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## Models of Virtue: Patriarchs and Prophets in the Sermons of John Chrysostom

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### Abstract

John Chrysostom utilized the major figures of the Jewish Bible in his homilies and discourses as part of an effort to articulate his particular vision of Christian virtue and form his congregation in accordance with the defined categories of that virtue. The Antiochene preacher based his carefully crafted image of Israelite saints who excelled as proto-Christians on his classical foundation of rhetorical style. The paper will present a brief overview of aspects of that virtue which Chrysostom associated with a myriad of exemplars from the Old Testament.

### Keywords:

John Chrysostom, homilies, Old Testament, virtue, rhetoric

The vast majority of the texts attributed to John Chrysostom come from the time when he served as a presbyter in the church of Antioch (387-398 CE). Chrysostom's homilies and theological writings, like those of other church fathers, were both exegetical and catechetical in nature. As a student of scripture who devoted years of his life to the study and memorization of the biblical texts, John placed the personages of the Jewish Bible

prominently in his exegetical discourses. References to scriptural figures such as Abraham, Moses, Elias, and Job populate his writings and sermons and help illuminate his Christian pastoral and theological outlook as well as his attitude toward the Judaism of his day. For Chrysostom, the assembly of the great men and women of the Jewish scriptural text also served as a didactic tool with which he could instruct the catechumenate and baptized faithful in the practice of Christian virtue.

We must recognize that, while Chrysostom often used language that seems harsh by contemporary standards when speaking about Jews and Judaism, he was no Marcion.<sup>1</sup> He fully embraced the Jewish Bible as his own and freely and liberally drew upon the text to address topics such as philanthropy, marriage, and the priesthood. The great exemplars of the Old Testament were *his* exemplars. Noah, Abraham, Moses, and the rest were all preeminent models of virtue whom he saw as worthy of emulation by his flock. In short, for Chrysostom, these exemplars were thoroughly Christian Israelite Saints whom he employed whenever and wherever he saw fit.

In this paper I will examine the ways in which John Chrysostom utilized the major figures of the Jewish Bible in his homilies and discourses as part of an effort to articulate his particular vision of Christian virtue and form his congregation in accordance with the defined categories of that virtue. As part of this discussion, I will examine the classical foundation of Chrysostom's rhetorical style upon which the Antiochene preacher based his carefully crafted image of Israelite saints who excelled as proto-Christians. I will then present a brief overview of aspects of that virtue which Chrysostom associated with a myriad of exemplars from the Old Testament.

## 1. Chrysostom's Rhetorical Style

Chrysostom extolled exemplars (moral and otherwise) as part and parcel of his rhetorical style. The Old Testament most certainly presented this great Antiochene exegete with ample material with which to satisfy the re-

<sup>1</sup> Regarding Chrysostom's use of the invective, *psogos*, see Robert L. Wilken, *John Chrysostom and the Jews: Rhetoric and Reality in the Late Fourth Century* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1983), pp. 112-116.

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quirements of his oratory. John Chrysostom received a classical education as a young man and by all accounts excelled in that education.<sup>2</sup> Although John later became a Christian, he did not leave this education behind. John used the philosophical and rhetorical methods he learned from his teacher Libanius, the preeminent rethor of his day, to help mold his congregation into his conception of a faithful Christian community. These methods included Stoic and sophistic usages which provided the famous Antiochene preacher with a toolbox of rhetorical devices with which he could present a thoroughly Jewish text to his Hellenistic audience.

Greek philosophical schools, most notably the Stoics and Sophists, were engaged in a similar program of formation and Christians, such as John, borrowed from their pedagogical tradition. The Stoics were especially concerned with forming virtuous men. John and other Christians appropriated their methods as they attempted to define their own particular Christian virtue. One noteworthy Stoic technique was to present a virtuous exemplar to be imitated by members of their philosophical school. Chrysostom projected Stoic attributes onto the figures of Noah, Abraham, Moses, and others in an effort to communicate to his flock the virtue he saw in these scriptural personages and which he desired his congregation to emulate. The Antiochenes, and especially Chrysostom, were less concerned about exploring the mystical ascent of the figure from the sensual world to the divine than they were about communicating a practical, virtuous way of life to their flocks.<sup>3</sup>

One of the features of the Second Sophistic movement was the use of figures from antiquity to convey a point. Contemporaneous figures were deemed to be both banal and boring. Even when addressing contemporaneous themes, the sophistic orators did so through the use of historical figures, taking the theme and “surrounding it with the glamor

<sup>2</sup> Chrysostomus Baur, *John Chrysostom and His Time*, trans. M. Gonzaga, 4 vols. (Vaduz, Germany: Buechervertriebsanstalt, 1958), 1:22ff.

