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ILLUMINATING WOMEN IN THE WORLD OF ST. JEROME

When Policy and Practice Diverged

Abstract: Women's presence was ubiquitous in the life of Jerome of Stridon c. 347-420 as in that of many early church fathers. This paper looks at the Christian stance on women, sex and marriage from the optic of the "life of angels" interpreted by Jerome in the Celibacy debates of 382-393. It includes profiles of aristocratic women in Rome who influenced him and who despite cultural limitations became leaders with reference to Jerome's legacy that endured beyond the late fourth century discord. A major intellectual force, Jerome rose to prestige and honors, but fell to disgrace. Celibate women stood loyally by his side and rescued him¹.

Keywords: *Fourth Century Theology, Christian Women, Jerome, Virgins, Celibacy, Patristics, Early Christian Fathers*

Introduction

Is a celibate monk who loved virgins a conundrum? St. Jerome,² 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, studied as a teen in Rome, and then in Constantinople under St. Gregory the Theologian. He was a world citizen.

¹ Abbreviations: Latin works translated into English. *LH* = Palladius. *Lausiac History*. Tr. by W. Loather Clarke. MacMillan, NY: SPCK. 1918. *NANF* = Schaff, Philip and Henry Wace, gen. eds. Fremantle was the scholar translator of Jerome's Epistles. *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994.

² Opinions on date of birth vary; for a discussion see Kelly, J.N.D. *Jerome: His Life, Writings, and Controversies*. New York: Harper and Row, 1979, 337-339, who says early, c. 331, But Rebenich, *St. Jerome*. London: Routledge, 2002, p. 1; says c. 347 is more likely in Stridon; Brown, P., *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*. Columbia University Press, 2008, p. 366, also says 347 CE.

My interest in St. Jerome and fourth century women began while teaching surveys of the early Church. I discovered unexpected aspects to this Dalmatian's life and his works and letters raised questions³. Why were women drawn to him? How did he earn renown? Did his historical works make him famous, or the biblical translations with commentaries or voluminous letters? Clearly, the Vulgate, the biblical tome for a millennium in the west, brought glory later since all who are interested in the authority of scripture hear, sooner or later, of its translator, Jerome of Bethlehem. But what of the widows and his close friendships with women?⁴ How did virgins fit into the life of a celibate?

Both Jerome's erudition and love of polemic were evident in letters that he freely sprinkled with hyperbole, exaggeration and insults, which were useful rhetorical conventions of that time intended both to entertain readers and display a writer's skill⁵. What puzzled me was the fame achieved⁶ by this monk even after he alienated clergy in the Church establishment and provoked the ire of laity in Rome. Bishops and clergy were targets of his vitriol, labeled "asses" and "beasts"⁷. F. F. Bruce said ecclesiastical life seemed squalid in that era, full of division⁸.

From peers, Jerome's biblical translations drew fear that he would alter the Septuagint, and outrage at his aim, to supply a text more closely aligned to the original languages⁹. Although his bible knowledge was

³ Letters of Jerome are in translations by William Freemantle in NANTF: Schaff, Ph., Wace, H. *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*. Vol. 6. Peabody: MA: Hendrickson, 1999. The primary sources for this article are Jerome's letters to women particularly but not exclusively 18–21, 22, also especially 45 to Asella from Ostia when banished in 385, 78 to Fabiola & 130 to Demetrius from Bethlehem.

⁴ Clark says in no other century were so many celibate Fathers *fixated* on babies. See Clark, E. A. *Women in the Early Church*. Collegville MN: Liturgical Press, 1983, 15–16.

⁵ Cameron, A. *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire. The Development of Christian Discourse*, University of California Press, 1991. Discourse was key in the faith's success, p.7. Brown says this type of vibrant debate helped the church endure.

⁶ Jerome attacked Ambrose, Pelagius & Augustine. See Brown, P. *Body and Society*, pp. 366–386.

⁷ Aquilina, M. *The Fathers of the Church. An Introduction to the First Christian Teachers*. Huntington: Our Sunday Visitor, 1999, 172–174.

⁸ Bruce, F. F. *The Spreading Flame: The Rise and Progress of Christianity from Its First Beginnings to Eighth-Century England*. Eerdmans 1954, 36–46 discuss piety's decline.

⁹ Jerome studied with a Jewish Rabbi for revisions to the Septuagint. See letter 22; p. 32.

encyclopedic, his exegesis was often allegorical with a questionable hermeneutic intended to bolster the “Oriental” asceticism he preferred. Thus like other church fathers may have done, Jerome wandered into eisegesis, a slanted method¹⁰. Translations and lifestyles he advised were not universally approved nor his radical evangelism for the “life of angels,” which made him at times appear semi-Encratic or Manichean¹¹. Despite the flaws of the monk, he left a voluminous *oeuvre*, letters and historic works that lifted him out of obscurity into prominence.

And this prominence elevated daughters and also mothers of the church.

Born in Dalmatia, this monk of the Western Church deposited a troubling ecclesiastic inheritance, for his innovations were taken up by bishops and scholars who set a problematic trajectory regarding Christians and sex. Reverberations of this trajectory endure, echoing today, for they may be linked to modern ecclesiastical scandals.

This paper is concerned with the intersection of three phenomena: conflicts, agenda and friendships. Jerome’s agenda was about the “life of angels,” his close friendships with women brought him patrons such as Marcella and Paula despite customary gender segregation, and the bitterness of Roman clergy ostensibly led to his fall and removal from Rome. Of the three, Jerome’s circle of women are the hub and *foci* here¹², for in the ancient system of patronage men like Jerome came to depend on the

¹⁰ Clark, El. A. *Women in the Early Church*, 15–16. Clark gave examples of fathers’ eisegesis in scripture to justify their opinion of women as inferior to men and bolster cultural assumptions. Both denigrated and praised, women met male ambivalence. 52. Also see her book, Clark, El. *Reading Renunciation. Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity*. Princeton University Press 1999, 259–320 for examples of Church Fathers’ eisegesis and analysis of them.

¹¹ Jerome was renowned in the Middle Ages. See Joseph Loef below. Luther admired the Dalmatian, respected his work on Galatians, but later in life, Luther criticized the Dalmatian’s exegesis as *eisegesis*.

¹² Why use *Policy and Practice* in the title? A seminal article in 1984 observed inconsistencies between Church gender theory, policy and practice. Avoiding contact with women (for the Dalmatian himself recommended minimal interaction) the monk yet was intimate friends like elite Romans widows and he also tutored virgins. See Clark, E. Clark, El. A. *Women in the Early Church*, 15–16.

finance and protection of elite women¹³.

Aristocratic Christian women did not merely aid Jerome or equip him financially, but were influential, and we will show that women rescued Jerome.

Policy and People in the Celibacy Debates

In the early 380's, when Jerome's conflicts with Helvidius took place in Rome, the Christian church was in a liminal state and the role of women unclear.¹⁴ Of the men and women around Jerome the premier was Damasus, Rome's pope from 366-384 CE, though in the celibacy disputes he seemed marginal. Influential in both secular and ecclesiastical spheres was Ambrose, c. 340-397, Bishop of Milan. Ambrose deplored Helvidius and Jovinian, two teachers whom Jerome rejected¹⁵. After the controversies rose again in 393, it was Ambrose, above Jerome in church hierarchy, who called a synod with Pope Siricius to anathematize the teachings Helvidius and Jovinian circulated¹⁶.

