

# ILLUMINATING WOMEN IN THE WORLD OF JEROME.

## POLICY AND PRACTICE DIVERGED

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**Abstract.** Women played a central role in the life of many early church fathers and a notable example of this was Jerome of Stridon 347-420. This paper looks at the “life of angels” as Jerome interpreted it, his friendships with aristocratic women, and particularly consequential celibacy conflicts that emerged in Rome in the late fourth century. The response to Jerome’s agenda of asceticism was mixed. Jerome rose to high ecclesiastic glory, but also fell to disgrace, but virgins and celibate women stayed loyally by his side and rescued him.

Is a celibate monk who loved virgins a conundrum? St. Jerome,<sup>2</sup> who lived 347-420 CE, is one who did, and by patronage was linked to wealthy Christian widows dedicated to a virgin life. As a church father, he was a scholar of both the east and west, born in Dalmatia, a teen studying in Rome, and in Constantinople under St. Gregory the Theologian. He was a world citizen.

My interest in St. Jerome and fourth century women began while teaching surveys of the early Church. I discovered unexpected aspects of this Dalmatian monk. His life and work raised questions.<sup>3</sup> Why were women drawn to him? How did he earn renown? Did his historical works make him famous, or the biblical translations and commentaries? Clearly, the Vulgate, biblical tome used for a millennium, brought glory to him later since anyone interested in the authority of scripture would hear of the translator, Jerome of Bethlehem. But what of the widows and women?<sup>4</sup>

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  - 2 J.N.D. Kelly puts his birth early, c331; Stefan Rebenich says 347 is more likely in Stridon, Dalmatia..
  - 3 Letters of Jerome are from Schaff, Philip and Henry Wace. *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*, volume 6, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999. The primary source for this article are Jerome’s works.
  - 4 Clark says in no other century were many celibate Fathers fixated on babies. For E. A. Clark, see below.

How could virgins fit into the life of a celibate?

Both Jerome's erudition and love of discourse were evident in his letters, freely sprinkled with hyperbole, exaggeration and insults which were a rhetorical conventions of that day meant to entertain the reader and display the writer's skill. What puzzled me was the fame achieved<sup>5</sup> by Jerome even after he alienated major parts of the Church establishment. Bishops or monks as targets of his vitriol were labelled "asses" and "beasts."<sup>6</sup> F. F. Bruce said ecclesiastical life seemed squalid in those days, for its officials behaved disgracefully.<sup>7</sup>

From his peers, Jerome's translations drew criticism and they moaned that he tampered with the Holy Septuagint with his scriptural revisions. Although his knowledge of scripture was encyclopedic, the exegesis he used was questionable. To bolster the extreme "Oriental" asceticism he preferred, Jerome fell into eisegesis with a slanted hermeneutic.<sup>8</sup> In his own day, his translations and the lifestyle, a radical agenda of asceticism and "life of angels," brought the fear that he was extreme.<sup>9</sup> As a controversial figure, he left a legacy, however, a voluminous *oeuvre*, plus letters which served to bring a previously obscure figure to prominence.

Born in the east, this man contributed to the Western Church, but what was most troubling, with other scholars he set a problematic trajectory regarding sex through the influence he and his letters created in that era. Reverberations of this can be linked to modern ecclesiastical scandals.

The purpose of this paper is to consider the intersection of three

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5 Brown. *Body and Society*, Columbia. He attacked Ambrose, Pelagius & Augustine; see pp. 366-386.

6 Aquila, Mike. *The Fathers of the Church*, Huntington IN, Our Sunday Visitor, 1999.

7 Bruce's *Spreading Flame, The Light in the West*. pp. 36-46 discuss piety's decline. Eerdmans 1954.

8 Clark, Elizabeth A. *Women in the Early Church*, Liturgical Press, 1983. Clark gave examples of eisegesis in fathers use of the bible to justify their opinion of women as inferior to men and to bolster cultural assumptions. Women were denigrated and praised, thus male ambivalence to women is often noted. pp. 15-16. See also her book, *Reading Renunciation*, . . .

