

St. John Chrysostom
Exegesis for Preaching and Teaching¹

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A discussion pertaining to St John Chrysostom cannot avoid dealing with Holy Scripture and its place in the domain that has come to be commonly known as theology. My contention in this paper is that this father of the church presented us with a paradigm, which if followed would bring a solution to two dilemmas that have plagued the life of the church for centuries. It will bring an end to the tension extant in all Christian traditions between theologians and students of the church fathers, on the one hand, and biblical scholars, on the other hand. It will also help bridge the gap, shown time and again to have been unnecessary, between the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Churches.

Scripture and Theology

However one looks at it, the apparent impasse created between theologians on the one hand, and biblical scholars on the other hand, boils down to the following question: Is the Bible simply one of many early exercises in theological discourse? Theologians are forced to answer this question in the affirmative. To do otherwise would (1) void scripture of any value for their particular field of interest, and (2) contradict the stance of early Christian writers who always quoted scripture and came themselves to be considered normative. Such an approach, however, ultimately does void scripture of its authority, since it makes of it a mere beginning for a continual discourse that would be carried out through the centuries.

To be sure, the term “beginning” entails some level of honor. Yet it is an honor that relegates the honoree to the low level of a “modest” beginner who opens the path toward the glorious present—a present associated with the work of the contemporary generation, which of course includes us. Such an honor bestowed upon the person of the initiator is actually a respectful way to dismiss his or her value for the present day. After all, with unavoidable advances of any human discourse, one is bound to keep only what is deemed still relevant and to discard the rest. Take, for example, the case of Hippocrates in the field of medicine. He is hailed as the “father of medicine,” yet his importance is relegated to a time past. The outcome is that it is modern physicians who honor him and give him importance, in that his value was for his own time.

The same applies *de facto* to any human discourse; the theological one is no exception. Consider, for instance, how we are used to saying that the accepted terminology of scripture is understood according to the faith of Nicea; the latter is clarified in Chalcedon for the Chalcedonians; the Cappadocians vindicate Athanasius; Maximus explicates and brings to further fruition the teachings of his

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predecessors. It is as though every generation not only elucidates, but actually “pushes ahead” the teaching of the previous one by extracting the fruit inherent in the seed. This is clearly a far cry from Paul’s approach to the authority of scripture. His classic “as it is written” (καθὼς γέγραπται) was never meant to be an elucidation of what scripture is saying; rather it is an appeal to the undisputed authority of scripture. For him, scripture is not a *first* word needing clarification or development; rather, it is the *last* word in the matter at hand and of every matter at hand dealt with in scripture. Paul did not “push ahead” the teaching of the Old Testament by bringing more light to it and by inviting his hearers to understand it in the light of *his* teaching. Rather, he read and judged his contemporary situation in the light of the Old Testament authoritative teaching.

What about the biblical scholars since the Renaissance and the Reformation? Generally, they fare better only in the sense that their field of inquiry is, or at least is supposed to be, scripture. They fall, however, into the same trap. Three striking examples should suffice. Martin Luther not only commended his friend Phillip Melancthon on the latter’s theological work, *Loci Communes*, but he himself wrote on the two natures of Christ. Besides his valuable commentaries, John Calvin’s major work is his theological *summa* “Institutions of the Christian Religion.” One of the more influential works of another eminent Protestant exegete of the last century, Rudolf Bultmann, is his *Theology of the New Testament*. His case is telling since he repeatedly asserts that the Bible is not “a word *about* (concerning) God” but God’s word in the sense of “a word *from* God.”²

The twentieth century saw biblical scholars producing many colossal works entitled *Theology of the Old Testament* as well as *Theology of the New Testament*. The intention, to be sure, was to underline the primacy of the Bible in any theological endeavor. Still, the titles betrayed the underlying reality that the Bible was indeed a “theological” endeavor as opposed to a historicizing, descriptive one. The factual result was that these scholars viewed themselves as the heirs of the prophets and apostles and thought they could bring a high level of fruition to the intellectual discourse started by the Prophets and Apostles. To my mind, this way of perceiving matters is none other than the Hegelian view that controlled not only theology from the beginning of the 19th century, but also philosophy and the writing of history as well. An example of this influence is the approach to world history predominant among British and then U.S. historians and politicians, who view their own time and country as being the end which previous world history converges and culminates into, and that their own commonwealth is the paradigm to be sought after by the rest of the world communities.³

² Even Bultmann’s own endeavor as a whole is referred to as ‘theology.’ See e.g. Walter Schmithals, *Die Theologie Rudolf Bultmanns*, Tübingen 1966, 2.Aufl. 1967.

