

I

Stories of Suffering and Providence

The final turbulent decade of John Chrysostom's life is, in basic outline, well established: coming from Syrian Antioch, John was consecrated bishop of Constantinople in AD 397; after having served in this capacity for seven years, he was sent into exile by his erstwhile patrons, the imperial family, with the support of Theophilus, the bishop of Alexandria. A few years later, in 407, he died while he was on his way into even deeper exile. Despite these well-rehearsed events, from shortly after John's death, there was substantial disagreement over how to narrate them, with defenders and detractors alike seeking to provide the definitive account of John's downfall. Among the earliest accounts is that of Palladius of Helenopolis, which was written within just a few years of John's death.¹ While Palladius purports in his *Dialogue on the Life of John Chrysostom* to state 'just the facts',² he ends up writing a sort of martyr narrative. John stands in the tradition of the apostle Paul and even of Christ himself, contending against Satan and his earthly representatives: Theophilus the bishop of Alexandria and those of his party.³ In

¹ For the dating of this work, see Demetrios S. Katos, *Palladius of Helenopolis: The Origenist Advocate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 27–29; Peter Van Nuffelen, 'Palladius and the Johannite Schism', *JEH* 64, no. 1 (2013): 9–10. Also very early is Pseudo-Martyrius' *Funeral Oration*. See Florent van Ommeslaeghe, 'La valeur historique de la Vie de S. Jean Chrysostome attribuée à Martyrius d'Antioche (BHG 871)', *StPatr* 12 (1975): 478–83.

² Katos, *Palladius of Helenopolis*, esp. 33–61, has argued that the dialogue as a whole represents a courtroom defence of John.

³ In the line of Paul, see Palladius, *Dial.* 8.79–81 (SC 341, 162); *Dial.* 8.99–105 (SC 341, 164–66); *Dial.* 8.114–15 (SC 341, 166); and *Dial.* 10.55–56 (SC 341, 208). In the line of Christ, see especially Palladius, *Dial.* 9.147 (SC 341, 194); *Dial.* 10.24–28 (SC 341, 204).

contrast, Socrates of Constantinople, who wrote his *Church History* several decades later, presents a less positive picture of John.⁴ While Socrates concedes that John's various opponents – both imperial and ecclesiastical – are undoubtedly in the wrong, it is ultimately Chrysostom's unyielding personality that is to blame for both his earlier successes and his later failures:⁵ if he had only been more tactful and politically minded, his problems would have been solved.

Notably, in their narratives of the end of John's life, Socrates and Palladius relate many of the same events; they even share in similar (uniformly negative) assessments of John's Alexandrian opponent, the bishop Theophilus. Where they differ is in their assessments of the causes of John's downfall. For Socrates, it is John's pride; for Palladius, his saintliness. And while both of these have become familiar ways of narrating the turbulent events at the end of the bishop's life,⁶ John himself traces

On the hagiographical nature of even these early accounts of John's exile and death, see especially Wendy Mayer, 'The Making of a Saint: John Chrysostom in Early Historiography', in *Chrysostomosbilder in 1600 Jahren: Facetten der Wirkungsgeschichte eines Kirchenvaters*, ed. Martin Wallraff and Rudolf Brändle (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2008), 39–59.

⁴ AD 443 is the usual date given for Socrates' *Church History* and Sozomen's somewhat later; see Glenn F. Chesnut, *The First Christian Histories: Eusebius, Socrates, Sozomen, Theodoret, and Evagrius* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1977), 167. But see the reassessment in Charlotte Roueché, 'Theodosius II, the Cities, and the Date of the "Church History" of Sozomen', *JTS* 37, no. 1 (1986): 130–32. On Socrates' negative assessment of John, see Martin Wallraff, *Der Kirchenhistoriker Sokrates: Untersuchungen zu Geschichtsdarstellung, Methode und Person* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1997), 72–74; Peter Van Nuffelen, *Un héritage de paix et de piété: étude sur les histoires ecclésiastiques de Socrate et de Sozomène* (Leuven: Peeters, 2004), 26–36.

⁵ He is described as stern and severe throughout, but see especially *Hist. eccl.* 6.3.13 (SC 505, 268); *Hist. eccl.* 6.21.2 (SC 505, 346).

