

The Letters of St. Jerome.¹

By E. H. BLAKENEY, M.A.

JEROME was born about the middle of the fourth century of our era. The date itself cannot be exactly determined, but we may fairly assume that it was not earlier than 346. The place of his birth was a little town on the borders of Dalmatia. Jerome himself hardly ever mentions the place, and it is evident that he had a poor opinion of the inhabitants of his native town. The era in which Jerome exercised his activities was a critical one in the history of the Christian Church. Only a few years before his birth Constantine had given to Christianity an official status in the Roman world; and the Church, free at length from the persecution which had hitherto dogged its course, was now ready to pursue an unimpeded path. It is true that there was a brief revival of paganism under the Emperor Julian, but the progress of the Church was never seriously impeded by that momentary reaction.

From early years Jerome was a scholar and a student, and probably his knowledge of the classical works of antiquity was unrivalled for a man of his generation. While he was yet a youth, he began to collect that library which was to become one of the most famous private libraries of the time. We do not know when Jerome received first that spiritual impulse which led him to become, not merely a follower of official Christianity, but an ardent and serious Christian. In this respect there is

¹ The only available *complete* edition in Latin of Jerome's correspondence is that of Vallarsi. There is a useful little volume of selections, edited with a few brief notes, by the Jesuit Father, Dr. Hurter. This contains some of the most celebrated of the letters, notably the twenty-second. A really adequate edition by some English scholar, with a full commentary and lexical index, is a real desideratum. Perhaps the general editor of the Cambridge Patristic Series (Canon Mason) will consider the matter. No better editor could be found than Professor Dill, to whose illuminating books readers of Jerome and his epoch are already deeply indebted. There is a good and helpful edition (in English) of the "Letters" in vol. vi. of the Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers (2nd series), for which Dean Fremantle is responsible. The chapters on Jerome in Farrar's "Lives of the Fathers" are very useful.

a singular contrast between him and St. Augustine, the story of whose conversion is given in the memorable pages of the "Confessions."

Jerome spent some years of student life at Rome, subsequently travelling to the East, though his exact movements are difficult to register. What we do know is—and this point is a vital one in the story of Jerome's life—that he became deeply influenced by the ideal of the monastic life. The ascetic ideal floated before the minds of men like a dream from heaven. The monks of Egypt were famous throughout the world, alike for their asceticism and their earnest desire to keep the Christian life "unspotted from the world." To us the idea seems (nowadays) impracticable and undesirable. We have learnt to understand the meaning of Christ's words when He said: "I pray not that Thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that Thou shouldest keep them from the evil." But in the fourth century it was different. The Roman Empire, which for hundreds of years had guaranteed the peace of the world, and without which men could hardly conceive that the framework of society would hold together, was already past its climacteric. Jerome himself was destined to witness that deadly wound which ultimately led to the destruction of the secular empire. Men's minds were vaguely harassed by fears for the future, by dreams of the past, and by dissatisfaction with the present. No wonder, then, that the notion of the ascetic life laid hold upon the minds of some of the greatest of the sons of the Church; and, notwithstanding the visionary futilities and the harsh and repulsive aspects of asceticism (as understood in the fourth and fifth centuries), it must be admitted that we do owe one great lesson to the ideal which monasticism sought to impress upon mankind—namely, the value of the individual soul. Consequently, many of the mistakes, and something of the intolerable harshness, of the monkish spirit may be forgiven for the sake of that great truth. The evils likely to result from a too great severity of discipline and an attitude of uninterrupted aloofness from the world outside were early realized. Ivo of

Chartres and St. Anthony, to mention these only, were insistent upon the magnitude of this peril.

Among the places visited by Jerome was Gaul; but his travels led him far afield both in the eastern and western sections of the Roman world. We are told that he established a small monastic society near his native Stridon, but for some unknown reason it was suddenly broken up; and Jerome fled to the East, accompanied by a number of friends like-minded with himself. His journey to the East may have lasted two years; and during that period he suffered much, both from the loss of friends, the fatigues of the way, and various misfortunes. In the year 374 he retired into the wilderness of Chalcis, to the east of Antioch, where he dwelt for five years among the hermits. During these years his routine of life was severely ascetic, the constant round of rigorous penance being lightened by ecstatic visions, while the hardness and poverty of existence were haunted with memories of his former life.

