CHRYSTOSOM AS OLD TESTAMENT COMMENTATOR

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Chrysostom's scriptural commentaries

Two decades ago at the 1967 International Conference on Patristic Studies a speaker offered the forecast that 'one may hope with some confidence that in ten or fifteen years it will be possible to begin a definitive critical edition of the entire corpus of Chrysostom's works.'

It could hardly be said, with regard to Chrysostom's exegetical works at any rate, that such definitive critical edition is yet under way, with the exception of M. Dumortier's two Isaian volumes.

Dr Geerard has at least rendered us the service of investigating the authenticity of available works, even if this task involves judgements that not every scholar regards as decisive.

We are nonetheless in a position to acknowledge the preponderance of exegetical (or at least scriptural) homilies amongst Chrysostom's extant works. They number between six and seven hundred, of which fewer than a quarter - around 150 - are devoted to Old Testament books or Old Testament characters. The bulk of these 150 occur in the two major series, 67 homilies on Genesis and 58 on Psalms (the same books, incidentally, treated of by Chrysostom's mentor, Diodore of Tarsus, and doubtless many other ancient preachers). The remainder are made up of another 9 on Genesis (usually classed as 'sermons', their relationship to the 67 'homilies' much debated, 5 on Hannah, 3 on David and Saul, 6 on Isaiah ch.6, and finally (if we follow Professor Quasten in not admitting the present form of the commentary on Is 1.1 - 8.10) the two homilies De prophetarum obscuritate which, if not directly exegetical, do enunciate Chrysostom's thinking on the Old Testament and the reasons why Old Testament books might be less tractable.

He admits without equivocation the relative difficulty of Old Testament material for commentator and reader:

"There are many difficulties in the Old Testament, its inspired writings are like riddles, and its books difficult to interpret; the New Testament, on the other hand, is clearer and less oblique. Why should it be, you ask, that this is the way things have been ordained, apart from the fact that the new Testament deals with more lofty realities, like the kingdom of heaven, the resurrection of the dead, and other indescribable good things surpassing man's understanding? What is the reason that the Old Testament inspired writings are obscure?"

He hastens to qualify this admission of obscurity by asserting it lies rather with the dullness of the Jewish recipients than with the scripture itself, although he admits later generations find obscurity for the added reason of composition in a foreign language translated into Greek. The Genesis commentary leads him often to stress the remoteness of this Old Testament material by comparison with the immediacy and intimacy of the New Testament authors:

"When Moses in the beginning took on the instruction of mankind, he taught his listeners the elements, whereas Paul and John, taking over from Moses, could at that later stage transmit more developed notions. Hence we discover the reason for the considerateness (synkatabasis) shown to date, namely, that under the guidance of the Spirit he was speaking..."
in a manner appropriate to his hearers as he outlined everything.  

So for Chrysostom, while the distance and remoteness of Old Testament material by comparison with the intimacy and directness of a Pauline letter or Johannine Gospel leads Moses into recourse to anthropomorphic expressions, this is also a bonus in giving occasions for demonstration of that linguistic considerateness (synkatabasis) that so fascinates Chrysostom. The Psalms commentary, too, falls back on that reason of the primitive stage of revelation history to explain the figurative character of a psalm like Ps 45:

"I will explain the reason. In the beginning when the word was not yet spread abroad, it made sense to base explanations on concrete and material things, in dwelling on an account of the divine plan (oikonomia) and initiating instruction on human nature. But with the growth of knowledge and the acceptance of the good news, it was an appropriate time to go on to higher things. Accordingly, the Old Testament authors in discoursing of Christ take the divine plan as the point of departure and begin from there."

A further problem of the Old Testament material is its lack of order:

"The psalmist narrates nothing of Christ's birth, nor of his upbringing, nor of other things about him, and yet at this point intrudes this remark about him. Why on earth? Because telling everything in order belongs to the evangelists, and accordingly he left that for them, this procedure being characteristic of them. On the other hand, the work of Old Testament inspired writing (propheteia) is to select some parts and deal with them."

The added difficulty of the 'uninspiring' nature of some Old Testament material, such as the genealogies in Genesis, proves to be a bonus for the student of Chrysostom in provoking him to enunciate his principles on inspiration of author/commentator/reader/listener, on the extent of inspiration to include these tedious details, on the salutary and revelatory of these inspired if tedious texts, on the need for the interpreter to take seriously and literally every such detail, and on his whole approach to commentary/exegesis.

