

Providence and Narrative in the Theology of John Chrysostom

This book is the first major study of providence in the thought of John Chrysostom, a popular preacher in Syrian Antioch and later archbishop of Constantinople (ca. AD 350 to 407). While Chrysostom is often considered a moralist and exegete, this study explores how his theology of providence profoundly affected his larger ethical and exegetical thought. Robert G. T. Edwards argues that Chrysostom considers biblical narratives as vehicles of a doctrine of providence in which God is above all loving towards humankind. Narratives of God's providence thus function as sources of consolation for Chrysostom's suffering audiences and may even lead them now, amid suffering, to the resurrection life – the life of the angels. In the course of surveying Chrysostom's theology of providence and his use of scriptural narratives for consolation, Edwards also positions Chrysostom's theology and exegesis, which often defy categorization, within the preacher's immediate Antiochene and Nicene contexts.

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Robert Edwards

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ROBERT G. T. EDWARDS

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For Kerensa

He loves us exceedingly, with an extraordinary love: a love that is passionless, but also most ardent, vigorous, genuine, indissoluble – a love that cannot be quenched.

John Chrysostom, *On the Providence of God*

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page</i> ix
<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	xiii
1 Stories of Suffering and Providence	1
John's Vision of Providence and Biblical Narrative	6
The Contribution	11
What Is Providence?	18
Chapter Outline	27
2 Divine and Human Activity in Biblical Narrative	29
Turning to Biblical Narrative for Consolation	32
History and Narrative	38
The Subject Matter of Biblical History	43
The Exegetical Relationship between Providence and 'What Is Up to Us'	51
Conclusion	57
3 Narrative Clusters, Providential Habits, and Typological Exegesis	59
Clusters	61
Deep Structures: Change of Circumstances	66
Providential Habits: Time for Repentance	73
Virtue and Narrative Structure?	79
Typological Interpretation	81
Conclusion	91
4 Proofs of Providence and God's Philanthropic Character	93
A Series of Proofs of Providence	96
Creation and Fall	102
The Incarnation	112

	Christ's Power and Philanthropy Narrated	119
	Conclusion	123
5	True Judgements and Consolation	126
	Changing Judgements with Consolation	127
	The Providential Good of Affliction	131
	The Apparent Evil of Affliction	134
	Moral Evil and the Danger of Misjudging Providence	138
	Incomprehensible Providence	144
	Consolatory Judgements in Biblical Narratives: John Chrysostom vs. Gregory of Nyssa	149
	Conclusion	153
6	The Virtue of Yielding to Providence	155
	Scripture's Exemplary Characters	156
	Character and Characterization	162
	Yielding to Providence	166
	Suffering and the Life of the Angels	180
	Conclusion	185
7	Conclusion	187
	<i>Bibliography</i>	193
	<i>Scripture Index</i>	213
	<i>Subject Index</i>	215

Preface

To many in our age, providence surely seems an old-fashioned notion. The word itself evokes various impressions: perhaps it calls to mind the deeply misled idea that military and economic supremacy comes as a result of God's provision for a nation or empire – resulting sometimes in the relentless pursuit of colonialism. Alternatively, it might call to mind a pre-scientific explanation for physical processes, both large and small – from animal and human physiology to the movement of the stars. In this sense, providence may seem to be merely a word for 'simple' folk who don't have more sophisticated explanations for the changes and chances of this world. Providence might also be deployed to set aside the seriousness of human suffering and evil: when all disastrous events are ascribed to God's providence, divine providence ends up looking a lot like divine capriciousness. These are, of course, caricatures of what might arise in the mind of someone living in the modern 'West', and yet I think they are not too far off the mark.