⁶ While the portrayal of Chrysostom in the work of Palladius and other 'Johannite' sympathizers has prevailed in the hagiographical tradition, Socrates' account of John's personality and downfall predominates modern scholarship. For critical accounts of John's years in Constantinople, see Claudia Tiersch, *Johannes Chrysostomus in Konstantinopel (398–404). Weltsicht und Wirken eines Bischofs in der Hauptstadt des Oströmischen Reiches* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002); as a counterpoint, Justin M. Pigott, 'Capital Crimes: Deconstructing John's "Unnecessary Severity" in Managing the Clergy at Constantinople', in *Revisioning John Chrysostom: New Approaches, New Perspectives*, ed. Chris de Wet and Wendy Mayer (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 733–78; and his fuller treatment in *New Rome Wasn't Built in a Day: Rethinking Councils and Controversy at Early Constantinople 381–451* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2019). On the various political 'spins' put on John's life in the decades following his death, see Mayer, 'Making of a Saint'; 'Media Manipulation as a Tool in Religious Conflict: Controlling the Narrative Surrounding the Deposition of John Chrysostom', in *Religious Conflict from Early Christianity to the Rise of Islam*, ed. Wendy Mayer and Bronwen Neil (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), 151–68.

a different aetiology. In John's estimation, the cause of his suffering is neither his brusque personality nor his laudable piety – nor even the venom of Theophilus. Rather, everything he has suffered is a result of God's providence. As he sees it, providence is the reason for his successes and sufferings and is therefore the principle that governs his narration of his own life. Although John composed no detailed account of his final years,⁷ throughout his exiles he maintained an intimate correspondence with his friend and patroness, Olympias. And in these letters, in which John tells Olympias of his various trials, we can hear what he thinks is the cause of the very same events related in Socrates' and Palladius' accounts. Writing to console Olympias, and perhaps also himself, he finds that all the trials that he and his supporters have suffered come from God's providence. Drawing from the narratives of Scripture, he learns to tell his own story – and teaches Olympias to do the same – with divine providence as the cause of all events, especially his sufferings.

In one of these letters, John responds to Olympias' grief over his sufferings by suggesting that it is all to God's glory: 'Perhaps it seemed good to God that I be placed on a longer race, twice as long, so that the crowns might also become brighter.'⁸ As the letter proceeds, John narrates his specific sufferings in keeping with the idea that they have all been for good: after a lengthy narration of the sufferings he endured in Caesarea at the beginning of his exile, he assures Olympias that these sufferings are 'able to do away with many of my sins and to furnish a great occasion for [God's] good favour'.⁹ In this letter as in the others, John continually weaves together his own story – and that of Olympias – with the narratives of Scripture's suffering saints. Indeed, it is often through telling scriptural stories that he furnishes himself and Olympias with the criteria for interpreting adverse events. Thus, in reference to Joseph he writes, 'his brother did not plan this, but everything happened from God's providence'.¹⁰ So also, John suggests, should Olympias consider that all afflictions in her life have occurred from God's providence.

But providence plays a larger role than acting as the lens through which Chrysostom interprets individual events of suffering in his and Olympias' lives. John also shapes his personal narrations around the

⁷ He does, however, send a letter in 404 with a brief account of his deposition to Pope Innocent (*Letter to Innocent 1*), which also survives inserted in Palladius' *Dialogue*. See Anne-Marie Malingrey, *Palladius. Dialogue sur la vie de Jean Chrysostome*, vol. 2, SC 342 (Paris: Cerf, 1988), 47–95.

⁸ *Ep. Olymp.* 9.1a (SC 13bis, 218). ⁹ *Ep. Olymp.* 9.3c (SC 13bis, 230).