For these reasons Chrysostom's Old Testament homilies are less numerous than those on Paul's letters and the Gospels, but are for the very reason of the difficulty of the material fertile soil for study of his thinking on Scripture. For the moment, however, we have to rely on the older editions of Savile and De Montfaucon for a text of the Old Testament homilies while awaiting further volumes in the Greek series of Corpus Christianorum and Sources Chrétiennes. We are grateful in the meantime for the Brepols reproduction of Migne's reprint of De Montfaucon's text. A contribution of my own is to work on English versions of Chrysostom's Old Testament homilies.

Chrysostom's equipment for the task of Old Testament commentary

Chrysostom was not equipped for Old Testament commentary like other Fathers with a knowledge of Hebrew, and so he could speak of the obscurity that derives from composition in a foreign language and translation into his native Greek. His guide in scriptural study, Diodore of Tarsus, himself a commentator on those parts of the Old Testament to which Chrysostom later devoted most
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attention, *Genesis* and *Psalms*, likewise laboured under this handicap. Hence he is dependent on "those who know that language," "those who know Hebrew" in accounting (for example) for the plural *ouranoi* in Homily 4, on *Gn* and in giving the etymology of "Abraham" in Homily 39, and is at the mercy of the inaccuracy of his source - a pity, since his whole formation gave him a fascination with names of people and places.

He was therefore hardly the one to write an essay on the obscurity of the Old Testament. The fact that he suffered both from a linguistic barrier and from lack of an informed critical faculty did not dissuade him from laying the blame for Old Testament obscurity, *asapheia*, on the dullness and insensitivity (*apeiria, thöriödia*) of the Jewish listeners/readers with the encouragement of his soulmate in 2 Cor. He was not uncritical in the sense of lacking an inquiring mind: Antiochene interest in the literal meaning of the text and his insistence on precision, *akribeia*, in both text and its interpreter absolve him of that. It was just that he was not equipped with critical skill and knowledge to handle complications in the tradition of Old Testament material. He admits his befuddlement in commenting on *Ps* 109(108):

"This too, you know, is characteristic of the Old Testament inspired writing (*propheieia*), to interrupt the thread in the middle and insert some story, then after telling that in full, go back to the former theme again. The Old Testament, you see, has been rendered obscure by the unenlightened minds of the Jews."13

Commentary on *Genesis* in particular shows up his limitations. He knows nothing of diversity of sources: in Homily 12 he passes from one creation narrative to the next almost without reference to the duplication, simply remarking that Moses had repeated his "first account" in the interests of that cardinal virtue, *akribeia*. Likewise, as he encounters the Priestly Sethite genealogy in *Gn* 5, he asks himself the question why the author "intends to conduct his narrative all over again," resolving the problem by saying the repetition is accounted for by the needs of moral instruction for the listeners/readers.14 The Flood narratives, too, catch him unprepared: having lectured his congregation on the significance of the seven pairs of creatures at *Gn* 7,2-3, he has no option but to pass over in silence the switch to single pairs in vv. 7-9 in this complicated text, despite his fascination with numbers.15 He has no way of accounting for the divergent statements of the duration of the Flood in Homily 26, although he struggles characteristically to reconcile other contradictions either by simple rationalising or by the ultimate refuge, divine transcendence: "Who could ever solve this by human reasoning? So what can you say? It was God's direction that achieved it all. Accordingly, let us not pry into the secret: let us simply take it on faith."16

One feels for this man, aching to deliver to his congregation the fulness of the inspired Word and yet labouring over this incarnational difficulty of ignorance of information available to commentators in other ages. On the other hand, the task of exegesis was secondary to his pastoral role and moral bent; he has no difficulty departing from his *Gn* text to devote a whole homily to warning his congregation of the moral dangers of going to the races.17 No wonder his contemporary Julian of Eclanum could say he dealt with the Scriptures "rather by exhortation than by exposition."18 Though he has the Bible at his fingertips and expects his congregation to resonate to his wide-ranging scriptural references, he sees Scripture's purpose largely as hagiography; he concludes his conspicuously moral treatment of the Joseph stories in *Gn* with the words, "If we were prepared to move on to all the stories contained in Scripture, we would find all those endowed with virtue passing through trials and thus succeeding in
winning much grace from on high." 19 A similar accent marks his cross-references to the New Testament, Paul's letters in particular and the words of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel; conspicuous by their absence are references to the deeds of Jesus (in Mark, for instance), as also to the historical books of the Old Testament.

