David Rylaarsdam

*John Chrysostom on Divine Pedagogy. The Coherence of his Theology and Preaching.*

John Chrysostom has often been received as a popularizer rather than a theologian who contributed substantively to the thought of early Christianity. David Rylaarsdam challenges this assessment in ambitious fashion, seeking to prove that there was, in fact, “an overall coherence” to Chrysostom’s theology that makes sense, in turn, of his homiletic approach. To demonstrate his thesis, Rylaarsdam traces the theme of adaptability within Chrysostom’s rhetorical context. While Margaret Mitchell and Frances Young have covered Chrysostom’s adaptation of contemporary rhetoric in his exegesis, Rylaarsdam endeavors to do the same with his theology. For Chrysostom, adaptability is the governing feature of God’s relationship with humanity, and the same idea characterized many aspects of his own ministry. Not only that, the theme of divine adaptability allowed Chrysostom to “Christianize classical *paideia*” and, in so doing, to initiate not only a process of Christian formation but also “a cultural takeover bid” (5). Thus, Rylaarsdam builds off of Averil Cameron’s work on the fourth-century development of a “totalizing Christian discourse.”

Rylaarsdam begins, in Chapter 1, with a careful analysis of what Chrysostom considered to be “divine pedagogy,” seeing God as teacher of the true philosophy. He examines the concept of adaptability against its Greco-Roman rhetorical-philosophical background and in light of the basic assumption of God’s incomprehensibility. The term Chrysostom favors for adaptation is *sukatabasis,* a word whose previous usage and range of meaning Rylaarsdam discusses with care, though his study is not limited to those passages in which Chrysostom uses the specific term. Within Scripture, God as pedagogue has employed several primary methods of divine adaptation: corporeal images (e.g. theophanies, the Incarnation), variation (in the tone of exhortation and in the
lowliness or sublimity of sayings), and progression (in terms of the developing capacity of both individuals and humanity).

In Chapters 2 and 3, Rylaarsdam begins to show how this concept is integral to all of Chrysostom’s thought, particularly his Christology and soteriology. To begin with, adaptability is key for Chrysostom’s exegesis, guiding the way he understands Scripture to interpret Scripture. This insight transcends attempts at simple ‘Antiochene’ versus ‘Alexandrian’ categorization; Chrysostom is not adhering to a ‘literalistic’ method, but attending to the ways that God adapted his speech to particular people in their contexts. The same insight allows for a more nuanced reading of his Christology. Chrysostom does not appeal to an ‘Antiochene’ distinction of natures, but to Christ’s ‘adaptation’ to the needs of fallen humanity through his flesh and the actions of his earthly ministry. This Christological approach, in turn, sheds light on the purported ‘moralism’ of Chrysostom’s preaching. His ethical exhortations take for granted the redemptive narrative in which his flock would have been schooled; God has graciously adapted himself to humanity through revelation and the work of Christ, and now, through the Spirit and sacraments, continues to reshape the moral capacity of souls. The coherence of Chrysostom’s thought becomes clear, argues Rylaarsdam, when it is considered through the lens of divine adaptability.

Christian teachers were to imitate divine adaptation, and Chrysostom lauded Paul, he who became “all things to all people,” as the one who exemplified this best of all. Chapters 4 and 5 explore Chrysostom’s repeated appeal to Paul as the ideal priest whose heavenly way of life equipped Christians to embody godliness before their neighbors, and so to transform their culture. Though Chrysostom’s understanding of Paul’s practice, and in turn the priest’s, is to be viewed as a form of psychagogy, Rylaarsdam argues that Chrysostom also sees the apostle Christianizing these ancient methods; indeed, priestly adaptability is a revision of the entire concept of *paideia*, toward the end of Christianizing society. Imitating divine adaptability, the Christian priest occupied the role of a popular philosopher who modeled and persuaded people toward the heavenly way of life.

Finally, Chapter 6 traces the ways that Chrysostom’s homiletic methods followed from his theology of adaptability. Chrysostom seeks to create a symbolic universe in listeners’ minds, through which they learn to reconceive reality. Rylaarsdam describes this as “a complex process of image-making, image-breaking, and image-relocation” (229) by which his audience’s imaginations are reclaimed from the world for the church. Through this re-training of the senses, Christians learn to reject the appeal of, say, the theater and to ‘see’ spiritual realities present in the sacraments. Adaptability brings to light pedagogical/pas-