<sup>3</sup> To be fair, Chrysostom makes a similar reference noting that Abraham was “the just man [who] kept his yearning on spiritual things after he had been promised visible goods.” Chrysostom, however, far from making a deep allegorical association is simply anticipating the words of Paul while at the same time providing the basis of a lesson on wealth for his congregation. *Catecheses ad illuminandos* 1–8, SC 50.8. John Chrysostom, *Baptismal instructions*, ed. Johannes Quasten and Walter Burghardt, trans. Paul W. Harkins, vol. 31, *Ancient Christian Writers* (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1963), p. 123.

of antiquity.”<sup>4</sup> Quite naturally, the great exemplars of the Old Testament provided ample glamor to accommodate this aspect of sophistic oratory. Indeed, Chrysostom frequently applied Abraham, Moses, Noah, Job, and other figures of the Old Testament to a host of contemporaneous situations which his flock encountered - from parenting to philanthropy - in an effort to support his position. Chrysostom took literally the need to “surround” a topic with the “glamour of antiquity” often referencing multiple Old Testament figures together in succession in order to prove his point. For example, Chrysostom instructed his flock to emulate the virtue of the great Old Testament saints who achieved virtue without the benefit of a teacher. John told his flock that such virtue “is possible, even very easy, if we are willing: and this they show, who first duly performed these things, as for instance, Noah, Abraham, Melchizedeck, Job, and all the men like them. To them it is needful to look every day.”<sup>5</sup> It was not simply one figure of the Old Testament or another but the multitude of them that bore witness to the lesson of virtue he taught.

In classical thought, virtue was not an abstract concept but was rather an identifiable and quantifiable human characteristic which was defined by discrete categories. The Christian theological or Pauline virtues expanded upon the classical categories without displacing them. Sophistic methods were used by pre-Christian orators to transform their students through the use of an exemplary model that proved that such virtue was indeed attainable. These orators offered an encomium of praise to great heroes, the goal of which was to urge the listener to emulate the exemplar’s virtue. The Jewish Bible presented an abundance of material well suited to the classical categories of virtue and the communication of this virtue through an encomium. Where needed, however, Chrysostom massaged the scriptural descriptions of the major personages of the Old Testament - exaggerating positive qualities, minimizing weaknesses, and filling in features that may have been absent from the narrative - in order to paint a complete picture of the Israelite saints as both true, archetypal models of virtue and Christianized figures worthy of emulation.<sup>6</sup> This picture of exemplars such as Moses

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Edward Ameringer, *The Stylistic Influence of the Second Sophistic on the Panegyric Sermons of St. John Chrysostom: A Study in Greek Rhetoric* (Washington: Catholic University of America, 1921), p. 13.

<sup>5</sup> *In Matthaeum* 64, PG 58.616 (NPNF1 10.378).

<sup>6</sup> Chrysostom did not gloss over the weaknesses of his Israelite heroes. Indeed, when a teaching opportunity presented itself he used the exemplars’ failings as a way to



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and Job that appeared on the canvas of Chrysostom's homilies were that of heroes who possessed virtuous bodies and souls, overcame obstacles, and emerged victorious to earn the crowns of glory they richly deserved.

## 2. Models of Virtue

The goal of Chrysostom's rhetoric and scriptural exegesis was to transform his congregation from Roman citizens into Christians. Christ, in the eyes of the church, had a paradigmatic function as the "New Adam" whose mission was to restore the once fallen image [εἰκόνα] of humanity. The high Christology defined in Nicaea and Constantinople, and to which Chrysostom subscribed, however, made living a "Christ-like" life problematic for the members of his flock - many of whom were recent converts to the Church. For Chrysostom, the saints of scripture offered a more immediate means of communicating what a Christ-like life was really like since they were unencumbered by the divine nature.<sup>7</sup>

The Old Testament provided a variety of personages that could and did provide such a function for Chrysostom. Chrysostom utilized the fullness of the encomiastic style to describe the bodily and spiritual virtue of his Israelite saints and their embodiment of classical and Pauline virtue. Unlike Paul, however, the principal figures of the Old Testament had achieved a Christ-like life *before* Christ arrived. Chrysostom asks, "What priest did Abraham have at his disposal? Tell me. Which teachers? What lesson? What encouragement, what advice? There were no written documents, no law, nor prophets, nor anything like it."<sup>8</sup> Indeed, in his description of Job's

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illustrate to his flock that even great men and women can fail. For example, John mentions that, "Elias was wonderful, but on one occasion he stood convicted of faint-heartedness; and Moses was great, but he also fled under the influence of the same passion." *In epistulam II ad Corinthios 26 (NPNFI 12.399)*.

<sup>7</sup> One such prominent example from the New Testament is the Apostle Paul. Chrysostom often turned to the Apostle Paul as a pedagogical means of achieving this end. Chrysostom was acutely aware that his flock had to believe that living a Christian life was indeed possible and the story of Paul's life was well suited to the encomiastic style which John embraced. In 1 Cor 13, 16, Paul, himself, challenged his flock to imitate him as he was also of Christ [καθὼς καὶ γὰρ Χριστοῦ]. Chrysostom states that this statement was not "self-exultation by Paul" but rather an indication that "virtue is an easy thing." *In epistulam I ad Corinthios 13, PG 61.110 (NPNFI 12.74)*.

<sup>8</sup> *Ad eos qui scandalizati sunt, SC 79.13.*

struggles, John tells his flock that, “now our wrestling has become easier [than Job’s], all these things being removed after the coming of Christ.”<sup>9</sup> If Job could attain such virtue, without the example of Christ, Paul, or even Chrysostom, for that matter, it should therefore be far easier for the Christians of Antioch.