Today, in the post-Enlightenment and now post-Christian North American and European contexts in which I have lived, other ideas of historical and cosmic order are, of course, predominant. Among those who spend any time at all thinking about the arrangement of the whole, it is not uncommon to find the idea that chaos and suffering are everywhere (an idea that I will not try to deny!), and therefore, one must live one's 'best life' – whatever that may be. This is a worldview that is without providence. Another commonly held worldview – also without providence – is a highly individualistic one, which disregards the question of the order of things altogether: whether the world is chaotic or orderly is irrelevant, since I am in control of my own destiny! Undoubtedly, such a

view is easier to hold among more prosperous populations, which have ready access to modern medicine and in which suffering is so often simply ignored. Certainly, from these perspectives, the idea that God (however conceived) oversees the whole physical world, ranging from the movements of the stars to physiological processes, is unfathomable, while the idea that God guides human history – of the individual and all humanity – is altogether laughable. Particularly in light of the depths of human suffering, such perspectives are wholly understandable, and very tempting, even for those of us who prefer to believe in a good providence that governs the world.

Even if the ‘official story’ is that the idea of a loving providence prevailed in pre-modern times, other more pessimistic perspectives seem to have been no less tempting or common prior to the Scientific Revolution and Enlightenment. John Chrysostom’s sermons reveal this much. Preaching in the fourth and fifth centuries in Syrian Antioch and Constantinople (both of which are situated in opposite extremes of modern-day Turkey: Antakya and Istanbul, respectively), John frequently speaks about providence, apparently because so many of those to whom he was preaching had different ideas. Certainly, his audiences were not full of atheists in the modern sense of the term, but divine powers were often understood to be unconcerned with humanity and therefore capricious; or, even if people held to the idea that there is a cosmic order, it did not care for human affairs. Then, as now, human suffering caused many to question – even to laugh at – the idea that a loving providence could ever be in charge of the universe.

John Chrysostom thinks that those who hold to such perspectives, however, are grievously mistaken. If someone interprets events in this manner, it is because they are not reading all the evidence; and the evidence that they do read, they are misreading. For John, if one reads the evidence properly, God’s philanthropic providence – providence that is loving towards humankind – can be appreciated as the cause of all things. Indeed, even experiences of suffering come from God’s loving providence. However, the preacher also recognizes that it is hard to see things this way. He therefore spends much of his time not only attacking these incorrect views but especially speaking about God’s good providence for all humankind and particularly for the saints. I will not claim that John Chrysostom’s ‘solution’ to the questions of human suffering and his perspective on providence are perfect. That is not the point of this book. Nevertheless, it was apparently a compelling vision of providence,

with which many of his audiences in Antioch and Constantinople could identify.

For those who have had leisure to read the sermons of John Chrysostom, it is often difficult to square their repetitious and moralizing nature with the fact that he was so immensely popular a preacher in his own age: why, if his preaching was so repetitive and accusatory, was it so beloved? Several scholars have recently provided helpful answers to this question: John was tapping into an already-existing ‘medical’ discourse – a therapy of the emotions – which people could understand culturally; he had a profound understanding of human emotion and the power of narrative, and he used this knowledge to shape his audience; moral upbraiding was expected and appreciated from teachers in antiquity – and Chrysostom fulfils this role with ease. These are all, I think, good answers to the question. However, I also believe that John’s idea of God’s loving providence was one of the aspects of his preaching that so captivated his audience. In this book, I seek to show why that vision was so forceful – even while, undoubtedly, many continued to reject the idea.

Here I briefly anticipate some of the aspects of Chrysostom’s teaching on providence that make it so compelling. First, it takes seriously the depths of human suffering and evil while also maintaining the goodness of God’s created order, which stems from divine love for humanity (*philanthrōpia*). While John does maintain that suffering is to the spiritual benefit of those who receive it rightly, at no point does he downplay the grievousness of the suffering of his flock. Second, Chrysostom’s view of providence acknowledges simultaneously the limits of human knowledge of God’s plans and the individual’s ultimate control over his or her own choices. That is, while I cannot always know precisely why God has so ordered the events of my life, no capricious force has any power over me. Rather, I am empowered to choose whether I live the good life of virtue – what Chrysostom calls the ‘life of the angels’ – or the opposite. Finally, and perhaps most compelling is not Chrysostom’s doctrine of providence, but his use of stories of providence in his consolation of those who are suffering and who are at risk of rejecting the idea of God’s loving care. Chrysostom uses the stories of Scripture to help his flock tell their own stories – so often filled with suffering – in accord with the view that God does everything out of his love for humankind.