Whatever his limitations as an exegete in matters of philology and biblical criticism, or from his moralistic approach to biblical figures, Chrysostom's greatest asset for commentary lay in his theology of the inspired Word. Without analysing the charisma of biblical inspiration of Old Testament texts (except once, in dealing with that locus classicus for patristic commentators, the opening of Ps 45, which he translates as "My heart belches with good news"), 20 he is utterly convinced of the fact of inspiration and its salvific purpose, and recites over and over again:

"Let us learn, if you would, the force of what has been read today from the words of blessed Moses. Attend carefully, I ask you, to what is said by us; they are not our words we are speaking, but what the love of God provides for the sake of our salvation."21

He can speak with conviction and beauty as well of the inspiration of the commentator on the biblical text, as in the few homilies on Isaiah 6:

"As I was saying, then, our hull is full - or, if you like, the tossing sea is everywhere calm, the tempestuous ocean quite steady. Come, let us launch the boat, loosing our tongue in place of the sail, trimming our canvas to the grace of the Spirit instead of the breeze, employing for pilot the Cross instead of rudder and oar. The sea has water that is salty, whereas here there is living water. There you find brutish creatures, here articulate beings; there people sail from sea to land, here they sail from the land and put in at the harbour of heaven; there boats, here spiritual discourses; there planks in the boat, here tightly-welded reasonings; there a sail, here a tongue; there the breeze's breath, here a visit from the spirit; there man as pilot, here the pilot is Christ."22

The theological base to his thinking on the nature of the inspired Scriptures is best enunciated in his characteristic term synkatabasis, God's gracious acceptance of the limitations of the human condition exemplified conspicuously in the Scriptures and pre-eminently in the Incarnation. It is appropriate that the Second Vatican Council acknowledges Chrysostom in its Constitution on Revelation when presenting the Scriptures as the incarnate Word,23 even if it is a hundred years exactly since F.H. Chase spoke appreciatively of Chrysostom's thinking: "The great principle expressed by the word synkatabasis is of deep and wide application. As in the historical Incarnation the Eternal Word became flesh, so in the Bible the glory of God veils itself in the fleshly garments of human thought and human language."24

I have written elsewhere of the various notes to the term synkatabasis, stressing also that in Chrysostom's thinking there is none of the patronising connotation associated with the customary translation "condescension" and what Chrysostom has in mind is the "considerateness" that makes allowances for human limitations (astheneia).25 Vatican II cites the Genesis homilies in documenting its point, as did Pope Pius XII in his 1943 encyclical on biblical studies Divino Afflante Spiritu.25 I would suggest Chrysostom's theology of the incarnate and inspired scriptural Word betokened by synkatabasis emerges
more powerfully in other places of the same Old Testament series, in Homily 23,27 Homily 27,28 and particularly in Homily 58 where Chrysostom portrays Jacob's limp consequent upon his bout with the angel as a kind of sacrament confirming the belief of later generations after the fashion of the divine appearance to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre in Gn 18 and the Hosean guarantee that God has taken various forms in the works of the inspired authors, whereupon he proceeds to the ultimate example of sacramental synkatabasis, the birth, life, ministry and Paschal Mystery of Jesus.29

It is from this profound theology of the Word that Chrysostom's hermeneutic of Old Testament material proceeds, encouraged of course by his Antiochene background, and it helps equip him as a commentator. He wrestles with minute items in the text, as in this account of the creation of the human being, because divine considerateness has given us in them akribeia ("precision", not "accuracy") and the commentator ought to respond with a like precision:

"'God', it says, 'formed the human being, taking dust from the earth.' Do you notice straightway the difference in the way the sentence opens? In the case of all other creatures blessed Moses taught us the manner of creation, saying, God said, 'Let there be light, and there was light;' 'Let the firmament be made;' 'Let the water be gathered together;' ... Do you see how they were all created by a word? Let us notice instead what it says in the case of the creation of human beings. 'God formed the human being.' Do you see how, by the considerateness shown in the words he uses on account of our limitations, it teaches us both the manner of the creation and the difference, and all but shows us (to speak in human fashion) man being shaped by God's hands?30