Using the rhetorical devices at his disposal, Chrysostom painted a verbal icon of the major figures of the Old Testament creating, what Margaret Mitchell called, “a living encounter” between the listener and the subject that led to a “deeper emulation of that model of virtue.”<sup>10</sup> This encounter was not a scatter shot listing of the positive qualities of an exemplar but rather a carefully crafted portrait rooted in the encomiastic and ekphrastic style of the day that Chrysostom learned from Libanius.<sup>11</sup> What emerged from this portrait was a living breathing model of virtue that Chrysostom contextualized to fourth century Antiochene society and which he expected his fellow Christians to emulate.<sup>12</sup>

The sophist, Theon, identified three principle categories which described the goodness [ἀγαθά] of a virtuous figure: the virtues of the body [τοῦ σώματος], the virtues of the soul [τῆς ψυχῆς], and inherited blessings such as birth, nobility, education, and wealth.<sup>13</sup> The encomiastic style which Chrysostom embraced and its associated categories were the containers into which he placed the particular features of a particular exem-

<sup>9</sup> *De diabolo tentatore* 3, PG 49.275 (NPNF1 9.197).

<sup>10</sup> Margaret M. Mitchell, *The Heavenly Trumpet: John Chrysostom and the Art of Pauline Interpretation*, vol. 40, Hermeneutische Untersuchungen zur Theologie (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), p. 103.

<sup>11</sup> The rhetorical schools educated their students through the use of *progymnasmata* [προγυμνάσματα], a set of rhetorical exercises of speech. Rhetorical teachers, like Libanius, prepared their own oratorical examples of praise or invective with which they taught their students.

<sup>12</sup> Ruth Webb notes that the language of ekphrasis drew upon the social context of the speaker and audience. As a result, “the orator uses his own visual resources to call up images which already exists in the audience’s mind.” Ruth Webb, *Ekphrasis, imagination and persuasion in ancient rhetorical theory and practice* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), p. 110.

<sup>13</sup> Harry M. Hubbell, “Chrysostom and Rhetoric,” *Classical Philology* 19, no. 3 (1924): p. 264. Averil Cameron notes how Christians were “drawn to a form for spiritual biography” since they “perceived the world in terms of the human body and soul.” Averil Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire: The Development of Christian Discourse*, Sather Classical Lectures (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), p. 57.

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plar's virtue.<sup>14</sup> Features of an Israelite saint's life were therefore described within the context of the categories of virtue and explained within the general parameters of the rhetorical style. The exemplar thus became a universal touchstone upon which Chrysostom repeatedly relied for a variety of pastoral and theological applications. Chrysostom thus presented their virtue in a discrete fashion in order to achieve targeted pastoral aims, while slowly building the virtuous credentials of his scriptural exemplars.

The sophistic attributes of the virtuous body are health [ὑγίεια], strength [ἰσχύς], and beauty [κάλλος]. As Averil Cameron rightly notes, "the language of the physical body had always been prominent in Christian writing" and Chrysostom's description of prominent scriptural figures certainly demonstrates the use of such language. (Cameron 1991)<sup>15</sup> Chrysostom, using physiognomic descriptions that were part of epideictic rhetoric, created an image of Israelite saints that clearly portrayed an image of Old Testament exemplars possessing these sophistic physical characteristics. God fashioned Abraham's body, according to Chrysostom, "as if he had made him so out of stones."<sup>16</sup> Job is likewise compared to athletes

"in the contests of the outer world, the combatants that are vigorous, and in high condition of body [and] wrapped all around with the garment soaked in oil; but when casting this aside, they are brought forward unclothed into the arena; then above all they strike the spectators on every side with astonishment at the proportion of their limbs, there being no longer anything to conceal them."<sup>17</sup>

Even after all of his trials, Job was nevertheless "strong as he was before he lost all, became still more powerful, and bore away an illustrious victory from the devil."<sup>18</sup> Despite such graphic descriptions of vigor, for Chrysostom, physical strength was not an end in itself but only a marker of the higher quality which was virtue.

In his description of Job, however, the preacher notes that true strength is found "not [in] wealth, nor strength of body, nor glory, nor power... but

<sup>14</sup> See Hippolyte Delehaye, *Les passions des martyrs et les genres littéraires* (Bruxelles: Soc. des Bollandistes, 1966).

<sup>15</sup> Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire: The Development of Christian Discourse*, p. 71.

<sup>16</sup> *In Matthaëum* 11, PG 57.194 (NPNF1 10.66).

<sup>17</sup> *Ad populum Antiochenum* 1 PG 49.26 (NPNF1 9.339).