9 Jerome came to renown in the Middle Ages. See Joseph Loef; Luther admired the Dalmatian, respected his work on Galatians, but late in Luther's life, he criticized the Dalmatian's exegesis as eisegesis.

phenomena: Jerome's agenda of the "life of angels, friendships with women, and theological conflicts with Roman clergy which ostensibly led to his fall. Persons in the conflicts, a policy of the superiority of virgins, and women in Jerome's circle are foci of this article,<sup>10</sup> because society's expectation for gender and what the church advised were reversed as Jerome's patrons were women.<sup>11</sup>

Policy, people and practice in the life of this church father diverged. In this women did not merely help, they saved him. Women rescued Jerome.

### Policy and People. In the Celibacy Debates

In the 380's, when Jerome's conflicts took place with Helvidius in Rome, the church was in a liminal state, and the role of women was unclear. Most prominent of the men and women around Jerome was Damasus, Rome's pope from 366-384 CE, although his part in the celibacy disputes seemed marginal. Influential in both secular and ecclesiastical spheres was Ambrose, (c. 340-397), Bishop of Milan. Ambrose also deplored Helvidius and Jovinian's message, the monks whom Jerome opposed.<sup>12</sup> After the controversies, it was Ambrose, above Jerome in church hierarchy, who, in 393 CE called a synod with Siricius to anathematize views that Helvidius and Jovinian had circulated.<sup>13</sup>

The problem in the celibacy debates in Rome was a rumor of novelty which shadowed the monk from Dalmatia, encircled both by women and men. Was he suggesting an extreme *kenotic* vision and did he lead aristocratic men into celibacy? Ostensibly, the scholars argued for and against Oriental-style asceticism, in particular, Jerome's insistence that

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10 Why have *Policy and Practice* in the title? Clarke wrote a famous article that observed inconsistencies between Church gender policy and practice. Avoiding contact with women; the Dalmatian himself recommended minimal interaction. Yet, he was intimate friend to elite Romans and tutored virgins.

11 Jerome became Marcella's tutor while doing translations for his patron, Pope Damasus.

12 Chiefly, Ambrose seemed offended at their attempt to dismantle *the hierarchy of merit*. See letters.

13 Auxentius, Genialis, Germinator, Felix, Prontinus, Martianus, Januarius, and Ingeniosus are clergy identified in the act of 390 which condemned Jovinianus, but Ambrose was senior to all.

the superiority of virgins be acknowledged. But the debates veered into a discussion of virginity itself, a declaration that Christ had no siblings, and that the Virgin Mary's physical purity was eternal. At the end, the Church in the west leaned toward *permanent* sacerdotal abstinence, and purity rituals of the Levites were enlarged, a turning point in ecclesiastic history.

Participants' ecclesiology and perspectives on Christian families, sex and the body were connected. Divergent views on the source of the unity of the Church were germane, what was considered best for married priests, and how a sacerdotal obligation to serve the Church without sex could be met. Helvidius brought the questions up c.382 and Jovinian reignited it a decade or so later.<sup>14</sup>

Virginity, ecclesiology, and celibacy were connected in this conflict over asceticism and whether priestly continence should be permanent or temporary. Was it possible to pray to God sincerely, with piety, yet engage in sex with one's wife? Could a priest give Eucharist in the afterglow of marital relations, and faithfully perform altar tasks if intimate relations with his wife were had the previous night? In the earliest centuries, consensus required a priest who served Mass to keep ritual purity, to meet the expectations held for Old Testament priests, the Levitical purity codes. Thus, Jewish ideals of sex invaded the early church and a married celebrant must temporarily abstain from marital duties, but could later resume sexual relations with his wife. Following the "Constantine revolution," greater religious freedom altered regulations and clergy widen their discussion of sex for married priests, disputing abstinence.

David G. Hunter says that part of the discord over this issue heated up at the close of the fourth century because under the new state regimes, liturgies might occur daily. Churches celebrated the Eucharist more often, so requirements for priestly abstinence enlarged. This question was further complicated by a rarity of priests in the "pioneer western" churches, which made Jerome and Ambrose's teachings on asceticism, the call for married priests to be celibate, problematic. Few married men in the west wanted to be priests if they must be "holy" to offer the daily Eucharists.

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14 According to D.G. Hunter, Jovinian was formidable, a holy monk, supported by many Christian aristocratic men and women. See Hunter's articles on the dispute; book *Marriage and Sexuality in Early Christianity*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018. Jovinian was not anti-ascetic but himself a monk.