This study, which began as a doctoral thesis at the University of Notre Dame, has benefitted from the help of so many – most directly from the expertise of my doctoral committee. David Lincicum taught me to reflect much more deeply on biblical reception; John Cavadini, having taught his

doctoral seminar to ‘think (and speak) in Augustinian’, helped me in this dissertation to ‘speak in Chrysostomian’; John Fitzgerald generously joined the committee at a late hour and offered his expertise in the long philosophical tradition to which John Chrysostom belongs. Many thanks are due to them all but especially to my adviser, Blake Leyerle, whose generosity, thoughtfulness, rigour, and good humour have not only been deeply appreciated but have also given me something to aspire to as a teacher and scholar. She introduced me to Chrysostom and his oeuvre, and – as will be seen in the following pages – I owe much of my own interpretation to her.

I am also grateful to Kacie Klamm, Kirsten Anderson, Grant Gasse, and Jeremiah Coogan, each of whom read chapters of this book at an early stage and offered valuable feedback. Kathleen Shain-Ross undertook the Herculean task of reading through the whole manuscript, and her feedback helped me to see the forest for the trees. Naturally, all mistakes that remain are my own.

When I could locate no suitable cover image for this book, the iconographer James Blackstone (of dunstanicons.com) came to the rescue. The image is modelled on an image in the *Menologion* of Basil II and depicts John Chrysostom on his way into exile – the saint’s own experience of suffering and providence. It is also fitting to thank those who (it seems many years ago now) taught me to read Greek, especially Bruce Clausen and Shelley Reid. I was one of many students to whom they gave an immeasurable gift of reading this beautiful language. It has brought me great joy. Finally, at an institutional level, thanks are also due to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, which helped fund the last few years of my PhD and thus the initial research for this book, as well as the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, which funded my research while I completed the book manuscript.

Finally, thanks are due to my family and friends – who (thanks be to God) are too many to mention! I especially extend my gratitude to those who know me best and who are therefore the most long-suffering of individuals. To my parents: thank you for your unfailing support in every season; I have had the good fortune of never doubting that you are proud of me. To Eliza and Margot, who sat upon each knee as I wrote this book: thank you for keeping me from working too hard. To Kerensa: you are my fiercest supporter and wisest counsellor; thank you for the loving care you show to me, our daughters, and so many others, and for the vision of providence and love (not to mention your charm and wit!) that you bring to us all. To you I dedicate this book.

Abbreviations

Where possible, abbreviations from *The SBL Handbook of Style* (2nd edition; Atlanta: SBL, 2014) have been used for both primary and secondary literature. I have not included in this list my abbreviations for John Chrysostom's commentaries and longer series of biblical homilies, for which I use the conventional abbreviations included in the *SBL Handbook* (e.g., *Comm. Gal.* for the *Commentary on Galatians*; *Hom. Gen.* for the *Homilies on Genesis*). Where abbreviations for John Chrysostom's works are insufficiently clear in the *SBL Handbook*, I have included in square brackets the abbreviations suggested by Wendy Mayer (<http://alc.academia.edu/WendyMayerFAHA>). For convenience, abbreviations used in this book are listed below.

Primary Sources

John Chrysostom

<i>Adfu.</i>	<i>Adversus eos qui non adfuerant</i>
<i>Adv. Iud.</i>	<i>Adversus Judaeos</i>
<i>Anom.</i> [<i>De incompr. hom.</i>]	<i>Contra Anomoeos 1–5 = De incomprehensibili dei natura</i>
<i>Anom.</i> 8 [<i>Pet. Mat. fil. Zeb.</i>]	<i>Contra Anomoeos 8 = De petitione matris filiorum Zebedaei</i>
<i>Anom.</i> 12 [<i>De christ. div.</i>]	<i>Contra Anomoeos 12 = De Christi divinitate</i>
<i>Ant. exsil.</i>	<i>Sermo antequam iret in exsilium</i>

