

## **Learning from the Church Fathers (18) Bible Translator Jerome (347-420 A.D.)**

The Bible has been translated into many languages reaching people around the world who never before heard the Gospel. Even today, agencies such as the United Bible Society and Wycliffe Bible Translators (along with the Summer Institute of Linguistics) focus on translation as their missionary tool.

### **Jerome's Life**

One of the greatest biblical scholars and translators of all time was the church father, Jerome (Sophronius Eusebius Hieronymus in Latin). His foremost accomplishment was translating the Bible from its original languages – Hebrew and Greek – into Latin.

Jerome was born into a prosperous Christian family of estate owners in Stridon (Slovenia). In 360 A.D. he went to Rome to study grammar and rhetoric. In this worldly city he got in touch with all the classical and pagan trends of his day. He acquired a respectable collection of Latin classics as well as an extraordinary knowledge of the Latin language and literature, which was to shape him and his writings for life. He personally provided a detail that sheds significant light on his lifestyle at this time: "While I lived in Rome as a youngster and was being trained in the liberal arts, together with others of my age and who shared a common purpose, I used to visit the tombs of the apostles and the martyrs on Sundays, and to enter the crypt frequently, where on either side of the visitors, bodies were buried in walls, dug deep into the earth."

Jerome did not have a pleasant character. He was a born satirist; as far as wit and literary elegance are concerned, he had no equal. He fiercely attacked those who disagreed with him, but he himself could not take criticism and was easily hurt.

He pursued his theological studies at Antioch (371-380). He achieved good language skills in Greek and Hebrew, which became foundational for his later translation work. He also began to read his Bible intensely, which at an earlier time had turned him off because of its unpolished style. His about-face from his near obsession with classical literature took place in a major life crisis, as he recounts through his famous dream. He dreamed he was standing before the judgment seat of God and heard God's verdict: "You are a Ciceronian, not a Christian; where your treasure is, there is your heart as well." Nevertheless, his works show how the classics never lost their influence upon Jerome.

In 382 Jerome returned to Rome, where he was secretary to Pope Damasus I, who requested him to translate the Bible. Forced to leave Rome in 385 by rumours of scandal, and by his unpopularity, Jerome made a pilgrimage to Palestine and Egypt before settling down in Bethlehem to devote the remaining three decades of his life to a vast literary production.

### **Bible Translator**

Jerome's translation of the Bible is notable in that he based it on original texts in Hebrew and Greek, creating a more accurate version than the old Latin versions. Jerome stressed that a fundamental principle in the translation of the Bible is to provide a fitting meaning of the text

and to detach it from a slavish, literal rendition. Jerome also produced many biblical commentaries. He insisted that the literal sense must be established first. Afterwards he ventured out in a quest for the spiritual sense, which for him was the heart of the matter. He excelled in covering a wide range of linguistic and topographical topics concerned with the interpretation of Scripture. Secluded in his monastic retreat near Bethlehem, from the year 386, Jerome brought his great linguistic talents to bear on the task. A completely new Latin version of the Old Testament was the result of his work, based on the Hebrew, together with his revised New Testament and the Apocrypha. This translation formed the Vulgata, or "commonly received" Latin version of the Scriptures, which was completed around 405. Its status, despite the need of some correction, was reaffirmed by the Council of Trent (1545-63). It became the "authorized version" of the Western (Roman Catholic) Church, and the basis for the first Roman Catholic Bible, the so-called "Douay Version" (1582-1610). Jerome's Latin *Vulgate* had a cultural influence far greater than any other Bible translation. It impacted not only the Latin of the Church, but also the vernacular literature of Western Europe. The *Vulgate's* authority was resolutely upheld by the RC church during the Reformation, and just as resolutely denied by the Reformers. But thanks to Jerome's reliance on the original Hebrew of the Old Testament, his work eventually served as a model for Protestant Bible translators. The *Vulgate* remained the official text of the Bible for the RC church until Pope John Paul II replaced it with the *New Vulgate* in 1979.

## **The Sack of Rome**

For Jerome the sack of Rome in 410 by Alaric, the king of the Goths, was an event of apocalyptic proportions. He wrote in a letter: "The world is sinking into ruins...The renowned city, the capital of the Roman empire, is swallowed up in one tremendous fire; and there is no part of the earth where the Romans are not in exile." Already in 409 he acknowledged that "we do not realize that the Antichrist is near." He was convinced that the Roman Empire restrained the coming of the Antichrist (referring to 2 Thess. 2:7). Its survival was all that stood between the human race and the end of the world. But Jerome also saw a wider picture beyond the fall of Rome. He looked for the ultimate explanation of historical upheavals in the constancy of the divine will rather than the fickleness of the human will. The lesson of history was that God reigned over the world and that regardless of human vice or virtue, His will be done on earth as well as it is in heaven.