He wrestles with apparent tautology in the opening words of Is 6, "I saw the Lord seated on a throne raised up / on high",31 with the "but" in Gn 2.20,32 and the alterations made to the names of Abram and Sarai (which, with his linguistic deficiencies, he gets wrong).33 He repeatedly accounts for this textual akribeia on the grounds that "Sacred Scripture says nothing idly or by chance; every single sound and syllable has a treasure contained in it."34 "Nothing idly or by chance" could well be Chrysostom's motto as a commentator, occurring as it does 39 times in the Gn homilies alone (less frequently in the Psalms series, where it is the figurative character of the text and not its precision that is of interest to him. Even Antiochene precision, however, must yield to ignorance; and not infrequently in his commentary on the patriarchal narratives in particular Chrysostom's anxiety to rationalise conflicting details of different sources (of which, of course, he is unaware) or conflicting motivation leads him either to throw up his hands or take refuge in divine transcendence - as, for instance, in the case of Lot's daughters' subterfuge with their drunken father, where the moral Chrysostom admits he is at a loss, for all his good will:

"Let us listen, dearly beloved, with caution and great fear to the contents of the divine scriptures: there is nothing written there idly and to no purpose; instead, everything is said carefully and to our advantage, even if we don't understand parts of it. You see, we can't understand everything precisely: on the contrary, even if we try to assign causes for some things to the extent possible to us, yet it still holds within it some treasure that is hidden and difficult to interpret."35

Likewise his love of finding significance in names is often defeated by his ignorance of the original language.
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With this theology and his Antiochene formation he remains committed to the literal sense of the text and ventures further only rarely and reluctantly. His hermeneutical principles are firm: Scripture provides its own interpretation ("Let us follow the kanon of Scripture", he says often), and the Spirit himself guides the interpreter. "It is better to be grateful and accept what is said, and not to reach beyond the limits of our own nature by meddling in matters beyond us", he says when admitting some uncertainty about the precise meaning of "firmament" in Gn 1.36 Particularly in the more figurative Psalms, and with the encouragement of the New Testament, he can admit the difference between the obvious sense, which sometimes has to be passed over, and the literal sense, which is to be prized and never lost: "No point in stopping at the level of the words themselves, but move beyond them to the sense", he says of Ps 113.5.37 He can, also with Scripture’s encouragement, admit a spiritual, even typological, meaning of rare passages; what he cannot permit himself is an allegorical interpretation because this involves rejection of the literal sense and therefore parts company with the verifiable element of the Word of God out of preference for the word of man.38 In all 67 homilies on Genesis only twice does he proceed, after exhausting the literal sense of passages, to acknowledge a further level of meaning: in Homily 47 he concludes his lengthy commentary on the sacrifice of Isaac with the words, "Now, all this happened as a type of the Cross", hastening at once to quote John, Matthew and Paul in support. God forbid the literal sense be ever undermined, he says of Ps 147,40 because the letter has been given us by God in his synkatabasis.

Such was Chrysostom’s equipment for the task of Old Testament commentary and exegesis. On the positive side, a profound theology of the inspired Word, leading to an equally profound esteem for the literal sense of the text; on the negative side, ignorance of languages and other critical skills available to modern commentators, a moral bent arising perhaps out of his pastoral role, and a consequent view of Scripture’s purpose as moral and hagiographical.

