

**ST. JEROME AND HOLY
SCRIPTURE: THE ENCYCLICAL
LETTER OF OUR HOLY
FATHER, POPE BENEDICT XV**

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St. Jerome and Holy Scripture: the encyclical letter of our holy father, Pope Benedict XV by P J. Kenedy

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P J. KENEDY

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ST. JEROME AND HOLY SCRIPTURE

THE ENCYCLICAL LETTER OF OUR
HOLY FATHER, POPE BENEDICT XV
TO ALL PATRIARCHS, PRIMATES, ARCHBISHOPS,
BISHOPS AND ORDINARIES IN UNION WITH THE
APOSTOLIC SEE: ON THE FIFTEENTH CENTENARY
of the DEATH of ST. JEROME, DOCTOR of HOLY CHURCH



AUTHORISED TRANSLATION

P. J. KENEDY AND SONS
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St. Jerome and Holy Scripture

A

St. Jerome's Life and Labours

SINCE the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, had bestowed the Scriptures on the human race for their instruction in Divine things, He also raised up in successive ages saintly and learned men whose task it should be to develop that treasure and so provide for the faithful plenteous "consolation from the Scriptures."¹ Foremost among these teachers stands St. Jerome. Him the Catholic Church acclaims and reveres as her "Greatest Doctor," divinely given her for the understanding of the Bible. And now that the fifteenth centenary of his death is approaching we would not willingly let pass so favourable an opportunity of addressing you on the debt we owe him. For the responsibility of our Apostolic office impels us to set before you his wonderful example and so promote the study of Holy Scripture in accordance with the teaching of our predecessors, Leo XIII. and Pius X., which we desire to apply more precisely still to the present needs of the Church. For St. Jerome—"strenuous Catholic, learned in the Scriptures,"² "teacher

¹ Rom. xv. 4.

² Sulpicius Severus, *Dial.* i. 7.

of Catholics,"¹ "model of virtue, world's teacher"²—has by his earnest and illuminative defence of Catholic doctrine on Holy Scripture left us most precious instructions. These we propose to set before you and so promote among the children of the Church, and especially among the clergy, assiduous and reverent study of the Bible.

No need to remind you, Venerable Brethren, that Jerome was born in Stridonia, in a town "on the borders of Dalmatia and Pannonia";³ that from his infancy he was brought up a Catholic;⁴ that after his baptism here in Rome⁵ he lived to an advanced age and devoted all his powers to studying, expounding, and defending the Bible. At Rome he had learned Latin and Greek, and hardly had he left the school of rhetoric than he ventured on a Commentary on Abdias the Prophet. This "youthful piece of work"⁶ kindled in him such love of the Bible that he decided—like the man in the Gospel who found a treasure—to spurn "any emoluments the world could provide,"⁷ and devote himself wholly to such studies. Nothing could deter him from this stern resolve. He left home, parents, sister, and relatives; he denied himself the more delicate food he had been accustomed to, and went to the East so that he might gather from studious reading of the Bible the fuller riches of Christ and true knowledge of his Saviour.⁸ Jerome himself tells us in several places how assiduously he toiled :

¹ Cassian, *De inc.* vii. 26.

² S. Prosper, *Carmen de Ingratis* v. 57.

³ *Vir. Illustr.* cxxxv.

⁴ *Ep.* lxxxii. 2.

⁵ *Ep.* xv. 1; xvi. 2.

⁶ *Præf. in Abdiam.*

⁷ *In Matt.* xiii. 14.

⁸ *Ep.* xxii. 30.

“An eager desire to learn obsessed me. But I was not so foolish as to try and teach myself. At Antioch I regularly attended the lectures of Apollinarius of Laodicea ; but while I learned much from him about the Bible, I would never accept his doubtful teachings about its interpretation.”¹

From Antioch he betook himself to the desert of Chalcis, in Syria, to perfect himself in his knowledge of the Bible, and at the same time to curb “youthful desires” by means of hard study. Here he engaged a convert Jew to teach him Hebrew and Chaldaic.

“What a toil it was ! How difficult I found it ! How often I was on the point of giving it up in despair, and yet in my eagerness to learn took it up again ! Myself can bear witness of this, and so, too, can those who had lived with me at the time. Yet I thank God for the fruit I won from that bitter seed.”²

Lest, however, he should grow idle in this desert where there were no heretics to vex him, Jerome betook himself to Constantinople, where for nearly three years he studied Holy Scripture under St. Gregory the Theologian, then Bishop of that See and in the height of his fame as a teacher. While there he translated into Latin Origen’s *Homilies on the Prophets* and Eusebius’ *Chronicle* ; he also wrote on Isaias’ vision of the Seraphim. He then returned to Rome on ecclesiastical business, and Pope Damasus admitted him into his court.³ However, he let nothing distract him from continual occupation with the Bible,⁴ and the task of copying various manuscripts,⁵

¹ *Ep.* lxxxiv. 3.

² *Ep.* cxxv. 12.

³ *Ep.* cxxiii. 9 ; cxxvii. 7. ⁴ *Ep.* cxxvii. 7.

⁵ *Ep.* xxxvi. 1 ; *cf.* xxxii. 1.

as well as answering the many questions put to him by students of both sexes.¹

Pope Damasus had entrusted to him a most laborious task, the correction of the Latin text of the Bible. So well did Jerome carry this out that even to-day men versed in such studies appreciate its value more and more. But he ever yearned for Palestine, and when the Pope died he retired to Bethlehem to a monastery nigh to the cave where Christ was born. Every moment he could spare from prayer he gave to Biblical studies.

“Though my hair was now growing grey and though I looked more like professor than student, yet I went to Alexandria to attend Didymus’ lectures. I owe him much. What I did not know I learned. What I knew already I did not lose through his different presentation of it. Men thought I had done with tutors; but when I got back to Jerusalem and Bethlehem how hard I worked and what a price I paid for my night-time teacher Baraninus! Like another Nicodemus he was afraid of the Jews!”²

Nor was Jerome content merely to gather up this or that teacher’s words; he gathered from all quarters whatever might prove of use to him in his task. From the outset he had accumulated the best possible copies of the Bible and the best commentators on it, but now he worked on copies from the synagogues and from the library formed at Cæsarea by Origen and Eusebius; he hoped by assiduous comparison of texts to arrive at greater certainty touching the actual text and its meaning. With this same purpose he went all through Palestine.

¹ *Ep.* xlv. 2; *cf.* cxxvi. 3; cxxvii. 7.

² *Ep.* lxxxiv. 3.