Constant readiness was necessary. Following advice the Apostle Paul gave in First Corinthians chapter seven, by their interpretation, priests did not pray effectively while active in sex. Eucharist offered daily, therefore, meant that sex must be denied daily. This caused what had been a temporary sacerdotal prohibition of married sex to turn permanent.<sup>15</sup>

Helvidius and Jovinian objected to this hermeneutic so they were called “anti-ascetic,” or maligned as liberals. ‘Anti’ the novelty of extreme fasting, they were pro-church unity, pro-family, pro-sex and accepted the physical in a way that countered Jewish or Semi-Encratite views of the body. However, Jerome won tacit support from aristocratic women, including Marcella, Asella and Paula, and called on serious Christians to choose celibacy, even married priests.<sup>16</sup>

For Jerome and Ambrose, virgins represent the apex of godliness, and were placed at the top of the ladder of merit. This view of sex was atypical for Christians families, and a majority of Romans, many of whom were still pagan. Jerome’s ultimatums were radical, as were claims that sex forced Christians to sink into impurity.<sup>17</sup> Virginitiy could make humans like the angels, bring “heaven on earth,” but sexual intercourse by married priests was a pollution. Debates over celibacy or sex as illicit or licit for married Christians came to a boil.

### **Women in Jerome’s Fiery Debates**

Celibacy and sex for Christians were topics of controversy yet Jerome was no misogynist, and claimed he was not anti-sex. In the west, he achieved both fame and infamy, after Rome’s prelate invited Jerome to do biblical tasks for him. Jerome’s ecclesiastical place was secure in Rome, until Damasus died.

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15 The Pauline strictures on sex were clearly stated to be temporary, in ch. 7 v. 5 the apostle said, “do not deprive” the spouse. He told *married Christians to resume intimate relations after abstinence.*

16 Ambrose held this emphasis on virginity for all who truly believed, and be celibate to serve God, also.

17 Augustine and Jerome believed that during sex man’s mind dropped out of its rational and spiritual place ,was distracted. If emotion or lust led to a loss of rationality, men turned into beasts. Passion in sex was the problem, not coitus itself, but enjoyment of it. Loss of man’s high rational self was at issue.

His obsession with virgins prompts questions about sex, yet women held a central place in Jerome's life. Ideals he taught about the celibate life required gender-segregated routines but this did not align with his personal \* with women. In addition, philanthropy and dowries of holy women financed the scholar's travels and foundation in Bethlehem, enabling his plethora of letters. Women secured Jerome's profession. Women were essential to Jerome.

Jerome jumped into discord when Helvidius argued for the idea that Jesus had siblings and Jovinian later criticized the harm brought to church unity if Christians called virgins superior. In the subsequent tumult, women were not passive. Marcella quelled rumors swirling around Jerome and remained loyal when he was accused of impropriety in relation to Paula in 385. She defended their friendship, and uncovered the false testimony of slaves. Marcella's aristocratic position, pious celibacy, and wealth rescued Jerome. Despite her support, however, Roman clergy evicted Jerome and he left the Eternal City.

Notwithstanding a tendency to generate discord, the Dalmatian monk rose high, for education and experience of the ecclesiastical world equipped him to serve. Born in the West, he studied in the East, travelled north to south, and became acquainted with the top ecclesiastical "players" of the day. His arrival in Rome coincided with the height of the Nicene battles dividing sees across the empire. He lived through convulsions of the Late Roman empire, and the transformation of a majority of the pagan Mediterranean world to Christianity. He saw the arrival of barbarian tribes.<sup>18</sup> And he travelled. In the safety of *Pax Romana*, pilgrimage and peregrinators multiplied. Despite gender ambivalence in church hegemony, men often travelled in entourages accompanied by and financed by women, so Jerome journeyed with women.

### **Power Inversion: Women as *Prostatas*. Ambivalence of Fathers Towards Gender**

Writings of fourth century women were seldom preserved, making it hard to study or know their contributions or achievements. It's rare to

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18 The breadth of Jerome's journeys, including to Trier, make it possible to speak of his "*many worlds*."

be able to study their own words. For this reason, Jerome's friendships, life and work provide a valuable optic not only for who he was and his conflicts, but also for women of that day. In some ways, Jerome closed the gender gap, promoting women as students and friends. Through Jerome, reading his letters, we observe many women's lives in a liminal era, as the church was in a time of major transition.