Chrysostom’s Old Testament text

Thus prepared he came to the text of the Old Testament in preaching to his congregations. It was not a Hebrew text, as we have seen and as we would expect of a preacher. The form of Greek text available to him at Antioch was apparently the revision by the priest Lucian of Origen’s reconstruction of the Septuagint. It differed in details from modern reconstructions of the Septuagint like Rahlf's and from the text of our contemporary Hebrew Bibles like Kittel’s, and so in translating it I have thought it best to take it on its own merits, noting where significant the degree of departure from so-called received texts. For instance, at Gn 37.27-28 his text does not incorporate the divergent tradition that has Midianites, not the Ishmaelites, withdrawing Joseph from the pit and selling him; yet he does not acknowledge any difficulty when he comes to Reuben’s surprise at the loss in v.30, and in concluding Homily 61 that he refers to the Midianites, not the Ishmaelites. His occasional quotations of Daniel are from Theodotion’s version.41 The independence of Chrysostom’s version could also be combined with faulty copying: when the Hebrew and Septuagint of Gn 15.15 present the Lord’s words to Abraham thus, "'As for yourself, you shall go to your fathers in peace, you shall be buried in a good old age,' " Chrysostom has no record of peace, which would have been grist to his moral mill, and for tapheis, "buried," reads trapheis "supported".42 His biographer, Dom Baur, warns us against presuming he is reading exactly from his written text: "The exact determination of the text was made difficult because of the fact that Chrysostom, as well as other ecclesiastical writers of older and newer times, often quoted Scripture texts freely and diversely, from memory, and occasionally joined similar quotations, so that it is very difficult to say how his...
actual text read."43 The warning is realised in Chrysostom's reference to his Old Testament texts (and with them in cross-references to the New Testament): his quotation of a verse can take different forms in successive homilies or even within the same homily 44 - and, great rationaliser that he is, he can even supply an interpretation for each different form! In his treatment of Sarai's offer of Hagar to Abram in Gn 16.3 he twists the simple statement of Hebrew and LXX that Abram had lived ten years in Canaan to read, "After ten years of living with her husband Abram in Canaan," and then in his perversely sexist way adds the comment, "It was not without purpose that even the time was conveyed to us, but for us to be in a position to know for how many years the good man showed his patience in nobly bearing his childlessness, proving superior to all passion and giving evidence of great self-control," so that the passage becomes an encomium of Abram rather than Sarai, whom he describes as as "the weaker vessel". But immediately afterwards he reverts to the other form of the text and justifies it with the explanation, "so that you might know, dearly beloved, for how many years the Lord had postponed putting his promise into effect without the good man being disturbed in mind."45 He is prepared to offer, apparently from memory, a paraphrase, précis or conflation of scriptural texts at any time. The frequency of error in this process of quotation and recall suggests the manner of an enthusiastic preacher, less that of a careful composer of sermons never delivered - whatever be the truth of the provenance of our present text of his homilies.

Chrysostom as exegete/ commentator

As we have seen, Chrysostom did not bring with him to the task of commentary, let alone exegesis, developed skills of language or critical faculty; and he has been roundly criticised by moderns for his inadequacies. "He was by far the best-known representative of Antiochene principles in the West," says Beryl Smalley, "and, at the same time, the author who could teach his readers least about Antiochene exegesis."46 Bardy classes him as primarily a preacher, commenting on a large number of books of the Bible without ever trying to define his rules of interpretation.47 In fact, the classic studies of Antiochene exegesis, like those of Vaccari 48 and J.N.D. Kelly,49 tend to fasten on interpretation and neglect other aspects of exegesis. We have seen Chrysostom faithful to the hermeneutics of his school; his insistence on akribeia in that regard would have made a better exegete of him in other respects if he had had the skills to match his interest in detail - as Beryl Smalley admits, "Antiochene principles favoured the development of biblical scholarship."50 As it is, the thoroughness and depth of textual exegesis in his Old Testament commentaries is inconsistent, and his homilies can be classed as 'exegetical' only to a degree. The shorter series, on Hannah and David and Saul, are thematic and attempt no detailed textual study. Of the other series, only the Genesis homilies develop a sequential momentum. The long Psalms series reveals a concentration on figurative language, sometimes without much conviction: the 18 homilies beginning with Ps 119 (LXX numbering) come in for commentary that can only be described as pedestrian, desultory, mechanical, routine.51 Only rarely, when a particular psalm engages his interest, does Chrysostom wrestle with an item of language, such as the opening of that Ps 45 44 which provides him (and other patristic writers) with the occasion of a statement of hermeneutical principles: he insists on a translation, "My heart belches with good news", so as to suggest the unrehearsed nature of divine inspiration.52 On v.9 of Ps 112, "He has dispersed his goods among the poor " he comments: See how the inspired writer makes the best use of language. I mean, he doesn't say 'gave' or 'distributed' but 'dispersed', which both reveals the generosity of the provider and names the substance being passed out."53 Likewise in the short series on Isaiah's vision in ch.6, he is more concerned with the significance of the vision for biblical inspiration; only some few textual details come in for comment, such as that
pleonasm in "I saw the Lord sitting on a throne raised up high" and the position of the wings of the seraphim, on which he comments, "I did not mean to imply that they have feet and faces (for they are incorporeal, as is the divinity itself), but was only hoping speech could in this way convey that in complete humility these creatures serve the Lord in fear and reverence."54