<i>Cat. ill.</i>	<i>Catecheses ad illuminandos</i>
<i>Cum exsil.</i>	<i>Sermo cum iret in exsilium</i>
<i>Dav.</i>	<i>De Davide et Saule</i>
<i>Diab.</i>	<i>De diabolo tentatore</i>
<i>Ep. Olymp.</i>	<i>Epistulae ad Olympiadem</i>
<i>Exp. Ps.</i>	<i>Expositiones in Psalmos</i>
<i>Fem. reg.</i>	<i>Quod regulares feminae viris cohabitare non debeant</i>
<i>Freq. conv.</i>	<i>Quod frequenter conveniendum sit</i>
<i>Grat.</i>	<i>Non esse ad gratiam concionandum</i>
<i>Hom. 1 Cor. 10:1 [Nolo vos ign.]</i>	<i>In dictum Pauli: Nolo vos ignorare</i>
<i>Hom. 2 Cor. 4:13 [Hab. eund. spir. hom.]</i>	<i>In illud: Habentes eundem spiritum</i>
<i>Hom. 2 Tim. 3:1 [Hoc scit. quod in nov. dieb.]</i>	<i>In illud: Hoc scitote quod in novissimis diebus</i>
<i>Hom. Act. 9:1 [Mut. nom. hom.]</i>	<i>De mutatione nominum</i>
<i>Hom. Isa. 45:7 [Ego dom.]</i>	<i>In illud Isaiae: Ego Dominus Deus feci lumen</i>
<i>Hom. Jo. 5:17 [Pater m. usq. mod. op.]</i>	<i>In illud: Pater meus usque modo operatur</i>
<i>Hom. Jo. 5:19 [Fil. ex se nihil fac.]</i>	<i>In illud: Filius ex se nihil facit</i>
<i>Hom. Matt. 26:9 [Pater, si poss.]</i>	<i>In illud: Pater, si possibile est, transeat</i>
<i>Hom. Rom. 16:3 [Prisc. et Aquil. serm.]</i>	<i>In illud: Salutate Priscillam et Aquilam</i>
<i>Inan. glor.</i>	<i>De inani gloria et de educandis liberis</i>
<i>Laed.</i>	<i>Quod nemo laeditur nisi a se ipso</i>
<i>Laud. Paul.</i>	<i>De laudibus sancti Pauli apostoli</i>
<i>Laz.</i>	<i>De Lazaro</i>
<i>Oppugn.</i>	<i>Adversus oppugnatores vitae monasticae</i>
<i>Paenit.</i>	<i>De paenitentia</i>
<i>Paralyt.</i>	<i>In paralyticum demissum per tectum</i>
<i>Pasch.</i>	<i>In sanctum pascha</i>
<i>Pecc.</i>	<i>Peccata fratrum non evulganda</i>
<i>Pent.</i>	<i>De sancta pentecoste</i>
<i>Proph. obscurit.</i>	<i>De prophetarum obscuritate</i>

List of Abbreviations

xv

<i>Res. Chr.</i>	<i>Adversus ebriosos et de resurrectione domini nostri Jesu Christi</i>
<i>Rom. mart.</i>	<i>In sanctum Romanum martyrem</i>
<i>Saturn.</i>	<i>Cum Saturninus et Aurelianus acti essent in exsilium</i>
<i>Serm. Gen.</i>	<i>Sermones in Genesim</i>
<i>Scand.</i>	<i>Ad eos qui scandalizati sunt (De providentia Dei)</i>
<i>Stag.</i>	<i>Ad Stagirium a daemone vexatum</i>
<i>Stat.</i>	<i>Ad populum Antiochenum de statu</i>
<i>Virginit.</i>	<i>De virginitate</i>