Towards the close of this period he became involved in certain controversies which were then agitating the Eastern Church, and in the year 379 he attached himself to the party of Bishop Paulinus, who ordained him priest at Antioch. He was enabled to settle down to the work for which he was eminently suited—that of a student and theological controversialist. After a period spent at Constantinople, he went to Rome with Bishop Paulinus, where he stayed for the best part of three years. It was at Rome that he began that work which was to make him famous, not only among his contemporaries, but among all after-generations of Christians throughout the West. At the request of Pope Damasus he undertook an edition of the Psalms in Latin; this version (which is not to be confused with his *revised* Psalter, made later) is still extant, and may be regarded as the first chapter in the history of the Latin Vulgate.¹

At the present time, when the attention of Western scholars

¹ There were three stages in this translation work of Jerome: (1) His translations from the Greek (N.T. and Psalms); (2) O.T. translation from LXX; (3) translations from the Hebrew O.T. His *revision* of the Psalter (? made at Bethlehem) is the basis of the Gallican version.

is being directed towards that most celebrated version of the Bible, by reason of the Committee appointed by Pope Pius X. for its revision, we naturally turn our thoughts to the great scholar to whose learning and zeal the Church of the West will ever be indebted. The story of Jerome's labours upon the Latin Version of the Bible is, perhaps, too well known to need elaboration here. Suffice it to say that Jerome brought to the task a knowledge which was then unique, for he was one of the few Western scholars of that epoch who understood Hebrew intimately, and was not content merely to produce a rendering of the LXX into the vernacular of Rome.

Jerome's life at Rome was singularly fruitful, whether as regards social, religious, or intellectual activities. He gathered to himself a number of pupils and friends, among them the noble and wealthy Paula, Blesilla, Paulina, and others—all of them of the highest family—who, amid the distractions of the time, found, in the thought of renunciation from the world, both inspiration and hope. During this period some of Jerome's most interesting private letters were written. These letters have indeed a special attraction for us, because, unlike his doctrinal or controversial treatises, or even his purely literary studies, they give us a complete picture of the man himself. More than that, they are intensely personal, throwing light upon his secret aspirations, his ambitions, and the social, moral, and intellectual conditions of the time. Few letters of antiquity exceed in interest the epistle to Eustochium, which is not only the most famous of all Jerome's writings (apart from the Vulgate), but contains an extraordinarily vivid picture of contemporary Roman society. In this letter Jerome lays down the motives which ought to influence those who devote themselves to the celibate life; and he also indicates the rules by which their daily conduct is to be governed. One has to go to Juvenal in order to get so vivid a picture of the luxury and profligacy of Rome as it existed a quarter of a century or so before the destruction of the city, by the barbarians, early in the fifth century.

Eustochium herself was a daughter of the Lady Paula, and subsequently settled at Bethlehem, to be near Jerome, dying in the year 418, some two years before the death of her master. With this celebrated letter to Eustochium may be compared a similar letter written, thirty years later, to Demetrias, a high-born Roman lady who had embraced the ascetic life; and one is interested to observe the points of difference, as well as the points of resemblance, in the two writings. Old age, an abundance of trials, and, it may be, the companionship of so many pure and pious women as Paula and her circle, had combined to soften some of the asperities of Jerome's middle-life. Nevertheless, the standpoint displayed in the two letters, despite the long gap of time between them, is much the same. Jerome, to the end of his days, was still faithful to the ascetic idea that dominated him. Great jealousies were stirred up against Jerome during his sojourn in Rome, and much unpopularity incurred by him owing to the influence which he exercised over his circle of converts and devotees. This was not altogether unnatural; and, indeed, the situation had its dangers. As long, however, as his friend Pope Damasus lived, he was fairly safe from the attacks of his foes; but after the Pope's death he found things so painful that any longer sojourn at Rome became impossible. He determined to leave the city, therefore; and about the year 385 sailed to Antioch. Before settling at Bethlehem, which was to be his home for the remainder of his life, he paid a visit to the monks of Nitria. He has left us an account of this visit there in his hundred and eighth letter (also addressed to Eustochium). This letter—the longest of Jerome's letters—not only describes his journey to the monastery of Nitria, but describes the life and work of his friend the Lady Paula, Eustochium's mother, at Bethlehem. This letter was written in the year 404, and is not only valuable from the historical point of view, but affords us a sight of Jerome in his most pleasing mood. His description of the death of Paula is at once faithful and touching. The concluding words of the letter are worth citing: "And now farewell, Paula; aid with

your prayers the old age of your votary. Standing in the presence of Christ, you will all the more readily win what you ask. In this letter I have built to your memory a monument which no lapse of time will be able to destroy."

