

ignorance is dead. In a world I was saved from a world, and in a "type," from a higher "type," and from the fetter of the impotence of knowledge, the existence of which is temporal. From this time I will reach rest in the time of the moment of the Aeon in silence."

When Mary had said this, she was silent, since the Saviour had spoken thus far with her. But Andrew answered and said to the brethren, "Say what you think concerning what she said. For I do not believe that the Saviour said this. For certainly these teachings are of other ideas."

Peter also opposed her in regard to these matters and asked them about the Saviour. "Did he then speak secretly with a woman (cf. John 4:27), in preference to us, and not openly? Are we to turn back and all listen to her? Did he prefer her to us?"

Then Mary grieved and said to Peter, "My brother Peter, what do you think? Do you think I thought this up myself in my heart or that I am lying concerning the Saviour?"

Levi answered and said to Peter, "Peter, you are always irate. Now I see that you are contending against the woman like the adversaries. But if the Saviour made her worthy, who are you to reject her? Surely the Saviour knew her very well (cf. Luke 10:38-42). For this reason he loved her more than us (cf. John 11:5). And we should rather be ashamed and put on the Perfect Man, to form us as he commanded us, and proclaim the gospel, without publishing a further commandment or a further law than the one which the Saviour spoke." When Levi has said this, they began to go out in order to proclaim him and preach him.

Source:

Clark, E., Richardson, H. / Women and Religion: A Feminist Sourcebook of Christian Thought, 1977, pp. 53-61.

## 6. Jerome: The Exaltation of Christian Virginity

NOTICE: This material  
may be protected by copyright  
Law. (Title 17 U.S. Code)

Jerome was one of the foremost advocates of the celibate life in fourth-century Latin Christendom,<sup>1</sup> a century which saw the rapid development of Christian asceticism. In former times, Christians had been able to demonstrate their extraordinary devotion to God and their religion by giving themselves as martyrs; once the persecutions ended and the empire became nominally Christian under Constantine, this way of displaying loyalty to Christianity of necessity ceased. Moreover, when Christianity became a legally protected religion, many joined the faith who were not made of heroic fiber. How, under these circumstances, could one show one's superior commitment? The route of asceticism became a very popular solution to the problem as the fourth century progressed; thousands of men and women took to the deserts to lead lives of extreme simplicity with the hope of overcoming the frailty of human nature. Jerome himself got caught up in the passion for the hermit's life and spent two or three years in the desert near Antioch;<sup>2</sup> he did not find the experience as satisfying as he had anticipated. He is honest enough to tell one of his numerous correspondents that he himself could never reach the height of Christian perfection, despite his life of deprivation, since he had already forfeited the crown of virginity in his youth.<sup>3</sup> And even when as a hermit he denied his body physical comforts, he was still plagued with visions of dancing girls.<sup>4</sup>

In his writings, Jerome frequently reveals himself as a misogynist. He incorporated the pagan antifeminist tradition derived from such authors as Juvenal and Horace into his own literary produc-

tions.<sup>5</sup> Both of our selections reveal this bias. To *Eustochium*, in fact, has been called "the greatest slander of women since Juvenal's sixth satire."<sup>6</sup> And Jerome's treatise *Against Jovinian* has been deemed responsible in part for the misogynist strain in the literary tradition of the Middle Ages.<sup>7</sup>

Although Jerome could scarcely have been more vicious toward women in his writings, he was extremely supportive of them—at least to the ones who accepted his tutelage—in real life. During his stay at Rome, he acquired a circle of wealthy Roman women among his devotees.<sup>8</sup> To these women he taught Scripture—even going so far as to organize Hebrew classes<sup>9</sup>—and gave them much encouragement in the undertaking of celibacy. Their loyalty to him is revealed by the fact that some of them followed him to Bethlehem and set up a convent near the male monastic institution he established there. How to reconcile Jerome's personal devotion to and friendships with women and the misogynist tone of his satiric writings therefore remains something of a problem.<sup>10</sup>

The *Eustochium* he addresses in our first selection was the teenage daughter of one of his favorite Roman women friends, Paula. While still an adolescent, *Eustochium* decided to embrace the "virgin's profession"; Jerome wrote her a long letter, actually a treatise, praising her resolution to do so. He tells her that she is the first highborn Roman Christian woman to devote herself to virginity. He reminds her frequently how lucky she is to be escaping the trials of marriage—which he paints in the blackest of colors—and to be winning the love of the heavenly bridegroom, Jesus. (He does not hesitate to use overtly sexual metaphors derived from the Song of Songs to describe the relationship between the pair.) Virginity will be for her a foretaste of the angelic afterlife; it is also a means of recapturing the innocence of Eden before the Fall. Although the virginal life is a rigorous one, he is confident that *Eustochium* will succeed in it if she but follow his advice, which included shunning the "sham" virgins who not only associated with men, but were sometimes found to be with child by their supposedly "spiritual brothers."<sup>11</sup>

