

Homily for Jerome, Priest and Monk of Bethlehem, 420
September 30, 2020

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

2 Timothy 3:14–17, Psalm 19:7–14, Luke 24:44–48*

I’ve started another non-fiction book by the British writer Andrew Wilson, *London: A History*.¹ I was surprised by his assertion that it was in the reign of the first Queen that torture was first used in England.” Clearly wrong. It was easy to find that the terrible rack was introduced around the year 1420 by the-then duke of Exeter.² That said, I like reading Wilson’s take on things.

This book starts on Hampstead Heath and winds its way via the path of a long-underground tributary of the Thames, the Fleet River. One of London’s historic prisons was the Fleet Prison—demolished in 1846.³ I learned from Wilson, “In the reign of Queen Mary, in September 1553, we find imprisoned there Miles Coverdale, the man whose translations of the Psalms

¹ Andrew N. Wilson, *London: A History* (New York: Modern Library, 2004), eBook. Search to find the quotation.

² <https://www.britannica.com/technology/rack-torture-instrument>, (accessed 30 September 2020).

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fleet_Prison, (accessed 30 September 2020).

are still sung daily in the cathedrals and colleges of England.”⁴

Today, we commemorate the father of the Bible in the Christian West, Jerome, a monk, and, eventually, a priest. For some years, he was at the center of things assisting Damasus I, when he was bishop of Rome. It was Damasus who asked Jerome to translate the Hebrew Scriptures and the Greek New Testament into Latin.⁵

In the year 386, Jerome was forty-four. He settled in Bethlehem and gathered a small community of monks. His entry in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, “Jerome’s writings issued from a scholarship unsurpassed in the early Church.”⁶ Many writings and letters, in addition to his translation of the Bible, somehow survived the centuries. This new Latin Bible for the Christian West is known as the Vulgate—after the Latin for “common.” Latin and Greek were in use throughout the Roman Empire.

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⁵ *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, (ODCC) 2ed. (New York: Oxford University Press 1978), s.v. “Vulgate,” 1451.

⁶ *Ibid.*

Jerome was the first to work from Hebrew texts to do his translation of the Christian Old Testament. He started with the psalms, but in the end, when the manuscripts began to be collected and copied in canonical order, his Hebrew Psalter was not included. Instead, the psalter of the early third-century theologian Origen carried the day until the Second Vatican Council required a new edition of the Vulgate to respect modern Biblical scholarship results. That said, much like the psalms of Coverdale, the psalter based on Origen's work, that came to be known as the Gallican Psalter, is printed along with the recent edition of the Vulgate in the version published by the United Bible Societies.⁷

I was surprised and delighted to discover this morning that the American Roman Catholic bishops have accepted a more honest translation of the Hebrew found in the seventh chapter of Isaiah that is quoted by the evangelist we know as Matthew. This evangelist quoted the Hebrew Scriptures from the Greek version of the Hebrew Scriptures known as the Septuagint. That translation was made for the great Library of ancient Alexandria.⁸ So, we read in Matthew, “Behold,

⁷ <https://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/biblia-sacra-vulgata-hendrickson/1132244719?ean=9781598561784>, (accessed 30 September 2020).

⁸ ODCC, s.v. “Septuagint, The,” 1260.

a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel (which means, God with us).”⁹

The Septuagint used the Greek word for “virgin,” but not the Greek word for the Hebrew word that Isaiah used. Here is Robert Alter’s translation, “the young woman is about to conceive and bear a son, and she shall call his name Immanuel.”¹⁰

For years, at the insistence of American Roman Catholic bishops, *The New American Bible* had Isaiah saying, “the virgin shall be with child, and bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.”¹¹ It came with a long footnote, but footnotes are not read at Mass. That bible is now in a fourth edition and is known as the New American Bible Revised Edition—NABRE for short. It’s the version that’s now online at the website of the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops. The verse now reads, “the young woman, pregnant and about to bear a son, shall name him Emmanuel.”¹²

⁹ Matthew 1:23.

¹⁰ Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019), II, 645.

¹¹ *The New American Bible* (Encino, CA: Benziger, 1970)

¹² <https://bible.usccb.org/bible/isaiah/7>, (accessed 30 September 2020).

I'm sure the intellectual honesty of this translation decision makes Saint Jerome happy.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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