

συγκατάβασις and ἀκρίβεια – **THE WARP
AND WOOF OF CHRYSOSTOM'S
HERMENEUTICS**
**A Study Based on Chrysostom's Genesis
Homilies**

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Introduction

The extant homilies of John Chrysostom number between six and seven hundred. Around 150 are devoted to Old Testament books or Old Testament characters, sixty-seven of which are on Genesis.¹ A study based on Chrysostom's Genesis homilies, then, should reflect quite accurately Chrysostom's hermeneutics of the Old Testament, if not the New. Even a cursory reading of Chrysostom's Genesis homilies² would

¹ Robert C. Hill, "Chrysostom as Old Testament Commentator," *Estudios Biblicos* 46 (1988): 62.

² Chrysostom's Genesis homilies in the English translation comprise three volumes of works, as follows:

Saint John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis, 1-17*, The Fathers of the Church, Volume 82, ed. Thomas P. Halton, trans. Robert C. Hill (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1986); *Homilies on Genesis, 18-45*, The Fathers of the Church, Volume 82, ed. Thomas P. Halton, trans. Robert C. Hill (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1990); *Homilies on Genesis, 46-67*, The Fathers

bring to our attention two words, συγκατάβασις and ἀκρίβεια, which appear so frequently in the homilies. This paper attempts to show how the concepts behind these two words tie in so closely with Chrysostom's hermeneutics that they actually form the warp and woof of his hermeneutical principles. At appropriate times, we would compare and contrast Chrysostom's exegesis with that of John Skinner, the writer of a Genesis commentary³ which "represents the best of turn-of-the-century critical thought."⁴

συγκατάβασις

The word συγκατάβασις is translated as "condescension" by Frederic H. Chase,⁵ but Robert C. Hill considers such translation inaccurate, stating that "a reading of Chrysostom at length makes it clear there is in *sunkatabasis* no suggestion by him of patronising, condescending behaviour." He prefers the translation "considerateness."⁶ However, "condescension" may be a more faithful translation of the Greek word συγκατάβασις, used by Chrysostom, which is connected with συγκαταβαίνω, "go down with." "Condescension" connotes a humbling act of God which "considerateness" fails to convey but "considerateness" would be more appropriate in some contexts. Recent theologians use the word "accommodation"⁷ to convey a similar idea, which is all right, but we will see that what Chrysostom meant by "condescension" is much broader than "accommodation" as understood by today's scholars. The most basic idea conveyed by συγκατάβασις is that God has chosen to communicate with man through human language. Chrysostom points out that idea in his very first homily on Genesis, Homily 2,⁸

of the Church, Volume 87, ed. Thomas P. Halton, trans. Robert C. Hill (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1992).

³ John Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis*, The International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark Ltd., 1910).

⁴ Tremper Longman III, *Old Testament Commentary Survey* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991), 60.

⁵ Frederic Henry Chase, *Chrysostom: A Study in the History of Biblical Interpretation* (Cambridge: Deighton, Bell, and Co., 1887), 41.

⁶ Robert C. Hill, "On Looking Again at Sunkatabasis," *Prudentia* 13 (1981): 4.

⁷ Jack B. Rogers & Donald K. McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible: An Historical Approach* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1979), 18.

⁸ Chrysostom's first homily in the Genesis series is a homily at the beginning of the holy season of Lent, which is not related to Genesis. Cf. Chrysostom, 1986, 20.

...when God formed human beings in the beginning, he used to speak to them personally, in a way that was possible for human beings to understand him...And even when all humankind fell into evil ways...when they then proved unworthy of his converse with them...he sent them letters...and this drew all humankind back again to him. It was God who sent them letters, Moses who delivered them.⁹

συγκατάβασις in this particular sense is not an idea held only by Chrysostom. It is the common view of the early church shared by both the Alexandrian and the Antiochene schools, and later on by Augustine, Luther and Calvin. Chrysostom's uniqueness lies in his taking it seriously. And that God speaks in a way that is possible for human beings to understand him is directly related to the literal sense of Scripture. It implies that anyone can read the Scripture and understand the Word of God. Accordingly, Chrysostom encourages Scripture reading on one's own, which is quite a brave and daring act in his time. In contrast to the Alexandrian school which claims that only the "elite" of the Church can correctly understand the message of the Scripture, Chrysostom probably believes that every believer can understand and benefit from the Scripture as long as they read it.