<sup>18</sup> *Ad populum Antiochenum* 2, PG 49.45 (NPNF1 9.353).

only the possession of virtue.”<sup>19</sup> Indeed, such virtue also had its limits. Chrysostom notes that the Israelite exemplars understood these limits for even though David and Abraham had achieved “the highest pitch of virtue” they nevertheless “would call themselves, the one, ‘earth and ashes,’ the other, ‘a worm;’ and all the saints too, like these, acknowledge their own wretchedness.”<sup>20</sup>

The virtuous soul was marked by the great philosophical categories of prudence [σωφροσύνη], wisdom [σοφία], courage [ἀνδρεία], and justice [δικαιοσύνη]. The sophists augmented the classical cardinal virtues with additional categories of praiseworthy characteristics such as philanthropy, obedience, and self-sacrifice. These virtues of the soul prompted the exemplar to engage in virtuous activities, not for personal gain but on behalf of others.<sup>21</sup> It was the “virtue of the soul” above all else that made Abraham “illustrious” [ἀλλὰ καὶ τὸν πατριάρχην ἢ λοιπὴ τῆς ψυχῆς ἀρετὴ λαμπρὸν ἀπέδειξε].<sup>22</sup> Chrysostom was effusive in the praise of the “boundless greatness of [Abraham’s] soul”<sup>23</sup> and employed the philosophical and sophistic categories he learned from Libanius to describe it. For Chrysostom, the soul was the throne upon which his faith, justice, and obedience were seated. Chrysostom, in a most dramatic way, extolled courage by name as the virtue of Abraham’s soul exclaiming, “What a courageous soul!” [ὦ ψυχῆς ἀνδρεία!]; “What a courageous attitude! [ὦ γνώμης ἀνδρείας!].”<sup>24</sup>

Similarly, John extolled the “fortitude” of Job’s soul which “the very theatre of angels [τῶν ἀγγέλων θέατρον] shouted at beholding.”<sup>25</sup> Not all Old Testament figures, however, were equal. The virtue of Job’s soul was contrasted to that of Adam when John cautioned his flock to “avoid the imitation of Adam knowing how many ills are begotten of indolence: and

<sup>19</sup> *In Matthaeum* 24, PG 57.324 (NPNFI, 10.165).

<sup>20</sup> *In Matthaeum* 25 PG 57.332 (NPNFI, 10.171).

<sup>21</sup> Hubbell, “Chrysostom and Rhetoric,” 264.

<sup>22</sup> *De virginitate*, SC 125.82.

<sup>23</sup> *Catecheses ad illuminandos* 8, SC 50.8. Harkins, Chrysostom, *Baptismal instructions*, 31, 123.

<sup>24</sup> *In Genesim* 47, PG 54.430-431. In the same passage, Chrysostom, himself, acknowledges his frequent use of such exclamatory (and virtue laden) language noting at one point that “Once again, I am amazed at the righteous man’s courage: how he was able to build the sacrificial altar, how he had such strength, how he did not collapse in agony” [Πάλιν ἐκπλήττομαι τοῦ δικαίου τὴν ἀνδρείαν, πῶς ἠδυνήθη τὸ θυσιαστήριον οἰκοδομήσαι, πῶς ἴσχυσε, πῶς οὐ διελύθη ὑπὸ τῆς ἀγωνίας].

<sup>25</sup> *Ad populum Antiochenum* 1, PG 49.26 (NPNFI 9.339).

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imitate the piety of Job.”<sup>26</sup> Such piety rendered the saint pure and such purity allowed the exemplar to grow in virtue and enter into communion with God. John explained that, “God, finding their mind pure, discoursed unto Noah, and unto Abraham, and unto his offspring, and unto Job, and unto Moses too, not by writings, but Himself by Himself.”<sup>27</sup>

The third category of Theon’s categories of virtue, that of inherited blessings refers to the background and upbringing of the exemplar and provides the framework within which virtue takes place.<sup>28</sup> Menander of Laodicea, writing in the third century C.E. and building on Theon’s model, developed guidelines for epideictic praise. In Menander’s framework of encomium he offered an outline of praise of a ruler [βασιλικὸς λόγος] that was popular among writers of the Second Sophistic period. In this outline he stresses the importance of describing the background of a subject, categorized under the headings of ancestry [γένος] and the circumstances of youth [ἀνατροφή]. Ancestry refers to the country [πατρίς], city [πόλις], or nation [ἔθνος] of the exemplar being praised, the circumstances of his youth, and special events in the early years of his life.<sup>29</sup>

Chrysostom describes the early years of Moses’ life and notes that although the parents of the future deliverer of Israel were “obscure” they nevertheless demonstrated great faith when they entrusted their child to the river.<sup>30</sup> Chrysostom presents Abraham as a faithful and obedient child who showed “great devotion to his parents.”<sup>31</sup> Abraham came from substantial wealth but John presented him as great because he rejected the riches of Chaldea and followed the call of God to take himself and go to a distant and undetermined land. Abraham, nevertheless, did not follow in his father’s idolatrous footsteps but even as a young child [κατὰ τὴν πρώτην ἡλικίαν] was nurtured by God and turned his attention to the divine.<sup>32</sup> While John presented Abraham as virtuous by gaining what he did

<sup>26</sup> *De diabolo tentatore* 3, PG 49.270 (NPNF1 9.195).

<sup>27</sup> *In Matthaem* 1, PG 57.13 (NPNF1, 10.1).

<sup>28</sup> The basic encomiastic *topoi* that described such inherited blessings included typical starting points for a speech like birth, education, and achievement. Webb, *Ekphrasis, imagination and persuasion in ancient rhetorical theory and practice*, 135ff.

<sup>29</sup> See Thomas Burgess’s classic treatment of the subject. Theodore Chalon Burgess, “Epideictic literature” (University of Chicago Press, 1902), 122ff.

<sup>30</sup> *In epistulam ad Hebraeos* 26, PG 63.180 (NPNF1 14.483).