For thirty-four years Jerome lived at Bethlehem as head of the monastery and the convent which he built. He was joined by that loyal band of women whose friendship he had made at Rome; and in all his works of benevolence he was aided by the wealth of Paula, who spent freely of her inheritance. His life was lived on the strict ascetic model. He himself describes it as one of repentance and prayers. Surrounded by his library, he was content to live in the humblest of dwellings; and we are told that he employed every spare moment, when he was not actively engaged in the cares of the monastery, on reading and study. His literary activity seems to have been enormous. It was during these years that the *magnum opus* of his life—the Vulgate—was completed. Besides this, he wrote a vast number of controversial works, the two most important of which dealt with the works and doctrines of Origen, of whom he now appeared as an impugner, though in his early life he had constituted himself a champion of the Origenic system. The last, and the greatest, of his controversies was with the great Augustine, who had ventured to criticize with no small severity Jerome's work on the Old Testament. In matters of controversy it must be admitted that Jerome was harsh and splenetic even for a Churchman of the period. His vocabulary of abuse was probably unrivalled. As one reads some of his more vehement letters, one recalls Milton's attack upon Salmasius. Hence it is all the more pleasant to be able to record that his controversy with Augustine was ultimately healed; and that henceforth these two great men, to the end of their lives, maintained a friendship that was unbroken.

The mass of correspondence which flooded in upon Jerome in his solitary cell at Bethlehem was immense. From all quarters men consulted the now famous scholar, not on points of doctrine

alone, but upon any matters of unusual interest. Jerome was ready enough at all times to give his correspondents of his best; and he tells us in one of his letters that scarcely a day passed without his writing to some friend upon some topic of moment. Indeed, the record of Jerome's life has now become mainly a record of his literary work; but, of all his works, to the modern reader none will appeal so completely as his collection of letters. Of these letters some hundred and fifty have survived, in addition to the special letters written to Augustine during the controversy above-mentioned. His gifts as a writer are nowhere better displayed than in his correspondence. Take, for example, his beautiful letter of spiritual counsel to a mother and her daughter (Ep. 17), his satirical description of Vigilantius, or his famous letter to Asilla on leaving Rome. In all these he shows the hand of a brilliant stylist, as did his master Cicero in that Correspondence which is one of the most admirable heirlooms from the ancient world. His description of the clerical life, in his letter to Nepotium, is a fine example of his power of generalizing on the one hand, and of dealing with special points upon the other. Nothing seems to escape his keen attention; and the language in which he has enshrined his thoughts is singularly effective, singularly forceful. In this letter, perhaps, more than any other, we see manifested to the full the writer's satire, insight, burning zeal, and power of heightened expression. Readers who are accustomed to imagine that Latin literature, as a whole, had ceased by the middle of the second century could scarcely do better than acquaint themselves with Jerome's correspondence in the original. It will come as a revelation to many, whose knowledge of Jerome is confined mainly to the fact that the Western Church owes him the translation of the Bible in the Latin vernacular. But those who read his letters will gradually learn that Jerome was something more than a mere scholar; he was a great personality. And in these letters that personality stands out as prominent and as attractive as that of Augustine himself. We can scarcely wonder that, by the end of the fourth century, an enormous

number of pilgrims thronged to see him from all parts; for his writings had, by their charm, their learning, their wit, their satire become celebrated throughout the whole of the Roman-speaking world.

Legend soon became busy with this anchorite of the cave at Bethlehem. Many stories, brought by the pilgrims of the time, and amplified by the imagination of subsequent centuries, were told about this great doctor of the West. Many of the stories are obviously silly, and many of them are false; but the very fact that such stories were circulated even before the death of Jerome himself is sufficient evidence of his fame. But in his letters, far more than in his controversial works, or even his translations, we catch a clear and true sight of the man as he was, alike in his strength and in his weakness. There are many things we cannot either admire or approve in his conduct or in his writings; but, when all is said and done, the verdict of Professor Dill is surely the right one: "He added to the monastic life fresh lustre by his vivid intellectual force and by his contagious enthusiasm for the study of Holy Writ."



Clergymen and Climbing.

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IT is not easy to explain the precise nature of the fascination that mountaineering possesses for any of its followers. The ordinary man looks upon it with a kind of amused contempt that finds expression in pitying remarks or patronizing inquiries. But to the extraordinary man who has been "bitten," it is an enthusiasm, an obsession, a paramount source of pure delight. Then, why is there, amongst climbers, such a large proportion of the clergy? Obviously, because they are more prone to the particular magic which mountaineering maintains. Now, my theory is that that magic lies in offering the most complete con-