In the early church, the view of women tended to be monochromatic, swinging from saint to sinner, a being like Eve or Mary, evil or saintly. Nevertheless women contributed significantly and experienced increased agency through fourth century monastic developments, despite the church fathers' ambivalence.<sup>19</sup> Ecclesiastical proscriptions were imprecise even while the church held predominantly negative views of women. As male philosophers before them had done, men described women as deficit or as "deformed males."<sup>20</sup>

With gender prejudice, latitude existed, for the position of bias against women, like many ecclesiastical issues, experienced vacillation and fissures. Inexactitude in roles permitted a few women, not those of ordinary classes but ones who were elite, educated, and wealthy, to take prominent leadership roles, and interposed secular power into ecclesiastical spaces. Vast possessions and secular prestige of women, as well as holy living, thrust them into Church roles.<sup>21</sup> Donations to bishops trumped gender of the giver and *prostatis* were elevated.

What pious widows achieved for the churches happened because of wealth and status. They were equipped by the astonishing size of their holdings and the senatorial status of men in their lineage. Money talked and prestige mattered, as Harvard scholar Osiek explains the enlarged role women held in early churches. Not only did elite women move into

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19 Clark, Elizabeth. *Women in the Early Church*. Collegville MN,: Liturgical Press, 1983. See also Cohick, Lynn, and Amy B Hughes, *Christian Women in the Patristic World*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic. 2017.

20 A long bias in the ancient world was towards men *and away* from women. Plato taught that women were formed when a male baby went awry, and Galen said if the womb had trouble or was too moist or cold, a female was created. Male Jews gave praise to God for *not* being born a female.

21 Another extraordinary Christian widow was Melania the Elder; whose family holdings ranged from west to east, a property so vast that giving it all away could destabilize the empire, scholars say.

church leadership, becoming ordained as deacons and presbyters, but in ecclesiastic spaces, through the system of patronage, a further inversion took place.<sup>22</sup> Expectations tied to the system of patronage caused a patron who was female and a beneficiary who was male to upend gender roles; women ruled men. In an age of transition, when orthodox attitudes about gender lacked clear definition, women rose up.

In this way, the holiness and work of a virgin such as Macrina of Annisi,<sup>23</sup> sister to Basil and Gregory, and the prestige or gifts of a widow such as Paula to Jerome effected a reversal in Late Roman social hierarchy. They turned male Church hegemony upside down. Women supported and rescued men.

However, by not preserving the writings and letters of women, the deeds of women were erased or ignored and many Christian men were honored above Christian women. The ontology of gender was unclear and allowed church leaders to ignore or erase Paul's words to Galatians that, in Christ, there would be no longer male, female, slave, free, Jew, Gentile."<sup>24</sup>

Despite the socio-ecclesiastical vacillations of that time, to support and rescue men was a task a female *prostatist* gladly took. In fact women played a prominent role in the life of the faith's founder, the Lord Jesus himself, who with apostles and writers of Holy Scripture, received support from women. The men were not ashamed to benefit from patrons who were women. In the years of his ministry on earth and the church born after Christ's death, male hegemony was turned upside down, as women helped and supported men.

The environment of ancient Palestine was not conducive to women's advancement for both the apostle Paul and the Lord Christ Jesus lived in a male dominated Jewish culture. Yet the power inversion of women helping men was visible in their ministries. In chapter 16 of the Epistle to the Romans, the Apostle Paul promoted Phoebe, and in ministry Christ

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22 Osiek. writes about the ordination to presbyter & deacon which women were given. Madigan, Kevin, Osiek. *Ordained Women of the Early Church*; Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2005.

23 Jaroslav Pelikan calls Macrina the FOURTH Cappadocian, as her influence was significant.

24 Galatians 3-28 was to bring status into a balance and gender into equality in Christ's church.

elevated female patrons. Christ was indebted to Joanna of Chuza, Susanna and Mary Magdalene who followed and financed his work.<sup>25</sup> Last at the cross, first at the Lord's grave, the presence of women in the life of Christ Jesus was ubiquitous.