## **Jerome's Twin Concerns**

For Jerome, reading the Bible with understanding was of the utmost importance. He wrote, "To live amongst these [the books of the Bible] to meditate on them, to know nothing else, to seek nothing else - does not this seem to you a corner of heaven already on earth?" And he noted that as you read the Bible, you are listening to God – just as in praying, you speak to God. Reading the Bible and prayer belong together – one passes from one to the other, in dialogue with God.

Jerome promoted asceticism (self-denial), fasting, and celibacy. He believed that the ascetic life exists to facilitate dialogue with God. In 393, he composed a polemical treatise *Against Jovian*. It was a spirited defence of virginity and celibacy against the effort to interpret the married life as not inferior in any way to life of celibates. Jerome argued that Eve in paradise

was a virgin. He, in line with many fourth-century thinkers, held that sexual reproduction was a consequence of the Fall. The superiority of virginity and sexual abstinence were taken for granted. Jerome based his case mainly on the need to draw a sharper moral distinction between the followers of Christ and the children of the world in Roman society of his time. But Jerome's depreciation of the married state and exalting the life of chastity met with little sympathy. He was apparently not a joyful Christian. According to Martin Luther, Jerome, in his table talks, always discussed fasting and virginity, but seldom mentioned faith, hope and love.

### **Jerome's Female Disciples**

While he was in Rome, Jerome stayed with his two widowed disciples Paula and Marcella, and Paula's daughter Eustochium. These widows were highly educated; Marcella even learned Hebrew in order to be able to study the Bible in the original. When Jerome decided to leave Rome, Paula and her daughter followed him with other companions and eventually settled in Bethlehem and founded a monastery and three convents. In a letter to Marcella, Jerome urged her to leave Rome as the city was too distracting a place for the practice of the Christian ascetic life. She did not accept the invitation to join the convent in Bethlehem. She died a martyr's death in Rome. Jerome wrote a miniature biography of this remarkable woman as a tribute to the service she had rendered to the twin causes of Christian asceticism and Christian orthodoxy.

### **Jerome vs. Heresies**

Jerome also combatted prevailing heresies, notably Pelagianism. (The British monk Pelagius was accused of exalting the human will to the detriment of divine grace.) Jerome took sides against Pelagianism. When Pelagius was so unwise as to criticize Jerome's commentary on *Ephesians*, Jerome did not mince words. He called Pelagius a "corpulent dog...weighed down with Scottish (i.e. Irish) porridge."

Some of the followers of Pelagius retaliated. In 416, groups of armed Pelagian monks burned the monasteries at Bethlehem; though Jerome escaped unharmed, it left him poverty stricken.

### **Jerome's Writings**

In Bethlehem, Jerome was largely engaged in biblical studies, polemics, and translation work. He seemed to thrive in disputes. For example, one sermon addressed to his Latin monks at Bethlehem consists of a criticism of the Greek custom of celebrating Christ's birth on the 6th of January instead of the 25th of December. Jerome corresponded with Augustine for the first time in 394/395. He did not respond kindly to Augustine, when he had questions about Jerome's exegesis of the second chapter of Romans, as well as comments and suggestions regarding his translation of the Bible.

Jerome also wrote *Adversum Helvidium*, denouncing a book by Helvidius, who declared that Mary had several children besides Jesus. His *De Illustribus*, an account of Christian authors, including the Coptic church fathers, was the first great work on patristics.

Jerome maintained a far-flung correspondence through which he continued to give ascetic

counsel to many in Italy and Gaul. Many of his letters were circulated widely, winning a number of "well-born" (especially female) converts to asceticism. These letters continued to serve as sources of inspiration long after Jerome's death.

## **Conclusion**

Jerome died at Bethlehem after a lingering illness. He was a great scholar who gave his all to the service of the Lord and His Church. His finest legacy is his translation of the Scriptures into Latin. In 1295 Jerome was honoured by the Roman Catholic Church by naming him a "Doctor of the Church."

Johan D. Tangelder  
December, 2008