

The Performative Preaching of John Chrysostom: A Warning from History

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Abstract

This article offers a critical review on John Chrysostom's *Homilies Against the Jews*,¹ first preached in Antioch in 386 CE. They are the supreme example of anti-Judaic writing among the patristic Fathers, and arise out of this author's work on the history of interpretation of anti-Jewish texts in Matthew's Gospel. Other scholars have undertaken to provide an account of John Chrysostom's preaching,² but here I offer my own analysis of his homilies for those who may be only vaguely aware of his antisemitic convictions. The importance of keeping this material in the public eye is to sensitise ourselves to antisemitic currents in Christian history, to be cognisant of the contribution Christians have made to the terrible atrocities perpetrated against the Jews throughout history. Reviewing the sermons of John Chrysostom against the Jews is also to be reminded of the power of the pulpit, and the responsibility of all who preach to perform words that contribute to the peace of God's kingdom, to be ambassadors of reconciliation.

Keywords

John Chrysostom; Jews; antisemitism

Introduction

John Chrysostom, known as 'golden-mouth' for the eloquence of his preaching,³ was accustomed to receiving the adulation of his

¹ I am using the translation, St John Chrysostom, *Adversus Iudaeos Orationes*, based on Migne, *Patriologia Graeca*, vol. 48, Section 20, Opensource <<https://archive.org/details/adversus-judaeos-orationes-st-john-chrysostom>> pp. 844–942. I have also cross-referenced with the translation produced by Mervyn Maxwell, 'Chrysostom's Homilies against the Jews: An English Translation' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Chicago, 1967).

² Wendy Mayer notes that the homilies receive significant attention in more than sixty books, articles, and dissertations across a broad range of languages. See Wendy Mayer, 'Preaching Hatred? John Chrysostom, Neuroscience, and the Jews', in *Revisioning John Chrysostom*, ed. by Chris de Wet and Wendy Mayer (Leiden: Brill, 2019), pp. 58–136 (p. 58).

³ Consider, for example, the eulogy of Hughes Oliphant Old: 'Without doubt the most universally respected of all preachers, the golden mouthed John remains the crowning example

congregation as they clapped and cheered his orations.⁴ Chrysostom, could today, however, also be described as ‘potty mouthed’ for the foul and abusive language he was want to employ when speaking about the Jews. If we ever wonder if preaching has any impact or legacy, the lessons to be learned from Chrysostom’s oratory are sobering. The negative repercussions of the sermons under consideration here have been documented by Stephen Katz, who has noted their inspiration for pagan Nazi antisemitism.⁵ James Parkes denounced these sermons in striking fashion as ‘the most horrible and violent denunciations of Judaism to be found in the writings of a Christian theologian’,⁶ and again, ‘In these discourses there is no sneer too mean, no jibe too bitter for him to fling and the Jewish people.’⁷ Marcel Simon’s estimate of the ‘golden-mouth’ is equally excoriating: ‘Chrysostom’s passion in the cause of anti-Semitism, and the violence of his invective, are without parallel in the literature of the first few centuries.’⁸ He is accused of being the ‘master of anti-Jewish invective’.⁹ It is not an overstatement to say that Chrysostom, in Christian tradition, has divided opinion, sharply.

A number of elements that characterise early Christian polemic against the Jews coalesce in unique fashion in Chrysostom’s

of how the faithful preaching of the word of God ever purifies and enlightens the church so that the Lord of the Church is glorified. Surely there is no one from whom we can learn more about preaching as worship.’ (Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church: Volume 2: The Patristic Age* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 171–172.)

⁴ Homily I, I, (1); Homily VII, VI, (2). The homilies are numbered I–VIII (Roman numerals), have sections I–various (Roman numerals), and paragraphs with Arabic numerals (1), (2), etc., in parentheses. I shall follow this pattern for ease of reference.

⁵ Stephen T. Katz, ‘Ideology, State Power, and Mass Murder/Genocide’, in *Lessons and Legacies: The Meaning of the Holocaust in a Changing World*, ed. by Peter Hayes (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1991), pp. 47–89 (pp. 52–54). Many other have also written about the progress of Christian anti-Jewish activity. See, for example, Wayne Meeks and Robert Wilken, *Jews and Christians in Antioch in the First Four Centuries of the Common Era*, SBL Sources for Biblical Study 13 (Missoula, MT: Scholar’s Press, 1978), pp. 34–36; Marcel Simon, *Verus Israel: Study of the Relations Between Christians and Jews in the Roman Empire, AD 135–425* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1996), pp. 135–236; James Parkes, *The Conflict of the Church and the Synagogue: a Study of the Origins of Antisemitism* (Cleveland: World Publishing, 1961) <[https://hdl-handle-net.dtl.idm.oclc.org/2027/heb01238.0001.001](https://hdl.handle-net.dtl.idm.oclc.org/2027/heb01238.0001.001). EPUB>.

⁶ James Parkes, *Prelude to Dialogue* (Elstree: Vallentine Mitchell, 1969), p. 153.

⁷ Parkes, *The Conflict of the Church and the Synagogue*, p. 163.

⁸ Simon, *Verus Israel*, p. 222.

⁹ Simon, *Verus Israel*, p. 217.

documented sermons. He employs the ancient rhetorical form of *psogos*¹⁰ to propagate tropes of popular antisemitism, air his theological grievances, and mine biblical texts to speak ill of the Jews. While his anti-Jewish polemic is evident throughout his work, his bitterness comes to its zenith in his eight *Homilies Against the Jews*, in Latin *Adversus Judaeus*, which are an extraordinary, personal rant against the people who were, lest we forget, of the same nationality as Jesus.

