

The Repentance of Jerome: How the Great Translator of the Latin Vulgate Bible Got His Priorities Turned Round.

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***“Thou liest [Jerome]; thou art a
Ciceronian, not a Christian!”***

Where I came to know the Lord, a little college town nestled among the rolling hills on the Palouse in Northern Idaho, I never encountered any advocates of the King James Only position. I do seem to recall vaguely someone telling me early on how he preferred the King James over the translation I was using that day—I don’t remember which one it was—on account of the greater grandeur of its style, majesty of its cadences, dignity of its expression, and so on. I remember commenting at the time—it must have made me appear a hopeless North Idaho bumpkin—that what drew me to the Bible were its promises not its poetry. That’s still true...by the way. Years later I was helped in this regard (or, if you like, confirmed in this opinion) by Søren



Fig. 1 *Saint Jerome*
Attributed to Balthazar Permoser
(German, 1651-1732)
Museum of Art and Archaeology
University of Missouri—Columbia

Kierkegaard's continual warnings against confusing the aesthetically beautiful for the divinely inspired.¹ That's not to say that the two are mutually exclusive, that butt ugly is somehow "more inspired" than beautiful. As the scripture says: "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" (Rom 10:15). But there the beauty of the feet has nothing to do with whether they are gnarled and corny, thick and horny-yellow nailed or smooth, pampered and elegantly manicured. Rather they receive their beauty from without, from the fact that they are viewed in the light of the good news they carry. Their beauty, in other words, only becomes visible through the ear not the eye of the beholder. And lest anybody get the wrong idea that I am getting ready to make a pitch here, for example, for the proliferation of cheap and tacky evangelistic materials, or cheesy Christian music. I am not arguing that aesthetics don't matter, only that we mustn't confuse the more aesthetic with the more divine.

To return to the theme of majestic cadences, dignity of expression, and so on, some may be surprised to learn that while some of the Bible as it was originally written did reflect that, a good deal of it did not. Indeed there have been times in history when the decoration of speech has been held in such high esteem that Christians of more refined rhetorical sensibilities have in fact found themselves being embarrassed, and even offended, by the plain dress God chose for his Word.

Such was the case, for example, for the great 4th-5th century Church Father, Augustine of Hippo, who describes his early dislike of the plainness of Scriptural language in the third book of his *Confessions*:

For then it was quite different from what I now feel. When I then turned toward the Scriptures, they appeared to me to be quite unworthy to be compared with the dignity of Tully [i.e., Cicero]. For my inflated pride was repelled by their style, nor could the sharpness of my wit penetrate their inner meaning. Truly they were of a sort to aid the growth of little ones, but I scorned to be a little one and, swollen with pride, I looked upon myself as fully grown.²

Part of Augustine's great story turns on how he learned to understand that truth is truth no matter how it's dressed. There are those who think

¹ See, especially, Søren Kierkegaard, "On the Difference Between a Genius and an Apostle," in *The Present Age* (trans. Alexander Dru; New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1966), 87-108.

² Augustine, *Confessions* 3.6.9 (ET: Albert C. Outler).

something is truer and better *because* it is expressed in beautiful words, just as there are others, who are so captivated by the idea of “calling a spade a spade,” that they are easily duped into believing false opinions plainly stated while at the same time rejecting true ones eloquently put. In reality the world is full of all kinds of people, and both truth and falsehood appears in all kinds of verbal attire. Augustine addresses this (as it happens very eloquently) in the fifth book of his *Confessions*, in a passage where he is describing his dissatisfaction with the finely-crafted defenses of Manicheanism—a heresy to which Augustine himself had been held captive for some years—put forward by the famous Manichaean, Faustus:

But what profit was there to me in the elegance of my cupbearer, since he could not offer me the more precious draught for which I thirsted? My ears had already had their fill of such stuff, and now it did not seem any better because it was better expressed nor more true because it was dressed up in rhetoric; nor could I think the man’s soul necessarily wise because his face was comely and his language eloquent. But they who extolled him to me were not competent judges. They thought him able and wise because his eloquence delighted them. At the same time I realized that there is another kind of man who is suspicious even of truth itself, if it is expressed in smooth and flowing language. But thou, O my God, hadst already taught me in wonderful and marvelous ways, and therefore I believed—because it is true—that thou didst teach me and that beside thee there is no other teacher of truth, wherever truth shines forth. Already I had learned from thee that because a thing is eloquently expressed it should not be taken to be as necessarily true; nor because it is uttered with stammering lips should it be supposed false. Nor, again, is it necessarily true because rudely uttered, nor untrue because the language is brilliant. Wisdom and folly both are like meats that are wholesome and unwholesome, and courtly or simple words are like town-made or rustic vessels—both kinds of food may be served in either kind of dish.³

Augustine of course never felt the need to abandon his ability to speak and write eloquently. But he did get over his early offence at the plainness of Scriptural language, and in doing so he became one of the Scriptures’ greatest defenders and expositors.