<sup>31</sup> *In Genesim* 36, PG 53.333.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

not have, he was equally virtuous for abandoning what he possessed. In a similar way, John extols the great faith of Moses who rejected his wealth as a Prince of Egypt “choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season; esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt.”<sup>33</sup> The preacher made sure his congregation understood the nature of the wealth Moses rejected and the affliction he chose to endure. John told his flock that Moses

“gave up the court, and the luxury, and the retinue, and the glory attending it, and chose rather to be with the Israelites. Yet, is this not only what no one else would ever have done, but would have even been ashamed, were another to have discovered him, of being found to be a kinsman of men, who were slaves and not only slaves, but were looked upon as even execrable.”<sup>34</sup>

For Chrysostom, possessions were antithetical to the virtuous life. John declares, “Great the tyranny of possessions, great the dearth of virtues.”<sup>35</sup>

It is in this light that Chrysostom presented the Prophet Elias as virtuous because of his poverty. John asks,

“For tell me who was poorer than Elias? Yet for this reason he surpassed all the wealthy, in that he was so poor, and this very poverty of his was his own choice from an opulence of mind. For since he accounted the wealth of all riches to be beneath his magnanimity, and not worthy of his spiritual wisdom, therefore he welcomed this kind of poverty; so that if he had considered present things as of much worth, he would not have possessed only a mantle.”<sup>36</sup>

Similarly, Job’s virtue rested not in the wealth of his earlier years but in the poverty of his affliction. Chrysostom asks his flock, “Who was poorer than Job? For he was poorer than the outcasts at the baths, and those who sleep in the ashes of the furnace, poorer in fact than all men?”<sup>37</sup> Job’s poverty, not his earlier wealth, illustrated his virtue. John explained that,

<sup>33</sup> *In epistulam ad Hebraeos* 26, PG 63.180 (NPNF1 14.483).

<sup>34</sup> *In epistulam ad Ephesios* 7, PG 62.53 (NPNF1 13.83).

<sup>35</sup> *In Genesim*, PG 53.331. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis*, trans. Robert C. Hill, 3 vols., The Fathers of the Church (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1986), 2:322.

<sup>36</sup> *Ad populum Antiochenum* 2, PG 49.40 (NPNF1 9.353).

<sup>37</sup> *De diabolo tentatore* 3, PG 49.270 (NPNF1 9.195).



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“since he was able to bear wealth with moderation, much more was he able to bear poverty with manliness; and he who desires not riches when present, neither will he seek them when absent; even as that blessed man did not, but by his poverty, on the other hand, he became still more glorious.”<sup>38</sup>

In Chrysostom’s rhetorical presentation, the Israelite saints’ rejection or lack of wealth is the key to their altruism. In their rejection of wealth, the Old Testament exemplars become for Chrysostom what Anthony was for Athanasius - followers of Christ’s command to sell their possessions and give them to the poor in order to follow the call of God. Such obedience typically caused the holy exemplars of the Jewish Bible to suffer innumerable troubles but, in the end, this only served to enhance their nobility.

The Israelite saints were thus models of Christian philanthropy before the incarnation. They did not simply forsake wealth but earnestly gave their wealth to the poor. John thus explained to his flock that

“Abraham was rich, but he was not covetous; for he turned not his thoughts to the house of this man, nor prayed into the wealth of that man; but going forth he looked around wherever there chanced to be a stranger, or a poor man, in order that he might succor poverty, and hospitably entertain the traveler.”<sup>39</sup>

Similarly, Chrysostom noted that Job, “when a possessor of wealth, opened his house to the poor, and whatever he had he bestowed.”<sup>40</sup> Chrysostom sought to convey to the wealthiest of his flock that sin rested not in the accumulation of wealth but in the deficit of philanthropy. In his sermons, the preacher from Antioch is explicit concerning this distinction when, setting forth David as an example, he explains that “family, or wealth, or money” are not impediments to living a virtuous life but rather

“it is possible that even one in a kingdom should lay hold on virtue, for the house of a king would be found more full of trouble than any private family. David then shone forth in his kingdom; the purple and the diadem rendered him not at all remiss.”<sup>41</sup>

Thus, also, “Job was rich, but he served not mammon, but possessed it and ruled over it, and was a master, not a slave.”<sup>42</sup> John spoke directly

<sup>38</sup> *In Matthaeum* 13, PG 57.213 (NPNFI, 10.81).

<sup>39</sup> *Ad populum Antiochenum* 2, PG 49.47 (NPNFI 9.349).

<sup>40</sup> *Ad populum Antiochenum* 1, PG 49.29 (NPNFI 9.341).

<sup>41</sup> *In epistulam Philippenses* 12, PG 62.274 (NPNFI 12.241).