¹⁰ *Ep. Olymp.* 10.14b (SC 13bis, 300).

narrative structures that he finds in Scripture's stories of providence. In his seventh letter to Olympias, after describing God as a skilled helmsman (a commonplace image for divine providence by Chrysostom's time), he spells out for Olympias one of these narrative structures of God's providential work:

But if [God] doesn't [ease the storm] at the beginning and immediately, such is his custom: not to resolve terrors at the beginning, but when they have increased, and come to completion, and most are in despair, then he works wonders and acts contrary to expectation, demonstrating his own power, and training in patience through what has occurred.¹¹

Following this generic narrative outline, John furnishes many biblical narratives to show that God has consistently operated in this manner throughout history, as he has providentially cared for the saints. Finally, he concludes this long letter by saying that all these sufferings – of the biblical saints and Olympias alike – are 'ineffable proofs of God's great providence and succour'.¹²

Chrysostom fully expects things to work out in his and Olympias' lives according to this narrative structure. Indeed, in the letter before this he had narrated his own misfortunes according to the same pattern. At least twice in the opening of this letter, John quickly mirrors this narrative of extreme suffering with sudden and unexpected resolution: 'We could hardly catch our breath when we arrived in Cucusus – where we are writing from – and we could hardly see clearly. . . . [But] now, since the painful things have passed, we are narrating them to your Piety.'¹³ Directly following this statement, he lists his various distresses in Cucusus with great specificity, finally writing, 'but now all these things have come to naught. For, when we got to Cucusus, we put aside every sickness, even its remnants, and we are in the best of health. We were delivered both from the fear of the Isaurians . . . and from having to be prepared for [their assault]. An abundance of necessities flows to us from every direction, and everyone has welcomed us with all affection'.¹⁴ And finally, he closes the same short letter in a similar vein: 'So far we are enjoying the benefit of great relaxation here, such that in two days every unpleasantness that happened on the way has washed away.'¹⁵

¹¹ *Ep. Olymp.* 7.1b (SC 13bis, 134, 28–33). See my article, 'Healing Despondency with Biblical Narrative in John Chrysostom's *Letters to Olympias*', *J ECS* 28, no. 2 (2020): 203–31. These passages are discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.

¹² *Ep. Olymp.* 7.5d (SC 13bis, 154). ¹³ *Ep. Olymp.* 6.1a (SC 13bis, 126).

¹⁴ *Ep. Olymp.* 6.1a–b (SC 13bis, 126). ¹⁵ *Ep. Olymp.* 6.1e (SC 13bis, 130).

Chrysostom thus continually narrates his own life in keeping with God's providence; not only does he employ providence as the interpretative lens for individual events – whether sufferings or successes – but he also uses it to shape the entire narratives he tells himself and Olympias. And this way of interpreting and narrating his life brings him – and should bring Olympias – no small comfort: for God who has provided so richly for them in the past and present will continue to do so into eternity.

On the basis of these letters, we can imagine that if John had written a full account of the last decade of his life, full of the many sufferings related by both Socrates and Palladius, such a work would have been an elegant encomium to God's providence. Although he would have related many of the same events as these other writers did, the guiding feature of his narration would be neither his abrasive personality nor his saintliness but God's providential care. As with all other events in sacred history, his exile should be attributed to God's providence: it has served to refine his followers in Constantinople and has proved their virtue and endurance in the face of trial; it has prepared both them and him for the age to come. Likewise, if John were able posthumously to narrate his re-inscription in the diptychs and the return of his relics to Constantinople – events that Socrates includes in his history – he likewise would have attributed these not to his own piety nor even to his support base in Constantinople but to God's providence. As we have seen in the narrative structure described above, this is so often how God's providence works: when the saints are nearly in despair of God's help, then God intervenes for a reversal of fortunes. Thus, Palladius' account of John's last words – 'Glory to God for all things' – seems to capture John's feelings about his trials: his sufferings are from God's loving providence and are thus worth praising God over.¹⁶

Another thing that John shares with Socrates and Palladius is his recognition of the power of narrative. But while Socrates and Palladius wield this power for primarily apologetic or polemical purposes, John relies on it for consolation – for healing (θεραπεία). As we have seen hints of in his *Letters to Olympias*, John finds that by rightly narrating the

¹⁶ Palladius, *Dial.* 11.140 (SC 341, 226). Palladius refers to this as John's habitual saying, and John himself confirms this in a letter to Olympias: 'I won't stop uttering this always in everything that happens to me: "Glory to God for all things"' (*Ep. Olymp.* 4.1b; SC 13bis, 118). Katos too notes that John's dying words were an affirmation of divine providence (*Palladius of Helenopolis*, 33).

