



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

### **Church History – Part One (100-1500 AD)**

#### **Lesson 20 – Jerome and the Latin Bible (The Vulgate)**

Jerome was born in northern Italy in 348 AD. He was very fond of the pagan classical writers like Cicero. But he felt guilty about his interest in heathen authors and determined to spend more time studying the Scriptures and the writing of Christian authors. He also felt guilty about his interest in sensual matters, so to fight against such things he became an austere hermit. But even then, he had dreams of female dancers in Rome. He learned that he could not remove himself from his sinful flesh. To try to keep his flesh under control, he determined to learn and master the Hebrew language.

Eventually he learned that he was not intended to be a hermit. He became a presbyter (that is, a pastor or priest) in Antioch. He attended the Council of Constantinople in 381 AD. He then became the secretary of the bishop of Rome. The bishop suggested that Jerome should translate the Hebrew Old Testament and the Greek New Testament into Latin, the official language of the Roman Empire. He began this project in Rome, where he was helped by several wealthy and intelligent women such as Albina and her daughter Marcella, Ambrose's sister Marcellina, and especially the talented Paula and her daughter Eustochium.

When the bishop for whom he worked died, Jerome was no longer welcome in Rome and had to leave Rome. Because of his prickly personality he did not have many friends. He spent some time in Egypt and Palestine. Eventually he founded a monastery in Bethlehem devoted to the study of the ancient languages. His friend Paula founded a similar convent in Bethlehem for women. It was in Bethlehem that Jerome devoted himself to his main work: the translation of the whole Bible from the original languages into Latin. This translation, known as the *Vulgate*, is still used to this very day. There were Latin translations before this, but not directly from the original languages. His translation did not please everybody, however, because many were used to the older translations. But still it was a magnificent accomplishment, and it remains his main claim to fame.

Over the years Jerome attracted many enemies because of his tactlessness and pride. He found fault with many of the Christian leaders of his time, including John Chrysostom, Ambrose of Milan, Basil of Caesarea, and Augustine of Hippo. Much of his correspondence with these men has survived, and Jerome was clearly not as superior to others as he thought. He was very much the product of his age in that he distained marriage and praised of the monastic life. But no matter what he tried to do, he could not overcome the desires of his own flesh.

After his circle of female associates died, Jerome was a lonely man. He lived to see the day (August 24, 410 AD), when the ancient city of Rome was overrun by pagan Goths under the command of Alaric. He realized that the days of the great Roman Empire were coming to an end. It was the end of an era.

**Questions:**

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1. How did it happen that Jerome took up the study of Hebrew?
2. How did Jerome try to overcome the natural desires of his flesh?
3. Why was he unable to master all of these desires?
4. Where did Jerome and his friend Paula establish a new monastic life?
5. Why was Jerome's translation better to others made before his?
6. What characteristic of Jerome's correspondence with other leaders?
7. What did Jerome realize when Rome was conquered by the Goths?