A nagging problem at this time in Rome was the battle between heresy and orthodoxy, so it was not minor that a rumor of novelty shadowed the monk from Dalmatia, encircling his friends. Was his extreme *kenotic* vision, to advocate that aristocratic men not just women take up celibacy, contrary to the patrilineal culture of Rome? Ostensibly, scholars argued for and against Oriental-style asceticism, in particular, Jerome's insistence that virgins be elevated and the superiority of a virgin life be everywhere acknowledged. The talk veered into a discussion of virginity itself, with a declaration that Christ had no siblings, and insistence that the Virgin

¹³ Jerome was Marcella's tutor while he did translations for Pope Damasus. Paula was host to the men who hired Jerome to go with them to Rome and was in Marcella's circle. Paula became Jerome's chief supporter, traveling to Palestine. *NANF*, vol. 9; see Letters 23–9 and 30–34.

¹⁴ In 382, Helvidius rebuked a monk named Certius who elevated virginity and denied Jesus' siblings.

¹⁵ Chiefly, Ambrose seemed offended by attempts to dismantle the hierarchy of merit. *Synod notes*.

¹⁶ Auxentius, Genialis, Germinator, Felix, Prontinus, Martianus, Januarius, and Ingeniosus are clergy identified in the act of 390 which condemned Jovinian, but Ambrose was senior. In *On the Good Marriage*, Augustine described the synods of Rome and Milan in the 390's – see also letters of Pope Siricius. Hunter refers to below.

Mary was eternally, physically untouched. In the wake of these debates, the western churches leaned to *permanent* sacerdotal abstinence, changing and enlarging rituals of Old Testament Levites. This formed a turning point in the ecclesiastical history of sex and marriage.

Participants' ecclesiology and their perspectives on marriage, sex and the body were intertwined¹⁷. Some diverged on the source of the unity of the Church, for Jovinian argued that baptism's efficacy was essential, but to Jerome and Ambrose celibacy was obligatory even for married priests, bound to serve the Church free of sex. In 382, Helvidius brought the questions up and Jovinian's books reignited this debate a decade or so later¹⁸.

Virginity for Married Clergy

Virginity, ecclesiology, and celibacy were central in this conflict over asceticism and whether priestly continence was a permanent necessity or merely temporary. Could a married priest give Eucharist in the afterglow of marital relations, i.e. was spiritual purity compatible with a sexual life, may believers pray to God undistracted, yet engage in sex with their spouse? Consensus in the earlier centuries was that a priest who served Mass would keep temporary "purity," and meet expectations placed on Old Testament men following the ancient Jewish Levitical codes. In Rome, they transferred the liturgical purity issues to the fourth century.

When Ambrose expanded it, saying no married priest was a true Levite, he not only copied the Levitical codes for the west, but he reignited the emphasis of Tatian the Encratite c. 120–173 from a past duality. In the east some had attempted to build a moral wall¹⁹, to fix a dichotomy be-

¹⁷ Jovinian wrote of the power of Baptism to unite and a spiritual equality inaugurated by baptism, plus how it erased sin. He spied Manichean traits in Ambrose & Jerome, and claimed they were anti- Jesus' incarnation and human physical body.

¹⁸ According to Hunter, D. G. *Marriage, Celibacy and Heresy in Ancient Christianity*. Oxford University Press, 2009, Jovinian was a holy monk of formidable intellect, supported by both Christian aristocratic men and women. Hunter argues for the possibility of Jovinian's orthodoxy see p. 232 and 243–284. Was Jovinian truly a heretical anti-ascetic or did Jerome's attack push Jovinian to take what seemed a heretical stance?

¹⁹ In Athanasius' day, Hieracas of Leontopolis preached that virginity was superior. Brakke, D. *Athanasius and Asceticism*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1995, p. 44.

tween a consecrated virginal state and married persons²⁰. So Hebrew ideals of priesthood merged into liturgical customs of the early church²¹. Married celebrants expected a temporary self-denial of sex, and then later were free, if not serving at the altar, to resume marital relations with their wives²². Jerome and Ambrose moved this a step further.

After the Constantine “revolution,” with new imperial support, ecclesiastical policies faced transition and its rules were unclear which made the Church function in a mist of liminality. Jerome and Ambrose widen the discussion of Christians and sex to include married priests, disputing temporary abstinence for they aimed to elevate virginity. Ambrose claimed the clergy’s distinct authority derived from a heavenly holiness displayed in virginity.

It was a liturgical innovation, David G. Hunter noted, caused by church expansion and security. Because the Christians faced greater safety, the Lord’s supper was able to occur daily in the post-Constantinian Church. When Eucharist grew more frequent, pressure to clarify policies about sexual abstinence grew. This novelty of Ambrose and Jerome was stalled but not stopped by a struggle to recruit priests in the “pioneer” regions further west, since a universal celibacy for priests was not popular. Few in the west felt interest in a priesthood if it was sex-less, if they were required to expect and set up a “holy” life of continual readiness for daily Mass. The real question was, were prayer, worship and sex incompatible?

By interpreting the advice Paul gave in First Corinthians chapter seven in the most conservative and applying it in novel way, Ambrose and Jerome insisted that an active sex life was incompatible with effective prayer²³, so clergy must deny themselves night and day. A temporary prohibition of married sex evolved to a call for universal sacerdotal abstinence²⁴.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 226–230. Hunter points to an Encratite linkage of sex /original sin & virginal purity/salvation.

²¹ The frequency of Eucharist was seen also in 1–2nd centuries as letters of St. Ignatius attest.

²² In Eastern orthodoxy, this policy is still the case; the highest ranks of the church are celibate.

²³ Hunter, D. G. *Marriage, Celibacy and Heresy*, 219–242. Pope Siricius, Ambrose and Jerome differed on why virginity mattered, but not if.

²⁴ Pauline strictures about married persons and sex were stated to be temporary. In ch. 7, v. 5 of Corinthians he commanded, “do not deprive” a spouse, saying *married Christians could resume* intimate relations after abstinence.

When Helvidius and Jovinian rejected this hermeneutic, they were called “anti-ascetics,” and maligned as liberals. But were they? ‘Anti’ the novelty of extreme fasting, anti- the schismatic tension caused if one group stood above another, they were pro-church unity, pro-family and accepted the physical body in a way counter to Jerome’s semi-Encratism. However, Ambrose and Jerome’s innovation won tacit support from aristocratic women, including Marcella, Asella, Lea and Paula, and serious Christians began to take up this manner of celibacy, even married priests and aristocratic men²⁵. Christians sought a second conversion.