Our second selection is taken from *Against Jovinian*, a treatise repudiating the theories of a monk who had given up the ascetic life

and had, in about 390, composed a work in which he argued against the exaltation of virginity. Jovinian reasoned that, in the eyes of God, a virgin was no better than a wife, nor would she receive a higher reward after death. (He based his opinion on the belief that baptism makes all Christians equal before God.) And there was much scriptural evidence Jovinian could marshal to demonstrate that marriage was commanded in the sacred writings. When the book became a best seller, Jerome undertook to answer its arguments. To his surprise, the Roman public considered parts of his work (the *Against Jovinian*) offensive, even shocking, and Jerome had to defend himself for even writing the treatise!<sup>12</sup> Despite the plea that he held a more favorable view of marriage than some others in the Christian fold,<sup>13</sup> the damage had already been done. Jerome had tried to dissociate himself from the opinions of the heretical Gnostics who downgraded marriage, but apparently he had not succeeded in convincing his audience. Certainly his inclusion of a long section of a biting, even venomous, treatise *On Marriage*, which he attributes to the earlier Aristotelian writer Theophrastus, had not helped his cause.<sup>14</sup>

Such an ardent apostle of virginity as Jerome could be expected to champion the perpetual virginity of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Jerome devoted a whole treatise (the *Against Helvidius*, not included in our selections) to this subject. Helvidius, a Roman layman, had argued that although Mary was a virgin at the time of Jesus' conception, she did not remain one afterwards. Helvidius drew his evidence from the wording of the birth stories which implied that Joseph and Mary had married and engaged in sexual relations after Jesus' birth, as well as from the biblical passages mentioning Jesus' brothers and sisters. Jerome applied his talents as an exegete—he was probably the foremost biblical scholar of his day—to the task of explaining away or interpreting the passages Helvidius had singled out so that Mary emerged as devoted to the ideal of lifelong virginity. The brother and sisters of Jesus mentioned in the text of the New Testament are turned into relatives.<sup>15</sup> Jerome was so eager to advance the cause of virginity that he even depicted Joseph as a devotee of lifelong celibacy.<sup>16</sup>

Jerome's treatise on Mary's virginity was part of a rising interest

at the end of the fourth century in the virgin birth and in Mary.<sup>17</sup> In 649, a Lateran Council declared the perpetual virginity of Mary to be doctrine of the Catholic church. Catholicism's devotion to Mary and to virginity has continued through the ages.<sup>18</sup>

#### Letter 22 [to Eustochium]

I am writing this to you, Lady Eustochium (I am bound to call my Lord's bride "Lady"), that from the very beginning of my discourse you may learn that I do not today intend to sing the praises of the virginity which you have adopted and proved to be so good. Nor shall I now reckon up the disadvantages of marriage, such as pregnancy, a crying baby, the tortures of jealousy, the cares of household management, and the cutting short by death of all its fancied blessings. Married women have their due allotted place, if they live in honourable marriage and keep their bed undefiled. My purpose in this letter is to show you that you are fleeing from Sodom and that you should take warning by Lot's wife. There is no flattery in these pages. A flatterer is a smooth-spoken enemy. Nor will there be any pomp of rhetoric in expounding the beatitude of virginity, setting you among the angels and putting the world beneath your feet. . . .

Oh, how often, when I was living in the desert, in that lonely waste, scorched by the burning sun, which affords to hermits a savage dwelling-place, how often did I fancy myself surrounded by the pleasures of Rome! I used to sit alone; for I was filled with bitterness. My unkempt limbs were covered in shapeless sackcloth; my skin through long neglect had become as rough and black as an Ethiopian's. Tears and groans were every day my portion; and if sleep ever overcame my resistance and fell upon my eyes, I bruised my restless bones against the naked earth. Of food and drink I will not speak. Hermits have nothing but cold water even when they are sick, and for them it is sinful luxury to partake of cooked

From Jerome, Letter 22, "To Eustochium: The Virgin's Profession," *Select Letters of St. Jerome*, trans. F. A. Wright, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, Loeb Classical Library, 1933).

dishes. But though in my fear of hell I had condemned myself to this prison-house, where my only companions were scorpions and wild beasts, I often found myself surrounded by bands of dancing girls. My face was pale with fasting; but though my limbs were cold as ice my mind was burning with desire, and the fires of lust kept bubbling up before me when my flesh was as good as dead.