events in one's life, one can be consoled and led to perfect virtue. This consolation does not come in the form of a banal 'everything happens for a reason', nor does it allow one to see 'in eternal perspective'. The consolation that comes from providential narration is so powerful because (like the narratives of Socrates and Palladius) it is concrete: by turning to the narratives – the *historiai* – of Scripture, Chrysostom points to actual circumstances, on a small scale (within a human lifetime), in which God has proved his care for his saints. In the concrete narratives of Scripture, John finds many discrete instances of God's providential care, which together furnish an overarching vision of how God has always cared and will always care for humanity.

JOHN'S VISION OF PROVIDENCE AND BIBLICAL NARRATIVE

Therefore, while I have focused so far on John's and Olympias' personal narratives, more significant for Chrysostom's exposition of divine providence are biblical narratives. Indeed, John's vision of God's providence over his own life is shaped profoundly by what he reads in Scripture, especially its narratives. He sees the narratives of Scripture as windows onto divine providence, through which human beings may correct their vision of events and thereby be consoled and led to virtue. The recognition that God's goodness and providence govern over our experiences, and the knowledge of what is in our own limited human power, play a significant role in forming the virtuous self. Because John himself has done the hard work of correcting his own vision through his reading of Scripture, such that he interprets adverse events in the light of God's good providence, in his pastoral office he seeks to do the same for his flock. For John's goal in his preaching and teaching is to paint – even to etch – the narratives of Scripture, and their virtuous characters, onto the walls of his listeners' minds.¹⁷

As we have already seen him do in his *Letters to Olympias*, John most often discusses providence and interprets biblical narratives of providence when he is writing or preaching to console those who are suffering. In fact, he is remarkably consistent in his consolation and comfort: he usually turns straightaway to Scripture – and, more specifically, to biblical narrative, or *historia*. Chrysostom approaches consolation in such a manner because, as he sees it, biblical narrative gives insight into God's

¹⁷ See *Laz.* 4.2 (PG 48, 1008–9).

providential plan or arrangement of things (οἰκονομία προνοίας).¹⁸ This providential *oikonomia* is how Chrysostom refers to God's way of relating to humanity throughout history. The history of God's working for the benefit of the saints serves to pull the reader out of the pit of despondency and despair, since it demonstrates that God continually works, even today, for the same salvation of humanity.

In other words, Chrysostom finds in biblical narratives God's characteristic ways of working in the world. Scholars have often referred to John's use of scriptural stories as exempla (παράδειγματα): proofs to demonstrate a point or actions to be emulated.¹⁹ But they are much more than this. By reading biblical narratives, John comes to understand God's characteristic providential way of acting in the world. He applies narratological interpretations to these scriptural narratives (ἱστορία), learned in the course of his grammatical and rhetorical education, and readily adapts them to his understanding of biblical poetics and theology. By reading biblical narratives in such a way, he learns, and can teach his congregation, God's customary way of relating to human beings. The central claim of this book is that for Chrysostom biblical *historia* is fundamentally about God's providence. And this is why biblical narrative is so helpful for consoling the suffering: because it shows that God arranges everything out of his providence and love for humankind.

Individual narratives testify to this vision of God's providence, as does the whole *historia* of Scripture. Chrysostom envisions divine providence as God's continual act of love for humankind, from beginning to end, which is seen especially in the greatest proofs of providence: creation and the incarnation. His understanding of providence, then, shapes his reading of individual narratives as well as Scripture as a whole: the former, because no single narrative ought to be read outside of the context of God's continual love for humanity, in which there are recurring narrative patterns of saving providence; the latter, because the differences between biblical ages or covenants are downplayed in favour of God's continuous care, characterized by God's love for humanity (φιλανθρωπία), which is the same before the Law as it is under grace. Chrysostom's understanding of providence therefore has much to tell us about Chrysostom's exegesis and biblical theology.

Biblical narratives, in their vision of God's providential care for humankind, also serve a dual function: they speak to God's character

¹⁸ For this specific phrase, see *Stag.* 1.7 (PG 47, 441); *Hom. 1 Cor.* 34.4 (PG 61, 291).