He encourages daily devotion:

...while relaxing at home, both before eating and after eating...take the Scriptures in our hands and gain benefit from them and provide spiritual nourishment for our soul. You see, as the body has need of material nourishment, likewise, too, the soul needs daily reminders and spiritual nourishment so that it may be strengthened...¹⁰

He even recommends his audience to form bible-study groups at home:

...a divine book in our hands, let each of us invite our neighbors to join us and refresh our minds and theirs with the divine words.¹¹

And for Chrysostom, the condescension of God includes not only his revealing himself in human language, but also his taking into consideration the ability of mankind of different epochs in understanding his message. How much does he say and in what manner does he reveal his message is directly related to the age to which it is given. As Chase puts it, Chrysostom "recognizes the progress in Revelation as affecting

⁹ Chrysostom 1986, 31.

¹⁰ Chrysostom 1986, 141.

¹¹ Chrysostom 1986, 89.

the form and the substance of the Old Testament."¹² That a fourth century exegete is able to grasp such an important concept as progressive revelation is surprising, but we can easily find illustrations of such recognition on Chrysostom's part in his Genesis homilies. First is the progress in revelation of the substance of God's message. When Chrysostom comments on Genesis 1:1 "In the beginning God created heaven and earth," he remarks that great extent of considerateness is shown in this statement in that there is no mention of unseen powers, including angels or archangels. Moses was talking to the Jews then, and they were incapable of forming any spiritual notion, so that he led them along for the time being from visible realities to the creator of all things. But Paul, in the age of grace, addresses differently to the people at Colossae. "In him were created all things – those in the heaven and on earth, the visible and the invisible, whether thrones, dominations, principalities, powers – all were created by him and with him in mind" (Col 1:16). And then John also said, "Everything was made through him, and without him no single thing was made" (John 1:3). People in the Old Testament times are like those who still require to be fed on milk, while those in the New Testament times can be fed on solid food. The Old Testament people are like children who need the fundamentals of learning; and the New Testament people are at more developed stages of learning. So Chrysostom states:

When Moses...in the beginning took on the instruction of the human race, he taught his listeners the elements, whereas Paul and John, taking over from Moses, could at that later stage transmit more developed notions. Hence we discover the reason for the considerateness shown to date, namely, that under the guidance of the Spirit *he was speaking in a manner appropriate to his hearers* as he outlined everything.¹³

Another example can be found in Homily 3, where Chrysostom compares the detailed account of creation to the simple, clear-cut opening sentences of the Gospel of John and states that:

Since mankind was yet untutored and could not understand more elaborate matters, the Holy Spirit accordingly explained everything to us...compare the approach of the Son of Thunder: when humankind *had advanced along the path to perfection*, no longer did he have them move by this lower way, but led his listeners to a loftier teaching.¹⁴

¹² Chase 1887, 42.

¹³ Chrysostom 1986, 34, italics mine.

¹⁴ Chrysostom 1986, 42-43, italics mine.

So, in doing exegesis, we are to look for deeper and more developed teachings in the New Testament but not in the Old.

As to the "form" of language that God employs out of his condescension or consideration for mankind, the most prominent expression that Chrysostom constantly mentions is the anthropomorphic expression. Chase gives us a little background as to why it becomes a specific concern for Chrysostom. At the time of Chrysostom, some wild, untaught monks of Egypt, out of a fanatical hatred of Origen's more spiritual teaching, held that God is of bodily shape.¹⁵ And Chrysostom is very much disturbed by that. But the issue of anthropomorphic language is of particular interest to us because Genesis, especially the earlier chapters, is full of this kind of expression. Commenting on Genesis 1:26 "Let us make a human being in our image and likeness," he mentions that there are people "who want to cast in human form him who is without shape, and to attribute limbs and forms to the one who has no body" and he calls them heretics.¹⁶ Then, commenting on Genesis 2:21 "God took one of his (Adam's) ribs," he asks his audience to take notice of the considerateness of Sacred Scripture in the words employed with our limitations in mind, and explicitly formulates the following principle of interpretation:

*Don't take the words in human fashion; rather, interpret the concreteness of the expressions from the viewpoint of human limitations...Let us therefore not remain at the level of the words alone, but let us understand everything in a manner proper to God because applied to God.*¹⁷

Admitting the plain, literal meaning of the text, this aspect of God's condescension warns against interpreting Scripture in a woodenly literal manner. The same principle applies to passages of theophanies. Theophany, for Chrysostom, is another manifestation of God's condescension or considerateness. The appearance of the Lord to Abraham by the oak (Gen 18) and Jacob's encounter with God (Gen 32) are all taken as a condescending act on the part of God.

