

Chrysostom's Paschal Homily: A Rhetorical-Literary Analysis

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Introduction

This Paschal Homily has been attributed to St. John Chrysostom (d.407), though his authorship of it is uncertain.¹ It was evidently delivered at Pascha (Easter Morning) and, if in fact from his pen, probably during his tenure as Archbishop of Constantinople.² It has been a tradition for it to be delivered within the Eastern Orthodox church at Pascha ever since.³ I propose to conduct a mainly literary analysis.

Context

Chrysostom was the son of a high-ranking official within the administration of the Roman Empire and hence a member of the social elite.⁴ He had been well educated in the classical pattern, in rhetoric, literature, grammar and philosophy but also in Christian Scriptures.⁵ Had he not taken holy orders, this might have fitted him for a role in the higher levels of state administration or the law.⁶ This was modified however, by his Christian faith and by his life as a Christian ascetic.⁷ While

¹ Fr. Panayiotis Papageorgiou, "The Paschal Catechetical Homily of St. John Chrysostom: A Rhetorical and Contextual Study," *GOTR* 43 (1998): 93-100, p. 93.

² Papageorgiou, "The Paschal Catechetical Homily of St. John Chrysostom," 96.

³ Papageorgiou, "The Paschal Catechetical Homily of St. John Chrysostom," 93.

⁴ A.H.M. Jones, "St. John Chrysostom's Parentage and Education," *HTR* 46 (1953): 171-173, p. 171.

⁵ D.J. Constantelos, "John Chrysostom's Greek Classical Education and its Importance to Us Today," *GOTR* 36.2 (1991): 109-128, PP.111-113.

⁶ Jones, "St. John Chrysostom's Parentage and Education," 171.

⁷ Fr. Lazar Puhalo, *Great Fathers of the Church* (Dewdney, British Columbia: Synaxis Press, 2014), 71.

Chrysostom's background was elite,⁸ his faith gave him a viewpoint that was far from elitist.⁹

The socio-economic composition of his usual audience was complex but mainly comprised of the elite and their attendant slaves. It was mainly well-off and well-educated and, whilst women of the higher social orders were present, mainly male. It is unlikely that the real poor were present, though differences in income amongst the congregation probably left many feeling relatively less-advantaged than others.¹⁰

Chrysostom came from an advantaged background, modified by his Christian outlook into a level of sympathy with the disadvantaged. Yet he delivered his sermons to a mainly elite, nominally Christian audience. They could be expected to have regarded his preaching favourably up to the point where his urging for them to consider the plight of the disadvantaged threatened their feeling of social superiority. We can contrast this with the nature of Jesus' audience for the parables referred to in the Paschal Homily, which was likely to have been more socially mixed and to have included his opponents.

⁸ W. Mayer, "Who Came to Hear John Chrysostom Preach?," *ETL* 76 (2000):73-87, p. 73.

⁹ Constantelos, "John Chrysostom's Greek Classical Education," 125.

¹⁰ W. Mayer, "Who Came to Hear John Chrysostom Preach?," 83.

Structure

The Paschal Homily can be divided into four paragraphs. The first two can be themed as a welcome to the feast, whilst the second two centre on Christ's victory over death. Their connection lies in the Paschal feast, celebrating Christ's victory over the forces of darkness.

Use of Rhetorical Devices

As might be expected from a writer of Chrysostom's education, the writer of the Paschal Homily uses rhetoric extensively.¹¹ Rhetoric was an art of the spoken word, intended to enthrall, persuade and emotionally engage. It had obvious uses in the classical world in philosophical debate and legal proceedings. Here, however, Chrysostom puts it to quite a different use in the service of God.

Anaphora, the repetition of a word or phrase at the beginning of successive sentences,¹² provides the impetus to the Homily. It occurs in almost every line of the first, third and fourth paragraphs. This device builds a driving rhythm to these sections of the work, building repeated climaxes. Chrysostom clearly intended it to progressively increase the emotional effect of these parts of the sermon and catch his audience with the word rhythm. This leaves the second paragraph, the only one where this device is absent, as a relative oasis of calm. There, Chrysostom can

¹¹ V.K. McCarty, "John Chrysostom: Golden-Mouthed Preacher: A Seminar Talk about Meaning and Method," *Academia.edu*: 2-13, p. 6, https://www.academia.edu/3715613/John_Chrysostom_Golden-Mouthed_Preacher_A_Seminar_Talk_about_Meaning_and_Method_by_V.K._McCarty (23 November 2016).