¹⁹ See Chapter 6.

and to human experience. Thus, while the certainty of God's providential love and mercy consoles the suffering, biblical narratives of suffering also provide exemplary human characters who have virtuously withstood and endured suffering, holding fast to the providence of God and hoping in the salvation to come. Chrysostom's discussions of providence are therefore not merely exegetical-theological exercises but are also pastoral therapies: John attempts to answer the intellectual question of how God governs the world because he is concerned to explain profound, personal human suffering. In this we see how Chrysostom's consolatory and hortatory (pastoral) work is inextricable from his exegetical and theological work. His pastoral care in situations of suffering is founded upon a thoroughgoing exegesis of biblical narrative that leads him to a robust theology of providence. In other words, John's pastoral goals are brought about through his exegetical and theological demonstration of the truth of God's providence even in the midst of suffering.

The consolation that a knowledge of providence offers, however, is not just aimed at making one 'feel better' but is meant to lead one to perfect virtue – what Chrysostom refers to as the 'life of the angels'. To be sure, the exposition of biblical narratives of divine providence and human virtue do serve as emotional therapies: they are meant to make one emotionally resilient in the face of adversity. Emotional resilience is not, however, the ultimate goal. Rather, Chrysostom is concerned to have his flock read their own suffering in the light of God's ever-present providence so that they might be formed as virtuous persons. More than this, he would have them slough off the passions, attending not to this world, but to the age to come, and thus to become like the angels. If one learns to read suffering the right way – as an occasion of God's providence – suffering becomes a vehicle of God's transformation into the life of the angels. Suffering not only serves to refine the sufferer, thus forming the virtuous self, but even leads the sufferer to the glory of the one who suffered for us and was raised. By suffering, one may attain to the resurrection even in this age. Thus, by God's providential design, the suffering self may become simultaneously the glorified, resurrected, and angelic self.²⁰

Because of the ubiquity of scriptural narratives of providence in Chrysostom's sermons, commentaries, letters, and treatises, this book explores the intersection of *pronoia* and *historia*: what does it mean that,

²⁰ See Judith Perkins, *The Suffering Self: Pain and Narrative Representation in the Early Christian Era* (London: Routledge, 1995).

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in Chrysostom's eyes, biblical history is about providence? And how is the providence seen in biblical history meant to lead the preacher's audiences to a life of virtue? Although *pronoia* and *historia* could each be studied in its own right, the two belong together in this study because they so often appear together in Chrysostom's teaching itself.

While present throughout Chrysostom's extensive literary corpus, the joint themes of *pronoia* and *historia* are found especially in the three works that represent the core of this study: the *Consolation to Stagirus*,²¹ the *Homilies on the Statues*²² and *On the Providence of God*.²³ In each of these works, Chrysostom consoles his suffering audiences by offering exegetically driven judgements about providence, but in slightly different ways, as he speaks to a variety of situations and audiences. The *Consolation to Stagirus* is a treatise in three books and is framed as a consolation to a young monk who suffers from epilepsy and depression and was probably written during Chrysostom's diaconate (ca. 381–386).²⁴ John attempts to treat Stagirus' depression by offering, in the first book, a thoroughly exegetical vision of divine providence; in

²¹ *Ad Stagirium a daemone vexatum* (CPG 4310). There are two modern translations of this work that I know of: one is the French dissertation, Élisabeth Mathieu-Gauché, 'La Consolation à Stagire de Jean Chrysostome: Introduction, traduction et notes' (PhD diss., Université Paris IV-Sorbonne, 2003). The other is in Italian: Lucio Coco, *Johannes Chrysostomus: A Stagirio tormentato da un demone* (Rome: Città Nuova, 2002).

²² *Ad populum Antiochenum de statu* (CPG 4330). Especially the first eight sermons.

