of article].pdf

Jerome: A Character Sketch from the Period of the Declining Roman Empire.

BY PROFESSOR GEORG GRÜTZMACHER, PH.D., HEIDELBERG.

WE have a picture by the German painter, Albrecht Dürer, entitled 'Jerome at Home.' The saint, withdrawn from the world, appears seated in a pleasant chamber. Everything wears a friendly aspect: the polished woodwork, the useful articles on the walls, the large pumpkin depending from the ceiling. In the foreground lies a lion, which can hardly keep his good-natured eyes open for sleep, and side by side with him the house dog lies sunning himself. The principal subject of the picture has placed his shoes under the window sill, hung the large cardinal's hat on the nail beside the sand-glass, and set himself to work. He is engaged on the translation of the Bible, the task which has immortalized his name. Seated at the beautifully wrought table, he is deeply engrossed with his work. The picture of a pious, quiet, contented scholar! Through the window panes the bright sun pours its mild and kindly rays. The same neatness and order that appear in the home seem to characterize the heart of this saint. Peace pervades the whole scene, and is diffused also over his lofty intellectual brow. Such is the picture which Albrecht Dürer, building upon legend, has painted of St. Jerome. What was the real character of this man who deserves to be better known than he is, the author of what is still accepted by the Roman Catholic Church as the authoritative Latin Version of the Bible, the so-called Vulgate?

When the emperor Theodosius died in 395 A.D., the mighty Roman Empire was divided between his two sons, Honorius and Arcadius. Honorius received the West, Arcadius the East. But scarcely had the powerful emperor, Theodosius, breathed his last when revolt, bloodshed, poverty, pestilence began within, while outside Huns, Germans, Parthians pressed upon the frontiers of the Empire. Men were seized with the idea that the world had grown old and that its course was run, and that life was not worth living. And, as a matter of fact, a great epoch in the history of mankind was coming to an end. The Roman Empire, the ancient world, was on the point of dying, and terrible was the death struggle. There

was nothing now to oppose to the destroying forces: neither the strength of a State that could control itself nor the power of a harmonious well-tried ideal of culture. The Empire fell, the culture fell to pieces; it had become hollow and false; there was no longer such a thing as a good conscience, a frank natural disposition, or pure hands.

It was at this time, when the Roman Empire was decaying and there were signs of the dissolution of all existing relations, that Jerome was born. When he first saw the light, *c.* 340 (the exact year of his birth is not determined), the Empire was ruled by the sons of Constantine, and when he died, an old man of eighty, in 420, he had had to mourn the fall of Rome. This Rome, so full of vices, but at the same time marked by the noblest strivings, rich in genius and culture, with its unsurpassable works of art, with its wealth ennobled by the impress of genius, this city which had formed the starting-point of a marvellous period in the history of intellectual development, had become in 410 a prey to the barbarians.

Jerome was born at Stridon, in Dalmatia, a petty country town of the province which formed the dividing line between West and East. Thus by his very birth he was marked out and qualified, as no one else, to serve as intermediary betwixt the two halves of the Empire, and he devoted his life-work more than any of his contemporaries to effecting this interchange of ideas. Sprung from a good Catholic family, not unpossessed of means, he grew up under the charge of attendants and pedagogues. The times when Roman mothers themselves nursed and educated their children, were long gone by. Associating with the domestics, an onlooker at the marriages of slaves, Jerome early picked up many a foul word and received many objectionable impressions. It was no wonder if afterwards, when plunged into the turmoil of the great city, young men succumbed to the countless temptations to a dissolute life. In the parental home he received also the first elements of education. In the first place, letters of boxwood or of ivory were put into the hands of the child. He

was told the names of these, and had then to learn their order and to repeat the names like a poem. Then the letters were mixed up, and the child had to practise identifying them. When he was familiar with the letters, instruction in writing began. With trembling hand he copied the letters with the style on the wax tablet, or he had given to him a small wooden tablet with the letters cut into it, that he might copy the characters in the same grooves, without the possibility of deviating from the prescribed form. The next stage was the making of letters into syllables, syllables into words, words into sentences. Elementary instruction had even then been completely reduced to a system, and had many points of contact with the methods of to-day. The children's zeal for learning was stimulated by small rewards, but severity was also an accompaniment of the process of education. Jerome has humorous reminiscences of his first pedagogue, a savage schoolmaster, from whose chastisement he often fled to the arms of his grandmother, and who sought him out and brought him back a prisoner to the repellent task of writing and reading.