³ Augustine, *Confessions* 5.6.10 (ET: Albert C. Outler).

Throughout history there have been other people like Augustine in this regard. The famous Erasmus of Rotterdam, whose Greek text lies at the root of both our King James New Testament and of Luther's New Testament as well, also needed prodding before he was ready to surrender his considerable talents to the service of Christianity and the study of Scripture.

The occasion seems to have been a letter, now lost, from his friend, the scholar Jean Colet, a man who Erasmus recalled in the line: "A book was ever his companion on the road, and his talk was always of Christ."⁴

The reason for this man's having credibility with Erasmus and therefore also potential influence over him was that, according to E. Harris Harbison, "the one thing Erasmus had never yet experienced was to meet a thoroughly devoted Christian with a first-rate mind and scholarly tastes something like his own."⁵ Colet was that man. Harbison writes further that "Colet seems to have put squarely up to Erasmus [in a lost letter] the decision which would affect the whole future course of his life: Was he going to waste his extraordinary talents by devoting his life to secular Poetry and Rhetoric, as he apparently intended, or would he immediately join Colet in his battle with the sophists and obscurantists [at Oxford] who were hiding knowledge of the Gospel."⁶

Whether Erasmus ever got as far as he should have in escaping his devotion to secular poetry and rhetoric is something that can be debated, but the continuing value of the work he did do in editing and commenting on Scripture can never be adequately measured.

I. CHRISTIAN OR CICERONIAN?

By far one of the most remarkable "repentings" along these lines is that of Saint Jerome, the 4th century Father who originally translated the Latin Vulgate Bible. In his Epistle 22 to Eustochium, written in A.D. 384, Jerome recalls how he left Rome for Jerusalem with the purpose of adopting the life of a Monk. "Many years ago for the sake of the kingdom of heaven," he writes, "I cut myself off from home, parents, sister, relations, and, what was harder, from the dainty food to which I had been used." And yet, he confesses, "I could not bring myself to forgo the library which with great care and labor I had got together at Rome. And so, miserable man that I was, I would fast, only to read Cicero

⁴ Quoted in E. Harris Harbison, *The Christian Scholar in the Age of Reformation* (New York: Scribner's, 1956), 56.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 76-77.

afterwards.” Not only so, but he would come back from his vigils only to enjoy himself with a volume of Plautus. What was worse, he says, is that “[w]henever I returned to my right senses and began to read the prophets, their language seemed harsh and barbarous.” But then Jerome fell seriously ill: “about the middle of Lent a fever attacked my weakened body and spread through my inmost veins. It may sound incredible, but the ravages it wrought on my unhappy frame were so persistent that at last my bones scarcely held together. Meantime preparations were made for my funeral: my whole body grew gradually cold, and life’s vital warmth only lingered faintly in my poor throbbing breast.” In this state Jerome reports having had the following extraordinary and life-changing experience:

Suddenly I was caught up in the spirit and dragged before the Judge’s judgment seat: and here the light was so dazzling, and the brightness shining from those who stood around so radiant, that I flung myself upon the ground and did not dare to look up. I was asked to state my condition and replied that I was a Christian. But He who presided said: ‘Thou liest; thou art a Ciceronian, not a Christian. “For where thy treasure is there will thy heart be also.”’

And then, straightway, the Judge ordered that Jerome be severely flogged, during which he cried out for mercy, until finally,

the bystanders fell at the knees of Him who presided, and prayed Him to pardon my youth and give me opportunity to repent of my error, on the understanding that the extreme of torture should be inflicted on me if ever I read again the works of Gentile authors. In the stress of that dread hour I should have been willing to make even larger promises, and taking oath I called upon His name: “O Lord, if ever again I possess worldly books or read them, I have denied thee.” After swearing this oath I was dismissed, and returned to the upper world.⁷

As strange as the experience seems, Jerome insisted that it was “no sleep nor idle dream, such as often mocks us,” and he even testifies that after he came to himself “my shoulders were black and blue, and that I felt the bruises long after I awoke from my sleep.” However we interpret Jerome’s experience, he himself claimed that it had its intended

⁷ Jerome, Epistle 22.30 (ET: F. A. Wright).

effect. "Henceforth," he says, writing perhaps a decade or so after the experience, "I read the books of God with a greater zeal than I had ever given before to the books of men."

