

Hagit Amirav:

Rhetoric and Tradition: John Chrysostom on Noah and the Flood

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John Chrysostom saw himself first and foremost as a pedagogue. Did he succeed in his ambitions to be the teacher of his flock? If so, by way of what technique? These are the principal questions that Hagit Amirav sets out to discuss in the book under review, a slightly revised version of her DPhil thesis, presented at Oxford University in 2001.

The book is divided into two parts, followed by a concluding “Epilogue” (chapter X, pp. 233-235). The first of the two main parts (chapters I-V) serves to delineate the background of Amirav’s investigation, whereas the second part (chapters VI-IX) contains what is her own contribution to Chrysostomean studies, that is, an analysis of the three homilies XXII, XXIII, and XXIV on Genesis. The book contains a select bibliography and three indexes (of sources, of modern authors, and of subjects and themes).

In chapter I (“Introduction”, pp. 3-8), Amirav declares her intentions to place John Chrysostom in the context of early Christian exegesis. The aim of her study is to disprove the often-proffered thesis that Chrysostom’s homilies were mainly spontaneous creations of the moment. In contrast, Amirav examines the homilies in the wider context of writings by his colleagues in Antioch and his rivals in Alexandria. While recognizing the impact of classical literature on early Christian writers, Amirav’s focus is on highlighting the sermons and commentaries themselves, and showing that biblical interpretation is of key importance in this context.

Chapter IIA (“John Chrysostom and his Time: Biography and Hagiography”, pp. 9-22), begins with a – perhaps unnecessarily lengthy – synopsis of Chrysostom’s biography. Unfortunately, the biography ignores or pays little attention to certain crucial factors, such as Chrysostom’s education and the possible impact on him of pagan teachers. Swedish classicists will miss a reference to Cajus Fabricius’ detailed study of Chrysostom’s links to the classicist movement of his time (C. Fabricius, *Zu den Jugendschriften des Johannes Chrysostomos: Untersuchungen zum Klassizismus des vierten Jahrhunderts*, Lund: Gleerup, 1962). It is true that Amirav is primarily concerned with other aspects of Chrysostom’s biography, but paying proper attention to these matters as well would have saved her from this kind of criticism.

On the other hand, the second part of the chapter, IIB (“Chrysostom and Preaching: An Overview of the Scholarly Debate”, pp. 22-31), proves to be all the more interesting. Chrysostom’s urban background and the urban setting for his preaching are particularly emphasized, quite rightly in this reviewer’s opinion. As so often in her highly readable book, Amirav’s reasoning is sound and methodical.

Contrary to many previous commentators on Chrysostom, Amirav is not interested in a thorough study of Chrysostom’s interplay with his audience. Instead, she sets out to prove that the sermons are first and foremost determined by the biblical text, as well as by the teaching methods adopted by the exegetical tradition.

Chapter III (“Ancient Exegesis as Scholarship”, pp. 33-44) is divided into two parts. The first part (“Mentors, Colleagues and Adversaries: the Antiochene and Alexandrian Exegetical Methods”, pp. 33-38) deals with the exegetical methods of the two rival schools, that is, the Antiochene, to which Chrysostom adhered, and the Alexandrian. This is a skilfully structured, if perhaps somewhat unoriginal, historical exposé. The second part of the chapter (“Ancient Critics and Defenders of Allegory”, pp. 38-44) discusses the use of allegory in interpreting the Scriptures as well as the critics and defenders, respectively, of this method. Interestingly enough to a classical philologist, it becomes apparent that the Christian debate on allegory was very similar to the century-long debate among pagan thinkers for or against allegorical readings of Homer. In this context, as well as in the debate on images portraying the holy, it seems that Christian debaters had adopted the arguments of the pagans.

In chapter IV (“The texts”, pp. 45-62), Amirav first surveys the material at hand, namely Chrysostom’s impressively large literary production in general, and the homilies on Genesis in particular. She skilfully addresses the difficult question of how often these homilies were actually delivered. The concluding part of the chapter offers an overview of the exegesis of Genesis by Chrysostom’s contemporaries in its Septuagint version. This leads into a comparison with Chrysostom’s approach to the text.

Chapter V (“Chrysostom’s Bible”, pp. 63-76) treats the important question of which version of the biblical text Chrysostom actually read. Amirav’s description is thorough without being overly so, not least as regards the variant readings. She rightly points out the importance of distinguishing between those deviations from the standard text that were probably caused by Chrysostom’s quoting from memory, and those that may well have been caused by his dependence on a divergent manuscript tradition.

Whereas Part One offers an introduction to Chrysostom and his contemporaries, Part Two (chapters VI-X) addresses the main issue of the book, that is, analysis of the Chrysostomean homilies on Genesis. This analysis, by now eagerly awaited, is particularly revealing of the strength of Amirav’s analytical reasoning.

Chapters VI-VIII are all organized in the same way: first, Amirav gives a description of the homily (while carefully avoiding an overly mechanical rhetorical analysis); there then follows a paraphrase of the text (the value of which is perhaps not self-evident), and finally a discussion of the contents.