³ Even Pierre Teilhard de Chardin with his Point Omega and Noosphere theory is not immune to Hegel’s influence.

In spite of all appearances, this is not a new phenomenon. It did not originate with Hegel; he just sanctified it. This approach actually originated in Athens, was then taken over by imperial Rome, then by imperial Constantinople—the new Rome, and then by Charlemagne. Each of those societies saw itself as the highest expression of human civilization.

The Way Out of the Impasse

Is there a way out of this impasse which theological discourse has thrown us into so deeply? Even the Protestant Reformation, with all its ado about the return to the primacy of the Bible, was not able to disentangle itself from its tight hold. Every new generation tries to find the solution in a new “approach,” hailing it as the right way to interpret the biblical text. Yet every such endeavor is a priori doomed, since it is looking for a “theological” key. It is as though the Bible needs a Hermes, a divine emissary, thus *another* god, with a device to unlock the divine message. The intrinsic inappropriateness of all theological endeavors lies in the fact that a central teaching—if not the ultimate premise of the Bible—is that there is only *one* God who *has already fully spoken*. His “word” (λόγος) is totally behind us, and to imagine that we can develop it through hermeneutics, i.e., by doing the work of Hermes, is sheer blasphemy since we would be contravening the first commandment. Furthermore, this divine word which is behind us has also been *fully committed into writing* for all subsequent ages. Finally, this divine word, which took form (to use the theological terminology, was incarnate) in writing (ἔχοντα τὴν μὀρφωσιν τῆς γνώσεως καὶ τῆς ἀληθείας ἐν τῷ νόμῳ|; Rom 2:20) is the same divine word that had been uttered orally and was refused. Actually, it was committed in writing in spite—actually, because—of having been refused in order to make it clear that it stands for all ages as it was delivered, without any possibility of addition or subtraction of any kind or sort. This reality stands forever as a light at the end of the tunnel of our impasse, and this is what Chrysostom fully and correctly understood. So let me first give room to scripture itself and then to our honoree in this symposium.

Scripture, the Written and Solely Valid Divine Word

I shall confine myself to the three clearest passages in the Old Testament and one New Testament passage, all of which reflect the points I just made concerning the divine word. The first passage is Ezekiel (Ezek 2:9-10) where we are told that the prophet is handed a fully written message to which nothing can be added and which the addressees are going to refuse just as their fathers did before them (vv.3-7):

And he said to me, “Son of man, I send you to the people of Israel, to a nation of rebels, who have rebelled against me; they and their fathers have transgressed against me to this very day. The people also are impudent and stubborn: I send you to them; and you shall say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord God.’ And whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house) they will know that there has been a prophet among them. And you, son of man, be not afraid of them, nor be afraid of their words, though briars and thorns are with you and you sit upon scorpions; be not afraid of their words, nor be dismayed at their looks, for they are a rebellious house. And you shall speak my words to them, whether they hear or refuse to hear; for they are a rebellious house. But you, son of man, hear what I say to you; be not

rebellious like that rebellious house; open your mouth, and eat what I give you.” And when I looked, behold, a hand was stretched out to me, and, lo, a written scroll was in it; and he spread it before me; and it had writing on the front and on the back, and there were written on it words of lamentation and mourning and woe. (Ezek 2:3-10)

The second passage is from Jeremiah, and here the importance of the written word is more telling since, in this case, the latest canonical version is actually a repetition of an earlier *scroll*:

Now, after the king had burned the scroll with the words which Baruch wrote at Jeremiah’s dictation, the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah: “Take another scroll and write on it all the former words that were in the first scroll, which Jehoiakim the king of Judah has burned...” Then Jeremiah took another scroll and gave it to Baruch the scribe, the son of Neriah, who wrote on it at the dictation of Jeremiah all the words of the scroll which Jehoiakim king of Judah had burned in the fire; and many similar words were added to them. (Jer 36:27-28, 32)⁴

The third passage is from Deuteronomy and is a second issuance at Mount Nebo of the written Law promulgated at Sinai/Horeb, which reflects the approach of the Jeremian school:⁵

And you shall again obey the voice of the Lord, and keep all his commandments which I command you this day. The Lord your God will make you abundantly prosperous in all the work of your hand, in the fruit of your body, and in the fruit of your cattle, and in the fruit of your ground; for the Lord will again take delight in prospering you, as he took delight in your fathers, if you obey the voice of the Lord your God, to keep his commandments and his statutes *which are written in this book of the law*, if you turn to the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. For this commandment which I command you this day is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you should say, “Who will go up for us to heaven, and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?” Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, “Who will go over the sea for us, and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?” *But the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it.* See, I have set before you this day life and good, death and evil. (Deut 30:8-15)

