

*John Chrysostom on Divine Pedagogy: The Coherence of His Theology and Preaching*,  
by David Rylaarsdam. Oxford University Press, 2014. 317 + xxvi pp. Hb., \$93.92.  
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### KEYWORDS

Athanasius, Diodore of Tarsus, John Chrysostom, Origen, patristics

David Rylaarsdam's Chrysostom is not the Chrysostom of the Eastern Church or the Chrysostom who exerts an almost talismanic presence in *The Pilgrim's Tale*, but a distinctly Western Chrysostom. This is apparent on the very first page of the book which contains appreciations of the church father by Aquinas, Erasmus, and Calvin. Rylaarsdam argues that the patriarch adapted his sermons to the needs of his parishioners in imitation of God's adapting Himself to the needs and capacities of His children and so became an ideal pedagogue. This, it is suggested, is one reason for his seeming lack of theological sophistication which has troubled recent scholars, among them Georges Florovsky. He preached to the lowest common denominator and resented having to do so. Rylaarsdam's book is therefore a book about adaptation or adaptability (*synkatabasis*). Adaptability is not the first thing one thinks of in regard to Chrysostom whose troubled relationship with the empress Eudoxia needs no introduction. The study can thus be seen as a welcome one, and a contrast to Liebeschuetz' recent portrayal of the emotional, unbending, and fragile patriarch.

Rylaarsdam emphasizes the non-Antiochene nature of Chrysostom's worldview despite his Syrian background. He shared more the Alexandrian concern with the divinity of Christ than the Antiochene affinity for His humanity, though Rylaarsdam unnecessarily questions the validity of these categories. He was in fact the only Antiochene to escape censure by the Second Council of Constantinople which attempted to placate the strongly Alexandrian Monophysites. In his biblical interpretation Chrysostom further abandoned the uncompromising literalism of his mentor Diodore of Tarsus to focus on theōria, the contemplation of Scripture's deeper meaning. The five foolish virgins of Jesus' parable for him sinned by lacking the oil of charity and almsgiving. It would have been felicitous to have been given more information on Chrysostom's Christology and hermeneutics, but these topics are abandoned for the sake of the main argument.

Philo, Origen, and Athanasius employed the concept of adaptability before Chrysostom but not to the extent that he did; significantly all three were from

Alexandria. When in Scripture God adapted Himself to the needs of His people, Chrysostom discovered, it was often in order to teach them humility. That is why Christ wept for Lazarus and washed His disciples' feet. The divine humility sometimes involved feigning ignorance. God asked Adam and Eve questions before judging them, and He personally investigated the hubris of the builders of Babel before the confusion of tongues, and the wickedness of the inhabitants of Sodom before the destruction of their city.

The apostles dutifully imitated the divine adaptability and none of them more so than Paul who became all things to all men in order to lead the weak to salvation. Chrysostom was Paul's greatest admirer in the early church—perhaps a reason why he was so popular with the Reformers—and he too strove to become all things to all men, even to the devotees of the theater, a school of immorality and an institution he deplored as much as Augustine. Chrysostom had a picture of Paul hanging up in his room in Constantinople, and his secretary Proclus once looked through the keyhole and saw the apostle standing over him while he wrote. A Byzantine painting based on the legend shows the two men, one sitting and the other standing, with similar features and intersecting haloes. Paul's use of adaptability, which Chrysostom imitated, was problematic because it involved a measure of deceit; for instance he had Timothy circumcised in order to win over the Jews. But Rylaarsdam claims that in the ancient world deceit was not viewed as an entirely irredeemable characteristic. He could have adduced the Old Testament figure Jacob who stole his brother's birthright, but he instead proffers the example of Odysseus, an otherwise sympathetic character whose deceit was the key to his survival. In late antiquity Paul was confronted with the same criticisms Odysseus had been subjected to by the philosophers.

Rylaarsdam's book is often a tedious affair, all the more perplexing because of the intensity and abrasiveness of its protagonist, and readers will find themselves inordinately looking forward to the quotations from Chrysostom's sermons which precede each section. In the last chapter he seems to rally, regaling us with stories about the Greek orators, illustrations of Chrysostom's use of homiletical scatology, and descriptions of his reverence for Paul. The rhetor Lucian, he relates, once visited the home of the philosopher Nigrinus who convinced him that philosophy was greater than the things he valued such as wealth and honor. Convinced by his speech Lucian continually reflected on Nigrinus' words which imparted a new sense of vision. Chrysostom intended to be to his parishioners what Nigrinus was to Lucian, someone who healed the eyes of their soul. In his attempt to give them new senses he frequently sank to the level of the obscene, and Rylaarsdam repairs to Blake Leyerle's article on the use of filth and refuse in his homilies. The homes of the luxurious were like sewers; they voided excrement into silver vessels; feasting with them

was like eating cow manure, and their belches, slipping from their bodies “as though from an overheated putrid kiln,” injured “the brain of bystanders.” To those tempted by moral filth, Rylaarsdam argues, Chrysostom became filthy, and to those who were morally obtuse he became materialistic.

John Chrysostom on Divine Pedagogy would be an acceptable textbook for a course on homiletics or Christian education but less so for a seminar on church history. The author too readily succumbs to the neologisms and doublespeech of contemporary academia: the church fathers integrated Hellenistic culture into a “totalizing discourse;” the ancient rhetors sought to exploit the “cultural codes” of their audience; Chrysostom was involved in a complex process of “image-making, image-breaking, and image-relocation.” But this is a minor problem. It is doubtful there is any false or misleading information in the book, and the bibliography is formidable, encompassing the most recent scholarship on Chrysostom. All in all it is a work of considerable erudition and learning, though Rylaarsdam should have taken to heart Plato’s advice to Xenocrates to sacrifice to the Graces.