Patronage and friendships in the early Church, therefore, were avenues that saw gender norms invert, as at Christianity's inception. A recipient of a woman's largesse, a client who was a monk or clergy, or the Rabbi Jesus himself, became subordinate to a female *prostatis*. In addition to the inversion finances created in the early Church was the fact that men and women became friends, near equals in ministry. Frequent contact birthed friendships between a client and her-his patrons.<sup>26</sup> Men and women became "spiritual" friends.

Church fathers relied on the money and friendship of celibate widows, exchanged copious letters. However when women were the dominant one in finance and support, and men became their clients, it subverted the gender roles expected in Late Antique society.<sup>27</sup> So it came to be with Paula and Jerome, in Bethlehem; he taught her and she aided and rescued him, setting up the religious foundation in Bethlehem with him. Then through what is written by and of Jerome, we learn of Marcella, Paula, Asella, Principia, Eustochium and many other virgins, widows and celibate women.

### **Educating virgins of Rome**

Agency for fourth century women was a by-product of what happened in the monastic developments, influenced not only by status and wealth but also by education. With Jerome, educating a person, male or

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25 Joanna, wife of Chuza, was healed by Christ and after Jesus died was at the tomb. Luke 8 and 24.10; the power inversion that Jesus initiated by becoming subordinate to Joanna or other women who provided financial help was reborn in the relation of Jerome to Paula, John Chrysostom to Olympia, Rufinus to Melantia at the Mt. of Olives.

26 Osiek, Carolyn, M. MacDonald & Janet Tulloch. *A Woman's Place*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006, pp.214-219. Patronal activities of women continued to appear after the position of bishops was established; C.f. Lynn Cohick, *Women in the Lives of the Earliest Christians*. Baker Academic, 2009, pp. 285-296.

27 In friendship, Rufinus relied on (Elder) Melania and John Chrysostome relied upon Olympia.

female, brought to them a larger grasp of Holy scripture, an exercise of linguistic skill and a wider intellectual freedom.<sup>28</sup> His focus in Rome on widows and celibates, teaching virgins for a time, closed the gender gap in education, albeit in private, sectarian spheres. As a monk who dedicated a portion of his time to teaching women, Jerome affirmed the capacity and intellect of females, thus it was little wonder that women celibates appreciated Jerome. So in 382-5 Rome, women who were widows, celibates or virgins came to seek Jerome out as teacher. Many circumstances turned these privileged women towards a life of monastic denial: the death of a child, spouse or fiancé, desire for seclusion from the world or escape from men, plus spiritual fervor, all, drove them.<sup>29</sup> For a variety of reasons, aristocratic women became celibate, taking up monasticism and in Marcella's home, they pursued a teacher – *quid pro quo* – the door Jerome opened for women brought reciprocal good. Education for his fame and security

Motives may have been complex, but Late Antique women such as Paula gave their wealth to the church, which allowed monks like Jerome to find a time and place to write, buy books and pay scribes, and rest in domesticity and peace in a settled space. Women *prostatas* also won tangible and intangible benefits, for widows and virgins acquired agency, received education and courage to lead.

When Jerome advanced women in education and virginity, he promoted and pointed out their spiritual assets.<sup>30</sup> In effect Jerome created teachers when he taught, for women were led to lead. Students like Marcella were taught to rise up and be “genderless” examples to others, including men, and humble guides of truth. Marcella, holy in mind and spirit, could provide the right doctrine, Jerome said in a letter, was able to turn clergy of Rome away from heresy.<sup>31</sup> If they were his pupils, even women students were trusted to “teach” theology, and advance doctrine, by using his teaching and scriptural interpretation. Being submissive to

28 Paula was more fluent in Hebrew than Jerome, and Marcella better in Greek, see Pallasius *LH*.

29 Did wealth and status free aristocrats to be nuns, or did they become nuns to be free of the patriarchy? This is a large debate among scholars who write about women in the early church.

30 Cain, *ibid*. Much of this section on Marcella relies on Andrew Cain's chapter, in his book.

31 *Ep* 65. Letters of Jerome. See also letter 127.

Jerome's tutelage, a woman's gender was covered, because right teaching from him trumped gender and allowed them to be the voice of Jerome, his disciple.