¹² V.K. McCarty, "John Chrysostom: Golden-Mouthed Preacher," p.6.

reassure his audience of God's beneficence before the relentless rhythm takes off again at the beginning of the third paragraph (line 18).¹³

The rhythm of anaphora is most intense in the fourth paragraph, as the sermon heads for its greatest emotional climax. Here the effect is heightened by the use of Polysyndeton, the emphatic, repeated use of the same conjunction.¹⁴ This occurs in lines 25 to 29 of the third paragraph and resumes in lines 35 to 39 of the fourth.

Parison is the repeated use of paired phrases, each using the same grammatical construction, in the same sentence.¹⁵ In the Paschal Homily, Chrysostom pairs it with antithesis, juxtaposing opposite attributes, throughout the third paragraph, from line 10 through to line 15 as he pauses in his headlong flight to reflect on the grace of God.

One rhetorical device used in this homily however has, I believe, had a more unfortunate effect than was originally intended. That device is Prosopopoiia, the personification of an abstract entity.¹⁶ Chrysostom uses it repeatedly from line 22 to 35, as he personifies both death and hell. He employs it to depict Christ's salvific action as a great victory, not over abstract concepts but over hostile personal entities. Yet it has led to the misconception that God might be thought to have practiced deception.¹⁷

Chrysostom alludes to several of Christ's parables in the Paschal Homily, including the parable of the Workers in the Vineyard in lines 2-10 (Matt

¹³ Please refer to the Appendix for the text with line numbers.

¹⁴ V.K. McCarty, "John Chrysostom: Golden-Mouthed Preacher," p.7.

¹⁵ V.K. McCarty, "John Chrysostom: Golden-Mouthed Preacher," p.7.

¹⁶ Papageorgiou, "The Paschal Catechetical Homily of St. John Chrysostom," p.95.

¹⁷ A. McGrath, *Christian Theology - an Introduction* (Chichester: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 2007), 323.

20:1-16), the parable of the Prodigal Son in line 17 (Luke 15:11-32) and the parable of the Talents in lines 2 and 12 (Matt 25:14-30).¹⁸ A parable is a simple story intended to catch its audience and elicit a response. They can be considered to be rhetorical devices.

This level of rhetoric is to be expected. Its purpose is to elicit a positive response to the message. Its use in the Paschal Homily is sophisticated, though it does not obscure the message, which is clearly expressed, direct and accessible.

Imagery

The imagery employed in the Homily is drawn from OT and NT Scriptures. The first paragraph uses images of fasting contrasted with the prospect of the feast. The feast image makes two allusions, firstly to the Paschal Eucharist, to which the Lenten fast and the Homily were preludes. The second is to Christ's open table, looking back to Jesus' practice of accepting hospitality from all, regardless of social or moral status or even of whether they were friendly or hostile. It also looks back historically to the Last Supper, at which Christ offered Himself as spiritual food and drink to His followers and in which He instituted the Sacrament of the Eucharist. Additionally, the image looks forward to Christ's offering of hospitality at His own table in His Father's house at the eschaton. This means that Chrysostom directs the first paragraph not just to the present, eucharistic, open table of Christ but also to the historical open table of the Lord during His life on earth and to His open table at the end of time. This is referenced in: "Blessed is the man who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God" (Luke 14:15)

¹⁸ Papageorgiou, "The Paschal Catechetical Homily of St. John Chrysostom," pp.95-97.

This means that the concept of being late in fasting, contained in the first paragraph's allusion to the Parable of the Workers (Matt 20:1-16), can be taken to refer not only to a literal delay in undertaking the Lenten fast before the present Eucharist but also to the possibility of a delay during the believer's life before appropriating Christ's offer of salvation. The latter was the original point of Jesus's parable, yet Chrysostom repackages it for his contemporary audience, re-purposing it to refer simultaneously to preparation for the imminent Paschal Eucharist: no-one will be locked out of Communion in the present by the tardiness of their fast and neither will they be locked out of Christ's offer of salvation.

The imagery of the second paragraph is that of God's gifts and humanity's offerings. Yet there is no sense of a *quid pro quo* involved in this picture of God's relationship with humanity. All will receive God's rewards regardless of social status, moral standing or level of diligence. Moreover, since the dual meaning of the feast has already been established in the first paragraph, the implication is that the openness of God's rewards applies not only to the present Eucharist but to His offering of salvation as well.