Do you see how the Lord shows considerateness for our human limitations in all he does and in arranging everything in a way that gives evidence of his characteristic love?¹⁸

¹⁵ Chase 1887, 43.

¹⁶ Chrysostom 1986, 109.

¹⁷ Chrysostom 1986, 199, italics mine.

¹⁸ Chrysostom 1992, 159.

For Chrysostom, these theophanies are:

premonitions from on high at the beginning that he would one day take human form to liberate all human nature by this means from the tyranny of the devil and lead us to salvation. At that time, however, *since it was the very early stages*, he appeared to each of them in the guise of an apparition...¹⁹

The climax of God's condescension is in his incarnation, and it is only at the earlier stages that God reveals himself in theophany. In interpreting these passages, then, we have to be careful not to take the words at their face value and believe that these Old Testament people really see God.

Other aspects of God's condescension are not primarily found in the book of Genesis and it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss them.²⁰

ἀκρίβεια

ἀκρίβεια is translated as "minuteness, detailed significance,"²¹ "accuracy,"²² or "precision."²³ And for Chrysostom, precision is the corollary of the inerrancy of Scripture.

let none of you...be ignorant of Sacred Scripture's point and be rash enough to find fault with what is written; instead, accept its words with a grateful mind, marvel at the precision of Sacred Scripture...²⁴

And ἀκρίβεια is intimately related to συγκατάβασις as well. It is out of God's considerateness (συγκατάβασις) for mankind that Scripture describes things to us in details (ἀκρίβεια), that we may learn the whole truth.²⁵ Also, ἀκρίβεια makes sense only when we talk about literal

¹⁹ Chrysostom 1992, 159-60, italics mine.

²⁰ These other kinds of condescension in the Old Testament include: obscurity, reticence, retention of pagan usages, rewards and punishments, and "moral condescension" which includes divorce, polygamy and "*lex talionis*." Cf. M.H. Flanagan, *St. John Chrysostom's Doctrine of Condescension and Accuracy in the Scriptures* (Ph. D. diss., St. Patrick's College, 1946).

²¹ Chase 1887, 41.

²² Flanagan 1946.

²³ Robert C. Hill, "Akribeia: A Principle of Chrysostom's Exegesis." *Colloquim* 14 (1981), 32. Again, Hill disagrees with the traditional translation of the term as "accuracy."

²⁴ Chrysostom 1990, 213.

²⁵ Chrysostom 1986, 96-97.

meaning, and as mentioned above, God's condescension implies that his Word should be understood in a literal sense (though not in a woodenly literal sense). Every word of Scripture is written "not idly and without purpose or reason" – a characteristic phrase used by Chrysostom in His Genesis homilies and we should "never pass heedlessly by the contents of Sacred Scripture, but...let us descry carefully the treasure hidden there."²⁶ And the precision of Scripture includes repetition, "saying the same thing once and again so that the words could be riveted in the minds of the listeners."²⁷ It also includes specification of the age of a person (e.g. "Noah was six hundred years old"²⁸), the name of a person (e.g. "Adam called his wife Eve"²⁹), the number of people involved (e.g. a total of seventy-five persons went down to Egypt³⁰) and many other details.³¹ For all these details, Chrysostom assigns various reasons. The conviction of the precision of Scripture compels Chrysostom to adopt what we called "a grammatical-historical approach" to Scripture with the ultimate purpose of finding out the author's intent.³² Steps typical of the grammatical-historical approach can be identified here and there in Chrysostom's Genesis homilies.