The passage in the New Testament, which mimics Deuteronomy and thus makes it clear that New Testament literature was patterned after Old Testament writings, is found in Galatians, arguably the first New Testament document:

⁴ One can add here a similar passage in Isaiah where the prophet confines to a scroll the teaching that has been refused by the people. It is clear that it is its being written which makes it binding forever: “Bind up the testimony, seal the teaching among my disciples. I will wait for the Lord, who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob, and I will hope in him. Behold, I and the children whom the Lord has given me are signs and portents in Israel from the Lord of hosts, who dwells on Mount Zion. And when they say to you, ‘Consult the mediums and the wizards who chirp and mutter,’ should not a people consult their God? Should they consult the dead on behalf of the living? To the teaching and to the testimony! Surely for this word which they speak there is no dawn.” (Is 8:16-20)

⁵ See my “The Book of Jeremiah and the Pentateuchal Torah” in Theodore G. Stylianopoulos, ed., *Sacred Text and Interpretation*, Holy Cross Orthodox Press, Brookline, Massachusetts, 2006, pp.7-36.

But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be accursed. *As we have said before, so now I say again*, If any one is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed. (Gal 1:8-9)

Paul's *oral* teaching to the Galatians, which they refused, was none other than what was consigned in his letter to them. To imagine that this teaching was floating about in an oral form in Galatia and was picked up by the following generations flatly contradicts the fact that those who had originally heard Paul's message refused or at least perverted it (v.7).⁶ Actually, had that generation accepted the Pauline gospel in the first place, we probably would not have had that letter at hand and consequently would have run the risk of receiving a perverted form of that gospel centuries later.

Chrysostom

That this view of scripture was fully perceived and endorsed by Chrysostom is evident in his first homily on Matthew:

It were indeed meet for us not at all to require the aid of the written Word, but to exhibit a life so pure, that the grace of the Spirit should be instead of books to our souls, and that as these are inscribed with ink, even so should our hearts be with the Spirit. But, since we have utterly put away from us this grace, come, let us at any rate embrace the second best course. For that the former was better, God hath made manifest, both by His words, and by His doings. Since unto Noah, and unto Abraham, and unto his offspring, and unto Job, and unto Moses too, He discoursed not by writings, but Himself by Himself, finding their mind pure. But after the whole people of the Hebrews had fallen into the very pit of wickedness, then and thereafter was a written word, and tables, and the admonition which is given by these. And this one may perceive was the case, not of the saints in the Old Testament only, but also of those in the New. For neither to the apostles did God give anything in writing, but instead of written words, He promised that He would give them the grace of the Spirit: for "He," saith our Lord, "shall bring all things to your remembrance." And that thou mayest learn that this was far better, hear what He saith by the Prophet: "I will make a new covenant with you, putting my laws into their mind, and in their heart I will write them," and, "they shall be all taught of God." And Paul too, pointing out the same superiority, said, that they had received a law "not in tables of stone, but in fleshy tables of the heart."

But since in process of time they made shipwreck, some with regard to doctrines, others as to life and manners, there was again need that they should be put in remembrance by the written word. Reflect then how great an evil it is for us, who ought to live so purely as not even to need written words, but to yield up our hearts, as books, to the Spirit; now that we have lost that honor, and are come to have need of these, to fail again in duly employing even this second remedy. For if it be a blame to stand in need of written words, and not to have brought down on ourselves the grace of the Spirit; consider how heavy the charge of not choosing to profit even after this assistance, but rather treating what is written with neglect, as if it were cast forth without purpose, and at random, and so bringing down upon ourselves our punishment with increase. But that no such effect may ensue, let us give strict heed unto the things that are written; and let us learn how the Old Law was given on the one

⁶ The same applies to the church of Corinth. Imagining that the tradition of the Eucharist is to be found in the way it was celebrated at Corinth before Paul corrected it would make out of it a 'demoniac celebration' worthy of divine condemnation: "When you meet together, it is *not* the Lord's supper that you eat." (1 Cor 11:20)

hand, how on the other the New Covenant.⁷

It is then no wonder that this father of the church is de facto dismissed from works that discuss the development of theology during the fourth century, its golden age. He is dismissed, we are told, because he did not engage in theological discourse and thus did not promote it. But he obviously had a very valid reason. He understood that God's word is to be channeled to every new generation as it stands in its written form,⁸ not for the people to comprehend; actually it is very clear. Rather, it is for the people *to do*⁹—it is instruction and the people are stubbornly refusing to heed it! This word, thus scripture, is not a mental proposition about God and his activity; rather it is ordinances, commandments, and statutes to be observed. Let me quote Chrysostom himself:

Some people, out of restless curiosity, want to elaborate idly and irresponsibly doctrines which are of no benefit to those who understand them, or else are actually incomprehensible. Others call God to account for his judgments and struggle to measure the great deep. For the Psalmist says: "Thy judgments are a great deep." You will find that few are deeply concerned about faith and conduct, but the majority go in for these elaborate theories and investigate questions to which there is no answer and whose very investigation rouses God's anger. For when we struggle to learn things which God himself did not will us to know, we shall never succeed—how can we, against God's will?—and we shall gain nothing but our own peril from the investigation.¹⁰

My assessment of how Chrysostom is generally viewed in Books of Dogmatic Theology and Patristics is shared by Fr Philotheos Faros, Professor of Pastoral Theology at Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology (1969-76), who writes:

It seems that St. John Chrysostom is a source of embarrassment for many modern Orthodox theologians. They either avoid him or have a condescending attitude towards him because he appears too practical to appeal to their scholarly tastes.

In that sense, St. John Chrysostom's legacy could be critical of contemporary Orthodox ecclesiastical life, which seems to be enclosed between a scholastic theology, often lofty and sublime, but unable to contribute to the improvement and appropriate formation of ecclesiastical life, and an ecclesiastical practice crude and alien to the nature of the *Ekklesia* whose essence it distorts and deforms.

It is very difficult if not impossible to scholasticize John Chrysostom's word because of its immediacy and direct contact with experience. Of course, it is not only the word of Chrysostom which is the product of ecclesiastical life. All the fathers of the Eastern Church were pastors. None of them was a scholastic... [However,] the difference between Chrysostom and most of the other Church fathers is that Chrysostom deals with the experience of the common person. This gives to his theological word a unique value for our ecclesiastical life today because it can

⁷ Homily I on the Gospel of St. Matthew in P. Schaff, ed., *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (Grand Rapids, 1st Series, x 1978).

⁸ See e.g. Deut 5:1; 6:3; 26:16; 28:13.

⁹ This in turn explains why the only debate in which he is seriously referred to is the Pelagian/semi-Pelagian one, which deals with the "deeds" of "grace."

¹⁰ *On the Priesthood*, 4.5.

decisively influence its appropriate formation and development. A sublime and lofty theological word that does not correspond to our experience is not only not beneficial, but is disorienting, confusing, and it can be very easily used as an escape because it is not truthful.¹¹

Thus Chrysostom essentially was not a “theologian,” nor even an “exegete” in the strict sense of the term, as was Theodore of Mopsuestia, for example. He was a preacher and teacher. To say that he was unable to rise to high levels of mental discourse would be a cheap way out of confessing that he presents us with a real challenge. Chrysostom, whom Libanius himself wanted as his successor,¹² took seriously the reality of scripture: scripture is the message of fatherly corrective instruction from someone whose basic function is that of a *judge*. This reality, that God is primarily and essentially judge, is the premise and consequently the key that unlocks all the seemingly difficult biblical texts. It is the crimson thread that holds all scripture together—the New Testament as well as the Old Testament—and makes sense of it at every turn of the page. Indeed, as early as Genesis 2-3 this is so. And when the sin of Israel against God is subsumed in the people’s refusal to accept him as their sole king, it is because the king is essentially a judge. Suffice it to mention the case of King Solomon. Upon requesting wisdom to discern between good and evil, instead of riches (1 Kg 3:9), Solomon’s one and only test is a straightforward one: an act of judgment (vv.16-28). At the end of the story of his success as a judge in solving equitably the difficult case of establishing who was the child’s mother, we hear: “And all Israel heard of the judgment which the king had rendered; and they stood in awe of the king, *because they perceived that the wisdom of God was in him, to render justice.*” (v.28)

So the biblical God’s kingdom is not a matter of “theology” that figures out whether the mystery of that kingdom is a spiritual reality or an earthly reality. In spite of all appearances to the contrary, it is a metaphor to indicate that God, as king, will be the final Judge. The Book of Daniel makes this amply clear—it culminates with God’s final judgment, at which point the book is ordered to be sealed (12:1-5).