²³ *Ad eos qui scandalizati sunt* (CPG 4401). In most of the Greek manuscripts, this treatise has the title 'To those who have been scandalized'. However, Anne-Marie Malingrey, in her critical edition, chose to use part of the title that is found in only a few manuscripts: 'On the Providence of God'. Although less often attested as a title, as Malingrey says, it does accurately reflect the subject matter of the treatise. See Anne-Marie Malingrey, *Jean Chrysostome. Sur la providence de Dieu*, SC 79 (Paris: Cerf, 2000), 36–37. In my study, I disregard the series of five homilies, *De fato et providentia* (CPG 4367). While there does exist an unpublished critical edition (F. Bonniere, 'Jean Chrysostome – Édition de De fato et providentia, introduction, texte critique, notes et index' [PhD diss., Université Lille, 1975]), this series of orations is much more problematic than the others because the early modern editors of Chrysostom dubbed them either dubious or spurious. See J. A. De Aldama, *Repertorium Pseudochrysostomicum* (Paris: CNRS, 1965). Whereas Thomas Halton, 'Saint John Chrysostom, "De Fato et Providentia": A Study of Its Authenticity', *Traditio* 20 (1964): 1–24, has argued that the work is authentic, and several others treat it as if it is authentic (e.g. Domenico Ciarlo, 'Sulla teoria e la prassi della "providentia Dei" in Giovanni Crisostomo', *Atti della Accademia Pontaniana* (n.s.) 56 [2007]: 87–93; Antonios K. Danassis, *Johannes Chrysostomos: Pädagogisch-psychologische Ideen in seinem Werk* [Bonn: Bouvier Verlag Herbert Grundmann, 1971]), a shadow nevertheless hangs over it. More to the point for my considerations, it is neither consolatory nor occasional, which is further evidence of likely spuriousness.

²⁴ For the dating of this treatise, see J. N. D. Kelly, *Golden Mouth: The Story of John Chrysostom – Ascetic, Preacher, Bishop* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 39–44.

the second and third books, he narrates the stories of exemplary figures who, in the midst of grievous suffering, nevertheless trusted in divine providence. The more famous *Homilies on the Statues* were delivered in early 387 to console the Antiochene populace, which was rightly terrified of the emperor Theodosius' wrath: a number of Antioch's more unsavoury citizens had gone about destroying the statues of the emperor throughout the city. This capital offense led Antioch's populace to be in dread for their lives. Throughout this particularly tense Great Fast, Chrysostom preached about these events, while introducing biblical material. Some is drawn from the lectionary and some not, but all of Scripture is a demonstration of God's providence and thus a comfort.²⁵ Finally, in 407, John found himself in exile. In this final situation of personal suffering, he wrote *On the Providence of God*. The goodness of divine providence is, Chrysostom thinks, the most convincing consolatory argument, and the bulk of the treatise is taken up with his re-narration of biblical stories. In this treatise, John attends to the consolation not of the despondent, necessarily, but of those suffering from moral lapse or scandal. Why this requires consolation becomes clearer when this treatise is brought into conversation with Chrysostom's other writings from this same exile: like the *Letters to Olympias*,²⁶ the treatise *No One Can Be Harmed*²⁷ and *On the Providence of God* were written to aid those – including Olympias – who were suffering in the aftermath of John's departure from Constantinople. These works too are full of demonstrations of God's providence in biblical *historia*.

While these three works are therefore deeply consonant with one another, the differences between them build confidence that this selection of works provides a representative picture of Chrysostom's thought on providence, narrative, and suffering. First, each work responds to a different mode of suffering. For Stagirus, the suffering was personal, physical, and ever-present. For the people of Antioch, the suffering was communal and caused by the dread of future events. Olympias' grief was well-founded; and, unlike that of Stagirus, it was not in itself physical, but emotional or psychological. Second, these works span almost the whole of Chrysostom's pastoral career: the first was written during his

²⁵ For a detailed study of these homilies, see Frans van de Paverd, *St. John Chrysostom, The Homilies on the Statues: An Introduction* (Rome: Orientalium, 1991).

²⁶ CPG 4405. Anne-Marie Malingrey, *Jean Chrysostome. Lettres à Olympias*. Seconde édition augmentée de la Vie anonyme d'Olympias, SC 13bis (Paris: Cerf, 1968).

²⁷ CPG 4400. Anne-Marie Malingrey, *Jean Chrysostome. Lettre d'exil. À Olympias et à tous les fidèles (Quod nemo laeditur)*, SC 103 (Paris: Cerf, 1964).