To Jerome and Ambrose, sex was a pollution and virgins represented the apex of godliness, secure at the top of a mystical ladder of merit. Jovinian rejected the hierarchy of merit, a claim that all virgins were morally superior and above all non-virgins, objecting to the bifurcation in a two-tiered church. He warned of the pride of a superior-inferior label. Virginity was unnatural, atypical for society, with communities knit together by family *pietas*²⁶. Imperial laws sought to protect and promote marriage²⁷ plus a majority of Romans were still pagan²⁸. Jerome’s ultimatums were absolute, sex for Christians was maligned²⁹, as he insisted that virginity made humans like angels, and drew “heaven to earth.”

Sexual intercourse by married priests polluted them, Jerome and Ambrose agreed, for it made them unfit to serve, but a new application of an old view met fiery rejection of Helvidius and Jovinian and others, and revealed how fragile this project of ascetic conversion was.

Must celibacy for priests be mandatory? Questions about the incom-

²⁵ Ambrose preferred virginity for all believers, even men but celibacy was previously urged more often upon women. *Concerning Virgins*, Book I.3-8. About virgins, and a clergy distinct from laity. *De officias*, 87.

²⁶ We do not have the two books Jovinian wrote, only objections that Jerome and others raised against him.

²⁷ In AD 18 civic laws favored marriage, demeaned virgins, to inspire family growth in the empire.

²⁸ Empire Augustine’s laws aimed to avoid the demographic collapse caused because of low birth rates.

²⁹ Augustine, Jerome and subsequent leaders taught that in sex a man dropped to a low, sensory state of feelings & lost his rational, spiritual self. If lust brought a loss of rationality, men became beasts. Passion was the problem, not *coitus* itself; enjoyment of intimate relations was. Loss of the high, rational self was at issue. See letters of Pope Gregory: *NANF*, 1898, Vol. 13, 75–81 paying particular note to p. 81.

patibility of prayer and pleasure, as well as arguments of sex as illicit or licit for married persons came to a boil.

Women in Jerome's Fiery Debates

Celibacy for priests and sex for Christians were controversial yet Jerome was no misogynist, and claimed not to be anti-sex or marriage. In the west, he achieved both fame and infamy, after Rome's prelate made him free of the papal palace and invited Jerome to do biblical translations for him. Thus, the Dalmatian's ecclesiastical height brought prestige and security in Rome, until December, 384 when Pope Damasus died.

His obsession with virgins prompts questions about sex, yet women held a central place in Jerome's life. Ideals he taught of the celibate life required gender-segregated routines but he did not follow his own theories, nor alter his many personal contacts with women. In addition, philanthropy and dowries of holy women financed the scholar's travels, paying for scribes and distribution of his work as well as the new foundation in Bethlehem, which led to books and a plethora of letters after 386. Paula, a celibate widow, secured Jerome's professional status, giving academic support essential to him³⁰. He wrote tenderly to her daughter, and letters full of praise to and for Paula. Selective in his vitriol, Jerome's malice was reserved for detractors.

In hostility, the Dalmatian erupted against Helvidius' argument that Jesus had had siblings, and rebuked Jovinian's dismissal of the ladder of merit. 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 and defended him, uncovering false testimony. Marcella's position, her unassailable piety plus wealth, rescued Jerome³¹. Despite her efforts, in August, 385, Roman clergy condemned the teacher and banished Jerome.

³⁰ More Church fathers who were dependent upon women were Chrysostom, intimate with Olympia of Constantinople, Rufinus of Aquila and Evagrius Ponticus, debtors to Melania the Elder, as was Origen of Caesarea to Juliana. See *LH*, for Olympias, Clark, E. *Jerome, Chrysostom and Friends*. NY: Edwin Mellon, 1979, 35–107.

³¹ The Influence of widows was notable especially in education, literature and art, according to Бояджиев, Р. *Късноантичното женско монашество в Рим*. София: Ах-ба-ка, 2011, p. 85.

Notwithstanding a tendency to generate discord, the Dalmatian monk rose high, for by *paideia* and hard work he acquired erudition, and was equipped to serve. Born in the West, he studied in the East and knew the ecclesiastical giants of his day. As Nicene battles divided many bishoprics, he came to Rome in time to observe society's convulsions, first, when a pagan majority across the Mediterranean converted to Christ, and secondly when tribes appeared and confusion arose with imperial turmoil as barbarians "became" Roman³². Yet in his life there was the safety of *pax romana*, which allowed pilgrims and *peregrinators* to multiply, and made it easy for men to travel in entourages paid for and accompanied by women, as did Jerome.

Power Inversion of Prostatism and Problem of Sources

While women patrons rose above a man, so Paula of Rome drew near him and paid for Jerome's travel, tour and life in the Holy Land. Women accompanied, advised and rescued men. However, the path of women was and is not easy to trace, for as Elizabeth Castelli says, students of women's history face a "treacherous, disappointing search"³³. In antiquity, women "spoke" through others' voices, not often their own³⁴, which is why Jerome's letters and friendships provide a valued optic for students of women. He gave his views not only of the contemporaneous Church but also of women he knew.³⁵ However, his letters must be read with a stipulation: narrative in a second voice may be blurred by an agenda or bias³⁶.

³² Jerome's many journeys included north to Trier, making it possible to speak of his "many worlds".

³³ Castelli, E. "Virginité and its Meaning for Women's Sexuality in the Early Church." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 2 (1986), 61–62. Clark says Women's conversion to asceticism shows constructs of Graeco-Roman identity. Also see Elm, S. *Virgins of God. The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity*. Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1996, particularly p.6; Clark, El. "Antifamilial Tendencies in Ancient Christianity." *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 5, No. 3 (1995), 356–380; Gillian Clark, "Women and Asceticism in Late Antiquity: The Refusal of Status and Gender". – In Wimbush, V. L., R. Valantasis (eds.), *Asceticism*, Oxford University Press, 1998, 33–48.

³⁴ See Atkins, E. *Male Authors, Female Lives*. University of London, Birkbeck College, 1998, p. 2.

³⁵ Palladius of Helenopolis, *Historia Lausaica*, c. 363–431 provides a look at many fourth century women lives.

³⁶ Woman's identity could be dispossessed by secondary narratives, say Christian Feminists who insist that legend or agenda in male authors may deconstruct a life; see Adichie,

Women of history are seen and their words heard in what Jerome wrote³⁷. Financial contributions, protection by and guardianship of Christian women, thus, won them recognition, yet viewing women in their role as patrons shows them only in part, not the whole. Illuminating the women themselves requires collating and stitching together a patchwork of narration, with threads picked up often out of histories authored by men. Also, fourth century women's letters, writings, poetry and words were rarely preserved, yet ironically, female patrons were instrumental in the distribution and thus preservation of male words³⁸.

Education, Agency and Contingencies

We know women corresponded with Jerome because a third of his epistles were responses to them, with treatises addressed to women, usually widows or virgins as well as the parents of virgins. In a paradoxical way, renunciation increased the agency of a few, elite females. Jerome diminished the disparity in their education, also, by promoting women as students and scholarly friends. Through reading letters, many Christian women in a liminal era are observed, despite civil transition upheaval to a state church followed by tribal invasions.

Through men's works and words, however, the early church view of women tends to be monochrome, a saint or sinner, the "Devil's Gateway" or Bride of Christ. Women were a guilty temptress like Eve or a saint, like Mary³⁹. The pejorative view of women came out of the Graeco Roman culture and led many church men to vacillate, describing women as inferior, morally weak as a gender, or else full of virtue, pure like Mary. It was commonplace in literature of the time to say that women had a weaker

Ch. "Danger of A Single Story," TEDS, October 2009.