Another clear example is the Book of Isaiah. After the introductory chapter 1, which is quintessentially a judgment passage, Isaiah 2 describes the heavenly Jerusalem as being the city of God’s teaching and *torah* where God’s “light” is none other than the “fire” with which he judges his own people. This is precisely why, from that same throne, high and uplifted, God summons Isaiah and sends him to inform the people of his divine decision to fully bring to naught the sinful kingdom of Judah:

¹¹ *Functional and Dysfunctional Christianity*, Holy Cross Orthodox Press, Brookline, Massachusetts, 1998, pp.4-5.

¹² “There was... a certain presbyter named John, a man of noble birth and of exemplary life, and possessed of such wonderful powers of eloquence and persuasion that he was declared by the sophist, Libanius the Syrian, to surpass all the orators of the age. When this sophist was on his death-bed he was asked by his friends who should take his place. ‘It would have been John,’ replied he, ‘had not the Christians taken him from us.’” (Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History*, 8.2 (translation *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*).

And he said, "Go, and say to this people: 'Hear and hear, but do not understand; see and see, but do not perceive.' Make the heart of this people fat, and their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed." Then I said, "How long, O Lord?" And he said: "Until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without men, and the land is utterly desolate, and the Lord removes men far away, and the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land. And though a tenth remain in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak, whose stump remains standing when it is felled." (6:9-13)

The reason I illustrate the Book of Isaiah is because it allows me to show how Chrysostom correctly perceived the biblical text. In his comments on the opening verses of ch.6, Chrysostom does not delve, as often theologians do, into a fruitless discussion about "Isaiah's vision of God." Rather he captures the meaning of the text by reading it functionally, i.e., according to its intention:

"I saw the Lord seated." Christ has indeed said, "No one has seen God at any time. The only-begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, has explained him."... How then can Isaiah claim to have seen the Lord?... After all, no one has observed bare divinity in its pure essence except the only-begotten. Isaiah, on the other hand, claimed to have seen his power. It is impossible to see God in and of himself. Isaiah saw God in an assumed form, one as much lowered as Isaiah's weakness was elevated. That neither he nor anybody else has seen bare divinity is made very clear by what they claim. For example, Isaiah says, "I saw the Lord seated." But God does not sit. He does not have a bodily form. Not only does he say "Seated," but "Seated on a throne."... Isaiah says, "I saw the Lord seated." But God does not sit. He does not have a bodily form. Not only does he say "Seated," but "Seated on a throne."... Therefore, why does he now appear seated on a throne among the Seraphim? He is imitating a human custom because his message is to humans. For he is about to carry out a decision that involves great matters and the whole world, but which also concerns Jerusalem. For it was the custom of their judges not to work in secret but while seated on high platforms with curtains drawn while everyone stood. God, in imitation of these things, places the Seraphim about him, sits on a high throne, and pronounces his verdict from there. I will try to make this point from another prophet so that you will not regard my analysis with suspicion but understand that this really is God's way of revealing himself...¹³ we can, as I said, deal with the question at hand accurately and explain the genre of each text. Therefore, why did he say, "I saw the Lord seated?" Sitting on a throne is always a symbol of judgment, as David said, "You have sat on the throne to judge righteously." ... His precise language makes it clear that he is not talking about a chair... To sit on the throne is to judge.¹⁴

However, as I indicated earlier, God behaves as a father instructing his children in the way to live in order to inherit his kingdom. And this is precisely what the *torah* is all about: the eschatological covenant (Mt 5-7) as well as that of the earlier Pentateuchal covenant. In both cases, those who do not live according to God's

¹³ Chrysostom then proceeds to speak of the similar setting of Dan 7:9-11.

¹⁴ Duane A. Garrett, *An Analysis of the Hermeneutics of John Chrysostom's Commentary on Isaiah 1-8 With An English Translation*. The Edwin Mellen Press, 1992, pp.123-5.

instruction shall not inherit his kingdom (Mt 7:21-27; Gal 5:19-21; 1 Cor 6:9-10).¹⁵ Thus, scripture is not the judgment (except when it is on previous generations, i.e., a past judgment with the intention to educate). Rather, functionally, scripture is a graceful “condescension” (συγκατάβασις) on God’s part. This condescension, however, is not only material but also formal. God is educating his children in a way they can understand, that is, through the language of metaphor and not through complicated philosophical jargon that only a few elect can fathom. The intention for this is twofold: first, that the children understand and be found righteous on judgment day, and secondly, that on that day it be understood that “thou [God] art justified in thy sentence and blameless in thy judgment” as the Psalmist declares and the Apostle asserts (Ps 51:4b; Rom 3:4b). There is no way to avoid the ultimate and final judgment. This is precisely what Chrysostom understood, and he spent his life “communicating” the already clear biblical message to those who were in his charge, lovingly but sternly, as a true father would, understanding that all will be judged. As the student of Paul par excellence, he could not have missed his teacher’s injunctions:

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family (πατριά) in heaven and on earth is named... Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord... Masters, do the same to them, and forbear threatening, knowing that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and that there is no partiality with him. (Eph 3:14-15; 6:4, 9)

Put otherwise, Chrysostom was extremely careful in both his sternness and love because he was the teacher who was preparing his students for the final test that someone else would be administering. Consequently and intentionally there was not much difference between his commentaries (on Galatians and on Isaiah 1-8) and his homilies. In both cases scripture was handled in a way that corresponds to what it really is: an instructional address from God to his people in preparation for the test lying ahead—not a theological treatise of some kind (as later many inferred, especially in regard to the letter to the Romans). And, as is clear from the entire scripture, and especially from the Gospel of Matthew, that test will not be on the correctness of credal formulae and their meaning, but rather on whether or not one will have done God’s will.¹⁶

Although Chrysostom proved to be the unchallenged master in this field, his attitude was not unique and was shared with a good number of fathers in the same geographical region of the Roman province of Syria, including Cyril of Jerusalem and Ephrem the Syrian. Their interest was quite different from that of the “Theological School” of Alexandria. Due to the philosophical mood of this city connected with the Royal Library, Christian teaching in Alexandria was drawn, through Philo’s influence, into a “philosophical” discourse à la Plato and later à la Plotinus. Instead of remaining basically an exhortation unto living the Christian life as was mainly the

¹⁵ See also Jesus’ answer “You know the commandments” to the man inquiring of him as to what “do to inherit eternal life” (Mk 10:17-19; Lk 18:18-20).

¹⁶ Mt 7:1-23; 25:1-46.

case in Syria, instead of following the Lord's injunction to teach the divine *torah* to all upcoming generations,¹⁷ and instead of making of themselves disciples in the scriptural "way" (of behavior), the Alexandrians entered into a debate with the Hellenes to convince them of the intellectual superiority of this new "philosophy." By doing so, they transposed the practical "truth of the gospel" (Gal 2:5, 14) as table fellowship under the aegis of the will of the one God¹⁸ into an intellectual system of "philosophical" truth. The λόγος of instruction and healing was transformed into a philosophical λόγος to be debated. This is a far cry from Chrysostom's handling of the true scriptural λόγος:

It is not the management of corn and barley, oxen or sheep, that is now under our consideration, nor any such like matters, but the very body of Jesus. For the Church of Christ, according to Saint Paul, is Christ's body, and he who is entrusted with its care ought to train it up to a state of healthiness, and beauty unspeakable, and to look everywhere, lest any spot or wrinkle, or other like blemish should mar its vigor and comeliness. For what is this but to make it appear worthy, so far as human power can, of the incorruptible and ever-blessed head which is set over it? If they who are ambitious of reaching an athletic condition of body need the help of physicians and trainers, and exact diet, and constant exercise, and a thousand other rules (for the omission of the merest trifle upsets and spoils the whole), how shall they to whose lot falls the care of the body, which has its conflict not against flesh and blood, but against powers unseen, be able to keep it sound and healthy, unless they far surpass ordinary human virtue, and are versed in all healing proper for the soul? Pray art thou not aware that that body is subject to more diseases and assaults than this flesh of ours, is more quickly corrupted, and more slow to recover? And by those who have the healing of these bodies, divers medicines have been discovered, and an apparatus of different instruments, and diet suitable for the sick; and often the condition of the atmosphere is of itself enough for the recovery of a sick man; and there are instances of seasonable sleep having saved the physician all further labor. But in the case before us, it is impossible to take any of these things into consideration; nay there is but one method and way of healing appointed, after we have gone wrong, and that is, *the powerful application of the word.*¹⁹ *This is the one instrument the only diet, the finest atmosphere.* This takes the place of physic, cautery and cutting, and if it be needful to sear and amputate, this is the means which we must use, and if this be of no avail, all else is wasted; with this we both rouse the soul when it sleeps, and reduce it when it is inflamed; with this we cut off excesses, and fill up defect, and perform all manner of other operations which are requisite for the soul's health.²⁰

¹⁷ Deut 4:9

¹⁸ As the catecheses Cyril of Jerusalem—another bishop of the Roman province Syria—were meant to do.