The *Genesis* commentary is therefore relatively painstaking: when Chrysostom interrupts the series after Homily 32 to allow for Easter ceremonies, he has completed only twelve chapters of his text, and towards the end of the series of 67 he has to gallop to bring things up to an eventual conclusion. As an Antiochene he wants to be precise, as a pastor he wants to be definite, and yet his limitations get in the way. Diversity of sources he knows nothing of. When he detects in 12.1-5 the inconsistency that arises from the merging of two strands, he is at a loss to account for it: "'He set out,' the text says, 'to travel to the land of Canaan.' How did he come to know that the destination of his travelling would be the land of the Canaanites whereas the effect of the command was 'Onwards to the land I will show you'? Perhaps God revealed to him this as well."55 He takes seriously the difficulty he presumes his listeners find in tracing the provenance of a wife for Cain if Scripture thus far has made no mention of females.56 He can say smugly to his audience, "The names Adam imposed on the animals remain up to the present time."57 He is impatient with the Septuagint's linguistic nicety in preferring *Zoe* to *Eva* at 3.20, and while quoting the former he slips at once into the traditional name without explaining the distinction.58 Such niceties, evidently, are not relevant to his purpose; to quote Julian of Eclanum again, he proceeds "rather by exhortation than by exposition" - or, perhaps more accurately, his exposition is conducted only to the depth that would serve exhortation. Definite though he likes to be as a pastor, he very occasionally can be tentative in his explanation, as with *gigantes* of 6.4,59 and even allow his congregation to opt for one of a range of interpretations, as at 4.7.60 In Homily 26, to do with the raven's flight from the ark, he can even urge them to turn exegetes themselves: "'It flew off,' the text goes on, 'but did not come back before the water was dried up from the earth.' (Gn 8.7) Sacred Scripture added the word 'before' (*heōs*), not because it did come back later but because this is a peculiarity of Sacred Scripture. You would often come across this feature, and we could locate many such examples and bring them to your attention; lest, however, you learn everything from us and become slack in your interest, we will leave it to you to study Scripture and discover where it employs these peculiar usages."61 But literalist that he is, he can't bear leaving the bird's fate in the balance, and proceeds to suggest various possibilities.

The moral character of Chrysostom's commentary

Chrysostom concludes his two homilies on the obscurity of the Old Testament by admitting, "We interpret the Scriptures, not merely to understand the Scriptures, but also with the purpose of correcting our behaviour; if this doesn't happen, then we read to no purpose and explain to no purpose."62 Hence it is not surprising to find his commentary on Old Testament books centring on the principal characters as moral figures worthy of the emulation of his audience. The five sermons on Hannah, he says, are to promote "piety of spirit" 63 and in the homilies on David and Saul "my purpose has been not only to praise David but also that we might emulate him ... Because if you want to talk about a king, there is a king in these stories; if it's about soldiers, or family matters, or public affairs, you will see a great abundance of these examples in the Scriptures. Examples of this kind are of great benefit."64 Partly because of the homiletic character and occasion of the biblical commentaries, the dogmatic force of the text can yield to its moral content; each homily concludes with a lengthy parenesis highlighting the moral application of the personage or incident...
involved. Thus, for Chrysostom the Fall is less significant as a crisis in human history than as an instance, if the grossest, of that recurring sin, *rhathumia*, "indifference, carelessness, sloth"; the reporting of the Fall in the text is primarily didactic in his view. Despite the New Testament and his beloved Paul, Adam is of less moment than Eve or Cain - both examplars, the one of that same *rhathumia*, the other of unprovoked malice. Similarly, Noah becomes a dominant figure in the *Genesis* series, occupying the stage for nine homilies for his solitary stand against the tide of evil under the form of *rhathumia*. Abraham, too, is seen not so much for his place in *Heilsgeschichte* as for his moral significance. Chrysostom is at pains to show that his advice to Sarah on their arrival in Egypt in ch.12 was quite impeccable: "Consider, I ask you, the extent of the panic the good man's mind had probably fallen into when he urged this course on his wife. I mean, you know perfectly well how there is nothing more depressing for husbands than having their wife fall under suspicion of this kind. Yet the good man shows all anxiety and takes every step to ensure the adultery is put into effect. Don't, however, dearly beloved, rashly condemn the good man; rather, from this gain a particular insight into his great sagacity and courage - yes, his courage in nobly withstanding and overcoming turmoil of mind to the extent of planning such a stratagem." Likewise, for his pressing hospitality at the arrival of his three guests in ch.18 Abraham is a model of that correlative virtue, *prothumia*, "enthusiasm". As F. Asensio has pointed out, for Chrysostom the Christian life can be reduced to a dialectic between a series of "binomials", *rhathumia*/*prothumia*, truth/error and the devil's deception, human reasoning/divine transcendence.