Did he suggest that women preach or become teachers of men? No, Jerome's advice was not that a woman should take the mantle of a priest or teach a man, for like other church fathers, he quoted the Pauline prohibition. Women were not to stand above men or preach, although women could teach women. A student of Jerome represented him and was able to correct errors in Rome, speak as he might if he were there. What Jerome promoted was an image of authority displayed by his students, to enlarge belief in his orthodoxy.<sup>32</sup>

Gender was not the point, but Jerome's right teaching, delivered through Marcella. This seemed the intention of his direction given to Marcella, who spoke for him, as his mouthpiece. Marcella was the ideal Hieronymist model of asceticism, and, in Jerome's view, shaped the landscape of Roman monastic life.<sup>33</sup> Yet his directive to Marcella indicated more about him than about her.<sup>34</sup> His motive aside, however, by advising her to address theology, to speak against the confusion brought by Rufinus' translation of Origen's works then circulating in Rome, Marcella's intellect was validated, and her gender disappeared.

Other fathers made intimate friends of women, such as John Chrysostom, with close ties to Olympias of Constantinople, c.360s-408, as well as Rufinus of Aquileia linked to Melania the Elder, c. 350-410 at the houses of Mt. Olives. A century earlier, the Virgin Juliana is referenced in Palladius', as one who rescued Origen of Caesarea, 184-253. Peter Brown cites the extraordinary role women had in constructing Rome's basilicas, noting elite, aristocratic women's generosity which contributed to the fourth century Christianization of Rome.<sup>35</sup>

Therefore Jerome's letters invite the reader to discover varied and important details about women of that era. Jerome may not have had the

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32 Cain, Andrew and Josef Lossl. *Jerome of Stridon; His life, Writings and Legacy*. Ashgate, 2009, p.52-55.

33 *Ep.* 127. Also see Cain, *ibid*, p. 56. See Kelly also, *ibid*, p. 246.

34 Seventeen of Jerome's letters to Marcella survived. None of hers to him have yet been discovered..

35 Brown, *ibid*. p. 354

intention of liberating women or illuminating their lives, yet his tutorials at the palace of Marcella and letters written to many women across the empire did both.

### **Women and men in polemic**

Women were not the only source of misunderstanding in Jerome's life. His style and agenda brought him into controversy for he seemed anti-family.

The fourth century debates about the role of celibacy revealed not only a subject under debate, but also what prepared, equipped Jerome and what drove him. First, education and travel lifted Jerome out of obscurity, and prepared him to cultivate a life of prestige in Rome, where he wrote hoping to influence the future and to be remembered.<sup>36</sup> Second, Jerome was ambitious, careful to attach himself to powerful persons of influence. In Rome, he did not sequester himself; rather, he put himself in the path of preeminent churchmen, such as Ambrose, who introduced current topics and discourse,<sup>37</sup> and the pope. Third, Jerome lived in a day of *paideia* and he had been similarly prepared.<sup>38</sup> Jerome was educated in the Graeco-Roman norms, with friends and patrons who provided him access to books and a wide study of languages.<sup>39</sup> Yet an insatiable thirst for significance also drove Jerome forward.

Finally, he did not avoid conflict but relished it as a way to distinguish himself and to highlight what he thought was best, that is, to elevate desert Christianity in Rome. His wish and the work of others came to fruition, for in the decades that followed, ascetic virginity "happened" to become the reigning social-spiritual trend. Monasticism and celibacy exploded in the fourth century, as many Christians separated themselves and took up a "life of angels." However Jerome's style was extreme, caused

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36 Brown. *Ibid.* Jerome's writing "ensured that future ages (viewed) the incident," as Jerome did.

37 His acidic pen brought trouble; in August 385, the clergy of Rome voted to exile him from Rome.

38 To Eustochium, he said, "Learn of me a holy arrogance." letter 22. Jerome; Schaf, *ibid.*

39 While in the Chalcis desert, he used Evagrius' library in Antioch regularly, and books were sent to him.

disunity and led to internal debates. Thus presbyter's like Helvidius' argued with papal staff, monks spoke against monks, and ascetics argued with ascetics over Jerome's more extreme suggestions. Jerome does appear anti-sex but was not a clear cut misogynist.