Chrysostom delivered his sermons in Antioch, in the autumn of 386 CE,¹¹ the immediate purpose being to deter Christians in Antioch who were attracted to Jewish religious culture and customs which compromised, in Chrysostom's mind, loyalty and participation in Christian life and worship in the city. Chrysostom accused these citizens of being 'Judaizers', a moniker which has generated much literature around the question whether the homilies were directed at the Jews, and are anti-Judaic, or at the Judaizers in his own congregation.¹² Robert Wilken has even proposed the title of the sermons be read not as *Against the Jews*, but *Against the Judaizing Christians*.¹³ The content of the sermons, however, suggests that while Chrysostom is attacking some in his own flock, his method is to persuade them of the Jews' perfidy, and for this reason they should have no engagement with them. To paraphrase Tertullian, what, for the Christian, has Bethlehem to do with Jerusalem?¹⁴

A significant development for understanding the background to Chrysostom's homilies against the Jews was the coming to imperial power of Julian the Apostate,¹⁵ whose eighteen-month reign from 361

¹⁰ Meaning, invective, vitriol, blame, etc. See Wendy Mayer and Pauline Allen, *John Chrysostom* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 148; Robert L. Wilken, *John Chrysostom and the Jews: Rhetoric and Reality in the Late Fourth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), pp. 112–116; Alberto J. Quiroga Puertas, 'Psogos: The Rhetoric of Invective in 4th Century CE Imperial Speeches', in *Brill's Companion to the Reception of Ancient Rhetoric*, ed. by Sophia Papaioannou, Andreas Serafim, and Michael Edwards (Leiden: Brill, 2021), pp. 170–191 <<https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004470057>>.

¹¹ See Mayer and Allen, *John Chrysostom*, p. 148.

¹² Meeks and Wilken, *Jews and Christians in Antioch*, p. 31.

¹³ See Wilken, *John Chrysostom and the Jews*, p. 68.

¹⁴ See Tertullian, *Prescription Against Heretics*.

¹⁵ See Peter van Nuffelen, 'The Christian Reception of Julian', in *A Companion to Julian the Apostate* ed. by Hans-Ulrich Wiemar and Stefan Rebenich (Leiden: Brill, 2020), pp. 360–397 <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004416314_013>; Wilken, *Chrysostom and the Jews*, pp. 158–160.

to 363 CE had an egregious impact on relations between Jews and Christians in Antioch. To deal with an uprising on the eastern border of the empire, Julian moved his living from Constantinople to Antioch in 362, arriving in the city on 18 July. Before launching a military campaign against the Sassanids, however, he devoted time to instituting a series of religious reforms which pitted Jews against Christians. Having converted from Christianity to paganism around the age of twenty, Julian believed the fortunes of the empire depended on a revival of the ancient religions and suppression of the newly dominant faith, Christianity. To defeat the church, therefore, he appointed the pagan priest Theodorus to organise a programme of rebuilding pagan temples in Asia as a means of reinstating pagan rites, and it also served his purpose to restore the fortunes of the Jews, including a plan to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem.¹⁶ In the event, the rebuilding was not successful, possibly the result of an earthquake, and the predictable reaction of the Christians proved to be a double blow, since they interpreted this as a sign of God's siding with their religion and divine opposition to both Julian and the Jews.¹⁷ Julian, keen to provide support for ancestral rituals, also instructed the Jews to resume the traditional sacrifices of Judaism, but again this was not realised on account of the reply from the Jews that sacrifice was only permissible in the sanctuary in Jerusalem. The anti-Christian policies of Julian made unusual allies of pagans and Jews, the link between them being Julian's preferment of ancient religions against the new.¹⁸

To the relief of Christians in Antioch, Julian's reign was destined to be brief as he was mortally wounded in battle with the Sassanids at Samarra, near Maranga, on 26 June 363, to be replaced by Emperor Jovian, who re-established Christianity's privileged position throughout the empire. Shortly after Julian's death, Christians in Antioch began to display increasing hostility towards the Jews, a backlash to Julian's attempts to use the Jews as a weapon against the church. Twenty-three years after Julian's death, John Chrysostom, newly ordained into the

¹⁶ This event is discussed in *Homily V*, see below.

¹⁷ See Sebastian P. Brock 'The Rebuilding of the Temple Under Julian: A New Source', *Palestine Exploration Quarterly*, 108, no. 2 (1976), 103–107 <<https://doi.org/10.1179/peq.1976.108.2.103>>.

¹⁸ Meeks and Wilken, *Jews and Christians*, p. 29.

priesthood, opened his ‘golden mouth’ to begin his series of eight homilies against the Jews.¹⁹

Homilies Against the Jews/Judaizers

The intensity of bitterness towards the Jews common in Chrysostom’s preaching means it is not only the Jewish religion, but also the people that are commonly denounced in his sermons.²⁰ Furthermore, his anti-Jewish rhetoric is found not only in his sermons, but elsewhere in his writings; for example, where he says, ‘The Christian must follow the example of the martyrs who, because they loved Christ, hated the Jews, for it is not possible to love the victim without hating his murderers.’²¹ Elsewhere he writes, ‘How can anyone have anything to do with these miserable, demon-possessed creatures, brought up on crime and murder? [...] Shun them like filth and a universal plague.’²² I would suggest it is only someone with a personal, extreme antipathy towards a people, not merely their religion, who could speak such words as these.²³

The homilies against the Jews were occasional sermons, prepared in a hurry as a series of Jewish festivals was about to begin in Antioch and John was troubled at the thought of Christians participating in the Jewish rites and rituals. The purpose of the sermons was to inspire the people to a hatred of all things Jewish, to persuade his congregation to stay away from Jews, Jewish festivals, Scriptures, and fasts, and motivate them to prevent any, who were so inclined, from attending. John’s rhetoric was neither unprecedented, nor short-lived in its impact. It had a context, which can be traced back to the New Testament,²⁴ and

¹⁹ See Meeks and Wilken, *Jews and Christians*, p. 30.