In order to understand the Iconography of Saints one must know a little about how one becomes canonized, that is to say how one comes to be a saint, in the Roman Catholic Church. In the New Testament all believers are saints. Not so in Catholicism, nor in other ancient Churches, where people came to be recognized as saints for a number of reasons, which included, but didn't necessarily require, having lived a life characterized by great sanctity.⁸ Those who have read Jerome learn to appreciate him less for his heroic piety, than for his crusty pugnaciousness, his bad-tempered irascibility, or, to speak plainly, his downright all around cussedness. When one thinks of Jerome, in other words, the list of the fruits of the Spirit in Galatians 5 and the love chapter of 1 Corinthians 13 don't spring readily to mind. What I am saying is that we are not talking Saint Francis of Assisi here! Truth be told, Jerome often wasn't very saintly in the traditional sense. Those he disliked experienced him as an opinionated, mean-spirited, acid-tongued, bad-tempered, nasty old coot. And that is what he was...on his good days! Even though Thomas J. Craughwell, includes Jerome in his, *Saints for Every Occasion: 101 of Heaven's Most Powerful Patrons*, he is nevertheless candid enough to say that "Jerome is a difficult man to like."⁹ He also tells us, by the way, that Jerome was the patron saint of students of the Bible, a curious contradiction, since students of the Bible, or at least those attentive to its teaching, will not want to have Saints they can pray to. The Bible's very conspicuous in its teaching on this point. There is, and can be, only one mediator between God and man, namely Jesus (1 Tim 2:5). But to continue, the question for us, then, is how can such an unpleasant old character come to be canonized?

Fact is, while some people became saints (in the Roman Catholic sense) because of their heroic piety, Saint Francis for example, others did so because of having been martyred. Still others, simply for some extraordinary service done on behalf of the Church. Such was the case

⁸ The current elaborate process of moving in stages of investigation first to beatification and then to formal canonization only came into existence many centuries after Jerome. For a convenient history of the development of this process see Richard P. McBrien, *Lives of Saints from Mary and St. Francis of Assisi to John XXIII and Mother Teresa* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 41-49.

⁹ Thomas J. Craughwell, *Saints for Every Occasion: 101 of Heavens Most Powerful Patrons* (C. D. Stampley Enterprises: Charlotte, NC, 2001), 55.

for Jerome, especially in view of his being the translator of the standard edition of the Latin Vulgate Bible. He was in fact one of the few men of his age who understood the implications of textual criticism and who troubled to master Hebrew so as to be able to understand the Old Testament. He was, in addition, a scriptural commentator as well as an energetic polemicist against anything he considered heresy, some of which actually was. For all this the Catholic Church, to say nothing of all the rest of us, is still indebted to him today.

II. THE ICONOGRAPHY OF THE “SAINTS”

When it comes to iconographic representations of the saints, three considerations usually come into play in establishing the symbolic imagery relating to their representation. The first is their contribution to the Church, the second some miraculous, or at least remarkable, story told about them, and third, in the case of martyrs, the particular instrument used in putting them to death for the faith, which the saint is often portrayed holding in their hand. Thus for example, the Apostle, who was beheaded, is often depicted holding a sword, James the brother of Jesus a fuller’s club, and Andrew the brother of Peter, a cross in the shape of an X (i.e., Saint Andrew’s cross). One of the strangest of these is seen in depictions of Saint Bartholomew, who was supposedly skinned alive. One account, reported in the Medieval *Golden Legend* of Jacobus de Voragine, tells how Bartholomew’s “skin was pulled off as if to make a bag.”¹⁰

Sometimes Bartholomew is shown simply holding a knife. Occasionally he also appears not only with his knife, but also with his own skin draped over his arm. One of the most famous of these depictions comes from Michelangelo’s *Last Judgment* on the back wall of the Sistine Chapel at Rome, where we see Bartholomew just to the right of Christ. Art historians regularly claim that in painting Saint Bartholomew’s skin, Michelangelo had in mind to impress upon it, a self portrait of himself.¹¹

¹⁰ Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Reading on the Saints* (2 vols.; trans. William Granger Ryan; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University press, 1993), 2:115.

¹¹ See Bernadine Barnes, *Michelangelo’s Last Judgment: the Renaissance Response* (Berkeley and Los Angeles; University of California Press, 1998), 155, n. 14.

However that may be, I include here instead an example I came across in the Jesuit church of Saint Xaver in Leoben, Austria (fig. 2).¹²

Jerome, however, was not martyred. He lived to the ripe old age of about ninety, and then quietly passed out of this world.

Consequently, his manner of dying was to have no formative influence on his iconography. His importance as a biblical scholar, however, did have influence, as is seen in his almost invariably being depicted with a book, and sometimes in a study. But it is the story told earlier about his repentance concerning worldly learning that was to dominate his iconography, such that the figure of Jerome was to become the patron saint, as it were, of repentance from worldly vanities, as represented in particular by the pagan authors whose stylistic refinement he had at one time preferred to the “harsh and barbarous” language of Holy Scripture. Paintings represented this by showing Jerome holding a stone, with which to beat his breast, a traditional symbolic act of repentance.

