

146// HERE FOLLOWETH THE LIFE OF JEROME

Jerome was the son of a noble man named Eusebius, born of the town Stridon, which is in the utter end of Dalmatia and of Pannonia. He, being yet a child, went to Rome and was there taught in letters of Greek, Latin, and Hebrew. He had for his teacher in grammar Donatus, in rhetoric Victorinus, the orator, and he was day and night occupied, and exercised himself in divine Scriptures, which he drew covetously, and after shed it out abundantly.

HOW JEROME RENOUNCED PAGAN LITERATURE

And as he writeth in an epistle to Eustochius, that on a time as he read on a day Plato, and in the night Tully desirously, because that the book of the prophets pleased him not, he was about mid-Lent taken with a sudden and burning fever, that all his body was cold, in such wise that there was no vital heat save a little which he felt in his breast. And as the exequies for his death were making ready, he was suddenly brought to the judgment of God, and there he was demanded of what condition he was, and he answered boldly that he was a Christian man. And the judge said: Thou liest, thou art a Ciceronian, and no Christian man. Whereas thy treasure is, there is thy heart.

Jeronimus is said of gerar, that is holy, and of nemus, that is to say a wood. And so Jerome is as much to say as a holy wood. Or it is said of norma, that is to say law, whereof is said in his legend that Jerome is interpreted a holy law. He was farforth holy, that is to say firm or clean or dyed of blood, or deputed to holy usage, like as vessels of the temple be said holy for they be ordained to holy usage. He was holy, that is to say steadfast, in holy work by long perseverance, he was clean in mind by purity, he was dyed in blood by thinking of the passion of our Lord Jesu Christ, he was deputed to holy usage by the exposition of holy Scripture, he was said a holy wood by the conversation that he sometimes did and abode in the wood. And he was said law for the rules of his discipline which he taught to his monks, or because he expounded and interpreted the holy law and Scripture. Jerome also is interpreted the vision of beauty or judging words. There is beauty manifold. First is spiritual, which is in the soul. Second, moral, which is in honesty of manners. The third is intellectual, which is in the angels. The fourth is substantial, which is divine. The fifth is heavenly, which is in the country of saints. This five-fold beauty had St. Jerome in himself. For he had spiritual in diversity of virtues; the moral had he in the honesty of his life; he had intellectual in the excellence of purity; he had the substantial in burning charity; he had the celestial in the perdurable and excellent clearness or clarte. He judged the speeches and words, his own well examined in clearly pronouncing, the others being true in confirming, the false condemning and confusing, and the doubtful in expounding.

Then St. Jerome was still and said nothing, and anon then the judge commended that he should be sore beaten. Then he cried and said: Have mercy on me, Lord, have mercy on me.

Then they that were assisting our Lord prayed him that he would forgive this young man his trespass. And he then began to swear and say: Lord, if ever I read or hear more secular books, I shall forsake thee.

And with the words of this promise and oath he was let go.

And anon he revived. And then he saw himself all bewept. And of the strokes of the beatings that he received tofore the throne of our Lord, the tokens of the strokes and lashes were seen on his shoulders right horrible and great. And from then forthon he became good, and read divine books with as great study as ever he had read the books of poetry and of paynims.

HE BECOMES A CARDINAL

And when he was nine-and-twenty years old he was ordained cardinal priest in the church of Rome. And when Liberius was dead all the people cried to have St. Jerome sovereign priest. And when he began to blame the jollity and lavish life of some clerks and monks, they had indignation and despite of him, and lay in a wait to hurt and slander him. And as John Beleth saith: They scorned and mocked him by the clothing of a woman. For on a night when he arose to matins, as he was accustomed, he found a woman's clothing lying by his bed which his enemies had laid there. And he weening [thinking] that they had been his own, did them on, and so clothed came in to the church, and this did they that had envy at him because others should ween that he had a woman in his chamber.

HIS SOJOURN IN THE DESERT

And when he saw that, he eschewed [stood aloof from] their woodness [madness] and went unto Gregory Nazianzen, bishop of Constantinople. And when he had learned of him the holy Scripture and holy letters, he went into desert. Where, what, and how much he suffered for Christ's sake, he recounted to [St.] Eustochium and said that when he was in that great desert and waste wilderness, which is so burnt by the sun that it gave to the monks a right dry habitable:

. . . I supposed me then to be at Rome among the delices, and my members scalded, burnt, made dry and black like to the skin of a Morian or an Ethiopian, and I was always in tears and weepings. And when the very sleep came and oppressed me against which I oft repugned, then I laid my dried bones on the bare earth. Of meats and drink I speak not, for they that were sick used only cold water, and for to take any thing boiled or roasted, it was to them lechery.