Other Ancient Sources

Aristotle, <i>Eth. nic.</i>	<i>Ethica nicomachea</i>
Aristotle, <i>Poet.</i>	<i>Poetica</i>
Basil of Caesarea, <i>Eun.</i>	<i>Contra Eunomium</i>
Basil of Caesarea, <i>Hex.</i>	<i>Homiliae in Hexaemeron</i>
Cicero, <i>Nat. d.</i>	<i>De natura deorum</i>
Epictetus, <i>Diatr.</i>	<i>Diatribai (Dissertationes)</i>
Eusebius of Caesarea, <i>Praep. Ev.</i>	<i>Praeparatio evangelica</i>
Eusebius of Caesarea, <i>Dem. Ev.</i>	<i>Demonstratio evangelica</i>
Gregory of Nazianzus, <i>Or.</i>	<i>Orationes</i>
Gregory of Nyssa, <i>Eun.</i>	<i>Contra Eunomium</i>
Gregory of Nyssa, <i>Trid. spat.</i> [<i>Res. 1</i>]	<i>De tridui spatio = In Christi resurrectionem I</i>
Josephus, <i>Ant.</i>	<i>Antiquitates judaicae</i>
Marcus Aurelius, <i>Med.</i>	<i>Meditationes</i>
Palladius of Hierapolis, <i>Dial.</i>	<i>Dialogus de vita Joannis Chrysostomi</i>
Plutarch, <i>Stoic. rep.</i>	<i>De Stoicorum repugnantiis</i>
Nemesius of Emesa, <i>Hom. nat.</i>	<i>De hominis natura</i>
Seneca, <i>Prov.</i>	<i>De providentia</i>
Socrates of Constantinople, <i>Hist. eccl.</i>	<i>Historia ecclesiastica</i>
Sozomen, <i>Hist. eccl.</i>	<i>Historia ecclesiastica</i>
Theodoret of Cyrrihus, <i>Graec. affect. cur.</i>	<i>Graecarum affectionum curatio</i>
T.Job	<i>Testament of Job</i>

Secondary Sources

- ACW Ancient Christian Writers
 ANRW *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt: Geschichte und Kultur Roms im Spiegel der neueren Forschung*. Part 2, *Principat*. Edited by Hildegard Temporini and Wolfgang Haase. Berlin: De Gruyter, 1972–
- AThR *Anglican Theological Review*
 ByzZ *Byzantinische Zeitschrift*
 CH *Church History*
 CP *Classical Philology*
 CPG *Clavis Patrum Graecorum*. Edited by Maurice Geerard. 5 volumes. Turnhout: Brepols, 1974–1987.
 CSCO Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium
 DTC *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique*. Edited by Alfred Vacant et al. 15 volumes. Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1908–1950.
 ETL *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses*
 FOTC Fathers of the Church
 GCS Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten [drei] Jahrhunderte
 GNO *Gregorii Nysseni Opera*. Edited by Werner Jaeger, et al. Leiden: Brill, 1952–2014.
 GOTR *Greek Orthodox Theological Review*
 GRBS *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies*
 HTR *Harvard Theological Review*
 ITQ *Irish Theological Quarterly*
 JECS *Journal of Early Christian Studies*
 JEH *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*
 JLA *Journal of Late Antiquity*
 JR *Journal of Religion*
 JTS *Journal of Theological Studies*
 LCL Loeb Classical Library
 LS *The Hellenistic Philosophers*. Edited by A.A. Long and D.N. Sedley. 2 volumes. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987–1989.
 MScRel *Mélanges de science religieuse*
 NTS *New Testament Studies*
 OCP *Orientalia Christiana Periodica*
 PG Patrologia Graeca
 PTS Patristische Texte und Studien
 RevScRel *Revue des sciences religieuses*

List of Abbreviations

xvii

RSR	<i>Recherches de science religieuse</i>
SacEr	<i>Sacris Erudiri</i>
SC	Sources Chrétiennes
SJT	<i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i>
StPatr	<i>Studia Patristica</i>
SVF	<i>Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta</i> . Edited by Hans Friedrich August von Arnim. 4 volumes. Leipzig: Teubner, 1903–1924.
TS	<i>Theological Studies</i>
VC	<i>Vigiliae Christianae</i>
ZAC	<i>Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum / Journal of Ancient Christianity</i>

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