<sup>42</sup> *In Matthaeum* 21, PG 57.295 (NPNFI, 10.144).



to the wealthy members of his congregation when he said that “you will receive as great a reward as [Job] if you had deposited all your wealth in the hands of the poor.”<sup>43</sup>

The sophistic method makes use of colorful and evocative language. The rhetorical use of metaphors in general and agonistic associations in particular was commonplace and a staple of Chrysostom’s homiletical works. Agonistic language, a feature of both the Pauline epistolary corpus and sophistic oratory, which employed athletic and militaristic metaphors, was well suited to John’s praise of the Israelite saints. Military terms such as battle [μάχη], war [πόλεμος], and battle line [παράταξις] were common usages for Chrysostom and readily applied to the luminaries of the Jewish Bible who battled against human nature and emerged victorious.<sup>44</sup>

The virtue of the body and the soul are actualized in the struggle [ἀγών]. In the struggle, exemplars are able to demonstrate their courage and prudence and the eventual (and inevitable) victory confirms their virtue. The exemplars of the Old Testament achieved their virtue through constant struggle. Chrysostom asks,

“Should I speak of Joseph himself? Or of Moses? Or of Joshua? Or of David? Or of Elias? Or of Samuel? Or should I speak of all the prophets? Will you not find that all these were made illustrious from their afflictions? Tell me then, do you desire to become illustrious from ease and luxury?”<sup>45</sup>

That many of the exemplars of the Jewish Bible engaged in combat only served to strengthen John’s argument. The preacher, however, was quick to note that such martial activity had a higher purpose when he explained to his congregation that,

“if thus the ancients made war with men in arms, much more ought we so to make war with men without arms. So Hezekiah triumphed over the Assyrian king, so Moses over Amalek, so Samuel over the men of Ascalon, so Israel over the thirty-two kings. If where there was need of arms, and of battle array, and of fighting, they, leaving their arms had recourse to prayer; here

<sup>43</sup> *Ad populum Antiochenum* 1, PG 49.47 (NPNFI 9.342).

<sup>44</sup> For a discussion on Chrysostom’s use of military metaphors, see Ameringer, *The Stylistic Influence of the Second Sophistic on the Panegyric Sermons of St. John Chrysostom: A Study in Greek Rhetoric*, pp. 59-61.

<sup>45</sup> *In epistulam ad Hebraeos* 29, PG 63.205 (NPNFI 14.501).

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where the matter has to be accomplished by prayers alone, does it not much more behoove us to pray?"<sup>46</sup>

The use of agonistic language to describe virtue has a long history, evidence of which is found in the works of philosophers, orators, and thinkers from Aristotle to Libanius. The former emphasized the practice of virtue as a struggle in a manner similar to that of the Olympic athletes who competed and won because they acted properly in their lives.<sup>47</sup> Athletes and soldiers possessed traits that were similar to those found in exemplars, like Noah, Abraham, and Job who struggled to live a virtuous life. Orators projected these traits onto the virtuous exemplar who was engaged in a struggle of greater importance and value. Thus, even though Job was virtuous in his philanthropy, he was "not so much admired for his alms-deeds as he was for his sufferings afterwards."<sup>48</sup>

For Chrysostom, more often than not, the struggle was a spiritual one in which the soul was triumphant over the passions and in which the spiritual world conquered the material world. Thus, Chrysostom describes the scene when Job waged war with the demons "when, like the wrestler that strips off his garment, he threw it aside, and came naked to the conflicts of piety, thus unclothed, he astonished all who saw him."<sup>49</sup> In describing the superiority of faith over works, Chrysostom explained that the struggle [τὸν ἀγῶνα] in which Abraham was engaged was a "battle for faith against works" [μάχην τῇ πίστει πρὸς τὰ ἔργα].<sup>50</sup>

Abraham, like Paul, was an athlete who fought the good fight for many years and emerged victorious [πρὸ τοσοῦτων ἐτῶν ἀθλήσαντας καὶ νικήσαντας].<sup>51</sup> The trophy for the victorious athlete was the crown.<sup>52</sup> Chrysostom declares that Abraham received a "myriad of laudatory crowns"<sup>53</sup> as a fitting trophy for his struggle [τὸν τελευταῖον ἀγῶνα].<sup>54</sup> The struggles

<sup>46</sup> *In epistulam ii ad Thessalonicenses* 4, PG 62.489-490 (NPNFI 13.391).

<sup>47</sup> Aristotle, *Ethica Nicomachea* 1.8.9. "ὥσπερ δ' Ὀλυμπίασιν οὐχ οἱ κάλλιστοι καὶ ἰσχυρότατοι στεφανοῦνται ἀλλ' οἱ ἀγωνιζόμενοι (τούτων γὰρ τινες νικῶσιν), οὕτω καὶ τῶν ἐν τῷ βίῳ καλῶν κἀγαθῶν οἱ πράττοντες ὀρθῶς ἐπήβολοι γίνονται."

<sup>48</sup> *In epistulam i ad Corinthios* 43, PG 61.372 (NPNFI 12.262).

<sup>49</sup> *Ad populum Antiochenum* 1, PG 49.26 (NPNFI 9.339).

<sup>50</sup> *In epistulam ad Romanos* 8, PG 60.455.

<sup>51</sup> *In illud: Habentes eundem spiritum*, PG 51.298.

<sup>52</sup> *Expositiones in Psalmos* 128, PG 55.368.

<sup>53</sup> *In illud: Habentes eundem spiritum*, PG 51.276.