²⁰ I share the view, defended by Wendy Mayer, that Chrysostom’s sermons cannot be exonerated from an *ad hominem* intention. See Wendy Mayer, ‘Preaching Hatred? John Chrysostom, Neuroscience, and the Jews’, p. 59.

²¹ Cited by Simon, *Verus Israel*, p. 223.

²² Cited by Simon, *Verus Israel*, p. 218.

²³ The words of Steven T. Katz come to mind, as he writes, with Chrysostom in view, ‘Hate is a sacramental activity. To hate Jews is for the Church Fathers a Christian *mitsvah*. Make no mistake — every major Church Father is a great hater of Judaism and the Jewish people.’ See Katz, ‘Ideology, State Power, and Mass Murder/Genocide’, p. 51.

²⁴ The literature on this theme is vast, but see for example, *Anti-Judaism and the Gospels*, ed. by W. R. Farmer (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press, 1999); D. R. A. Hare, ‘The Rejection of the Jews in the Synoptic Gospels and Acts’, in *Anti-Semitism and the Foundations of Christianity*, ed. by A. Davies

created a context for others to attack Jews in word and person, and this is one of the reasons his words should not be forgotten or too easily excused.

Homily I

The feasts of Trumpets, Tabernacles, and associated fasts²⁵ are drawing near, and an upsurge in Jewish religious fervour is endangering Christian loyalty. First, as a faithful shepherd, Chrysostom warns his sheep not to mix with the Jews, then, as a doctor, who recognises the onset of plague, Chrysostom warns his people to keep away from danger, for ‘this is what physicians do’.²⁶

His first point of attack concerns the scandalous manner in which the Jewish feasts and festivals are kept, which are not with humility and sobriety, but ‘dancing with bare feet in the marketplace, [...] with kettledrums, with lyres, with harps, and with other instruments’.²⁷ The risk to one’s reputation, however, is the least of a Christian’s concern, because, more importantly, God has declared that he hates the festivals of the Jews (Amos 5:21),²⁸ and has demonstrated his rejection of festivals and sacrifices, along with his forsaking of the Jews as a people, by allowing the destruction of the Jerusalem temple by barbarians.²⁹

The scandalous behaviour of the Jews, he warns, is of a piece with what they do in the synagogue, which they have turned into a theatre where ‘the effeminate and prostitutes perform’.³⁰ It is ‘a den of robbers and lodging for wild beasts [...] a dwelling of demons’,³¹ so why would Christians want to go there?

(New York: Paulist Press, 1979), pp. 27–47; R. R. Reuther, *Faith and Fratricide* (Minnesota: Seabury Press, 1974).

²⁵ Homily I, I, (5).

²⁶ Homily I, I, (6); I, IV, (3).

²⁷ Homily I, II, (7); I, VII, (2). Dancing with bare feet indicates that the fast of Yom Kippur was imminent. See Wilken, *Chrysostom and the Jews*, p. 75.

²⁸ Homily I, VII, (1–2).

²⁹ Homily I, VII, (4).

³⁰ Homily I, II, (7); II, III, (4).

³¹ See also Homily VIII, VIII, (7–8).

The attraction of the synagogue may seem puzzling to us today, but the appeal to Judaizers was the antiquity of the Jewish religion, exemplified by the scrolls of the Law and Prophets they preserved.³² But what good do the scrolls serve the Jews, Chrysostom asks, since they do not read them, and worse, they fail to see Christ foretold in them, thus missing their very purpose.³³ Sacred books do not make a place holy. So, turning to the Judaizers directly, he asks, ‘Why do you reverence that place, must you not despise it, hold it in abomination, run away from it?’³⁴

We understand something of Chrysostom’s pleading with the Judaizers when we realise that for him, the denunciation of the Jews is the obverse side of the coin to their rejection of Jesus. For example, he laments, ‘Here the slayers of Christ gather together, here the cross is driven out, here God is blasphemed, here the Father is ignored, here the Son is outraged, here the grace of the Spirit rejected.’³⁵ It follows, therefore, that it is impossible that those who have tasted the grace of Christ could find any delight in the rituals of his killers.

Lastly, Chrysostom turns his attention to the Jews themselves. Vilifying the Jewish people in the most outrageous and deprecatory terms he can conjure, he attacks the Jews with preaching that is unashamedly *ad hominem*. Jews are ‘pitiful and miserable’,³⁶ and no one should be offended at calling them ‘pitiably and miserable’, for they are ungrateful, and have spurned the many blessings and gifts God has bestowed upon them. Supreme in their ingratitude was their failure to recognise and embrace ‘the morning Sun of Justice, but they thrust aside its rays and still sit in darkness’.³⁷ Having rejected Christ, the *prodigal* sons ‘fell to kinship with dogs’, and furthermore, ‘they became dogs, and we became the Children’.³⁸ Here the preacher’s tactics are transparent, *dehumanisation*³⁹ of his enemies, with a side-order of replacement

³² See Homily VI, VI, (8).

³³ Homily I, V, (2–4).

³⁴ Homily I, III, (1); I, III, (3); I, IV, (2); I, V, (2); I, VI, (2).

³⁵ Homily I, VI, (3); see also VI, VI, (7).

³⁶ Homily I, I, (5); I, II, (1)

³⁷ Homily I, II, (1).

³⁸ Homily I, II, (2).

³⁹ See Katz, ‘Ideology, State Power and Mass Murder/Genocide’, pp. 50–52.

theology,⁴⁰ both constructs that would pay forward into medieval antisemitism with deadly effects.