In the debates, both the ladder of merit and virginity were emphasized and women seemed to have become gender-free when they became celibate. Jerome was ambivalent about the place and role of women, yet achieved a great deal because he received an identity as their tutor and relied on the women for rescue and work-travel funds. Both conflict and opportunities sprang out of his wide travels and the breadth his education gave. His participation in the celibacy disputes advanced virginity and led to a larger consensus in the church that virginity was better.

### **A Scholar of East and West Rises High and Fails Low. Bishop Executed in Trier after Scandal**

In a time of anxious orthodoxy, it was not difficult to fall into disfavor and even be in danger of losing one's life. An aficionado of denial, another monk on the frontier, faced rumors and scandal over his friendships and behavior with women. Priscillian became bishop of Avila in 380 yet when accused of impropriety in 385, had a harsher fate; he met execution in Trier. It was easy to fail and hard to rise; Jerome relied on the patronage of Marcella of Rome in the years 382-385 CE, as well as the safety of position while serving Pope Damasus.

### **Fall of An Ideologue**

Jerome was an ideologue, not a moderate theologian. He had roots in both the east and west, for after his training in Rome, spent two years in Trier, and by age 30 lived near Antioch, where, in the 370s CE, he was ordained a priest by Paulinus, the man who later brought him back to Rome as translator. Jerome labelled himself a *guru* of ascetic denial after he spent a short time in the Chalcis desert.<sup>40</sup> In Constantinople c. 378, he was among the students of no less a personage than Gregory of Nazianzus,

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<sup>40</sup> Rebenich, Stefan. Jerome. London: Routledge, 2002, pp. 12-13. In north Syria, Jerome was seldom isolated and never far from scribes or books, so it is misleading to label him a desert hermit. Yet in biographies, "lives" of hermits, he praised the heroic isolation and poverty of those who withdrew from society.

which is the period when Jerome began to love Origen and champion virgins. Like other middle-class Romans, he was educated in the traditions of *paideia* and as a result, was a son of Hellenism.<sup>41</sup>

In the east, he worked on a continuation of Evagrius' *Ecclesiastical History*, and pursued leading men. He came to Rome with Paulinus, of Antioch, and the Greek speaker Epiphanius, bishop of Salamis where Paulinus intended to plead for his succession to the see before the Pope of Rome.<sup>42</sup> Jerome's suave and formidable intellect attracted the attention of locals, so when that entourage returned east, he stayed.

In Rome Jerome was promoted to be secretary to the pope, who was a complicated character, for Damasus was one of the bloodiest to hold the See of Rome.<sup>43</sup> Jerome's austerity was a foil to the faults of the pope. He admired the prelate's poetry, yet Damasus was known for a predilection for gossip with wealthy women and addiction to luxury.<sup>44</sup> He was a plump man, and called by his opponents, "the ear tickler," reveling in gold, glitter and rich fabrics, a notable contrast to the Dalmatian. What of the sordid way Damasus ascended to power?<sup>45</sup> Ruffians roamed Rome, doing his bidding. Sadly, when in power, "Christian" magistrates paid for attacks on pagans.<sup>46</sup> Before Jerome arrived, in 366, violence occurred between contenders, and an instigator was Damasus.

Yet in 382, Jerome chose to live under this prelate's shadow, to receive the security conferred by him with introductions to aristocratic

41 See Elm *Sons of Hellenism* about *paideia*'s ubiquitous Greek hold on Church fathers.

42 Both Paulinus, supported by Athanasius while he lived, and Melitius, supported by Basil of Cappadocia, claimed the See of Antioch. Since Paulinus ordained Jerome, was this why Jerome helped?

43 Ruffians beat up his rival, roughing up Ursinus at St. Agnes Church. Pope Liberius previously had the Arian emperor's support. So in 366, two deacons were elected and "won." Did Damasus justify violence against Ursinius for being soft on the heresy of Arianism, or did he 'fight' for unity in solitary power?

44 Rebenich, *ibid.*

45 "Christian" magistrates in the fifth century bullied pagans who tried to protect Jews of Egypt. In the 410's, Hypatia, a female philosopher, was cut up and died. In 415, Orestes the governor was beaten by ruffians hired by Bishop Cyril of Alexandria, in a state-church feud.