³⁷ Scholars speculate that letter 46 was dictated by Jerome by the words were Paula's and Eustochium's.

³⁸ An exception is Faltonia Betitia Proba's *Cento*; also preserved was the early 5th c. diary of Egeria, the Pilgrim.

³⁹ Bloch, R. Howard. Chapter 3: "Devil's Gateway and Bride of Christ: Women in the Early Christian World," two locations; *Women & a New Academy: Gender and Cultural Contexts*, ed. Jean O'Barr. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989, 81–102. Tertullian's said the "Devil's Gateway." Bloch claimed gender negativity from the early church endured through medieval times. *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Romantic Love*. University of Chicago, 1999.

nature yet women experienced leadership in monastic roles, and faced proscriptions and bias⁴⁰. Deficit or “deformed” females overcame gender⁴¹, and in the end, virgins and matrons made significant contributions to the Church⁴².

Patronage unraveled and undermined ecclesiastical cultural assumptions, for money and class decisively trumped gender, while women’s roles in the Church were undefined. Latitude and necessity pushed the Church hegemony to diverge from its policy, caused the theory of gender segregation to diverge from the reality of experience, to misalign in practice.

In this way, unclear policies about leadership permitted a few women to lead, rescue and save; they were not women of the ordinary or “lower” class but elite, educated, and wealthy women, such as Marcella and Paula of Rome, Olympia of Constantinople and Melania the Elder of Mt. Olives. Gaining control was contingent on social status, since a widow might interpose her family’s secular power into ecclesiastic spaces. Vast possessions as well as secular prestige, added to their holy living, thrust Church leadership roles upon women⁴³.

Donations to bishops trumped the giver’s sex, therefore in *prostatitis*, the giver, albeit female, was elevated, and particular ones were elevated to receive ordination as “deacons”⁴⁴.

What pious fourth century widows achieved for the Church happened because of wealth and status. Equipped by the remarkable size of family holdings and the senatorial status of men in their lineage, women rose in power. Money talked and prestige mattered, for Harvard scholar Osiek explains that the anomalous role women held in the earliest church-

⁴⁰ Clark, El. *Women in the Early Church*, p. 112. See also Cohick, Lynn & Amy B Hughes, *Christian Women in the Patristic World*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017, 285–296.

⁴¹ The ancient world’s common bias was for men *and away from* women. Plato taught that women were formed when a male baby went awry; Galen said if the womb had trouble or was too moist or cold, a female was created. Male Jews praised God they were *not* born gentile or female. Clark, E. *Women in the Early Church*, 15–17.

⁴² Peterson, Joan. “Handmaids of the Lord”. *Cistercian Studies*, 1996, p. 99.

⁴³ An extraordinary widow, Melania the Elder’s family had such vast holdings that ranged from west to east so some warned that to divest herself, and give it all away, could destabilize the economic engine of the empire.

⁴⁴ The male term “deacon” was applied to both men and women, used for women’s titles also, vis-Osiek.

es was linked to their class. Not only did elite women choose celibacy and move into leadership, ordained as deacons and presbyters, but through the well-known system of patronage, a further inversion took place in cultural and ecclesiastical spaces⁴⁵.

Customs tied to the system of patronage meant that a patron who was female made donations to a beneficiary or client who was male, and in this, gender role expectations shifted. Policies and lines of orthodoxy were nebulous, so through class and wealth, women made a significant ecclesiastical impact including theological support for doctrine, and as patrons. David Brakke points to the role financial support made to the trajectory of orthodoxy when Melania's bread went to Egyptian Nicene monks, and Suzanna Elm cites the holiness and achievements of a virgin such as Macrina of Anisi⁴⁶, sister to Basil and Gregory, whose gifts of compassion were sent across Cappadocia during its famine. The prestige and funds that widows like Paula or Marcella shared with Jerome also effected a reversal in Late Roman social hierarchy. Dismantling male hegemony, women undergirded orthodoxy and rescued men.

However, Christian men were known by letters and writings, so acquired power to rule above Christian women. A confused ontology of gender let males dominate women and sadly ignore or diminish Paul's command to Galatians that, in Christ, there would be no longer male, female, slave, free, Jew, Gentile⁴⁷.

Despite societal and ecclesiastic inconsistencies, to support and rescue men was a task female *prostatis* took up, echoing their role in the first century life of the Church and the life of the Lord Jesus. Scriptural writers endorsed and the Lord embraced the help given, becoming clients to women patrons. In Jesus' and the apostles' work after his resurrection, ancient biases were upended, and women were set free to hold discipleship with men.

⁴⁵ Osiek writes of early women's offices, ordained as presbyter & deacon. Madigan, K., C. Osiek. *Ordained Women of the Early Church*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2005, 186–188.

⁴⁶ Jaroslav Pelikan calls Macrina the 4th Cappadocian, for her significance: *Christianity and Classic Culture*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993, p. 8.

⁴⁷ Galatians 3-28 was to equalize race, status and gender in Christ's Church, not make women superior.

Power inversions occurred, therefore, despite what was expected and in disregard to norms embedded in the ancient Palestinian culture of the apostle Paul and the Rabbi Jesus. In his Epistle to the Romans chapter 16, Paul promoted Phoebe, while in the Lord's travels, Joanna of Chuza, Susanna and Mary Magdalene were donors⁴⁸. At the tomb, a penultimate task was assigned not to men but to women, the so-called "second class," who were commanded to proclaim to the absent men that Jesus was alive. Last at the cross, first at the grave, the presence of women in the life of Christ Jesus was ubiquitous.

Patronage and friendships therefore, in the fourth century as in the first, became avenues outside society's limitations, used in the first centuries of the Church as paths for women. Relying on her largesse, a client like Jerome, bishop, clergy, Paul the apostle or the Rabbi Jesus, was subordinate to a female *prostatis*. Frequent contact and gifts exchanged between a client and her-his patrons⁴⁹ led to asexual love. A "spiritual" partnership was born.

Women in a Dominant Role: Saved and Made

Church Fathers wrote and celibate widows reciprocated with copious letters. As women played the leading role of financial and career support, giving protection and enabling journeys, some traditional roles for women in Late Antiquity were blurred⁵⁰. This occurred in Bethlehem with Paula and Jerome, for while he studied and wrote, she ordered, led, built and managed the guest house, hospice, and multiple monasteries which housed both men and women, as well as the chapel. She paid for and saved his

⁴⁸ Joanna, wife of Chuza, was healed by Christ and after Jesus died went to the tomb. Luke 8 and 24.10; show an inversion of hierarchy as Jesus became subordinate to Joanna who provided financial support. This dynamic echoed in the relation of Jerome to Paula, John Chrysostom to Olympia, Rufinus to Melania of the Mt. of Olives, and Origen to the Virgin Juliana of Caesarea. See Clark, El. *Women in the Early Church*. Colleville MN, Liturgical Press, 1983, p. 112.