As if to justify his own intemperate rhetoric, he reminds the congregation that the Jews were the target of their own prophet, Jeremiah, when he complained ‘you broke your yoke and burst your bonds’, which, in Chrysostom’s estimation, ‘is the crime of untamed beasts, who are uncontrolled and reject rule’.⁴¹ On he goes, with bitter invective, saying that ‘the Jews themselves are demons [...] they sacrificed their own sons and daughters to demons’.⁴² The Jews ‘live for their bellies, they gape for the things of this world, their condition is not better than that of pigs or goats because of their wanton ways and excessive gluttony’.⁴³

The worst crime of the Jews, is of course, their response to their Messiah, Jesus. It is early into the sermon, but Chrysostom wheels out the ‘big gun’ trope of the Jews as Christ-killers: they had the prophets, and all the benefits of Scripture, nevertheless they ‘crucified him whom the prophets foretold. [...] [B]ut we did worship him of whom they prophesied.’⁴⁴ They shouted, “Crucify him, Crucify him,” “His blood be upon us and our children.”⁴⁵ Since, therefore, they rebelled against the ruler of creation, committed an outrage against God himself, it is folly and madness to have fellowship with these insurrectionists. Finally, what follows from this is even more chilling, as Chrysostom, led on by the logic of his own rhetoric asserts, ‘Although such beasts are unfit for work, *they are fit for killing*. And this is what happened to the Jews [...] they grew fit for slaughter.’⁴⁶ It is impossible to hear these words in a post-holocaust world without a sense of sadness and shame that they were uttered from the pulpit of a Christian church.

⁴⁰ I am drawing here and throughout on Philip Esler’s principles of intergroup conflict theory. See Philip F. Esler, ‘Intergroup Conflict and Matthew 23: Towards Responsible Historical Interpretation of a Challenging Text’, *Biblical Theology Bulletin: Journal of Bible and Culture*, 45, no. 1 (2015), 38–59 <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0146107914564824>>.

⁴¹ Homily I, II (4).

⁴² Homily I, VI, (3), see I, VI, (6–7).

⁴³ Homily I, IV, (1).

⁴⁴ Homily I, II, (1); I, III, (3)

⁴⁵ Homily I, V, (1); I, VII, (5).

⁴⁶ Homily, I, II, (6).

This opening homily is powerful and persuasive in its rhetoric, the ‘coarsest of the sermons’, in the judgement of Mervin Maxwell,⁴⁷ intended to prevent Judaizers from joining Jewish feasts and festivals. He warns those who then do go to the ‘spectacle of the Trumpets, or rush off to the synagogue, or go up to the shrine of Matrona, or take part in fasting, or share in the Sabbath, or observe any other Jewish ritual great or small, I call heaven and earth as my witness that I am guiltless of the blood of all of you’. For those who insist on friendship with Jews, then their pastor has washed his hands of them.

Homily II

Five days before the Jewish fast of Yom Kippur, the second sermon is addressed not directly to Judaizers, and has less to say about the Jews directly than the first homily, but appeals to the faithful believers whom Chrysostom hopes will reach out to their families and neighbours and plead *his cause* with them. He asks them to be ‘fishermen’, and ‘bird hunters’, tracking down with all fearlessness those who are suffering from the disease of a love of Judaism.⁴⁸

The sermon is based on Galatians 5:2–5,⁴⁹ ‘If you be circumcised, Christ will be of no advantage to you,’ taken to mean that a Christian can have no part, whatsoever, with Judaism. In other words, Chrysostom argues, you cannot be a Christian and a Judaizer, it is one or the other, or as Maxwell entitles the sermon, ‘All or Nothing’.⁵⁰

The dangers of Judaizing, therefore, are manifold. First, to embrace one element of the law is to put oneself under the yoke of the whole law. Second, to cling to the law demonstrates a lack of faith and trust in the strength of Christ to free us from our sins, we are hedging our bets. Third, Jewish rites are null and void, because the only place on earth where God ordained Jewish fasts, sacrifices, festivals, and the reading of the law to take place was Jerusalem, but due to idolatry, God

⁴⁷ Maxwell, ‘Chrysostom’s Homilies’, p. lvi.

⁴⁸ Homily II, I, (2–3).

⁴⁹ The text on which the sermon is based is not given but is obvious from the content. See Maxwell, ‘Chrysostom’s Homilies’, p. lvii.

⁵⁰ Maxwell, ‘Chrysostom’s Homilies’, p. lvii.

used the Romans to raze the temple to the ground, and exclude the Jews from the city of Jerusalem. This tragedy means for contemporary Jews that, far from being virtuous, all fasts, festivals, and laws are contrary to God's commands, and are, rather, 'impure' and 'defiled'.⁵¹

This is the nature of the argument Chrysostom makes to persuade the Judaizers, especially women, to keep away from Yom Kippur. It is an argument most scholars regard as utter nonsense and must have appeared 'fantastic' to Jews.⁵² They did not need Palestine, Jerusalem, or the temple to legitimate their rituals, but in this sermon John was not addressing Jews, but Christians, and he knew what arguments would work best for his own flock.

Homily III

'Passover' is the subject of the third sermon, and the target is a small group of Judaizers in the congregation called '*Protopaschites*',⁵³ who were insistent on joining with the Jews to celebrate the festival. Since the date of Passover did not coincide with Easter, the actions of the Judaizers were viewed as disloyal, even treacherous, for this was a purely Jewish occasion.⁵⁴

The sermon is based on 1 Corinthians, and illuminates Paul's plea for unity in the Christian fellowship. Though there were many errors and sins in the Corinthian church, Chrysostom shows that the main concern in the epistle was to confront 'dissent and contentiousness' among the believers.⁵⁵ What Chrysostom has against the Judaizers, therefore, is their unwillingness to submit to their leaders

⁵¹ Homily II. At this point numbering is not possible because this material is contained in a lost segment of the second sermon only recently recovered and translated at the request of Roger Pearse of the Tertullian Project. The text can be found at The Tertullian Project <https://www.tertullian.org/fathers/chrysostom_adversus_judaeos_02_lost_portion.htm>.

⁵² See Wilken, *Chrysostom and the Jews*, p. 151.

⁵³ In the heading to the homily. On the complicated meaning of this term, which defies complete clarity, see Maxwell, 'Chrysostom's Homilies', pp. lxxvii–lxxxii. His meticulous research of their identity is not for the faint-hearted!