While quite a youth, Jerome came to Rome. Here he sat at the feet of the famous grammarian, Donatus, and received instruction in all the subtleties of grammar and all the artifices of rhetoric. The Latin language, pressed into the service of all the devices of education, had long lost its innocence. With the decline of culture the language also had paid the penalty in the loss of the virtue of truthfulness, and the gifted boy learned all the deceitful arts of which he afterwards availed himself with such biting eloquence in his conflicts with opponents. He exercised his ingenuity in the discussion of imaginary points of law. Even in extreme old age, when his head was already snow-white, he dreamt that he was back again in these days of youthful instruction. He saw himself with carefully dressed hair and clothed in toga declaiming with pathos his little controversial speech before the rhetor; but, when he awoke, he rejoiced that he had left behind him those days when a strict master subjected his raw efforts to rigorous criticism. That such a course of education could not fail to exert an influence on the formation of character is a matter of course. In the case of Jerome, with his strong passions and rich imagination, these influences found a very fertile soil. In Rome he began, moreover, to

collect a library. A sincere love for science, an ineradicable inclination to learned occupations already show themselves prominently in him, and amidst all his changes of opinion, he remained ever faithful to this love. Science was his bride, first secular, afterwards theological science. When in later days he began a life of asceticism, his library accompanied him into the dreary wilderness. In Rome Jerome as an adult submitted himself to baptism. It had become customary to defer baptism, because this sacrament effected the pardon of all sins, and there was the fear of again forfeiting by transgression the grace that had been received. In spite of his baptism, however, he was guilty of serious lapses from morality. He drank full draughts from the intoxicating cup of sensual indulgence. In this matter we are not to judge him too severely; a greater than he, Augustine himself, likewise fell at the same time. Christianity had not yet devised proper forms for educating the young in accordance with the principles of Christian ethics. In the schools the heathen authors were studied, and the lewd mythological tales worked like poison on the young mind. It is easy to understand how, under such circumstances, a Christian character could then as a rule be developed only as the result of severe moral struggles. But it is characteristic that Jerome, at the very time when he was leading a life of sensual indulgence, used to go on Sundays to the catacombs and, filled with the piety of an enthusiast, descend to the graves of the apostles and martyrs. Here he would wander through the deep subterranean passages in whose walls, to right and left, the bodies of martyred saints were interred. Amidst dreadful darkness shrouding him, the word of the prophet occurred to his mind, 'Thou shalt go down living to Sheol.' It was a remarkable double life he led; at one moment he would abandon himself without a scruple to sensual enjoyment, and then with awakened conscience delight to allow the terrors of death and the grave to work upon him in the gloomy shadows of the underground cemetery.

From Rome Jerome, in company with his young friend, Bonosus, undertook a journey to Gaul. He visited the semi-barbarian banks of the Rhine, and made some stay in Mainz, Worms, and Treves. It was in the last-named flourishing town that he formed the resolution of dedicating himself to Christ. Disgusted with the wild life of excess, he

determined to be a monk. From Treves he proceeded to Aquileja, not far from the modern Venice, where he lived for a short time in the company of those who felt called to a clerical profession. His hot-blooded friend Bonosus had already begun the monastic life upon a solitary island on the Dalmatian coast. In romantic solitude, where the stormy sea raged and the surf broke with tremendous roar upon a much indented wall of cliffs, he sought like a joyous child to live to his God. Where no green blade ever showed itself, where in spring the whole place offered no shady resting-place, he sought rest from the world. The difficulty of escaping destruction in the vortex of life, weariness of the empty common life, and the prospect of a higher good were driving those who were not the worst of men out into the wilderness, to escape from society and its vices.

Then Jerome too set to work. In the desert of Chalcis, near Antioch, at what was a classic site of monasticism, he determined to commence the penitential life. From his native town of Stridon, the home of rustic barbarism, from his parents and relatives he parted without regret. He reached Antioch, but had not the courage to become a hermit. There, in the course of Lent, shortly before mid-Lent Sunday, he had a severe illness, and experienced a remarkable vision. He was brought in spirit before the judgment-seat of God and asked who he was. He answered, 'A Christian,' but the Judge replied, 'Thou liest; thou art a Ciceronian and not a Christian,' and caused him to be beaten till he took an oath never to read heathen books again. Upon swearing to this he was let go and returned to the world. This vision led him to fulfil his original resolution. But he had many surprises when he found himself transferred all at once to the society of the hermits. These men, with their penitents' chains and mourning garments, their unkempt hair and filth, did *they* embody the highest Christian ideal of life? Jerome soon discovered that his hermit friends were by no means the saints they were taken to be. 'In the wilderness,' he writes, 'pride quickly slips in, and when one has fasted for a little and seen no human being, he considers himself somebody, and goes astray inwardly with his heart and outwardly with his tongue.' It did not elude his observation what an amount of cheating was practised in connexion with fasting, how frequently they ate what was unlawful, how they

would in sinful sloth spend whole days in sleep, or invent ghost stories about their conflicts with evil spirits, and allow themselves to be looked upon with admiring wonder by the vulgar crowd, from all of which they derived profit. At the death of a hermit a perfect Cræsus treasure was discovered, which he had saved from the alms given him. At first Jerome sought to emulate his dirty comrades in the matter of fasting, but he speedily made the painful discovery that the temptations he had meant to escape assailed him in other forms. The holiness of which he was in search he neither found in his companions, nor attained for himself. So energetic a spirit as that of Jerome could not possibly find permanent scope for its activity in penitential exercises. He began to learn the Hebrew language, of which he gained a very considerable knowledge. His translation of the Old Testament from the Hebrew is an unimpeachable witness how thoroughly and diligently he gave himself to the study of a language so difficult to a Roman, and all this with the use of very imperfect aids which had first to be created by himself.