<sup>54</sup> *In Genesim* 48, PG 55.434.

of Job, likewise, “adorned that holy head more than ten thousand crowns [μυρίων στεφάνων], and made proclamation louder than many trumpets [σαλίγγων πολλῶν].”<sup>55</sup> Chrysostom told his flock that they too could be sharers in such a crown if they but only admired the great athletes<sup>56</sup> who had endured so much in pursuit of virtue. John paints a picture of his congregation, standing in applause for a great athlete such as Abraham and sharing in the joy of the patriarch’s victory. He tells his flock that they, like Job, should “bear all that comes upon us nobly, and with much thankfulness, in order that we may be able to obtain the same crown as he.”<sup>57</sup> As always, the ancient Israelite sage had a contemporary lesson to teach.

The exemplar’s struggle served as a vivid indication that virtue was indeed something that the average member of John’s flock could achieve. It was for this reason that the preacher exhorted his flock to follow the example of the men and women whom Chrysostom presented as their Israelite ancestors of faith. John urged his flock to

“be filled with zeal and imitate Moses. He saw one suffering wrong, and avenged him; he despised royal luxury, and for the sake of those who were afflicted he became a fugitive, a wanderer, lonely and deserted; he passed his days in a foreign land; and yet he blamed not himself.”

John continues to explain that Moses did not become bitter or resentful but was, in contrast, kind and forgiving. The virtuous exemplar was clear in his instruction to his listeners and the Antiochene pastor explained that lesson urging his congregation to be like Moses and to “have a soul apt to sympathize and to have a heart that knows how to feel with others in their sorrows: no unmerciful temper, no inhumanity.”<sup>58</sup>

Chrysostom, as with other contemporaneous ecclesiastical figures, was fond of sailing metaphors and nautical imagery to describe the exploits of his exemplars. Thomas Ameringer notes that it is difficult to ascertain the exact origin of such metaphors.<sup>59</sup> There is, however, precedence for their use in Greek philosophical discourse. In Plato’s *Republic*, Socrates offers

<sup>55</sup> *In epistulam i ad Corinthios* 28, PG 61.236 (NPNFI 12.165).

<sup>56</sup> *De Davide et Saule* 1, PG 54.687.

<sup>57</sup> *De diabolo tentatore* 3, PG 49.275 (NPNFI 9.197).

<sup>58</sup> *In Acta apostolorum* 43, PG 60.306 (NPNFI 11.266).

<sup>59</sup> Ameringer, *The Stylistic Influence of the Second Sophistic on the Panegyric Sermons of St. John Chrysostom: A Study in Greek Rhetoric*, 62.

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an extended discourse in which the state is likened to a ship.<sup>60</sup> In Basil's treatise on the education of the youth, the Bishop of Caesarea used a sailing metaphor to describe the perilous journey young men undertake in order to receive a proper education.<sup>61</sup> Among the Latin fathers, Jerome, in his letter to Innocent, described his difficult situation to be like that of a passenger who finds himself in charge of a ship and laments that Innocent urged him to "hoist the swelling sails, to loosen the sheets, and to take the helm."<sup>62</sup>

Chrysostom followed a similar motif in which he likened Abraham's struggles to that of a sailor, navigating his way through stormy waters. In this setting, the patriarch was like a navigator who "sailed on unfavorable seas" [ἄπλουv ἔπλει θάλατταν]<sup>63</sup> and stretched out his affection toward God as a sailor who needs to stretch out the sails of his boat [τείνειν τὰ ἱστία].<sup>64</sup> In this homily, Chrysostom used the sailing metaphor to compare his congregation's struggles to that of Abraham saying that, "we too are sailing over a great and wide sea, full of many monsters, and of many rocks, and bringing forth for us many storms, and from the midst of serene weather raising up a most violent tempest."<sup>65</sup> Similarly, Noah, the captain of the Ark, "was like a skillful skipper, handling the steering-oar of his mind with great alertness, not allowing his vessel to sink under the violent waves of wickedness."<sup>66</sup>

Chrysostom's use of agonistic language was no doubt a product both of his sophistic training and love of Paul, the great athlete for Christ.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Plato, *Republic* 4, 487e-489c.

<sup>61</sup> Basil, *De legendis gentilium libris* 1.25. "Τοῦτο μὲν οὖν αὐτὸ καὶ συμβουλεύσων ἦκω, τὸ μὴ δεῖν εἰς ἅπαξ τοῖς ἀνδράσι τούτοις, ὥσπερ πλοίου τὰ πηδάλια τῆς διανοίας ὑμῶν παραδόντας, ἥπερ ἂν ἄγωσι, ταύτη συνέπεσθαι, ἀλλ' ὅσον ἐστὶ χρήσιμον αὐτῶν δεχομένους, εἰδέναι τί χρῆ καὶ παριδεῖν." Basil, *Aux jeunes gens sur la manière de tirer profit des lettres helléniques*, ed. Fernand Boulenger (Paris: Société d'édition "Les Belles lettres", 1935).

<sup>62</sup> Jerome, *Epistola I. Ad Innocentium*. PL.23.325 (NPNF2 6.1). "Hortaris, ut tumida malo vela suspendam, rudentes explicem, clavum regam."

<sup>63</sup> *Ad eos qui scandalizati sunt*, SC 79.13.1.

<sup>64</sup> *In epistulam ad Hebraeos* 34, PG 63.236 (NPNF1 14.521).

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> *Homilae in Genesim* 23, PG 53.196-7, Hagit Amirav, *Rhetoric and Tradition: John Chrysostom on Noah and the Flood*, *Traditio Exegetica Graeca* (Leuven: Peeters, 2003), p. 165.