As a moral commentator Chrysostom had considerable gifts of rhetoric to move his congregation by exploiting the emotive force of a scene or a character's dilemma, as in the case of Abraham's quandary over the sacrifice of Isaac, or the indictment of Cain for his invitation to Abel to accompany him into the open country:

"O Cain, what are you doing? Don't you know whom you are talking to? Don't you understand that this conversation is taking place with your brother? Don't you realise that he was born of the same mother as you? Have you no notion of the foulness of your scheme? Have you no fear of the judge who is proof against deception? Don't you shudder at the realisation of your temerity? Why is it, after all, that you are enticing your brother out into the open country and leading him out of his father's paternal arms? Why are you depriving him of his father's assistance? ... What is this madness? What is this fury? ..."

**Chrysostom's sexism**

A word about the sexist character of Chrysostom's Old Testament commentaries, if only for the jarring note it sounds for today's readers and the problem it poses for the translator. We are not surprised to find him using only the masculine of his congregation in general or of the particular examples he takes. Today's congregations, however, would be less content to have a preacher talk about the wonderful people of sacred history and refer only to men, as Chrysostom almost invariably does (the defence of Tamar in Homily 62 on *Gn* is an exception partly explained by the opportunity to make an unfavourable comparison of Judaism with Christianity); in Homily 21 he even recommends them to name their children generally after those holy *andres*. Even when his text reminds him that it is the human being, *anthrōpos*, that is in question - as in the story of its creation - he thinks in terms of the male, so that for him (despite the text) *anthrōpos* and *gynē* become correlatives; likewise...
in Homily 38 in talking of relations between Abraham and Sarah and Jacob and Rachel he can apply these same correlatives to husbands and wives. In that same homily his reference to Sarah as "the weaker vessel" moves his editor De Montfaucon to defend him thus: "In the Rule of Pachomius, too, women are called "frailer vessels". But in Livy and other historians they are called 'baggage' (impedimenta )." His commentary on the Fall in Homily 17 further leads him to a somewhat unbalanced explanation of male superiority on the basis of greater female guilt. Again, one asks whether it was the lifestyle of Antioch at the time or Chrysostom's own prejudices that leads him often to lecture the ladies on extravagance and neglect of the poor, while the men are generally the figures of virtue (as in the instance of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath cited in Homily 42). Doubtless he is not alone amongst the Fathers with this usage and these attitudes, but they do prove a particular reminder of the distance between his time and our own.

Chrysostom's significance as commentator on the Old Testament

Perhaps it is that distance between his time and our own that throws greater accent on Chrysostom's limitations as a commentator on the Old Testament. His deficiencies by comparison with better equipped modern commentators are clear; skills we have been able to develop with the passage of time he lacks. But he has strengths as well to balance those limitations, strengths that stand even by comparison with moderns. To the remote material of the Old Testament, to which he has obviously and understandably less affinity than to Gospels or his beloved Paul, he brings a profound theology of the inspired Word arising from the paradigm of that other, historical Incarnation. With that comes an exalted notion of his role as scriptural commentator, also inspired (as is his attentive congregation), on the analogy (developed in the Isaiah homilies) of the navigator trimming his canvas to the breath of the Spirit with Christ as pilot. Typical of the Eastern Fathers he communicates to his listeners great reverence for the Scriptures; he says to them, again in those Isaiah homilies, "Be sure to give all your attention; for the reading of the Scriptures is an opening of the heavens." Today's congregations would hardly be likely to come daily, as Chrysostom's did, for lengthy homilies on the Old Testament.

