

Notes

St Jerome was only two years in the Wilderness from 375-377. He craved human company and was not able to transcend the desires of his body to enter the spiritual realm.

As a Christian priest he prayed and fasted to assuage his temptations. His guilt led him to violent penance, beating his breast for his sins.

St Jerome's attraction to female company is recorded as are his teachings to Paola, a wealthy Roman noblewoman, and her virgins on the right behaviour for women.¹ Soon after the death of his patron Pope Damasus in 384, St Jerome was forced to leave his position in Rome when the Roman clergy inquired into allegations that he had an improper relationship with the widow Paola. St Jerome then moved to Bethlehem and, sponsored by Paola and her daughter Eustochium, founded a convent, a hospice for pious travellers and a monastery, where they all settled until his death in 420.

Paolo Uccello's extraordinary painting of St Jerome is usually understood as showing prayer and flagellation overcoming temptation. In the light of contemporary psychoanalysis, it could be read as depicting 'evil piety', a split, caused by denial of desire, and leading to extreme acts of a sadistic and/or a masochistic order.

¹ *He held classes for a monastic-minded circle of noble Roman widows and virgins (e.g., Marcella, Paula, and her daughters Blesilla and Eustochium). He taught them the Hebrew text of the Psalms, orally and in letters, he answered their biblical problems, and he was their master in spirituality as well. Under these conditions, he wrote a defence of the perpetual virginity of Mary, Jesus' mother (383) and attacked the view of those who espoused the equality of virginity and marriage.*
As quoted in <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Saint-Jerome>

I am a woman, and St Jerome is one of the early church fathers who crafted the moral code, concerning the female body, for Christianity. It is a faith which glorifies female chastity and virginity but which considers the erotic life of the body, pleasure in beauty and expression of the body to be sinful.

At the time of St Jerome, Christianity was establishing itself as the state church of the Roman Empire and persecuting the Greco-Roman mystery cults. These goddess cults were eventually deemed heretical by the Roman Church leaving women restricted in their expression and denied the right to practice much of their Knowledge.

Although there are some cracks appearing, this thinking is still deeply ingrained into the fabric of our Christian based culture. A culture that has elevated the mind over the body, and led to the female body being commodified and sexualised rather than celebrated and appreciated for its wisdom and life force.

I paint with the movement of my body in touch with the canvas surface.

In this painting, St Jerome's cast off red cardinal's robe, and the sensual flesh of his conflict, merge and pay tribute to the blood of female experience.

Brown, Peter *The Body and Society, Men. Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, Columbia University Press, New York 1988

Rebenich, Stefan *Jerome: The early Church Fathers*, Routledge, London & New York 2002

Jerome, *Letter 22 to Eustochium*,
Translated by W.H. Fremantle, G. Lewis and W.G. Martley. From Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, Vol. 6. Edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1893.) Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight. <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3001022.htm>

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