In chapter VI (“Homily XXII (PG 53.183-196)”, pp. 79-158), Amirav describes and analyses the homily where Chrysostom treats Gen. 6.1-7. According to Amirav, this homily deals primarily with the origins of sin, and she discusses certain central themes as they are treated by Chrysostom and the Antiochenes as opposed to the Alexandrians. An example is the definition of the “sons of God” (Gen. 6.2), whom Chrysostom and the Antiochenes categorized as descendants of Seth, and not as angels, as the Alexandrians would have it. Other examples are: spirit vs. flesh; the nature of the Giants; and the free will of Man. If this accurate and thorough investigation has any flaws, it is perhaps a certain lack of perspective; the reader would have benefited from a more transparent ordering of the themes discussed. The central theme, here as well as in the other two homilies, is (at least in this reader’s opinion) the free will of Man, but this is not made sufficiently clear by Amirav.

Chapter VII (“Homily XXIII (PG 53.196-206)”, pp. 159-187) deals with the homily in which Chrysostom continued his exegesis on Genesis, praising the righteousness of one particular individual, Noah (Gen. 6.8-9). This homily clearly demonstrates the importance of the concept of free will for the understanding of Chrysostom’s thought: it was of his own free will that Noah was decent and upstanding, and of their own free will that his contemporaries were not. They, therefore, were justly punished with the flood, while Noah was saved. Amirav rightly points out the Stoic influence on the homily as regards the concept of virtue and its definition.

Chapter VIII (“Homily XXIV (PG 53.206-218”, pp. 189-220), finally, deals with the theme of the prelude to the Flood and the building of the Ark (Gen. 6.10-7.5). This homily offers another example of how Chrysostom effectively drives home his theses by repeating ones that have been expounded in the previous homilies. As Amirav points out, Noah’s upright character (and not his noble ancestry) is the reason for Chrysostom’s dwelling on his genealogy. Noah’s extreme age at the time of the flood (500 years) and the low ages of his sons are yet another indication of his virtue: since Noah was so old when he begot his children, he must have lived in celibacy for an impressively long time, in contrast, so Chrysostom argues, to his contemporaries who displayed no restraint at all. Amirav also shows how typological interpretation is exemplified in this homily: Noah is presented as the prototype of Christ, Abel as a model of St. Paul.

In chapter IX (“Conclusion: The Rhetorical Application of Scripture”, pp. 221-232) Amirav sums up the findings of her thesis regarding the efficacy of Chrysostom’s rhetoric. She argues, quite rightly, that the opposition between the homiletic, popular speaker, and the exegete or commentator should not be exaggerated. In fact, the two groups under discussion had a great deal in common. Both saw themselves as pedagogues; both strove to educate and convert their audiences, orally or in writing, on the basis of the Scriptures; both adhered to certain exegetical traditions. Chrysostom thus operated within a tradition of Christian homilists and exegetes. In Amirav’s opinion, he was influenced by his Christian predecessors and colleagues just as much as – if not more than – by pagan scholars, and this was similarly the case as regards his use of rhetorical devices. Thus, while underlining the importance of rhetoric for the propagation of Christian faith and drawing attention to Chrysostom’s influence on Christian rhetorical practice, Amirav at the same time issues a warning not to regard patristic homiletic as an offspring of classical rhetoric only; it is necessary to consider the influence of specifically Christian genres, such as sermons and Bible commentaries.

Amirav also points out well the different outlooks of the Antiochene and the Alexandrian exegesis. For the former, the message of the Scriptures was identified with the Christian message, and the audience was urged to follow this message; this was important for the latter, too, but their exegesis was more polemical in its tone.

Chapter X (“Epilogue: Biblical Exegesis in its Historical Dimension”, pp. 233-235) forms a somewhat surprising, but nevertheless very interesting, conclusion to the book. Here, Amirav the author introduces herself to the reader and highlights some personal questions that arose during the process of writing this book. The parallels drawn by Amirav between the ancient debates, as reflected in Chrysostom, and the on-going debate in today’s Israel are intriguing. Amirav’s reflections on the matter are thought-provoking to a bystander such as this reviewer, who, like Amirav herself, is not primarily a patristic scholar. Although it is not absolutely relevant to the context of the analysis of the homilies itself, this epilogue is a proof as good as any of Amirav’s clear and innovative thinking.

Besides being well structured, logical in its thought processes, and characterized by intellectual stringency, the study is also well executed on the formal level. Typographical errors are few, and none of the likewise very few mistakes in Greek impedes understanding of the text.

A more serious flaw of the study, however – despite Amirav’s primary focus on Christian writers – is the fact, as any non-theologian reader would remark, that there are only very few references to pagan authors: for instance, in chapter IIIB, dealing with allegory, the reader is referred to secondary literature only. Finally, it is deplorable that Amirav virtually ignores scholarly literature published in languages other than English and French. Italian and Spanish titles are totally absent from her ten-page list of “Secondary Literature” (pp. 244-254); and,

apart from manuscript catalogues, congress reports, and other compilations, the bibliography includes at most three titles in German. All the rest are in French or English, plus a few in Latin and one in Dutch.

But these are minor objections that do not overshadow the fact that Amirav has succeeded in her ambition to demonstrate the importance of rhetoric in the development of the homiletic tradition, and so for the spread of Christianity. *Rhetoric and Tradition: John Chrysostom on Noah and the Flood* is a highly enjoyable book that should be of interest to all students of rhetoric and its applications, even though the field (early Church fathers) may perhaps be new to some of them.

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