⁵⁴ Homily III, I, (2).

⁵⁵ Homily III, II, (3).

and conform to their teaching, by which he means himself in the first place, and heed their warnings of spiritual danger.

Serious though it was, there was more at stake than merely the unity of the local church, since by aligning themselves with the Jews in observing Passover, the Judaizers were rejecting the authority of the Council of Nicaea (325 CE), which had set the authorised date for Easter, and was endorsed in the first canon of the Synod of Antioch in 341 as the accepted practice for the region. The intention of Nicaea, John reminds them, was to unify the church in celebrating the death and resurrection of Christ without any reference to the date of Passover as calculated by the killers of Christ. By ignoring the Nicene decree about Easter, the Judaizers clearly regarded the Jews as wiser than the Fathers of the church who gathered from all parts of the world,⁵⁶ and for this reason, Chrysostom does not accuse them of heresy, but indicts them on the charge of schism.⁵⁷

Returning to a theme developed in Homily II, Chrysostom mocks the *Protoschites* for their foolishness, for failing to realise that Passover celebrated outside Jerusalem has no legitimacy or efficacy. He repeats that God destroyed Jerusalem to wean the Jews off the rituals and observances of Judaism, and therefore it is folly to join the very rites God has terminated.⁵⁸

Since he is addressing the Judaizers in this sermon, there is less attack on the Jews, though some words of insult about the nation are still to be found here, accusing them of slaughtering their children, sacrificing them to demons, being hard of heart, senseless and despisers.⁵⁹ It is almost as if Chrysostom cannot help himself, as if it is a reflex action to spontaneously disparage the Jewish people.

⁵⁶ Homily III, III, (4–6).

⁵⁷ Nicaea, influenced by the practice of the Alexandrian church, decreed that the church would make its own calculation of the vernal equinox, independent of Jewish calculations, and that Easter would be celebrated on the first Sunday after the first full moon following the vernal equinox. See Maxwell, 'Chrysostom's Homilies', p. lxix.

⁵⁸ Homily III, III, (7).

⁵⁹ Homily III, III, (8); III, V, (7).

Homily IV

The Jewish fast of Yom Kippur is ten days away, and inspires the fourth sermon in which, ‘with all the vulgar cunning that could be mustered’,⁶⁰ Chrysostom attacks the Jews as ‘the most miserable and wretched of all men, [...] more dangerous than any wolves’.⁶¹ The purpose of the sermon is, once again, to discourage Christian participation in Jewish rituals and John has in view ‘those who seem to belong to our ranks although they observe the Jewish rites’.⁶² These people are more to be condemned than Jews themselves, and speaking directly to them says, ‘I am exhorting you to flee from that accursed and unlawful fast.’⁶³

Two arguments are used to support the central thesis that the fasts are ‘unlawful’, and therefore to be avoided by Christians. First, God’s will and word about any matter is decisive in determining whether an action is virtuous or sinful:

When God commands, you must not question too much the nature of the action, you must only obey. [...] Therefore, always look into the decrees of God before you consider the nature of your own actions. Whenever you find something which accords with His decree, approve that — and only that.⁶⁴

This principle is now applied to the fasts of the Jews, and each must make their own judgement on the matter, whether God approves of what they do, or not.⁶⁵ Chrysostom is in no doubt that the Jews act contrary to the laws and commands of God, and fast in violation of his decrees.⁶⁶ In particular, John restates his familiar argument that God instructed the Jews to celebrate fasts and festivals in Jerusalem, and there only.⁶⁷

The second argument was from precedent, and Chrysostom recounts the experience of the Jews in Babylonian exile, cut off from Jerusalem, who, in obedience to the law refrained from offering

⁶⁰ Katz, *Ideology, State Power and Mass Murder/Genocide*, p. 50.

⁶¹ Homily IV, I, (1–2).

⁶² Homily IV, III, (4, 8).

⁶³ Homily IV, I, (5).

⁶⁴ Homily IV, II, (2, 7).

⁶⁵ Homily IV, III, (3).

⁶⁶ Homily IV, IV, (2).

⁶⁷ Homily IV, IV, (3–7).

sacrifices, worship, and observing festivals.⁶⁸ Knowledge of their history should cause the Jews of his own day to cease from ritual, since they too are without a temple or access to Jerusalem, but since they continue to fast, how do they imagine they can avoid being cursed and defiled?⁶⁹ Furthermore, how can Christians think there is virtue in joining with them in their disobedience?

In this sermon, the undercurrent of John's anti-Jewish prejudice is strongly evident. The Jews are a wayward people who, from the outset, God tried to pacify with sacrifices that he did not desire, and have no essential meaning or purpose. The Jews are steeped in disobedience, never listening to God's decrees, or obeying his commands, but making their own judgements about what is virtuous. They do not heed God's word, or discern his actions in history such as the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple, thus they habitually do the opposite of what God wills to be done.

For this reason, the sermon ends with a customary plea to the congregation not to be indifferent about those who meet with Jews, but to rouse themselves to rescue their Judaizing friends. He asks, 'If you look the other way when so many souls are perishing, how will you find confidence to stand before the judgement seat of Christ?'⁷⁰

Homily V

The fifth sermon⁷¹ is an argument from prophecy that the Jerusalem temple will never be rebuilt, and the Jews will never return to their former way of life.⁷² In some respects, the sermon is an elaboration of points made in the first sermon about the destruction of the temple, and sermon four about the indispensable nature of the temple to Jewish worship, which taken together delegitimised the feasts and festivals of contemporary Jews, and made the connivance of Judaizers in Jewish rituals absurd.

⁶⁸ Homily IV, IV, (9).

⁶⁹ Homily IV, V, (5).

⁷⁰ Homily IV, VII, (2, 7–8).

