

Excerpts from a recent life of St. Jerome¹

Jerome studies in the desert. Jerome thus spent some years in the desert of Chalcis (375-376) . . . intent on practicing his ascetic choice of life in a very hot and desolate scenario, which offered no safe habitat for solitaries . . .

It was —writes Angelo Penna— a hard period of his life, between rigorous penances and frequent illness, marked also by intense studies, above all of a biblical nature. . . . also the study of the Hebrew language . . .

The Dalmatian monk does not hesitate to recall the incessant temptations of the flesh, in order to overcome which, he would later confide, “I entrusted myself as a disciple to a brother who was a converted Jew, in order to learn, after the subtlety of Quintilian, the rivers of eloquence of Cicero, the gravity of Fronton and the pleasantness of Pliny, a new alphabet, and to exercise myself in the pronunciation of shrill and aspirate sounds. How much fatigue it was for me, what difficulty I encountered in it, how many times did I quit and, then, through the desire to learn, begin anew, this can be witnessed to by my conscience and that of those who were close to me.”

He began then to exercise himself in the exegesis of Holy Scripture, beginning with the books of the Old Testament, but also to deepen his knowledge of the astral cult and of the rites of the pagan world of the East. [p. 21]

Jerome and his circle of women ascetics. At the same time [during his second Roman sojourn, 382-385] he assumed the direction of an ascetic circle on the Aventine² . . . already promoted by the noblewoman Marcella, which gathered together many women from the Roman aristocracy, particularly widows and virgins, with whom Jerome established deep relationships of singular friendship. With that auditorium he vented about the unjust charges concerning the translation of the Bible made against him by some ecclesiastics and lay people, making clear —as he wrote to Marcella— that his purpose had always been simply that of reestablishing the exactness of a version of the text which the manuscripts presented in diverse ways. “If those people want to renounce

¹ Pietro De Leo, *Vita di San Girolamo* (Soveria Mannelli [Calabria]: Rubbettino, 2007). Trans. by E.G.C.

² One of the seven hills of Rome, where today several “general houses” [like headquarters] of religious orders have their seat, e.g., Santa Sabina for the Dominicans, or Sant’Anselmo for the Benedictines. It is an upper-class residential area with clean air.

textual criticism—he noted—they can even go to quench their thirst in the swamps.” [p. 25]

“If any one comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.” (Luke 14:26 RSV) In the eulogy of Paola which Jerome would write after her death in 404, we read not only the excruciating scene of the women monks’ departure from the Roman port, but also the weightiness [*portata*] of the ideals they pursued.³

“Paola went down to the sea accompanied by her brother, by her relatives, by her friends and children, confident that they could at the last moment move her maternal pity and induce their kinswoman to cancel the departure. In vain. Already the ship sails were swelling by the blowing wind and the push of the oars distanced the ship from the riverbank. On the beach, little Toxotius, Paola’s youngest, held out his supplicating little hands. The other daughter, the youthful Rufina, continued tearfully to implore that the mamma would at least wait until her wedding-day. Paola, with eyes dry, had her eyes fixed on heaven, love of God overcoming that of her children, heedless of being a mother, in order to raise herself to be a perfect servant of God. Her motherly entrails melted from the pain, but putting aside all human affection, Paola rested her spirit on her [daughter] Eustochium, her companion in ideals and navigation.” [p. 40]

³ The port is Ostia. They were on their way eventually to Bethlehem, where beginning in 386 they all would lead a spiritual, eremitical life of prayer and of the study of the Scriptures and its languages.