⁴⁹ Osiek, C., M. MacDonald & Janet Tulloch. *A Woman's Place*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006, 214–219. Patronal activities of women continued after the bishop's role was established; cf. Cohick, L., *Women in the Lives of the Earliest Christians*. Baker Academic, 2009, 285–296.

⁵⁰ In friendship, Rufinus relied on gifts of Melania just as John Chrysostom relied on Olympia's patronage.

work. Paula made his dreams reality.

Through the letters of Jerome, we meet Marcella, Paula, Asella, Lea, Principia, Eustochium, Demetrius, and other female students for in scholarship they became known.

Educating Virgins of Rome

Increased agency and prominence were by-products of the ascetic evolution, but for women these were inextricably tied not only to status and wealth but also to education. Like patronage, education provided a warrant for women to rise. To Jerome, educating a person, male or female, equipped them with a grasp of Holy Scripture and the ability to explore and advance in linguistics, practical skills that lifted women to a wider intellectual freedom⁵¹. His focus on celibate widows in Rome in 382-85, tutoring virgins in a private sphere, reduced the gender gap in education. By investing time in women, Jerome affirmed the intellect and capacity of females, thus it was little wonder that women celibates appreciated Jerome.

Yet did Church Fathers and male authors of Late Antiquity present “real women,” or instead fulfill their own agenda when they described holy women? Perhaps one aim was to give examples who displayed the wide impact of a Father or influence a monk had, or show female submission for even elite, noblewomen followed and submitted to male hegemony⁵². Men seemed to use women as models of piety to reinforce a monk’s or bishop’s message, says Stephen Davis, addressing this dynamic in Egyptian male authors⁵³. Gender relations did not follow a simple mathematical equation of win-loss, nor were they monolithic, for while winning tangible education and intangible agency, women in their turn rescued and helped Christian

⁵¹ See Palladius, *Historia Lausaica*. Trans. by Lowther Clarke, SPCK, MacMillan NY, 1918. Jerome was a proficient linguist, but Paula was more fluent in Hebrew than Jerome, and Marcella may have surpassed him in Greek. Palladius admired Paula, but Jerome’s “temper was disastrous,” p. 126. *LH* p135 RE: Melania & Evagrius, LIV, p 157, Olympica, LVI, p. 161, or Juliana and Origen in Ch LXIV, p 171. Palladius lived c. 363–c.430. See also Katos, D. *Palladius*. Oxford Early Christian Studies, Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 4.

⁵² Clark, E. “The Lady Vanishes: Dilemmas of Christian Historians”. *Church History* 67 (1998), 1–31.

⁵³ Davis, St. J. *Melania: Monastic Revivals in Early Christianity*. Yale University Press, 2019, 260–270.

male writers, enabling them to process and “think,” says Clark⁵⁴. For many reasons, women had value. So, in the palaces along the Aventine, ascetic widows and virgins, especially ones in Marcella’s circle, recruited Jerome to be their bible teacher. Women found a way to better understand the bible, study languages and increase their learning.

Flee and Pursue: Dynamics of Celibacy

Many privileged maidens joined the semi-monastic houses at a turning point in their lives, like Blesilla, who became ascetic after the death of her spouse⁵⁵. Some were prompted by guilt and others by grief, with a negative impulse decided to flee the carnal world. This flight blended with a positive dynamic, however, a hope to draw nearer to God. In crisis, released from maternal-marital ties through death, like Melania the Elder, some experienced the loss of a child or children. Others lost a fiancé as with Macrina of Annisi or a spouse as with Paula of Bethlehem⁵⁶.

Patrilineal obligations were severed and women were freed of the expectation to build up Rome by having children for the *polis*, a Graeco Roman presumption. While fleeing an earthly family, there was spiritual pursuit of union with Christ, the chance to construct a new spiritual family, with the attraction of a holier, higher life⁵⁷. Drawn to renunciation, aristocratic women followed a semi-monastic ‘rule’ in Marcella’s home, taught by a scholar, Jerome, yet the door the monk opened swung back with reciprocity⁵⁸. Those who give may receive, for when education was provided to eager women, security, prestige and fame were provided to Jerome.

Reasons that motivated women were multivalent, but did women

⁵⁴ Brakke, David. “The Lady Appears”. *Journal of Medieval & Early Christian Study* 33.3 (2003), 390–398.

⁵⁵ The scandal of Blesilla’s death from extreme fasting haunted Jerome. Ep. 39, 38, 78–80. About the fine line between ascetic fasting or anorexia in nunneries see Bynum, C. *Holy Feast Holy Fast*, note Ch. 8, 245–250, how fasting was flight “not from but into physicality”. Thus, it was not always body rejection but could be desire for mastery.

⁵⁶ Elm, S. *Virgins of God*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994. For Origen and Juliana, see p. 33. Also, Macrina’s ascetic denial long preceded Basil’s, 43–88.

⁵⁷ Feminists ask if wealth and status freed aristocrats to be nuns, or if nunneries freed women of the patriarchy? E. Schussler Fiorenza, “Women in the early Christian movement”. In: *Woman spirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, 1979, 84–92.

⁵⁸ Compton, M. S. *Sisters in Wisdom*. Waukesha, WI: The Order of St. Julian, 2013, 48–51.

scheme to advance through renunciation and intend to rise through patronage?⁵⁹ This aspect is unclear without the women's self-reflection. However, what is clear is that Late Antique women such as Paula and Marcella gave wealth to churches and men, which allowed monks like Jerome the opportunity to write, copy, buy books, buy oil for lamps, pay salaries to scribes, and rest in domesticity in a settled space. For themselves, women *prostatis* won benefits, tangible and intangible, held a larger independence, acquired self-efficacy, received education and found courage to lead⁶⁰. Whatever the motive or aims that brought women into the ascetic life, through reciprocity, a patron's obligations were fulfilled and, in that power, women rose.

How did Jerome elevate women in education? This was seen as he called them out as examples and praised their acumen, particularly Marcella's⁶¹. In effect, Jerome created teachers when he taught, for those he tutored led. Students, even virgins, were exhorted to rise up as "genderless" guides of truth and Marcella, holy in mind and spirit, fired by an insatiable curiosity, was ready⁶². Jerome insisted that she was able to instruct not only other women but also clergy of Rome, for example, to turn men from the tornado of heresy⁶³. Female pupils were trusted to "teach" orthodoxy, and regurgitate scriptural ideals, if they submitted to Jerome's tutelage. Cultural expectations were trumped. Female disciples were allowed to channel his voice to men in his absence, for education made a cover for them that cloaked gender.

Did he suggest that women preach or be teachers of men? No, Jerome's advice was not that a woman take the mantle of a priest or teach a man, for he held to the era's view of Pauline prohibitions. Women must not stand above men or preach, although women could teach women, however, if they represented him to men, a woman offered his view and words as

⁵⁹ Clark, El. "Ascetic Renunciation and Feminine Advancement: A Paradox of Late Ancient Christianity". *Anglican Theological Review* 63 (1981), 240–257.

⁶⁰ Clark, El. "Theory and Practice in Late Ancient Asceticism: Jerome, Chrysostom, and Augustine." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 5 (1989), 25–46.