⁷¹ The longest sermon in the series, by some distance, almost twice as long as the others.

⁷² Homily V, I, (6).

The ‘proof’ that the temple will never be rebuilt consists of citing the incontestable testimony of Jesus in Luke 21:24 that Jerusalem will be trodden down until the time of the Gentiles is fulfilled, by which is meant the consummation of the world. John considered this a prediction the temple would be devastated and completely disappear,⁷³ but the Jews, on account of Christ being their enemy and regarding him as merely human,⁷⁴ do not believe his words to be prophecy, and maintain a hope of return and restoration.

Chrysostom’s response is to show from history how prophecies made by Jesus were fulfilled, just as predicted. For example, the woman who anointed the feet of Jesus was told that her deed would be recounted wherever the gospel was preached, in memory of her, and it was so. This is proof that Jesus is divine, and his word true.⁷⁵ Jesus predicted the building of the church upon the rock and the gates of hell would not prevail against it. Despite unprecedented persecution against the church, history has confirmed the truth of these words.⁷⁶

Lastly, John comes to his point, that Jesus ‘also predicted that the temple would be destroyed, that Jerusalem would be captured, and that the city would no longer be the city of the Jews as it had been in the past’.⁷⁷ Furthermore, three centuries have passed since the capture of Jerusalem, and there is not the remotest chance of any change in the fortune of the city, or the Jews.⁷⁸ This contrasts with previous captivities, which were predicted to begin and their duration specified, but the current exclusion from Jerusalem, though predicted to begin has no promised end, neither has a promise been given that the city or temple will ever be restored.⁷⁹

To emphasise the futility of the Jewish hope of a restored city and rebuilt temple, three thwarted attempts to retake the city and reconstruct the temple are rehearsed.⁸⁰ The first (132–136 CE), was

⁷³ Homily V, I, (6).

⁷⁴ Homily V, III, (2).

⁷⁵ Homily V, II, (2).

⁷⁶ Homily V, II, (8); V, III, (7).

⁷⁷ Homily V, III, (13).

⁷⁸ Homily V, IV, (1).

⁷⁹ Homily V, X, (7).

⁸⁰ Homily V, X, (7).

during the time of Hadrian and resulted in a catastrophic annihilation of the Jews and obliteration of Jerusalem. The second was during the time of Constantine, but again was unsuccessful.⁸¹ Julian's recent attempt to rebuild the temple likewise proved an impossible venture⁸² because God had destroyed the city and decreed it would not be rebuilt. Did the Jews not know that 'what [God] has destroyed and wishes to stay destroyed, no man can rebuild'.⁸³ The irony of this last effort to resurrect the temple was that the Jews supported the emperor in his ambitions, and justified their cooperation with a pagan ruler on the basis that sacrifices were not permitted outside of Jerusalem.⁸⁴ This was precisely the point Chrysostom had been arguing in previous sermons, and now the Jews themselves confirm his contention against the Judaizers. The Jews had given the game away, that their ritual observances away from the temple were invalid and worthless.

Three efforts to rebuild a God-destroyed temple is evidence that the Jews 'resist the holy Spirit' and work against God's declared purposes. But, says John, 'that is the kind of people you are. From the beginning you have been shameless and obstinate, ready to fight at all times against obvious facts.'⁸⁵ Because history works according to the providence of God, it should be obvious to all who can read the signs that Judaism is destined to fail and Christianity to flourish.⁸⁶

This extraordinarily long sermon has less than usual to say directly about the Jews, but insults are not entirely absent. The Jews are 'arrogant and obstinate', and Jeremiah exposed Jewish use of cannibalism, referring to 'women [who] boiled their own children', and as a people, they fight against God.⁸⁷ This last point means that those who have sided with the Jews have pitted themselves against God, hence again he ends with a plea to loyal hearers to 'rescue your brothers', 'set

⁸¹ Homily V, XI, (3). There is no historical record of an attempt to rebuild the temple at this time, though Chrysostom says it is remembered by the old among them. See Wilken, *Chrysostom and the Jews*, p. 157.

⁸² By all accounts this was due to an earthquake. Homily V, XI, (9).

⁸³ Homily V, XI, (6).

⁸⁴ Homily V, XI, (5).

⁸⁵ Homily V, XII, (1).

⁸⁶ Homily V, XII, (2).

⁸⁷ Homily V, IV, (4); V, VI, (2); V, IX, (3); V, XII, (1).

them free from their error', because all that he has said was not for the benefit of the faithful, but for those who are sick.⁸⁸

Homily VI

The theme of the sixth sermon was the feast of the martyrs, and revisiting accounts of past persecutions of the church has aroused Chrysostom, who is 'stripped and ready' to enter the arena against the Jews.⁸⁹ Changing the metaphor, he likens himself to a wild beast who has acquired a taste for human blood and, being insatiable, his appetite for homiletical battle against the Jews has intensified.⁹⁰ In this extraordinary imagery, projecting the conflict between church and synagogue into the realm of mythology,⁹¹ Chrysostom flips the metaphor again, and likens the Jews to wild beasts who tormented and killed the martyrs in the arena. The martyrs, he assures us, will now be listening in as a great cloud of witnesses, enjoying his sermon, for they too 'have a special hatred for the Jews', since they killed Christ whom the martyrs loved even unto death.⁹²

With rhetorical bravura, the sermon moves next to address the Jews directly, and asks why they are suffering more in this moment than at any other time in history. 'Tell me this,' John questions, 'Why did you have great honour from God when your sins were greater? Now that your sins are less serious, he has turned himself altogether away from you and has given you over to unending disgrace.'⁹³ What is the reason for this present calamitous situation?

The simple answer is that the Jews have sinned. The Jews have always sinned, and 'it is not only now that your people are living sin filled lives', it has been their habit from the beginning.⁹⁴ Even after the many miracles God performed in rescuing them from Egypt they worshipped a calf idol, tried repeatedly to kill Moses, blasphemed God,

⁸⁸ Homily V, XII, (12–13).