46 The Late Roman empire saw many power shifts of Arians and Orthodox; bishops suffered schisms.

women. Through his position with Damasus, he came to the attention of holy women. One of the first letters between Jerome and a woman was from Marcella, a scholarly ascetic who filled her Aventine nunnery-palace with dedicated virgins, a leader who peppered Jerome with queries. Wealthy and renowned, Marcella engaged “the teacher,” as her personal bible tutor, and for his part, Jerome valued the status that accrued to him in being her client. This was added to the papal protection he already enjoyed, however, following the winter Damasus died, Jerome lost everything. Short years of papal protection evaporated, and city clergy were able to send him away.

“The teacher,” was not irenic and became known as an ideologue. Therefore, despite successful work and glorious patrons, personal disgrace met Jerome at the end of his time in the Eternal City, due to his unfortunate manner and extreme polemic. Biblical scholars were another group offended by his eisegesis for in his interpretation, scripture was bent exclusively to uphold his “Oriental” version of *kenosis*, causing further contention.<sup>47</sup> As Kelly describes it, Christians were dismayed to see the way he insisted on a single form of Christian life and the manner in which Jerome hounded them. Worse, dishonorable charlatans jumped on his ascetic “bandwagon.”<sup>48</sup> David Hunter writes that Jerome lost support of the Church majority, and contemporaries who agreed with him in theory found Jerome’s manner extreme.<sup>49</sup>

### **A Lost Battle But A War Won. Celibacy and “Life of Angels” Become Popular**

Jerome lost the battle, as a zealot whose exegeses were controversial and whose incendiary style was destructive, but he won the war, although peers like the contemporary historian Palladius derided him as a contentious monk.<sup>50</sup>

It was not celibacy itself, but his fanatical call for virginity for all that bothered the believers in Rome, for it excluded and diminished Christian mothers. This style and view veered towards enclavism, the heresy rebuked by Clement of Alexandria. Devoted Christians, especially parents,

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47 Theresa Tinkle, a medieval scholar, calls Jerome’s exegesis, “S-exegesis.”

48 Kelly, *ibid.*

49 Hunter, *ibid.*

50 Palladius *LH.*

felt marginalized and demeaned. Gossip, fanatical views and, finally, a tragic death unseated him.

The final straw occurred when a virgin from his inner circle of students, an aristocratic teen, died of over-fasting. This shadow was added to his questionable friendships with women, from his regular tutorials given at the palace not only of Marcella but also of the widow Paula. Paula, widow of Toxotius, had been host to Paulinus and Epiphanius in 382. Jerome's repute was tarnished by gossip over the close friendships with women and he was a target of ecclesiastical scandal. His discharge was observed by all, both friends and foes in the Church, other monks, such as Helvidius in 383, and the presbyter, Jovinian in the early 390s. Jerome's self-immolation brought infamy and temporary loss. According to D.G Hunter, a variety of Christians gathered to reject his exegesis with its "escalating ascetic agenda," says Elizabeth Clark, in *Reading Renunciation*,<sup>51</sup> reading scripture to bolster an ideology of radical celibacy.<sup>52</sup>

Marcella partially seemed to soften his temper and rescued him during the years he taught at her palace. Women appeared to ameliorate his faults. But as a fanatic and ideologue, he sowed disgrace in manner and agenda. At the cusp, at the height of the ecclesiastical pinnacle, as papal aid, Jerome fell.

Women played a vital role in the world of Jerome. He wrote a third of his letters to women. Marcella and Paula were fundamental in his success. It was astonishing how important women were for this celibate monk, and his work in biblical and historical studies. Women saved the monk from Dalamtia.

Virgins were at the highest point of the ladder, in Jerome's opinion, leading a Christian closer to God. This is the reason that Jerome stood at the center of the century's debates and arguments for Jerome's treatises centered on this area of family and sexual behavior.

So for a celibate monk, friend of virgins, total sacerdotal abstinence was not just an option or a better choice. Instead to Jerome, the life of angels was an essential habit for the church to take up, to draw all Christians closer to God.

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51 Princeton University Press, 1999.

52 Hunter, David G. *Marriage, Celibacy and Heresy in Ancient Christianity*. Minneapolis: Fort Press, 2018.