⁶¹ Cain, *ibid.* Letter 127; Much of what is said of Marcella relies on Andrew Cain, see 62–65.

⁶² Aquilina, M. *The Witness of Early Christian Women*. Huntington: Sunday Visitor, 2014, 101–120.

⁶³ *NANF*, op. cit., Letter 65, Vol. 9–8. 223 to Principia. Also Letter 127; 10, on Marcella's death, p. 428.

if he were present. Cain says Jerome promoted his authority, more than a student's erudition, to advance his famed orthodoxy⁶⁴. Thus Marcella was like a *capsa* or channel for Jerome's message. Gender became immaterial. Education lifted repression off the women.

In this dynamic, women were a showcase for men, an object to display the male viewpoint, a vehicle to deliver a man's words while the monk or church leader was absent.

Jerome's right teaching was central, even if delivered through Marcella, but did she become more than a *capsa*, a mouthpiece? She was an ideal Hieronymist ascetic, says Cain, for Roman conversion to the ascetic ideal was seen in Jerome's way⁶⁵, although the directives to Marcella may have indicated his wish to be quoted more than to enlarge gender roles⁶⁶. Motives aside, she was told to correct clergy's errors due to the circulation of Rufinus' translation of Origen's works, so her intellect was validated. Theological confusion was reduced, Jerome's views displayed and Marcella's gender disappeared⁶⁷.

Protection and Achievements of Women

Marcella's role and Paula's later role with Jerome were not singular for other Church fathers made women their voice and confidantes, such as John Chrysostom who was friend to Olympias of Constantinople, c. 360s–408. Evagrius Ponticus and Rufinus of Aquileia were intimately linked to Melania the Elder on Mt. Olives, c. 350–410. A century earlier, the Virgin Juliana was cited by Palladius in the rescue of Origin of Caesarea, c. 184–253. Peter Brown notes the extraordinary achievements of women. Benefactors advanced the empire's conversion to faith, with internal changes that accompanied external construction of Rome's basilicas, often paid for by women patrons. "Opulent as jewel cases," basilica's became impressive

⁶⁴ Cain, A., J. Lossel, *Jerome of Stridon; His life, Writings and Legacy*. Ashgate, 2009, 52–55.

⁶⁵ *Ep.* 127. Also see Cain, *op. cit.*, p. 56. See also Kelly, D. C. *Op. cit.*, p. 246. However, there is a flaw in Jerome's thinking since Marcella chose to be ascetic long before he arrived in Rome, after Athanasius stayed with her mother in Rome.

⁶⁶ Seventeen of Jerome's letters to Marcella survived. None of hers to him *have yet been* discovered.

⁶⁷ Excelling in Greek, Marcella was said to have read Origen multiple times in the original, p. 52 Compton.

collaborations of wealth and a triumph of church over politics, displaying the transformation and Christianization of cities across Rome⁶⁸.

Letters to and from Jerome provide insights both about him and about women. His intention may not have been to liberate women or illuminate their lives, yet through education in the palace tutorials for Marcel-la and by letters crisscrossing the empire, Jerome did both.

A Vantage Point and Results of Jerome's Style

Women friends and their education led to rumors about Jerome and became a source of misunderstanding but squabbles about virgins also uncovered his faults and arrogance, and many clergy disliked him. The feeling was mutual.

Although he claimed to support Christian marriage, his writings appeared anti-family. He despised married clergy and was far from irenic. His behavior and attitude provide a vantage point from which to view the many fourth century perspectives on virginity.

His discursive style highlighted who Jerome was and what drove him⁶⁹. First, education and travel lifted Jerome out of obscurity, and equipped him to cultivate life as an intellectual, ascetic, biblical scholar, and with them, to win protection and prestige in Rome. Always looking over his shoulder, forever glancing 'at the mirror,' he wrote hoping and intending to influence the future Church and through writing to be remembered⁷⁰. He was successful and many of his works outlived him.

Second, Jerome was ambitious and practical. He fastened himself to persons of influence quickly because competition for patronal support was fierce. To find employment and acquire a wealthy patron was *de rigueur* for a traveling scholar. So, in Rome, he did not stay sequestered in a library or the papal palace but set himself in the path of preeminent churchmen, such as Ambrose of Milan⁷¹, as well as friends of Damasus, the pope. Third,

⁶⁸ Brown, P. *Op. cit.*, p. 354, and *Western Civilization*. Tenth Anniversary Edition, Wiley & Sons, 2013, p. 108.

⁶⁹ Tinkle, T. *Gender and Power in Medieval Exegesis*. Basingstoke: MacMillan Palsgrave, 2010, p 60. Tinkle coined the phrase, saying Jerome's exegesis was Sex-egesis.

⁷⁰ Brown, P. *Ibid*. He "ensured that future ages (viewed) incidents," as Jerome did. *Body and Society*, p. 345.

⁷¹ His acidic pen brought trouble; in August 385, the clergy of Rome voted to evict him; *ibid*.

Jerome incarnated the norms of *paideia* for which his entire life prepared him. Immersed in Graeco-Roman attitudes, with rich friends who copied or sent books, he was able to pursue study of past theologians and languages⁷².

Beside these, he hungered for spiritual knowledge coupled with an insatiable thirst for significance, aiming to change his generation, to convince them of the “higher” way of celibacy. He was an ideologue, a militant driven to win, convict and save the future Church. “A holy arrogance” constrained him, and bonded Jerome with enemies and friends⁷³.

Finally, he relished the high-profile time in polemics brought. Debate provided a chance to distinguish himself as well as to promote dogma he felt was best, that is ascetic celibacy. Always, he elevated the desert type, or so called “Oriental” Christianity, in Rome. In the “Eternal City,” at the empire’s heart, Jerome spoke.

A Social - Spiritual Trend

His aggressive agenda for virginity had influence, and amplified by the emphasis of other churchmen such as Ambrose, Augustine and the later Pope Siricius, the campaign ended in success. His hopes were realized, for in the century that followed, ascetic virginity “happened” to become the reigning social-spiritual trend. Women and aristocratic men joined the movement in droves. “White martyrdom” or monasticism saw explosive growth, for both elite and ordinary Christians separated themselves and families, to take up a “life of angels.”

Ascetic propaganda pursued by Jerome and others led step by step to an evolution in *gnosis*, a change that claimed to be rooted in scriptural endorsement, and then led to sacerdotal reform with a Church rebirth through the growth and spread of western monasticism.

Unfortunately, Jerome fomented disputes. His style was destructive, he tended toward eisegesis, was girded by ego, and primed by raising a sinner through the ladder of merit. Worst was the internecine strife he inspired. A layman – priest like Helvidius’ argued with other Christian

⁷² While in the Chalcis desert, he was seldom solitary and Evagrius’ of Antioch’s books were sent to him.

⁷³ *NANF*; a famous line of Letter 22 to Eustochium; Jerome said, learn from me *a holy arrogance*, 36–64.

laymen or clergy. Jovinian, a brother in the faith and in monastics, opposed the Christian writings of Jerome and incited the papal staff. Monks railed against monks. Moderate ascetics argued with extremists over novel propositions, especially that of a permanent virginity for priests. Likely Jerome veered to be semi-Encratic, as Jovinian feared, a Manichean. Twisting scripture, mired in eisegesis, he called sex a pollution and marriage a necessary evil for second class Christians, showing himself to be anti-body and anti-sex, but not quite fully misogynist⁷⁴.