This is made explicit in the first two lines of paragraph three, where all may appropriate the fruits of God's grace. The imagery then changes from line 19 onwards, as we are shown the reason why God can afford this level of magnanimity: His victory.

Chrysostom reminds his audience that Christ won a great victory through His death. In doing so he turned the tables on two of Mankind's greatest enemies – death and hell. Chrysostom allows us to imagine how this was achieved (although he does not explicitly set out the mechanism). Christ entered the state of death and should have been made captive in hell, just

as all human beings had been up to that point. Instead, he destroyed death and abolished hell. Chrysostom employs the rhetorical device of prosopopoiia to personify both death and hell, which are shown to have been overthrown by coming into direct contact with Christ's divinity. Chrysostom uses not just personal imagery to depict the downfall of these personified abstracts but goes so far as to picture them as entities suffering from the worst cases of indigestion imaginable. He employs heavy irony to depict these personifications expecting to feast on humanity and instead finding that they had bitten off more than they could chew. They have ingested not the expected morsel but the unseen, and to them poisonous, divinity of Christ. This leads us towards the climax of the imagery of Christ's victory in the fourth and final paragraph, with its crescendo of repeated cries that "Christ is risen!" which will be repeated in the Easter greeting.

In paragraph four, Chrysostom contrasts the victory of the risen Christ with the casting down of death and hell, and the joy of the angels with the defeat of the demons. Significantly, this is the only reference in the Homily to demons or the devil. It is death and hell that are the problems that Christ must overcome on humanity's behalf, not the devil, who we can safely assume is no match for Him and hence of little concern.¹⁹ Death and hell, though personified here for rhetorical purposes, are actually not persons but abstract concepts. This means that no deception has been employed in their defeat. This is important because some writers have asserted that the suggestion of deception makes God guilty of duplicity.²⁰ This view contends that God had allowed hell and death to believe they were ingesting an ordinary human being, whilst they were actually taking

¹⁹ Ben Myers, "The Patristic Atonement Model" Los Angeles Theological Conference, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DzdgDdZkSOY>.

²⁰ N.P. Constatas, "The Last Temptation of Satan: Divine Deception in Greek Patristic Interpretations of the Passion Narrative," *HTR* 97.2 (2004): 139-163, p. 139.

in a combination of human nature and divinity.²¹ Yet such deception would only be possible if hell and death were persons capable of being deceived. They are not, except as a rhetorical device, and it is not possible to deceive the abstract concepts they actually are.

A real, personal Satan is not represented in the Paschal Homily and so is not present to be deceived by God. The demons are fallen in as far as they can no longer use sin and death to exercise control over humanity. Even so, it is understandable that the idea of deception should arise.

It should also be noted that the lack of reference in the Homily to Satan also removes the accusation of dualism that might otherwise have been levelled against Chrysostom's representation. There is no Satan present with whom God needs to contend and hence no struggle between two opposing powers.

Another striking absence in the Paschal Homily is that of the Cross – Christ's death is central to the final two paragraphs but its instrument appears almost irrelevant. Chrysostom was preaching to a late classical audience composed largely of the elite of the society that had executed Jesus, for whom the Cross (a fate reserved for slaves and rebels) might still have had negative undertones.²² That said, Chrysostom's failure to refer to it may equally derive from the view of the Eastern Orthodox church, that it was Christ's actions after death that were important and not His agony on a particular instrument of torture. In the Eastern Orthodox church, the Cross is regarded as a prelude to the Resurrection.²³

²¹ Rufinus of Aquileia, "Expositio Symboli 14," in *The Christian Theology Reader* (ed. A. McGrath; Chichester. Blackwells Publishers Ltd., 2011), 292.

²² Constatas, "The Last Temptation of Satan," 141.

²³ N.T. Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began* (San Francisco: SPCK, 2016), 27.

It is illuminating to compare the imagery of the Homily with that of the Gospel of Nicodemus.²⁴ This too features the descent of Christ into Hades but attempts to depict what happened there in more “realistic” tones. The differences turn out to be more striking than the similarities. The imagery of the Gospel is highly mythologised and personifications of Hell and Death are joined by one of Satan too. This is no longer a merely rhetorical device. Here we have dualism, a confrontation between Christ and the dark powers in person and with it the suspicion that God has indeed resorted to a ruse to rescue humanity. The difference may lie in the target audience. Whereas that of the Homily was well-educated, it may be that the Gospel was aimed at simpler tastes.