⁸⁹ Homily VI, I, (5).

⁹⁰ Homily VI, I, (1–2).

⁹¹ See Katz, 'Ideology, State Power and Mass Murder/Genocide', p. 49.

⁹² Homily VI, I, (7).

⁹³ Homily VI, II, (8).

⁹⁴ Homily VI, II, (5).

learned the rites of Baal Peor, sacrificed their children to demons, and engaged in every kind of ungodliness and sin.⁹⁵ Yet, in spite of all their wickedness and waywardness, God continued to favour, protect, and bless them, why? And if God restored them after past failings, why, despite their strict observances in the present age, are they currently without rescue and devoid of hope?

The answer again is simple, but no less devastating: it is because the Jews had a ‘mad rage against Christ’, and they had slain Christ.⁹⁶ Appealing first to his own people he asserts, ‘They did lift their hands against the Master,’ and speaking over their heads to the Jews he accuses, ‘You did spill his precious blood.’ Now in full oratorical flow he decrees that for this crime there is no atonement, no excuse, no defence.⁹⁷ This recurring theme in Chrysostom is the unsurpassable sin, the unpardonable sin, and is the reason why the Jews will be punished without end. Unrelenting, Chrysostom repeats, ‘You committed outrage on him who saves and rules the world; now you are enduring this great punishment. Is this not the reason?’⁹⁸ Again he says,

You are in the grip of your present sufferings not because of the sins committed in the rest of your lives but because of that one reckless act. [...] Now, after the cross, although you seem to be living a more moderate life, you endure a greater vengeance and have none of your former blessings.⁹⁹

God has turned his back on the Jews, which is a terrible fate, not least because history cannot be reversed, there never can be a ‘before the cross’, and therefore the Jews are under an inescapable judgement.

If the Jews want proof that God has abandoned them, if they want evidence that what Chrysostom is saying is true, then history is a true and faithful witness; the current circumstances in which the Jews find themselves tell their own story. History is revelation.¹⁰⁰ The destruction of the city of Jerusalem, the desolation of the temple, exile of the people, and all the other misfortunes, which God, not men, has

⁹⁵ Homily VI, II, (6).

⁹⁶ Homily VI, IV, (5).

⁹⁷ Homily VI, II, (10).

⁹⁸ Homily VI, III, (2).

⁹⁹ Homily VI, III, (3); VI, IV, (7).

¹⁰⁰ Homily VI, V, (5). My phrase, not Chrysostom’s.

unleashed upon the Jews, time without end, are irrefutable. God has deserted them,¹⁰¹ and the reason has God left them is clear: 'Is it not obvious that he hated you [the Jews] and turned his back on you once and for all?'¹⁰²

The application of this sermon takes the form of a warning to Antiochene Christians that the contemporary patriarchs in the city are 'hucksters and merchants and filled with all iniquity'.¹⁰³ The rituals of the Jews are a sham, the scrolls of the Law and Prophets do not make the synagogue holy, the ark in which their scrolls are kept is no more sacred than a box bought in the market,¹⁰⁴ and their rituals and observances serve only to provoke God's wrath.¹⁰⁵ Jewish worship is like shadow boxing, it is pretence, it has no reality, ritual without authenticity, ceremonies without divine sanction, so why would anyone who understands Scripture, as Chrysostom does, associate with these people.

This sermon is as bitter as any in the series, and the summons to action predictable. Let those who would be a temple of the Lord, if they see someone tempted to Judaizing, or running to the synagogue, do all in their power to rescue them and persuade them of the error of their ways. If necessary, bring them in your home and force them as means of breaking their Jewish fast.¹⁰⁶

Homily VII

Chrysostom was in combative mood when he launched into the seventh sermon, and expresses his delight in the verbal battle with the Jews which the sermon series has become. He cannot get enough of this theme, and for those who might be tiring of his spiteful vitriol he warns, 'The man who does not have enough of loving Christ will never have enough of fighting against those who hate Christ.'¹⁰⁷ The fight must go

¹⁰¹ Homily VI, III, (7); VI, IV, (4).

¹⁰² Homily VI, IV, (4).

¹⁰³ Homily VI, V, (6).

¹⁰⁴ Homily VI, VII, (2).

¹⁰⁵ Homily VI, VI, (9).

¹⁰⁶ Homily VI, VII, (10).

¹⁰⁷ Homily VII, I, (1).

on for these reasons: the Jews are still holding their feasts and tents are even now pitched in the city ready for the festivities; and the tents are no better than whore houses; and the Jews still fight against God and resist the Holy Spirit. They carry on as if they lived in the old dispensation, so the seventh sermon has one aim: ‘Let me prove that both the sacrifices of the Jews and their priesthood have completely ended and that day will never again return to their former status (or usage).’¹⁰⁸

Proof that observance of the Mosaic Law was temporary takes the form of a reprise of the obscure ritual of the ‘water of conviction’ set out in Numbers 5:12–28, an ordeal for women suspected of adultery but impossible to perform since the time of the exile. Add to this David’s words confirming the end of the sacrificial system when he announced ‘sacrifice and offerings you did not desire’,¹⁰⁹ and the *coup de grâce* is inevitable as Chrysostom declares that Christ has offered a once for all sacrifice for sin, a perfect atonement which has abolished the old system of the Jews.¹¹⁰ There is no sense, in Chrysostom’s thinking, that Christianity fulfils or builds on God’s covenant with the Jews, it is simply a case of the imperfect former being ended by the perfection of the latter, it is replacement theology, pure and simple.¹¹¹

The sermon finishes with a familiar exhortation to go out and rescue those not present, who are negligent, sick, and cut off from the truth, who ‘side with the Jews’.¹¹²

Homily VIII

The eighth homily coincides with the end of the Jewish fast, what Chrysostom calls ‘a drunken orgy!’¹¹³ The Jews do not use wine to get drunk because they are deranged, out of their minds, unable to see aright, their speech is disgraceful, and to cap it all, as with all who are

¹⁰⁸ Homily VII, II, (3). See translation in Maxwell, ‘Chrysostom’s Homilies’, p. 205.