¹⁹ Some translations have "Word," understanding that Chrysostom was referring to the word of Scripture or the word of the gospel. There is no doubt that he was intending to say that the minister is to administer, through his own word[s], the word[s] of God. Indeed, earlier Chrysostom alludes to Ephesians when he writes: "For the Church of Christ, according to Saint Paul, is Christ's body, and he who is entrusted with its care ought to train it up to a state of healthiness, and beauty unspeakable, and to look everywhere, lest any spot or wrinkle, or other like blemish should mar its vigor and comeliness." This is directly taken from Ephesians 5 where Paul states clearly that this action of cleansing care of Christ's body is done "by the washing of water with the word" (v.26). In Ephesians the "word" refers to the word of God (6:17) or the gospel (1:13).

²⁰ *On the Priesthood*, 4.2,3.

The intimate connection between Alexandria, the city of knowledge, and Rome²¹ forced the continuation of the philosophical debate into the new Rome. This explains the theologico-political axis between Alexandria and Constantinople that developed during and after the Constantinian era. Thus began the intra-Christian persecutions between Niceans (Orthodox) and non-Niceans (Arians), under the aegis of the heirs of the same Roman emperors who earlier persecuted those who followed the “way” of Christian living, which culminated in the deplorable post-Chalcedonian split that tore apart the body of Christ, and which was recently repeatedly deemed unnecessary by the 20th and 21st century followers of the two camps.²² So, it is no mere chance that Chrysostom was martyred by Constantinople and Alexandria for preaching the scriptural “word” of instruction and correction.

Antioch, Greece, and Romania

I would like to end by pointing out the Chrysostom legacy I have witnessed in the three realms I have had close ties to over the years, and offer this as a paradigm to be followed in the world today.

Instead of making the theologically correct formulation of the faith or the beauty and richness of the liturgical services the main tenets of Orthodoxy, the Churches of Antioch, Greece, and Romania, each in its own way, gave primacy to the scriptural word of God with which they both fed and corrected their people. Instead of raising the banner of “Orthodoxy,” which leads only to an effort toward proselytism, direct or indirect,²³ these three churches, as undoubtedly other Churches in traditionally Orthodox regions, concentrated on feeding their own flocks with the word of God inscribed in scripture. For almost a century now, the Churches in Greece and Romania have led the way on two levels: the production of scholarly works on scripture, and the utmost seriousness given to preaching. Suffice it to point out the numerous commentaries and monographs published in these two countries throughout the twentieth century and still being published today,²⁴ and the seriousness that is given to the study of biblical languages, Hebrew and Greek. It is the Chrysostom legacy, however, in these two countries that I would like to underscore.

²¹ Due to the Ptolemaic Royal Library that came under Roman imperial auspices.

²² Time and again at Oriental-Orthodox international symposia it was stated that the difference was merely formal and not material.

²³ Unfortunately, this has become the pattern in the countries where “Orthodoxy” is a minority and where results are always understood quantitatively, in the numbers of converts that join the ranks of the Orthodox Church. In fact, this is tantamount to proselytism since the source of such new members is by and large the other Christian denominations.

²⁴ I am convinced that I shall not be offending any of my Romanian teachers and colleagues if, given the time limits, I single out the late Very. Rev. Prof. Vasile Tarnavschi (1859-1945) whose name will forever be linked to the fact that he published already in 1928 and 1930 the impressive 656 page *Introducerea în sfintele cărți ale Testamentului Vechi* followed by the even more impressive 710 page *Arheologia biblică*. I feel honored that, although I did not know him personally, his student and my professor, the late Very Rev. Vladimir Prelipcean gave me his own copies of those two books.

In Greece, the pioneering work of Professor Savas Agourides, the acknowledged “father” of scores of biblical scholars within and without his native country, definitely sets him apart in his commitment to the challenging teaching of the Prophets, Jesus, and Paul. Like Chrysostom before him (whom he loved to quote), he brought scriptural teaching to the social arena and challenged his fellow Greek Orthodox to live up to that teaching in their daily lives. Again, like his predecessor, he paid a price for his witness.²⁵