References to Christ’s descent in canonical scripture are meagre. Paul tells us that Christ descended into “the lower earthly regions,” (Eph 4:9) whilst Peter (Acts 2:24) declares that “... God raised him from the dead, [...] because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.” 1 Peter 3:19, in saying that “After being made alive, he went and made proclamation to the imprisoned spirits...” takes the picture of Christ’s descent further but is unclear at exactly what stage this took place. In the OT, Zechariah (Zech 9:11) prophesies that Zion’s coming King will “...free your prisoners from the waterless pit.” Taking these together, we have a hazy picture of Christ descending to hell, proclaiming the Gospel there, defeating death and returning with its prisoners. Yet the Paschal Homily mirrors all four of these elements: Christ descends to Hades (line 23), where death is impotent against him (line 33), he is risen (lines 37-39) and leaves no-one in the grave (line 39).

²⁴ Anon. “The Gospel of Nicodemus,” Early Christian Writings, <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/gospelnicodemus.html> (28 November 2016)

Interpretation

Chrysostom's message is that salvation is available to all, regardless of status, and can be appropriated through eucharistic participation in Christ. This is an egalitarian message and not what would be expected given Chrysostom's socio-economic background. However, his deep commitment to Christ's message of love for the disadvantaged overrides any identification with the social elite.

The purpose of the Paschal Homily was not to set out a theory of the Atonement, yet it has one as its basis that predominated in the Patristic period.²⁵ Ben Myers has compared the atonement ideas contained within the works of a number of Patristic writers and arrived at a composite theory which the atonement ideas contained in the Paschal Homily resemble.²⁶ Elements of such a theory can be detected in Gregory of Nyssa,²⁷ Athanasius²⁸ and Gregory of Nazianzus²⁹

The starting point of that theory is that whilst God loves humanity, human nature has fallen in thrall to death, from which God intends to rescue it. To do so, God needs to enter death, which Myers defines as a state of deprivation of being. God, being infinite life, is unable to enter a state of deprivation of being and so becomes incarnate in Jesus. This is the hypostatic union, whereby each of Christ's two natures, human and divine, participates in the properties of the other. Christ's human nature is filled with divine life and, by extension, so is human nature in general,

²⁵ Gustaf Aulen, *Christus Victor* (London: SPCK, 1931), 37.

²⁶ Ben Myers, *The Patristic Atonement Model*.

²⁷ Gregory of Nyssa, "Dogmatic Treatises," CCEL, 1892, <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf205.xi.ii.xxvi.html>. (23 november 2016)

²⁸ Athanasius, "On the Incarnation IX," *New Advent*, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/2802.html>. (5 December 2016), p. 12.

²⁹ Gregory of Nazianzus, "Oration 45: XXXVIII," *New Advent*, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/310245.html>. (23 November 2016)

since there is only one human nature. Divinity is now able to enter death as Jesus dies on the Cross. As the fullness of divine life enters death, it cancels out deprivation of being, eliminating death. This results in Christ's resurrection, which is passed on to the rest of humanity through the commonly-held human nature. Human nature, being now freed from the power of death is restored not just to the state it enjoyed before the Fall but to a yet higher one. It is now united to God's nature and so is raised above its original status.³⁰ This is the process of Theosis, whereby God transfers properties of His divinity to humanity through grace.³¹

Elements of such a theory are present in the third paragraph of the Paschal Homily. Christ, having been held prisoner by death succeeds in destroying it. He does so simply by entering death and descending into hell. This destroys death and abolishes hell as the two come into contact with His divinity. This results in Christ's resurrection, leaving, we are told, no human being left in the grave and hence no-one left in hell. Christ becomes the first example of a new kind of humanity that incorporates divine elements conveyed to it through its link to Christ through the common human nature. As Gregory of Nazianzus puts it: "We needed an Incarnate God, a God put to death, that we might live."³²

Conclusion

What can usefully be carried across from the Paschal Homily to contemporary theology and worship? Being close to the period of the Evangelists, the writings of the Church Fathers, such as Chrysostom,

³⁰ Ben Myers, "Atonement - Jesus Christ's Resurrection" Faith Theology, 30 September 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NiXdVvzfbJc>.

