

St. Jerome

St. Jerome was born around 345 AD in a small town on the border between what is now Italy and the former Yugoslavia. His parents were fairly well to do Christians and sent their son to Rome to complete his education in grammar, rhetoric, and Latin literature. Soon afterward, Jerome and a number of friends became more active as Christians, adopting a monastic lifestyle of study and meditation. Jerome also made copies of important Church writings which was the only way these texts could be preserved and made more readily available in this period 1000 years before printing.

Jerome was critical of Church officials who he viewed as not living an appropriate simple Christian lifestyle. His sharp and outspoken nature resulted in Jerome and his friends being forced out of Italy. He traveled to Antioch in Syria where he perfected his knowledge of the Greek language. During this time he became ill and dreamed of being condemned by God for preferring secular writings to Christian literature. When he recovered he sought to remedy this by dedicating himself to finding, studying and copying (with the help of others) writings and Scriptural commentaries by earlier Greek fathers of the Church. Jerome was able to locate earlier, more accurate copies of the Greek translation of the Old Testament used by the first Christians, known as the Septuagint as well as copies of the New Testament written in the original Greek. He also began to study Hebrew in order to be able to read the Old Testament in its original language.

After about 5 years in Syria, Jerome travelled to Constantinople where he continued to study Scripture in Greek with Bishop (and later saint) Gregory Nazianzen, an important Biblical scholar in Constantinople. From here Jerome traveled to Rome as part of a delegation to a Church council called by Pope Damasus. The Pope recognized Jerome's great knowledge of Scripture and asked him to revise and standardize the Latin translation of the Gospels. The current Latin Gospels were circulating in many versions, all of which were poorly translated and contained many errors. Jerome translated the Gospels from older texts written in their original language, Greek. This pleased the Pope but aroused the anger of ordinary Christians who used and were comfortable with the corrupt Old Latin Gospels. Jerome typically responded to his critics by referring to them as "two legged asses," which, of course, did not go over well. When Pope Damasus died, Jerome was forced to leave town.

While in Rome, Jerome had served as instructor and spiritual advisor for a number of wealthy widows who were also interested in pursuing a monastic lifestyle. When Jerome left Rome and returned to Palestine, a number of these women joined him. Their wealth financed the building of a monastery and two convents in Bethlehem, where Jerome settled down to do his most important work. He spent the rest of his life, over 30 years, translating the entire Bible into Latin from the original Hebrew and Greek. His translation, known as the Latin Vulgate, served as the Church's official translation for the next 1500 years.

Jerome has been called the most famous Biblical scholar in the history of the Church for good reason. It was not until the Dutch scholar Erasmus in the early 16th Century that anyone applied a similar knowledge of language to the Biblical text. He also produced commentaries on the books of the Bible that preserved the interpretations of Church Fathers writing in Greek. Jerome was recognized as a saint and for his important contributions to the Church was declared, along with Saints Ambrose, Augustine, and Gregory the Great, one of the four original Latin Doctors of the Church. It is a tribute to St. Jerome that the Church expresses the importance of the Bible, in its magisterial teachings, by repeating St. Jerome's well-known statement:

“Ignorance of the scriptures is ignorance of Christ.”

S. Csontos, 13 May 2014