Obsessed by sex, scholars say he did not exegete scripture; his work was “*Sexegisis*”⁷⁵.

Further developments occurred. Marian theology in the west became knit into Jerome and Ambrose’s ascetic revolution, which raised Mary up as a semi-goddess, Queen of Heaven seen by more believers as a Perpetual Virgin, the logical outcome of their “victory.”

However, a costly soteriological shift occurred, a dogmatic slant which seemed to draw Ambrose and Jerome perilously close to the heretic Pelagian’s elevation of man’s abilities. “Oriental” asceticism carried with a version of *gnosis* the expectation and emphasis on human performance that could go to extremes and become overbearing. Man’s dedication to virginity, his behavior and deeds, they said, was necessary but did this reduce the necessity and efficacy of Jesus Christ’s death?

Were virgins capable of winning salvation themselves? It seemed they could, for they grasped an eternal place on the “ladder” of heaven through their work of celibacy, their personal human merit. The free gift of Christ’s grace appeared less essential. Thus, man’s own virtue was added to augment the saving work of Jesus Christ, an emphasis that elevated man’s effort. This seemed a turn in Christian soteriology, hardening a previous tendency or slant.

On the positive side, women’s agency rose and if they wished, they found a way to either be seen or else to hide, through service in nunneries

⁷⁴ See Eustochium’s letter 22 lines 2, 5 and 19. For Blesilla see line 15. Also, Cain: *The Letters of Jerome; Asceticism, Exegesis and the Construction of Christian Authority in Late Antiquity*. Oxford Univ. Press, 2009, 101–104. Chapter 4 is about Jerome’s expulsion from Rome due to his extreme ascetic agenda.

⁷⁵ Tinkle, T. *Gender and Power in Medieval Exegesis*, p. 60. Jerome’s scriptural exegesis fell into eisegesis, driven by an agenda to promote celibacy.

and acts of generous patronage. Gender bias softened in monasticism, as it had in martyrdom, with female “inferiority” veiled, sheltered, draped in the drab garments of celibates⁷⁶. Virile, with virtues like men, in being a “female man of God,” a woman’s gender was less tangible⁷⁷.

With other Fathers, Jerome was ambivalent about the place and role of women, yet he achieved a great deal on the behalf of this ‘weaker’ gender when he taught virgins at Marcella’s palace, made possible due to his proximity to Damasus.

As the pope’s translator, his high profile among the clergy in Rome reflected prestige that shielded his students yet the monk from Dalmatia was himself shielded and ever dependent on the advice, professional supplies and work-travel funds women offered. Women gleaned praise, honor and education in the bilateral commitment of patronage.

Jerome’s legacy, to summarize, was complex, for his life was full of desolation and beauty. Through the last half of his life, women served, calmed and rebuked him⁷⁸.

Rescued by Marcella in Rome, he was mired in ceaseless controversy. A positive impact fell on the Church, however, from the ascetical emphasis on self-denial, spread by Jerome’s eloquence and breadth of *paideia*. Select women were transformed in study, and the celibacy disputes at the century’s end left both negative and positive outcomes for a high value was placed on virtue, self-control, right behavior, and virginity. Pride puffed up but *gnosis* purified many laity. After the debates, a wider consensus on permanent sacerdotal abstinence remained.

Laity and monks continued to fight after he left, troubled by Jerome’s insistence that virginity was the ultimate lifestyle, a singular premier version of the Christian faith. The extreme style of his rants and the continuous insults to Rome’s clergy, brought about his rejection and expulsion by Christian peers.

⁷⁶ Incognito, Melania the Elder, in 370^s was veiled and disguised by drab garments while visiting Nicene monks in an Egyptian prison. Brakke, D. *Op. cit.*, p. 109.

⁷⁷ Cloke, G. *This Female Man of God. Women and Power in the Patristic Age*. London, 1995, p. 4.

⁷⁸ In Letter 45 to Asella, Jerome admits Paula calmed him but Marcella also rebuked Jerome for being harsh on clergy. Cain uses “squabbles” to describe Jerome’s conflicts, *op. cit.*, 100–105.

Mortal Danger and a Scholars' Fail

In an era of “anxious orthodoxy,” it was mortally easy to fall out of ecclesiastical favor. Scandals and rumors could land even bishops in civil courts. Dissent, particularly over money and patrons, was laden with consequences. Some who erred in friendships with women lost their lives, as did a monk who served in the west, in the region of Hispania, at the end of the same century.

Priscillian (c. 340-385) was a wealthy noble who joined the church and shared similar attitudes associated with Jerome. Arrogant, both were charismatic fourth century preachers of novelty, aficionados of denial, with close ties to women. However, Priscillian was higher in the hierarchy than Jerome, a bishop of Avila, yet he fell lower. He found himself mired in scandal over women friends and a new teaching that led to rumors of the occult.⁷⁹

The disputes in Hispania were sharpened by questions over the patronage of women, and gifts personally received, not sent to churches. De-nounced at Zaragoza in 380, shadowed by impropriety, he was executed as a so-called “heretic,” at the court of Gaul in Trier in 385.⁸⁰

For monks such as Jerome and Priscillian, it was easy to fall but hard to rise.

Priscillian lacked patrons or clergy close to him who were willing to muster a defense, for he wandered outside their parameters.⁸¹ But in 382-385, Jerome stayed close to elite, ecclesiastic patrons, maintained a few scholarly clerical friendships, and most of all, was under Marcella of Rome’s protection, guarded by his relationship to Damasus, while the pope lived.

Thus, Jerome’s banishment was regrettable, but timely. Leaving Rome allowed Jerome to fulfill his and Paula’s ambition to tour places where Oriental ascetic teachers lived.

They traveled to Egypt, met Didymus the Blind saw many holy sites of Palestine set apart by Constantine’s mother, Helena, and, finally, made a home in Bethlehem for themselves and many who went with them. Travel

⁷⁹ Burrus, V. *The Making of a Heretic: Gender, Authority and the Priscillianist Controversy*. University of California Press, 1995, p. 25.

⁸⁰ Augustine of Hippo described “lies of Priscillian,” and Virginia Burrus wrote about this bishop of Avila. See also Henry Chadwick’s classic of 1976.

⁸¹ Burrus, V. *Ibid.* Also, he was said to dabble with semi-Manichean and gnostic beliefs.

was provided by Paula, who joined his entourage with her daughter Eustochium a few weeks after he departed.

Disgraced, embarrassed, but alive, Jerome quit Rome and the west.

Conclusion: A Remarkable Legacy

Women were appropriated by Jerome and other fathers as exemplars of teaching and models of piety, useful for bishops and Christian leaders, so Clark claims, “to think with.” Women were essential participants in the Church.⁸² In the celibacy disputes of 382-390, Rome, women held a “mind at peace,” and stood loyally by Jerome, able to rescue him and relocate him afterwards⁸³. His letters to and from women and men, friends in Rome, kept his influence alive. Although absent, Jerome was “in view,” because in letters and his writing made his ideals present even after he left. Through patron-clients, as was customary in the Late Antique age, an odd gender power inversion occurred in society and the Church. Male Christians were subordinate to women who financed and rescued ecclesiastical leaders.

