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**The guidance of the Holy Spirit in the formation of Scripture is found in its translators such as Jerome, who is depicted in these paintings in his study and before the Trinity.**

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# Inspired Translator

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

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The guidance of the Holy Spirit in the formation of Scripture is found not only in the work of the Bible's authors (see, for example, Caravaggio's *Inspiration of Saint Matthew*), but also in its translators, such as Jerome (c. 347-420). In the Latin West, the inspiration of Scripture was represented visually as a supernatural event by showing the attributes of the Four Evangelists—symbols assigned to them based on a vision of the prophet Ezekiel that is echoed in the prophet John's first vision of heavenly worship (Ezekiel 1:10; Revelation 4:7). In these visions the heavens opened to reveal four creatures with the aspects of a man, a lion, an ox, and an eagle. The distribution of the symbols among the Four Evangelists that became canonical in the West was established by Jerome in the preface to his commentary on Matthew.<sup>1</sup> In the Caravaggio painting, we see Matthew looking up toward his symbol, a miraculous messenger from heaven.

Jerome is usually represented as a theologian in his study translating the Bible into Latin, as in the Renaissance picture by Antonello da Messina illustrated here. Antonello was from the Sicilian town of Messina, but he is believed to have influenced Venetian painting by introducing the technique of oil painting when he lived there from 1475 to 1476. Antonello probably learned oil techniques from the Flemish-influenced painter Colantonio, whom he may have studied with in Naples. Antonello was employed in 1456 in the court of Galeazzo Maria Sforza in Milan at the same time as the Flemish artist Petrus Christus (a student of Jan van Eyck).<sup>2</sup> The abundance of Flemish characteristics in this painting—such as meticulous attention to every detail of each individual object, illusionistic arch, light effects, and oil glazes—caused a documented debate about its attribution to Hans Memling, Jan van Eyck, or Antonello.<sup>3</sup>

Penny Howell Jolly claims that the individual facial characteristics, however, defy the typical features of Jerome. The Italian view of the saint is an elderly figure with a full, white beard. The Northern tradition is a dark-haired man with a low brow and a long straight nose; his lips are full, his eyebrows strongly drawn, and his chin, cheek, and neck are smooth. Antonello's Jerome differs from both traditions: he is middle-aged, has deep-set eyes, slightly corpulent cheeks, and an aquiline nose; for these reasons, Holly suggests that it may be a disguised portrait.<sup>4</sup>

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*Andrea del Castagno (1417/19-1457), SAINT JEROME'S VISION OF THE TRINITY WITH SAINTS PAULA AND EUSTOCHIUM (1454-1455). Fresco, 9'9" x 5'10". SS. Annunziata, Florence, Italy. Photo: Scala / Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.*

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The vision of the Trinity by Jerome is a much rarer subject than the saint writing in his study.<sup>5</sup> Andrea del Castagno painted Jerome between two women whom art historian Millard Meiss identifies as Jerome's much loved disciple and associate, Paula, and her daughter Eustochium. Meiss also connects its iconography to the recently founded eremitical congregation dedicated to Saint Jerome in the nearby town of Fiesole.<sup>6</sup> Jerome is depicted as a penitent based on the most quoted paragraph of Jerome's famous Epistle 22 to Eustochium, which describes his years of penitence in the Syrian desert. He wrote, "Whenever I found a deep valley or rough mountainside or rocky precipice, I made it my place of prayer and of torture for my unhappy flesh."<sup>7</sup> There

is not, however, any reference in Jerome's letter to the vision of the Trinity. However, in the twenty-sixth chapter of another collection of Jerome's letters and treatises, but with modification inclining towards hyperbole, Pseudo-Jerome states, "I have seen with the sight of divine vision.... My witness is the Trinity itself, which I saw, I know not with what kind of sight."<sup>8</sup>

Castagno represents the Trinity as a throne of mercy/throne of grace before Jerome, or *Gnadenstuhl*. The image of a penitent mortification by Jerome was invented in Italy about 1400. "Per la memoria della passione di Cristo" ("For the memory of the passion of Christ") was a common phrase in every flagellant confraternity in Florence, of which there were many. By 1454 Jerome was pictured before a Trinitarian vision as his reward for those weeks of mortification and meditation on the Passion.

The Trinity is drastically foreshortened, and for this the clergy criticized Castagno and demanded a "correction." Jerome's red cardinal's hat is seen at his feet and his own animal symbol, the lion, is visible behind him. The flagellant's rope is present not only because of Jerome's practice of mortification but because the patron, Girolamo (Jerome) dei Corboli, belonged to a flagellant confraternity.<sup>9</sup>

Although self-mortification is no longer a common or even accepted Christian practice, meditation on the Scripture as practiced by Jerome remains. The contemplative Jerome in his study combined with the actively penitent Jerome who is rewarded with a vision inspired by the Holy Spirit, may still offer insight to the power of scriptural reflection.

## NOTES

1 Irving Lavin, "Divine Inspiration in Caravaggio's Two St. Matthew's," *The Art Bulletin*, 56.1 (March 1974), 59-81, here citing 60. For a discussion of Caravaggio's *Inspiration of Saint Matthew*, see Heidi J. Hornik, "The Urgency of Inspiration," *Scripture, Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics* 52 (Waco, TX: Baylor University, 2014), 64-65.

2 Frederick Hartt and David G. Wilkins, *History of Italian Renaissance Art*, seventh edition (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2011), 412.

3 Ibid.

4 Penny Howell Jolly, "Antonello da Messina's 'St. Jerome in His Study': A Disguised Portrait?" *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. 124, no. 946 (January, 1982), 26-29, here citing 28.

5 Eugene Rice, "St. Jerome's 'Vision of the Trinity': An Iconographical Note," *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. 125, No. 960 (March, 1983), 151-153, 155.

6 Ibid., 151.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Hartt and Wilkins, 178.



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