Long before I met Professor Agourides, I was ready for his challenge due to my very precious experience in Romania during my studies there between 1965 and 1969. Two things marked me deeply. The first was the primacy given to the preaching and teaching of the scriptural word. (Extra-churchly religious organizations and meetings were not allowed during those years.) The church leadership did not choose the easy way out by underscoring the beauty, majesty, and uniqueness of liturgical services or the richness of its patrimony. What that leadership decided for was a double dose of preaching, so that, de facto, the services were indeed the λογικὴ λατρεία of which the Apostle Paul spoke in Rom 12:2 and of which he was the λειτουργός and ἱεουργῶν (Rom 15:15).²⁶ The services were lengthy and unabridged, yet the people were fed twice, making the services even lengthier. The “first” and usually lengthy sermon was given after the scriptural readings, often from the solea. The “second” and equally lengthy sermon was a *cazanie*²⁷ read to the people during the communion of the clergy, as if to say two things: (a) that the real bread of life is God’s scriptural word, and (b) that the fathers, Romanian and otherwise, still feed us through the exposition of that same word. And, at the end of each sermon, to express acknowledgement that they were granted (the bread of) life, the people in unison wished, “May you live long, Father!”²⁸ to their “feeder.”

The second thing I witnessed was another facet of the Chrysostomian approach: the involvement of the church in the social arena. The then Patriarch of the Church in Romania, His Beatitude the late Justinian, along with members of his Holy Synod, including His Beatitude the actual Patriarch Teoctist, spearheaded an impressive spiritual renewal at all levels. Patriarch Justinian will always be remembered, as he himself willed, in conjunction with his monumental twelve volume *Apostolat Social*. Under Patriarch Justinian’s impetus, this Chrysostomian spirit pervaded the life of the Church in Romania also on the intellectual level—witness the monumental and timely doctoral dissertation of Antonie Plămădeală, later Metropolitan of Ardeal: *Biserica slujitoare în Sfânta Scriptură, Sfânta Tradiție și în teologia contemporană*.

²⁵ Recently he was awarded an honorary doctorate from Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology at the end of a symposium in his honor. The papers of this symposium were published in a commemorative volume edited by Theodore G. Stylianopoulos, *Sacred Text and Interpretation*, Holy Cross Orthodox Press, Brookline, Massachusetts, 2006.

²⁶ Indeed the Pauline εὐαγγέλιον was the προσφορά (Rom 15:16).

²⁷ A homily taken from a book of homilies delivered by preachers in earlier times.

²⁸ *Să trăiți părinte!* and often coming from the elderly the more informal *să trăești părinte!*

Last and not least, I would like to refer to the Antiochian arena, the turf of Chrysostom himself. Unlike Orthodoxy in the “New World” which, willy-nilly, has slipped into the road of proselytism, and unlike even European Orthodoxy which is confronted with Western Christianity, Antiochian Orthodoxy has lived for centuries among many other Christian Churches whose head bears the same title as its own, “Patriarch of Antioch and All the East.” These churches all drink from the same fountain that is fed by Chrysostom and his like. Each of these Churches follows the apostolic and Chrysostomian way of feeding their *own* flock with preaching and teaching and living by the word of scripture. The formal School of Theology at Balamand, founded in 1970 by the Greek (Roum) Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch, has blossomed into a full-fledged university with a School of Medicine and the best School of Architecture in the Middle East. Within the Maronite Church, the School of Theology grew into the University of the Holy Spirit at Kaslik and sponsors international symposia on Syriac Christianity. Maronite priest Paul Feghali produced a series of biblical commentaries in Arabic, read by students in all Christian seminaries, and was also behind founding a pan-Christian Society of Biblical Studies which sponsors a yearly International Biblical Conference in Lebanon. Members of this Society are two Orthodox professors of scripture who teach at Balamand University and also teach scripture at the Maronite School of Theology at Kaslik, at the Protestant Near East School of Theology, at the Melkite (Greek Catholic) Seminary, and at the Maronite Seminary for late vocations. This attitude of unity around the scriptural word of God and feeding the people with that same word has brought about a rapprochement between the Greek Orthodox and the Syrian Jacobite Patriarchates of Antioch, which ensures that believers of both communities living in remote areas receive liturgical as well as spiritual attention.

Epilogue

Just as the Prophets and Paul are alive in that they carried and planted the seed of the divine word, so Chrysostom is still alive in his legacy. What is stunning is the way in which Chrysostom emulated his scriptural teachers not only in their teaching but also, as a true disciple ultimately would, in his end. Actually his end was virtually a copy of the classic scriptural story. Just as with the Prophets, Jesus, and Paul, Chrysostom lived by and for the divine word and he died for it, condemned by a gathering of the religious leaders in collusion with the imperial power! May we be deemed to follow his path in this one world of ours!