Of course, for all his insistence on the inspiration of his text he hardly ever analyses that charism, and his moral purpose as a preacher dissuades him from subjecting that text to in-depth exegesis; he would still have suffered from the handicap of ignorance of Hebrew and other tools of biblical criticism. What he did bring to the task, even if an inherited gift, was his respect for the literal sense of the text and an eye for detail, itself arising from his theology that saw in the text God's gracious considerateness, synkatabasis, for the human condition. "The mouths of the inspired authors are the mouth of God," he says again in the Isaiah homilies; "such a mouth would say nothing idle. Accordingly, let there be nothing idle in our attention. After all, men digging in quarries let no fragment however small go unnoticed, but on striking a vein of gold they examine every single one closely. How much more should we act like this with the Scriptures? Happily, it is not surprising that with this attitude Chrysostom struck gold frequently enough to make his Old Testament commentaries worth our attention today.
Notes


4. J. Quasten (*Patrology* III, Westminster Md; 1960, 436) contests the authenticity of that commentary on *Is. 1.1 - 8.10* that Geerard and Dumontier seem to presume.

5. For the range of possibilities, see Introd. to Vol. I of my trans. of Chrysostom's Homilies on *Genesis*, FOTC 74, Washington DC, 1986.


7. II (178).


9. Homily on *Ps* XLIV (PG 55, 195).

10. Ibid. (187).


13. PG 55,262.


15. Homilies 24 and 25.

16. PG 53,234.


18. PL 21,960.


22. PG 56,121.


26. AAS 35 (1943), 316.

27. PG 53,205.

Homily 13 on Gn (PG 53,106).

Homily 15 on Gn (PG 53,119).

Homilies 39 & 40 on Gn.

Homily 18 on Gn (PG 53,154).

Homily 44 on Gn (PG 54,410-11).

PG 53,42.

PG 55,302.

Cf. A. Vaccari, "La theôria nella scuola esegetica di Antiochia", Biblica 1 (1920), 12: "La essenziale differenza fra teoria e allegoria consiste in ciò, che l'allegoria esclude di sua natura il senso letterale."

PG 54,432. This is the example he quotes in his commentary on Ps 47 to justify typology there (PG 55,209). The other Gn example is the birth of Tamar's sons in Homily 62 (PG 54,535) - though he does remark briefly of Melchizedek, with support from Hebrews, "He was to prove a type of Christ" (Homily 35; PG 53,328).

PG 55,483.

Homilies 22 & 32 on Gn.

Homily 37 (PG 53,345).


Gn 13.8,9 in Homily 33; Gn 6.5 in Homilies 22 & 24; Gn 7.1-5 in Homilies 24 & 25.

Homily 38 (PG 53,352-53).


"Interpretation chez les Pères,," SDB IV (Paris, 1949), 581.

N. 38 above.


PG 55,338-407.

PG 55,183.

PG 55,298.

PG 56,102.

Homily 31 (PG 53,290).

Homily 20 (PG 53,168).
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57 Homily 14 (PG 53,117).
59 Homily 22 (PG 53,191).
60 Homily 19 (PG 53,159).
61 PG 53,234.
62 PG 56,186.
63 Sermon 3 (PG 54,653).
64 Homily 1 (PG 54,686).
65 Homilies on Gn 21-29.
66 Homily 32 (PG 53,298).
67 Homily 41 (PG 53,281).
68 'El Crisóstomo y su visión de la escritura en la exposición homilética del Génesis,' Estudios Bíblicos 32 (1973), 223-55, 329-56.
69 Homily 47 on Gn .
70 Homily 19 (PG 53,159).
71 PG 53,179.
72 Homilies 8 & 10 on Gn .
73 PG 53,352.
74 PG 53,350.
75 PG 54,393.
76 Homily 4 (PG 56,121).
77 Homily 2 (PG 56,109).
78 Homily 2 (PG 56,110).