In this connection he is also very often depicted in a desert setting. Quite often Jerome’s breast is represented being covered with blood, as can be seen in the dark markings below his beard on the detail from a 16th century glazed Italian plate (fig. 3).



**Fig. 2: Saint Bartholomew with his skin draped over his arm
(Saint Xaver Church, Leoben, Austria)**

¹² Those interested in pursuing this curious theme further may enjoy (if “enjoy” is the right word) Sarah Kay’s article “Original Skin: Flaying Reading and Thinking in the Legend of Saint Bartholomew and Other Works,” *Journal of Medieval & Early Modern Studies* 36.1 (2006): 35-73.



Fig. 3 Detail of dish painted in Urbino, lustrated in Gubbio (1530)
Nelson-Atkins Museum, Kansas City, MO.



Fig. 3 *The Penitent Saint Jerome*, by
Antonio d' Enrico, Italian, c. 1627-30
Nelson-Atkins Museum, Kansas City, MO.



Fig. 5 *The Penitent Jerome*
Johann Veit Hauck
On the Baroque Pulpit (1710)
Graz Cathedral (Austria)

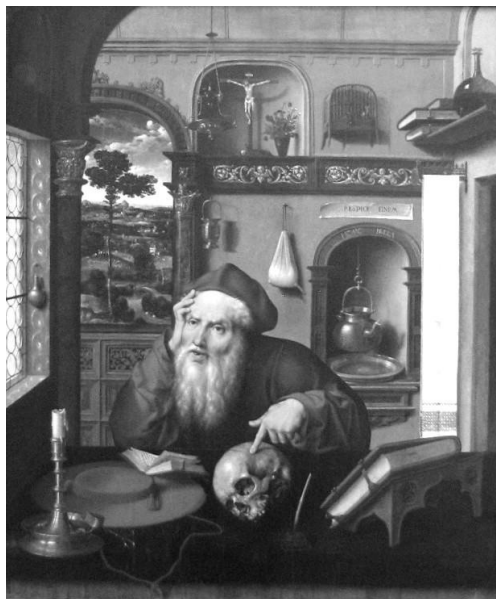


Fig. 4 Jerome in his Study (detail), Joos Van Cleve, c. 1424-1430. Fogg Museum, Harvard University.

Another feature typical of the iconography of Jerome, one indeed present in most of the examples looked at so far, is a human skull. It represents the impermanence of human life, as in 1 Peter 1:24-25 (quoting Isaiah 40:6-8): “All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord stands forever.” The passage is most appropriate given both Jerome’s repentance from his preference for classical writers, and his dedication to Biblical scholarship. One Saint Jerome that brings this motif forward very emphatically is *Jerome in His Study* by Joos Van Cleve, now in the Fogg Museum at Harvard University (fig. 6). In this picture Jerome sits in his study (another common setting for him in view of his role as a great scholar) and leans on his desk holding his head with one hand and pointing to the skull with the other. Before him on the table stands an extinguished candle, also representing the brevity and transience of human existence. His face as well reflects the theme. His face is perplexed, and his eyes are not directed toward the viewer, but rather are troubled and distant. His mouth hangs open revealing that he is missing some teeth (fig. 7). Perhaps we should imagine he is muttering a prayer, acknowledging in the presence of the Lord and of the viewer that we are but grass. One of the most fascinating details however comes in the background where we see a kettle hanging in an arched recess in

the wall (fig. 8). Above the recess a piece of paper or cloth has been pasted up (and is already coming loose) upon which is written the Latin words *RESPICE FINEM* (“Look to the end”), below which, on the arch itself, appear the words of the well known saying from classical times: *HOMO BULLA* (“Man is a Bubble”).¹³ Wholesome words for all would-be bible scholars, and indeed, if you think about it, for us all.

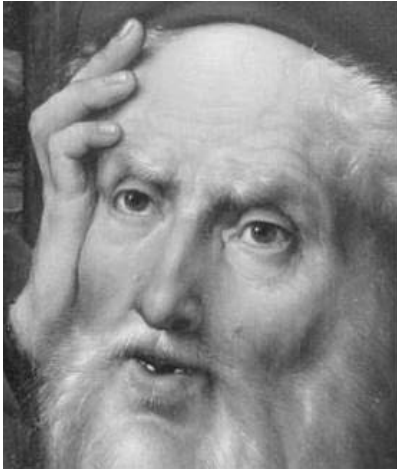


Fig. 7



Fig. 8



The author in present day Ljubljana, Slovenia (ancient Emona), a city not far from where Jerome's hometown of Stridon, Dalmatia, is thought to have been.

¹³ Erasmus included a long discussion of this saying in his *Adages* 2.3.48 (see *The Adages of Erasmus* [selected by William Baker; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001], 171-177).