But a longing for the society of his friends soon revived within him, and the doctrinal conflicts in which he became involved made his sojourn in the wilderness growingly irksome. Finally, he left it, saying, 'It is better to dwell among wild beasts than with such Christians.' In Antioch he received priestly consecration, after which he went for a short time to Constantinople, where he sat at the feet of its learned bishop, Gregory of Nazianzus. In 382 we find him again at Rome, where the sunshine of papal favour fell upon him. He enjoyed the protection of Damasus, the bishop of Rome, at whose instance he began his translation of the Bible. He revised the Old Latin version of the New Testament, with the aid of the best Greek text accessible to him, but the friends of tradition sounded the note of alarm at the idea that the learned monk should presume, in opposition to the authority of the ancients, to correct anything in the sacred text. Jerome made an angry retort to those 'who mistake boorish ignorance for sanctity, two-legged asses who understand the blare of a trumpet better than the soft notes of the guitar.' He had to make acquaintance with a species of martyrdom from which no scientific theologian is exempt.

Beside his learned labours he acted as spiritual

adviser, while at Rome, to a circle composed of ladies belonging to the principal noble families. The noble widow Marcella, who after the death of her husband had rejected all proposals of marriage, first plucked up courage and sent an invitation to the interesting man who had lived in the East as a hermit. 'I had shyly kept out of sight of the noble ladies, when Marcella, in the words of the apostle, addressed herself to me in season and out of season, until by her importunity she overcame my shyness. And because it was believed that I had a vocation for biblical studies, she never met me without addressing to me some question about Holy Scripture.' She gave him no rest, submitting to him all kinds of impossible questions about obscure passages. The new life that commenced within the ascetic circle, presents itself as an intellectual emancipation. The ascetic movement brought an inward enrichment to woman's world which cannot be too highly estimated. In painting their faces with carmine and white lead, in decking themselves with trinkets, silken attire and flashing jewels, the life of Roman matrons had been spent hitherto. Now they were able to satisfy their intellectual and religious interests in converse with men of like disposition. And Jerome possessed all the qualities that could attach inquisitive women to him. He was too vain ever to acknowledge his ignorance, and imposed upon the noble ladies by his all-comprehending knowledge. Marcella, indeed, was not so easily satisfied, and was not blind to the weaknesses in the saint's character. But quite different was it with the lady who stood next to her in eminence in the ascetic band, Paula. She was a true woman, she had been a loving wife and a happy smiling mother. After the death of her beloved husband, Toxotius, she lived a life of the strictest asceticism. She dispensed her wealth with lavish hand, completely indifferent whether the recipient of her favours was deserving or the reverse. With devoted unquestioning love, she attached herself, along with her daughter Eustochium, to Jerome. At times, however, the relations between Jerome and his female friends lost their serious character, and assumed a gallant and sportive tinge. For instance, on St. Peter's Day Eustochium sent to her revered teacher armlets, doves, a basket of cherries. Jerome in his letter of thanks interprets the gifts allegorically. But strict asceticism leaves

the field entirely, and polite adulation dictates the words: 'We have also received a basket of cherries, so fresh and bright with maidenly blushes that I imagined they had just come from Lucullus. Now, since we read in Scripture of a basket filled with figs, but have no word of cherries, we commend in what has been brought what has not been brought, and wish that you may be one of those fruits which are placed before the temple of God, and of which God says, "They are good, very good."'

As long as Pope Damasus lived, Jerome, according to his own account, enjoyed the goodwill of the whole city, and even cherished the hope of succeeding Damasus on the papal throne. But when the latter died in 384 and Siricius took his place, a veritable crusade began against the man who was hated by so many. Blasilla, the eldest daughter of Paula, had come to a premature end through severe asceticism, and the fury of the Roman mob found expression at her funeral. It was proposed to fling the foreign monks into the Tiber to be drowned. Then Jerome resolved to leave the ungrateful city. Remote from hostile attacks he determined to live in sacred spots an exemplary monastic life, which was to fill the world with admiration and to enrich the West with brilliant scientific achievements. He did not go alone; his pious friends Paula and Eustochium followed him directly afterwards. Paula parted from her family without shedding a tear; the little Toxotius stretched his hands imploringly after her from the shore; Ruffina, whose marriage was close at hand, silently conjured her by her tears to wait at least for that event. But Paula, turning her dry eyes towards heaven, overcame her love to her children by her love to God. At Antioch she met with Jerome, and now began a tour round the Holy Land, in which every spot was hallowed by some dear memory. With burning devotion they knelt before the sacred cross, wept at the sepulchre of the Lord, kissed the resurrection stone. Next they bent their steps to Egypt, where a visit was paid to the famous settlers in the Nitrian mountains. Paula was seized with an enthusiastic reverence for these heroes of asceticism, she flung herself on her knees before them, imagining that in each one of them she beheld Christ. Then the return was made to Bethlehem, where, at the expense of Paula were erected, in the vicinity of the Saviour's birthplace, a monastery presided