³¹ Fr. Lazar Puhalo, "Theosis" Plain Truth Ministries, 2014, <https://vimeo.com/104640566>.

³² Gregory of Nazianzus, "Oration 45: XXXVIII," New Advent, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/310245.html> (23 November 2016).

represent a bridge to the teachings of the earliest church and can serve as a check on unhelpful later developments in doctrine.³³ If, for example, later Atonement theories vary from those of the Church Fathers, we need to ask whether this development is justified. The Patristic Atonement model is, for example, a viable alternative to the Penal Substitution model that can appear immoral, since it represents God as inflicting the punishment that should have been borne by humanity on His Son, Jesus Christ.³⁴ In the Patristic model, God does not inflict punishment on a third party as a surrogate. Instead, God finds a way of dying Himself, in order to cancel out death on humanity's behalf.

While the power of evil still manifestly exists in the world, Christ's death broke the mechanism of sin and death that Evil used to hold humanity in control. It has thus been decisively weakened. Its ultimate downfall is now assured. Whilst we must be wary of triumphalism, we can nevertheless have full faith in Christ's ability to finally destroy evil once and for all.

We should also draw the lesson from the Paschal Homily that God is not remote from us but inextricably linked to our human nature. God's love and grace is universal and available to all those who choose to appropriate it through identification with Christ. As Chrysostom asserts, Christ is the first fruits of a new humanity and in that we will all be revealed at the end of time.

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³³ Fr. Lazar Puhalo, "Why Study the Patristics?" Plain Truth Ministries, 2014, <https://vimeo.com/104639424>.

³⁴ Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began*, 43.

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Appendix 1 – Text of the Homily

1. If anyone is devout and a lover of God, let them enjoy this beautiful and radiant festival.
2. If anyone is a grateful servant, let them, rejoicing, enter into the joy of his Lord.
3. If anyone has wearied themselves in fasting, let them now receive recompense.
4. If anyone has laboured from the first hour, let them today receive the just reward.
5. If anyone has come at the third hour, with thanksgiving let them feast.
6. If anyone has arrived at the sixth hour, let them have no misgivings; for they shall suffer no loss.
7. If anyone has delayed until the ninth hour, let them draw near without hesitation.
8. If anyone has arrived even at the eleventh hour, let them not fear on account of tardiness.
9. For the Master is gracious and receives the last even as the first; He gives rest to him that comes at the eleventh hour, just as to him who has laboured from the first.
10. He has mercy upon the last and cares for the first; to the one He gives, and to the other He is gracious.
11. He both honours the work and praises the intention.
12. Enter all of you, therefore, into the joy of our Lord, and, whether first or last, receive your reward.
13. rich and poor, one with another, dance for joy!
14. you ascetics and you negligent, celebrate the day!
15. You that have fasted and you that have disregarded the fast, rejoice today!
16. The table is rich-laden: feast royally, all of you!
17. The calf is fatted: let no one go forth hungry!

18. Let all partake of the feast of faith. Let all receive the riches of goodness.
 19. Let no one lament their poverty, for the universal kingdom has been revealed.
 20. Let no one mourn their transgressions, for pardon has dawned from the grave.
 21. Let no one fear death, for the Saviour's death has set us free.
 22. He that was taken by death has annihilated it!
 23. He descended into Hades and took Hades captive!
 24. He embittered it when it tasted His flesh! And anticipating this, Isaiah exclaimed: "*Hades was embittered when it encountered Thee in the lower regions*".
 25. It was embittered, for it was abolished!
 26. It was embittered, for it was mocked!
 27. It was embittered, for it was purged!
 28. It was embittered, for it was despoiled!
 29. It was embittered, for it was bound in chains!
 30. It took a body and came upon God!
 31. It took earth and encountered Heaven!
 32. It took what it saw, but crumbled before what it had not seen!
 33. death, where is thy sting?
 34. Hades, where is thy victory?
 35. Christ is risen, and you are overthrown!
 36. Christ is risen, and the demons are fallen!
 37. Christ is risen, and the angels rejoice!
 38. Christ is risen, and life reigns!
 39. Christ is risen, and not one dead remains in a tomb!
 40. For Christ, being raised from the dead, has become the first-fruits of them that have slept.
 41. To Him be glory and might unto the ages of ages.
- Amen.