¹⁰⁹ Homily VII, II, (4). Taken from Ps 40:6.

¹¹⁰ Homily VII, III, (1).

¹¹¹ See Homily VII, V, (10).

¹¹² Homily VII, VI, (10).

¹¹³ Homily VIII, I, (1) Maxwell’s translation, ‘Chrysostom’s Homilies’, p. 230.

inebriated, they are ‘drunk but do not know they are drunk’.¹¹⁴ Chrysostom’s attention in this homily, however, is not the Jews *per se*, but the ‘many’ Christians who joined their fast, regarded now as comrades fallen on the battlefield, soldiers wounded in battle, brothers and sisters needing rescue and recovery, who by God’s grace will be attended by physicians of the soul and restored to health.¹¹⁵

The good news of this sermon is that no one is beyond the reach of salvation. Adam and Cain are set forth as examples of grace, who must inspire the faithful to care for the wounded, and cure them of their illnesses. They must play the role of the Good Samaritan for their brothers (*sic*) who have fallen among the Jews:

Those who have just observed the fast have fallen among robbers, the Jews. And the Jews are more savage than any highwaymen; they do greater harm to those who have fallen among them. [...] The Jews have mortally hurt their victim’s soul, inflicted on it ten thousand wounds, and left it in the pit of ungodliness.¹¹⁶

Of course, the parable has been inverted, so a Jew is no longer the victim of unmerited violence but the assailant of Christians; a predictable twisting of Scripture for John to perform.

Another reason Christians have been associating with Jews is to seek healing for illnesses and ailments from Jewish healers. This is condemned by Chrysostom, who asks, ‘What excuse will we have if for our fevers and hurts we run to the synagogues, if we summon into our own house these sorcerers, these dealers in witchcraft?’¹¹⁷

Recognising, however, the desperation of sickness as a motivation to join with Jews, John outlines a strategy for winning back those who have done so which consists of placing the Christians in an impossible position: the person should be asked, ‘Tell me, do you approve of the Jews for crucifying Christ, for blaspheming him as they do, and for calling him a lawbreaker.’¹¹⁸

¹¹⁴ Homily VIII, I, (4).

¹¹⁵ The mention of ‘many’, which is an interesting detail, is at Homily VIII, IV, (5).

¹¹⁶ Homily VIII, III, (10).

¹¹⁷ Homily VIII, VI, (6).

¹¹⁸ Homily VIII, V, (4).

The implication of the logic is obvious; no illness is so great that a believer would consort with the Christicides, even if it cost one's life. To seek help from a Jew is to put in danger one's very soul, it is to contaminate oneself with sin, it is to seek temporary respite at the risk of eternal condemnation. Get rid of those 'foul sorcerers', is Chrysostom's advice to his flock, for their healing is poison. The synagogues to which people go for healing are 'wicked places', the dwelling of demons and evil forces.¹¹⁹

The homily concludes with another appeal to those who have remained faithful to go out and rescue the fallen, cure those who are sick with Judaizing, put right those feeble in their faith, just as Christ the Good Shepherd went out to rescue and save the lost and perishing.¹²⁰

Conclusion

John Chrysostom is widely regarded as one of the greatest preachers of Christian history, but in this article I have sought to highlight a dark theme that occupied his attention, namely his campaign of homiletic vitriol against the Jews. His prejudices and pernicious words about the Jews in contemporary Antioch and as a historic people, fall roughly into three main categories. First, accusations *ad hominem* which teach that Jews are demon possessed, sorcerers, God-forsaken, are dogs, naturally immoral, drunkards, gluttons, covetous, robbers, dishonest, compulsive idolaters, cannibals, infanticides, cursed and defiled, kin to Sodomites, obstinate, shameless, hated by God and hated by John.¹²¹ The second group of complaints is targeted at the religious institutions and traditions of the Jews: synagogues are a 'den of robbers', full of wild beasts, the synagogue is a brothel, a theatre, full of wild beasts and a haunt of demons, the temple is destroyed and their worship is dishonouring to God, the law and sacrificial cult is finished in the economy of salvation, priests are hucksters, and the priesthood is ended, Judaism is finished and has been replaced by Christianity. Thirdly, John attacks the current religious practices of the Jews, declaiming that sacrifices and offerings

¹¹⁹ Homily VIII, VIII, (7).

¹²⁰ Homily VIII, IX, (3).

¹²¹ The hatred is stated in Homily VI, VI, (11).

are worthless since the temple and its altar are gone, rituals such as Passover are meaningless noise, pilgrimage to Jewish sites is pointless, and festivals are simply occasions for impurity and defilement.

The three-pronged attack Chrysostom launched on the Jews means that on the one hand the Jews become meta-human, assuming the role of enemies of God, Christ-killers, and therefore guilty of deicide, and as God's opponents they are essentially satanic. On the other hand, they are sub-human, regarded as dogs. On both counts Chrysostom has justified his call to kill the Jews.¹²²

By wrapping his words in a series of sermons, John marshals Scripture, God's words, against the Jews, and the preacher assumes the mantle of divine authority for his deadly prejudice. His manipulation of the Bible against the Jews gives *his* words the weight of 'God says', and Scripture is confirmed by history, so his declamations must be true.

In preaching these words John Chrysostom was sowing seeds of a deadly poison which would yield a harvest one hundred-fold, reaped repeatedly throughout history, even to our own day. It is for this reason that we must not lose sight of this record of Christian homilies which we might wish had never flowed from the 'golden mouth'.

¹²² See Katz, 'Ideology, State Power and Mass Murder/Genocide', p. 51.