over by Jerome, and a nunnery directed by Paula herself. Here Jerome was able to complete his great task of Bible translation and to compose a number of exegetical works on the O.T. and N.T. Soon, however, financial difficulties began to be felt. Paula by her heedless benevolence had almost exhausted her fortune, and Jerome was driven to raise money by the sale of his ancestral property at Stridon. The monastery, moreover, was so overrun by pilgrims coming from the West, that hostelries for them had to be erected along the highway leading through Bethlehem. The learned leisure of the scholar was grievously disturbed. He describes how he was frequently pressed by pilgrims to give them a letter to take to a friend at home. 'Already were the papers made out and the post-horse saddled, already had the noble youth with his Phœnician tunic girded himself with his sword-belt, when he would bring forward a scribe and press me to speak, so that what was quickly spoken was written down by the swift hand, and the letters of the words kept pace with the tongue.' From every country of the West, from Gaul, North Africa, Rome, Italy, Spain, men came to see the revered patriarch of monasticism. A rich Spaniard did not shrink from the enormous expense of sending six scribes to Bethlehem to copy out for him, under the author's superintendence, the works of Jerome. It was the custom that, when a noble Roman lady took the veil, she applied to the aged apostle of virginity for a letter. Twenty years after he had left Rome the object of anything but honour, he can write in triumph: 'The number of monks in Rome increases enormously; the monastic state, once ridiculed and despised, is now one that commands honour and praise.' Roman senators like Pammachius, ex-consuls like Paulinus of Nola, took monastic vows. The decaying heathen religion sank more and more every day, the rigidly conservative Roman aristocracy, which had so long clung to the old gods, turned to Christ and completed the breach in the rudest fashion by many of those aristocrats becoming monks. Although the leader of the heathen party, Q. Aurelius Symmachus, a patriot enthusiastic for the ancient order of things, did his utmost to stir up the emperors to protect heathenism, he accomplished nothing, because he himself had no real faith in his cause. He might be a noble character, a benevolent man, a kind and

painstaking father, and in more than one respect he might stand morally higher than Jerome, but he was a sceptic in religious matters, whereas upon the side of his Christian opponent there were strength, energy, intellectual superiority, and a living faith. And in spite of the bizarre forms which this faith assumed, it conquered the world.

On the 26th of January 406 Jerome received a heavy blow in the death of his dear friend Paula. She was solemnly interred at the birth-place of Jesus, and Jerome composed for her a warmly appreciative epitaph. Then in 410 came the news that Rome, the eternal city, was besieged. The city that had been the scene of his sins of youth, but in which also he had spent the most brilliant period of his life, was captured by the Gothic barbarians. His patriotism was aroused. 'One is stricken dumb, and the words of him that dictates are interrupted by sobs.' 'O God, heathen break into thine inheritance and defile Thy holy temple,' he complains. His friend Marcella died immediately after the fall of the city. His one comfort was Eustochium, who now presided over the convent in her mother's place. Ten years after the conquest of Rome by Alaric, Jerome himself died, having remained to the last a keen controversialist, whose intellectual vigour was unabated.

Jerome was a remarkable personality, the trusted adviser of a powerful pope, and the idol of the noble ladies of Rome, hermit and monk, scholar and witty conversationalist. We must always keep in mind that he lived in an age of decadence and degeneration, whose features are deeply impressed upon his character. He was passionate and yet cowardly; stained with youthful sins, and yet a hero of chastity; consumed with the fire of impure sensuousness, and yet an uncompromising prophet of asceticism; vain and greedy of power, and yet a weak man; strictly orthodox, and yet with an undogmatic mind; a champion of dogma, and yet no witness to the truth; pious, and yet no child of God; an impassioned scholar, and yet at times a learned trifler. Yet, in spite of these unpleasing traits in his character, who can deny the immense historical influence which the life of this man has had? The intellectual renaissance which took place in the West in his time, owed its origin in great part to him, while in his translation of the Bible he produced a work which, in spite of many imperfections, must be reckoned amongst the greatest products of Christian genius in any age.