<sup>67</sup> 2 Tim. 4, 7.

Indeed, as John Poulakos points out, the art of oratory was, in many ways, a form of athletic competition in which the orator “turned rhetoric into a competitive enterprise.”<sup>68</sup> Debra Hawhee correctly notes the didactic function of agonistic language when she observes that the root ἀγών is connected to ἄγω which means “to lead” but, in the Platonic sense, can also mean “to bring up, train, educate.”<sup>69</sup> Chrysostom used the athletic, military, and nautical images as a tool to draw his congregation into the homily and make them part of the Old Testament world and thus help relate this thoroughly Jewish text to his Hellenistic audience. Chrysostom’s use of agonistic language, including athletic imagery, as a pedagogical tool, was especially useful in fourth century Antioch, a city obsessed with athletic competition.

### 3. Conclusion

The literary, rhetorical, and exegetical norms which Chrysostom inherited help explain both the reasons why and the ways in which John presented the Israelite saints of the Jewish Bible to his Christian congregation. John was a product of fourth century Roman society in a complete sense and one can see the influence of that society, both Christian and non-Christian, in his homilies and discourses. As J. N. D. Kelly so aptly puts it, Chrysostom’s

“treatises and sermons alike give proof, abundantly although sometimes underrated in the past, that he was thoroughly familiar with, and prepared to exploit as the occasion demanded, all the oratorical and stylistic devices which often appear artificial to modern taste but which were strenuously inculcated in the fourth-century schools of rhetoric.”<sup>70</sup>

The Stoic emphasis on virtue and use of exemplars to promote that virtue was common to fourth century discourse whether or not the orator identified himself as an adherent to Stoic philosophy. Indeed, so profound

<sup>68</sup> John Poulakos, *Sophistical rhetoric in classical Greece* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1995), p. 35.

<sup>69</sup> Debra Hawhee, *Bodily Arts: Rhetoric and Athletics in Ancient Greece* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2004), p. 16.

<sup>70</sup> John Norman Davidson Kelly, *Golden Mouth: The Story of John Chrysostom, Ascetic, Preacher, Bishop* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 8.

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was the prevalence of Stoic language and usages that the Apostle Paul made use of them in his writings. Libanius looked to the Homeric heroes and the exemplars of antiquity for Stoic virtue whereas Chrysostom referred to the scriptural text in which he found figures such as Abraham, Moses, Job, David, Elias, and the many other exemplars of the Jewish Bible. Chrysostom saw Stoic qualities in all of these figures of the Old Testament and amplified these qualities so that his congregation, familiar with the categories of virtue, could easily identify the relevance of Israelite saints in their daily lives.

Chrysostom clothed the Stoic qualities of his virtuous figures with sophistic rhetoric. Sophistic rhetoric was the accepted method of discourse and John was well equipped to compete in the marketplace of ideas through his training under the famous Libanius. Chrysostom found the antiquity of Old Testament figures attractive and well suited to the sophistic style that valued historical figures as models of virtue. The praise and invective of sophistic discourse was cause for entertainment but Chrysostom was more concerned with the moral rectitude and catechesis of his flock than he was with their amusement. Chrysostom lived in a fourth century Antiochene social and religious environment that underwent significant change in the preceding decades. While the rhetoric of praise was a useful tool to extol virtue, the practice of diatribe was just as valuable to condemn opposing points of view.

Libanius and Chrysostom employed common methods but their source materials were very different. The scriptural text in general and the Old Testament text in particular may have seemed incompatible with the classical methods which influenced Chrysostom but he nevertheless saw a way in which the methods in which he was educated could be applied to the prominent figures of the Israelite narrative.

The type of exploration in which John was engaged was part of the rapid growth of the Christian textual tradition in the fourth century. The size of Chrysostom's homiletical corpus is a testimony to this rapid growth. Christians actively defined who they were and who they were not. John's oratorical expositions on virtue were part of a tradition that originated in apostolic times but later exploded in the new age of toleration that was the fourth century. Chrysostom used the sophistic techniques he learned from Libanius and his source scriptural material to describe Christian virtue in a most specific way. The use of an exemplar (albeit one taken from a scrip-



tural text) was fully consistent with the classical usages which Chrysostom inherited. Indeed, Gregory of Nyssa's use of Moses for such a presentation bears witness to an approach which the Jewish philosopher Philo also embraced.

The Antiochene method in which Chrysostom was formed as a neophyte Christian taught that the scriptural text had an inner, moral meaning that was visible if the exegete simply looked deep enough. John, following the Antiochene line, had little use for allegorical excursions into the scriptural text when it came to the spiritual formation of his flock. For Chrysostom, there needed to be a practical, pastoral application for his exegesis and his presentation of Old Testament scriptural figures needed to be relevant to the daily lives of the members of his congregation. To be sure, there was often a higher, typological meaning to the text but the principal focus was the historical and literal meaning of any given passage and its contemporaneous application. For Chrysostom, he and the members of his congregation were participants in the same historical story as that of ancient, biblical Israel. It was this literal interpretation of the Jewish Bible that led John to argue that the Christians to whom he preached were the true successors of the Israelite heroes he extolled.