And yet nevertheless I was oft fellow unto scorpions and wild beasts, and yet the carols of maidens and the embracements of lechery grew in my cold body and in my flesh, wherefore I wept continually, and for to adaunt and subdue my proud flesh I rose at midnight all the week long, joining oft the night with the day, and I ceased not to beat my breast, praying our Lord to render to me the peaceable peace of my flesh.

And I also doubted [feared] my proper [my own] cell as fearing my conceits [ideas] and thoughts, wherefore I went and departed wroth, and revenging myself, passed alone through the sharp and thick deserts. And as our Lord is witness, after many weepings and tears, it seemed to me that I was among the company of angels, this during four years.

HIS YEARS IN BETHLEHEM

Then his penance thus done, he returned to the town of Bethlehem, where, as a wise and a prudent beast, he offered himself to abide by the crib of our Lord. And then his holy Bible, which with study he had translated, and other books he read, and led the day forth with fasting unto even. And there he assembled many disciples unto him for to labour there in his holy purpose, and abode there in the translation of holy Scripture fifty-five years and six months, and remained a pure virgin unto the end of his life.

And how well that it be said in his legend that he was ever a virgin, yet nevertheless he wrote of himself to Palmatian: I bear virginity into heaven, not for that I have virginity, but for I marvel more that I have it not.

Then at the last he being weary for to travail, lay down in his bed wherover hung a cord on a beam, whereon he laid and held his hands for to lift up himself that he might do the service of God as much as he might.

ST. JEROME AND THE LION

On a day towards even [night] Jerome sat with his brethren for to hear the holy lesson, and a lion came halting suddenly in to the monastery, and when the brethren saw him, anon they fled, and Jerome came against him as he should come against his guest, and then the lion showed to him his foot being hurt. Then he called his brethren, and commanded them to wash his feet and diligently to seek and search for the wound. And that done, the plant [sole] of the foot of the lion was sore hurt and pricked with a thorn. Then this holy man put thereto diligent cure, and healed him, and he abode ever after as a tame beast with them.

Then St. Jerome saw that God had sent him to them, not only for the health of his foot, but also for their profit, and joined to the lion an office [gave the lion a job], by the accord of his brethren, and that was that he should conduct and lead an ass to his pasture which brought home wood, and should keep [protect] him going and coming, and so he did. For he did that which he was commanded, and led the ass thus as a herdsman, and kept him wisely going and coming, and was to him a right sure keeper and defender, and always at the hour accustomed he and the ass came for to have their refection [meal] and for to make the ass to do the work accustomed.

On a time it happed that the ass was in his pasture, and the lion slept fast, and certain merchants passed by with camels and saw the ass alone, and stole him and led him away. And anon after, the lion awoke and when he found not his fellow, he ran groaning hither and thither, and when he saw that he could not find him he was much sorrowful and durst not come in, but abode at the gate of the church of the monastery, and was ashamed that he came without the ass.

And when the brethren saw that he was come more late than he was wont [accustomed to], and without the ass, they supposed that by constraint of hunger he had eaten the ass, and would not give to him his portion accustomed, and said to him: Go and eat that other part of the ass that thou hast devoured, and fill thy gluttony.

And because they doubted, and they would wit [know] if he had so eaten, they went to the pastures of the town to see if they could have any demonstration of the death of the ass, and they found nothing, and returned and told it to Jerome, and then he commanded them to enjoin him to do the office of the ass [make the lion do the ass's work]. Then they hewed down bushes and boughs and laid upon him, and he suffered it peaceably.

And on a day when he had done his office, he went out to the fields and began to run hither and thither desiring to know what was done to his fellow, and saw from far merchants that came with camels charged and laden, and the ass going tofore them. It was the manner of that region that when the people went far with camels, they had an ass or a horse going tofore with a cord about his neck for to conduct the better the camels.

And when the lion knew the ass, with a great roaring he ran on them so terribly that all the merchants fled, and he so feared [frightened] the camels with beating the earth with his tail that he constrained them to go straight unto the cell with all their charge and lading [cargo].

And when the brethren saw this they told it to Jerome, and he said: Brethren, wash the feet of our guests and give them meat [food]; abide ye the will of our Lord hereupon.