And so, when all other help failed me, I used to fling myself at Jesus' feet; I watered them with my tears, I wiped them with my hair; and if my flesh still rebelled I subdued it by weeks of fasting. I do not blush to confess my misery; nay, rather, I lament that I am not now what once I was. I remember that often I joined night to day with my wailings and ceased not from beating my breast till tranquillity returned to me at the Lord's behest. I used to dread my poor cell as though it knew my secret thoughts. Filled with stiff anger against myself, I would make my way alone into the desert; and when I came upon some hollow valley or rough mountain or precipitous cliff, there I would set up my oratory, and make that spot a place of torture for my unhappy flesh. There sometimes also—the Lord Himself is my witness—after many a tear and straining of my eyes to heaven, I felt myself in the presence of the angelic hosts and in joy and gladness would sing: "Because of the savour of thy good ointments we will run after thee" (Song of Sol. 1:3).

If such are the temptations of men whose bodies are emaciated with fasting so that they have only evil thoughts to withstand, how must it fare with a girl who clings to the enjoyment of luxuries? . . .

You may choose perhaps to answer that a girl of good family like yourself, accustomed to luxury and down pillows, cannot do without wine and tasty food and would find a stricter rule of life impossible. To that I can only say: "Live then by your own rule, since you cannot live by God's." Not that God, the Lord and Creator of the universe, takes any delight in the rumbling of our intestines or the emptiness of our stomach or the inflammation of our lungs; but because this is the only way of preserving chastity. . . .

It wearies me to tell how many virgins fall daily, what notabilities

Mother Church loses from her bosom: over how many stars the proud enemy sets his throne, how many hollow rocks the serpent pierces and makes his habitation. You may see many women who have been left widows before they were ever wed, trying to conceal their consciousness of guilt by means of a lying garb. Unless they are betrayed by a swelling womb or by the crying of their little ones they walk abroad with tripping feet and lifted head. Some even ensure barrenness by the help of potions, murdering human beings before they are fully conceived. Others, when they find that they are with child as the result of their sin, practise abortion with drugs, and so frequently bring about their own death, taking with them to the lower world the guilt of three crimes: suicide, adultery against Christ, and child murder. Yet these are the women who will say: "To the pure all things are pure. My conscience is enough for me. A pure heart is what God craves. Why should I refrain from the food which God made for enjoyment?" When they wish to appear bright and merry, they drench themselves with wine, and then joining profanity to drunkenness they cry: "Heaven forbid that I should abstain from the blood of Christ." When they see a woman with a pale sad face, they call her "a miserable Manichean"; and quite logically too, for on their principles fasting is heresy. As they walk the streets they try to attract attention and with stealthy nods and winks draw after them troops of young men. Of them the prophet's words are true: "Thou hast a whore's forehead: thou refusest to be ashamed" (Jer. 3:3). Let them have only a little purple in their dress, and loose bandeau on their head to leave the hair free; cheap slippers, and a Maforie fluttering from their shoulders; sleeves fitting close to their arms, and a loose-kneed walk: there you have all their marks of virginity. Such women may have their admirers, and it may cost more to ruin them because they are called virgins. But to such virgins as these I prefer to be displeasing.

There is another scandal of which I blush to speak; yet, though sad, it is true. From what source has this plague of "dearly beloved sisters" found its way into the Church? Whence come these unwedded wives, these new types of concubines, nay, I will go further, these one-man harlots? They live in the same house with

their male-friend; they occupy the same room and often even the same bed; and yet they call us suspicious if we think that anything is wrong. A brother leaves his virgin sister; a virgin, scorning her unmarried brother, seeks a stranger to take his place. Both alike pretend to have but one object: they are seeking spiritual consolation among strangers: but their real aim is to indulge at home in carnal intercourse. About such folk as these Solomon in Proverbs speaks the scornful words: "Can a man take fire in his bosom and his clothes not be burned? Can one go upon hot coals and not burn his feet" (Prov. 6:27)?

Let us therefore drive off and expel from our company such women as only wish to seem and not to be virgins: Now I would direct all my words to you who, inasmuch as you have been at the beginning the first virgin of high rank at Rome, will now have to labour the more diligently so as not to lose your present and your future happiness. As for the troubles of wedded life and the uncertainties of marriage, you know of them by an example in your own family. Your sister Blesilla, superior to you in age but inferior in firmness of will, has become a widow seven months after taking a husband. How luckless is our mortal state, how ignorant of the future! She has lost both the crown of virginity and the pleasures of wedlock. Although the widowed state ranks as the second degree of chastity, can you not imagine the crosses which every moment she must bear, seeing in her sister daily that which she herself has lost? It is harder for her than for you to forgo the delights that she once knew, and yet she receives a less reward for her present continence. Still, she too may rejoice and be not afraid. The fruit that is an hundredfold and that which is sixtyfold both spring from one seed, the seed of chastity. . . .