The Fathers’ view that prayer and sex were incompatible, although contrary to Old Testament creation mandate and Christ’s words recorded in the synoptics, endured⁸⁴. This slur on marriage and sex took root in the newly formed Christian “empire” carried by books and writings, so only a minimal heritage of reverence for sex was left, choked by a semi-Encratic view of the body and strangled in belief that sex brought pollution to married Christian.

Many examples of the spread of this view in the decades that followed exist, but one is particularly notable. After Gregory, c. 540-604, became the pope in Rome, he wrote to a missionary priest, advising Augustine of Canterbury about the stain of sex, ensuring this negative view would continue⁸⁵. Bodily pleasure in *coitus* led to irrationality, the bishop said, thus priests must enforce a purification requirement to remove pollution sex had upon

⁸² Clark, E. *The Lady Vanishes*, 1–5.

⁸³ Harvey, S. A. *Scenting Salvation*, 23. True ascetic piety was seen as a mind at peace.

⁸⁴ Synoptics tell of Jesus’ words, quoting Genesis: See *Note 86* below. Christ often asked, “Have you not read?”

⁸⁵ Letter LXIV of Gregory the Great, NANE, Vol. 13, pp 75-81: with particular note to p. 81.

married Christians⁸⁶. Sex aroused pleasures incompatible with church life, he said, so the pope propagated the attitude others set. Ambrose and Jerome's view, in the coming years, won the consent of Augustine of Hippo. The ladder of merit or salvation by holy deeds, sexual denial mixed with adulation for virgins formed a potent brew, an emphasis that ran counter to Christ who explicated the Old Testament view of marriage⁸⁷. This slanted view, however, advanced in the writing and fame of the Church Fathers. It usurped a previous emphasis on the mystery of Christ's unity with his bride, the Church, and swayed Christendom. A call for *gnosis* entangled with an ascetic propaganda, demeaning sexuality, marriage and the body.

Jerome's priceless achievement was his translation of scripture which resulted in the Vulgate, a formative text in education, linguistics and theology for western Europe, causing his face to be imagined, drawn to illustrate a bible held by Frankish kings⁸⁸. In the new age, Brown says, a world emerged, a Christendom of "Romans" without a Roman Empire, in which⁸⁹ language and shared texts forged a crucial link between the future and the past, melded inside the scriptoriums of scattered monasteries⁹⁰. Jerome's treatises on virginity, with advice to parents on how to raise young girls, were circulated during the turbulent fifth, sixth and seventh centuries, and

⁸⁶ To Gregory, purity concerns related to the Jewish liturgy and ritual cleansing in Lev;15:16 for a man remained unclean until evening- not able to go to temple. Gregory insisted it was both cultural and spiritual since in the empire, Romans also had a custom that after sex a man would seek cleansing before attendance at church service - all married Christians, not only priests. *Op.Cit. Gregory's Letter 64* Also see David G. Hunter, YOU Tube lecture: "From Married Popes To Celibate Priests." Given November 18 at Leuven Theological Faculty in 2014.

⁸⁷ Eph. 5.31, Matt. 19.5 & Mark 10-8 record Jesus Christ's quote of Genesis 2.24, as men leave their parents and cleave to a wife. "Leave & Cleave," said Jesus, for in sex, the two are one flesh. Deut 10 shows how married fidelity to a woman expressed fealty to God Himself. Prov.2.17 marriage expresses *part of a mystery* of intimacy with God.

⁸⁸ Veyne, P. (ed.), *A History of Private Life. I. From Pagan Rome to Byzantium*. Trans. A. Goldhammer. Cambridge, Mass, and London: Harvard University Press, 1987, p. 534. Note the illustration in the king's bible, now in Paris National library.

⁸⁹ Halsall, Guy. *Barbarian Migrations and the Roman West*. Cambridge University Press, 2007, 108-111.

⁹⁰ Brown, P. *The Rise of Western Christendom*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013, p. 98. He remarks on the multiple low-profile centers of book production, such as 7th-century Irish scriptoriums.

his letters cherished by Benedictines of Monte Cassino⁹¹.

Epistles of the Dalmatian were kept beside the works of other revered Church Fathers in disparate monasteries, from Bangor, Ireland, the Portuguese coast in Hispania, to Gaul at Marseille, and circulated in Egyptian and Syrian religious houses⁹². Jerome's women were admired by Frankish Christians, spoken of in Syrian lands and through late medieval days, in Anglo Saxon, Swedish and British nunneries, Paula and Eustochium were revered⁹³.

The obscure Dalmatian monk left a remarkably broad and deep legacy⁹⁴.

The impact of his letters and teaching, as well as changes which came to Europe through the Vulgate translation, caused Jerome's influence to live far beyond his death in 420, in Bethlehem. Although absent, he was present, through what he wrote. Biographies of hermits and chronicles supplemented histories that existed but broadened what was available in the study of early church women for voluminous works and prolific letters were penned many dedications to women in the bible book's introduction as well as commentaries made. Through Jerome, women dominated by male hegemony, silenced in the early Church, became less "elusive." Many were called pious, others were profligate in generosity, and holy virgins were recognized as erudite believers who lived for Christ in Late Antiquity.

Elite women joined the "life of angels." Aristocratic women were wooed by this idealogue who militantly exhorted asceticism. Carried by fervor, the view spread from the palaces along the Aventine to the monasteries of Palestine, where a spirit of transcendence and a "breath of immortality" awoke.⁹⁵ Because of letters to patrons, reliance on partners, Jerome's tender friendships towards Marcella, Lea, Asella, Demetrius, and Eustochium are known, and future generations, even in later centuries, a wider cel-

⁹¹ Фокин, Ал. Р. *Блаженны Йероним-Библеист- Ексегет-Теолог*, Москва, 2010, p. 14.

⁹² Brown, P. *Op. cit.*, 22–40, says Jerome's works were known in Ireland, studied in Portugal by Hydatius of Chaves or Galicia c. 397–470, who met Jerome in 407 in Bethlehem. As a child Hydatius was presented by his mother. Letters of Jerome and writings of the Fathers were studied by monks in Arles and Marseille; 98–101&111.

⁹³ McNamara, J. *Cornelia's Daughters*, 1984, republished www.umilta.net "Cornelia".

⁹⁴ Noll, M. *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity*. 3rd ed. Baker Academic, 2012, p. 79.

⁹⁵ Brown, P. *Body and Society*, 71–76. Brown also refers to Priscillian in this chapter.

eneration of early Christian women was born. Most of all, there was Paula, mother and widow, patron and partner.

She was his friend *par excellence*, a generous benefactor, an unusually able linguist and a capable manager, previously invisible, who became seen and known. Revealed through Jerome's work, readers see and know the joy, and a peculiar delight he discovered in educating virgins. Through his many letters and works, fourth century women are illuminated.