And then the lion began to run joyously throughout all the monastery, as he was wont to do, and kneeled down to every brother and fawned them with his tail, like as he had demanded pardon of the trespass that he had done. And St. Jerome, which knew well what was to come, said to his brethren: Go and make ye ready all things necessary for guests that be coming to us.

And as he thus said, there came to him a messenger, saying to him that there were guests at the gate that would speak with the abbot. And as soon as they were come they kneeled to the abbot, and required of him pardon. And he raised and made them to stand up goodly, and commanded them to take their own good[s], and not to take away other men's. And then they prayed the holy saint that he would take the half of their oil, and he refused it. And at the last he commanded to take a measure of oil, and then they promised that they should bring every year a measure of oil to that church, and their heirs after them.

HIS REFORM OF THE LITURGY

It was anciently the custom that whosoever would might sing in the church, so that Theodosius the emperor, as John Beleth saith, required and prayed Damasus the pope that he would commit to some wise man of the church to ordain the office and ordinal of the church. And then he knew well that Jerome was a man that knew the languages of Greek, Latin, and Hebrew, and in all science [knowledge], and committed to him the said sovereign office. And then Jerome divided the psalter by ferias [weekdays], and to every feria a nocturn¹ proper be assigned, and established in the end of every psalm to be said: *Gloria patri* [Glory be to the father]. And after, he ordained reasonably to be sung the epistles and gospels, and all other things appertaining, save the song which he sent from Bethlehem unto the pope. Which all was approved and ratified of him and of the cardinals for to be used perpetually and so confirmed.

¹ The liturgical office of matins, sung at midnight or daybreak, was divided into three parts called "nocturns," each of which contained psalms and scripture readings.

HIS DEATH AND BURIAL

After this, in the mouth of the spelunke (or cave) in which our Lord lay, he did do make his monument or sepulture. And when he had accomplished eighty-eight years and six months he was there buried.

COMMENTS OF THE FATHERS ON ST. JEROME

In what reverence St. Austin [Augustine] had him in, it appeareth in his epistles that he sent to him, in one of the which he wrote in this manner: “To his right dear friend; most best beloved and most clean in observing and embracing of chastity, unto Jerome, Austin, etc.” And in another place he writeth thus of him: “St. Jerome, priest, learned in letters of Greek, Latin, and Hebrew, and in holy writings approved unto his last age, of whom the nobleness of his fair eloquence hath resplended from the east unto the west, like unto the clearness of the sun.”

Prosper saith also of him in his *Chronicles*: Jerome, priest, was in Bethlehem sometime, clear to all the world, of noble engine, and lived in translating and writing of holy Scripture, and with high and noble study served the universal church.

He said also of himself to Albigen: I never enforced me so much from mine infancy as for to eschew a swelling courage and enhanced head, and calling against him the hate of God. And ever I have dreaded the sure things, and have entended with all my heart to the monastery and to hospitality and have received gladly all comers save heretics, and have washed their feet.

Isidore saith thus in the book of *Etymology*: Jerome was wise in three languages, whose interpretation is taken tofore other, for it is more holding and clear by words and it is interpreted of a very Christian.

It is written also of Jerome in the dialogue of Severus, disciple of St. Martin, which was in his time: Jerome without the merit of the faith and dowry of virtues is not only instruct in letters of Latin, but in Greek and Hebrew, so that none ought to be compared to him in every science, the which had war perpetual against the wicked men. The heretics hated him for he left never to impugn against them, the clerks hated him for he reprov'd their sins and their life, but plainly good men loved him and marvelled of him for they that deemed him a heretic were mad. He was all in lessons, all in books, he never rested day ne night but always read or wrote. Hæc Severus.

And like as it appeareth by these words, and also he witnesseth himself, he suffered many persecutors and detractors, which persecutions he suffered patiently and goodly, as it appeared in an epistle that he sent to Assela: I give thankings to our Lord God that I am worthy that the world hate me, and that wicked men and janglers [noisy disputants] hold me for evil. For I know well that men come to heaven by the defaming of wicked men more than by good renomee [fame], and I would that the company of miscreants should pursue and persecute me for the name and right of our Lord. My will is that the reproof of the world arise more fervently against me so that I might deserve to be praised of our Lord, and that I may hope the reward of his promise. Temptation is desirous and agreeable whose merit in resisting is to be hoped reward of Christ in

heaven. Ne the cursing ne malediction is not grievous which is changed into divine laud [praise] and praising.

He died about the year of our Lord three hundred and eighty-eight.

The [iconography of St. Jerome](#) is available at the [Christian iconography website](#).

For other saints, see the [index to this Golden Legend website](#).

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