Some one may say: "Do you dare to disparage wedlock, a state which God has blessed?" It is not disparaging wedlock to prefer virginity. No one can make a comparison between two things, if one is good and the other evil. Let married women take their pride in coming next after virgins. "Be fruitful," God said, "and multiply and replenish the earth" (Gen. 1:28). Let him then be fruitful and multiply who intends to replenish the earth: but your company is in heaven. The command to increase and multiply is



fulfilled after the expulsion from Paradise, after the recognition of nakedness, after the putting on of the fig leaves which augured the approach of marital desire. Let them marry and be given in marriage who eat their bread in the sweat of their brow, whose land brings forth thorns and thistles, and whose crops are choked with brambles. My seed produces fruit a hundredfold.

... Eve in Paradise was a virgin: it was only after she put on a garment of skins that her married life began. Paradise is your home. Keep therefore as you were born, and say: "Return unto thy rest, O my soul" (Ps. 116:7)....

I praise wedlock, I praise marriage; but it is because they produce me virgins. I gather the rose from the thorn, the gold from the earth, the pearl from the oyster. Shall the ploughman plough all day? Shall he not also enjoy the fruit of his labour? Wedlock is the more honoured when the fruit of wedlock is the more loved. Why, mother, grudge your daughter her virginity? She has been reared on your milk, she has come from your body, she has grown strong in your arms. Your watchful love has kept her safe. Are you vexed with her because she chooses to wed not a soldier but a King? She has rendered you a high service: from to-day you are the mother by marriage of God....

In the old days, as I have said, the virtue of continence was confined to men, and Eve continually bore children in travail. But now that a virgin has conceived in the womb a child, upon whose shoulders is government, a mighty God, Father of the age to come, the fetters of the old curse are broken. Death came through Eve: life has come through Mary. For this reason the gift of virginity has been poured most abundantly upon women, seeing that it was from a woman it began. As soon as the Son of God set foot on earth, He formed for Himself a new household, that as He was adored by angels in heaven He might have angels also on earth....

Let the seclusion of your own chamber ever guard you; ever let the Bridgroom sport with you within. If you pray, you are speaking to your Spouse: if you read, He is speaking to you. When sleep falls on you, He will come behind the wall and will put His hand through the hole in the door and will touch your flesh. And you will awake and rise up and cry: "I am sick with love" (Song

of Sol., 5:8). And you will hear Him answer: "A garden inclosed is my sister, my spouse; a spring shut up, a fountain sealed" (Song of Sol., 5:8). Go not from home nor visit the daughters of a strange land, though you have patriarchs for brothers and rejoice in Israel as your father. Dinah went out and was seduced (Gen. 34:1). I would not have you seek the Bridgroom in the public squares; I would not have you go about the corners of the city. You may say: "I will rise now and go about the city: in the streets and in the broad ways I will seek Him whom my soul loveth" (Song of Sol. 3:2). But though you ask the watchmen: "Saw ye Him whom my soul loveth?" no one will deign to answer you. The Bridgroom cannot be found in the city squares. "Strait and narrow is the way that leadeth unto life" (Matt. 7:14). And the Song goes on: "I sought him but I could not find him: I called him but he gave me no answer."

### Against Jovinian

... For ourselves, we do not follow the views of Marcion and Manichaeus, and disparage marriage; nor, deceived by the error of Tatian, the leader of the Encratites, do we think all intercourse impure; he condemns and rejects not only marriage but also food which God created for the use of man.... We are not ignorant of the words, "Marriage is honourable among all, and the bed undefiled." We have read God's first command, "Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth"; but while we honour marriage we prefer virginity which is the offspring of marriage. Will silver cease to be silver, if gold is more precious than silver? Or is despite done to tree and corn, if we prefer the fruit to root and foliage, or the grain to stalk-and ear? Virginity is to marriage what fruit is to the tree, or grain to the straw. Although the hundred-fold, the sixty-fold, and the thirty-fold spring from one earth and from one sowing, yet there is a great difference in respect of number. The

From Jerome, "Against Jovinian," St. Jerome: *Letters and Select Works*, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 2nd ser., vol. 6, ed. Philip Schaff (New York: Christian Literature Co., 1893).