Choose the Correct Text

Chrysostom does not know Hebrew and uses the Septuagint as his Old Testament. In his comment on the Old Testament, including Genesis, he therefore lacks the advantage of knowing the original language as he does with the New Testament. He works primarily with the Septuagint. As Chase points out, "when we consider him as an expounder of the Old Testament, we really consider him as the expounder of the great Greek Bible."³³ Variations between the Hebrew Bible and the Septuagint escape his notice most of the time. For example, the Hebrew version of Genesis 2:2 in fact reads "on the seventh day," but the Septuagint has "God completed on the sixth day (ἐν τῇ ἡμέρᾳ τῇ ἕκτῃ) the works he had

²⁶ Chrysostom 1990, 104.

²⁷ Chrysostom 1986, 133.

²⁸ Chrysostom 1990, 125.

²⁹ Chrysostom 1990, 4.

³⁰ Chrysostom 1992, 247.

³¹ Hill, "Akribeia," 33.

³² Chrysostom elsewhere explicitly states that "we must mark the mind of the writer." Chrysostom X 675A, quoted by Chase 1887, 157.

³³ Chase 1887, 38.

done." Chrysostom then comments and says, "Notice how it says the same thing twice over so that we might learn all the works of creation were done up to the sixth day."³⁴ His ignorance of the original text definitely limits his exegetical capability. Commenting on Genesis 1:1, for example, Chrysostom is totally unaware of the fact that grammatically, the verse can be interpreted as a subordinate clause, with verse two as a parenthetical phrase. He simply takes Genesis 1:1 as a statement of declaration of God being the creator of heaven and earth,³⁵ though after all, his conclusion may be correct. However, we can still detect instances in his Genesis homilies where he tries to be faithful to the original. His comment on Genesis 1:8, "The Lord called the firmament heaven," illustrates this point:

Now, those with a precise knowledge of that language tell us that among the Hebrews the word 'heaven' is used in the plural...not because there are several heavens...but because it is idiomatic in Hebrew to use the name of a single thing in the plural.³⁶

Ask Interpretive Questions

"What is meant by..." is one of Chrysostom's favorite questions in his homilies. Consider the following examples. "'Darkness,' the text says, 'was over the deep, and the Spirit of God moved over the water.' What is meant by... 'The Spirit of God moved over the water?' It seems to me to mean this..." "'God separated light from darkness.' What is meant by 'He separated?'" "'God saw that the light was good.' What is the point of the remark?...why did he use this expression?"³⁷ "'The earth was invisible and lacking all shape.' For what reason, tell me, did he create the sky bright and finished, but let the earth appear formless?"³⁸ At times Chrysostom would throw out a bunch of questions, provoking his audience to think and pressing his audience for an answer. Here is one good example:

Did you see the whole of creation made in those five days merely by word and command? Notice...how great the difference...no longer does it say, Let a human being be created. Instead, what? "'Let us make a human being in our image and

³⁴ Chrysostom 1986, 138.

³⁵ Chrysostom 1986, 30ff.

³⁶ Chrysostom 1986, 57.

³⁷ Chrysostom 1986, 41-43.

³⁸ Chrysostom 1986, 36.

likeness." What is new in this? What is strange? Why is it...that if this creature is more important than all these, it is brought forth after them?³⁹

Sometimes he would argue by negation. Commenting on Genesis 1:31, "God saw everything he had made, and behold, it was very good," he says:

I mean, it didn't just say "everything" and stop there, but added "that he had made;" nor did it conclude at that point, but said, "And behold it was good," even "very good" – that is to say, "completely good."⁴⁰

And then the following is a classic example of how meticulous Chrysostom can become:

"For Adam, however, there proved to be no helpmate of his kind." What is the force of this brief phrase, "For Adam, however"? Why did he add the particle? I mean, would it not have been enough to say, For Adam?⁴¹

It is where Chrysostom adds his characteristic admonition,

Let us not be heedless...instead, let us act so as to interpret everything precisely and instruct you not to pass by even a brief phrase or a single syllable contained in the Holy Scriptures.⁴²

But then Chrysostom may go too far. Commenting on the change of names of Abram and Sarah, he says that by adding a syllable to Abram's name, God is indicating to Abraham that he would be the father of many nations. Likewise, by adding a letter to "Sarah," whose name then becomes "Sarrah," God is telling Sarah that now the time has come for God's promises to come true.⁴³

Interpret by the Immediate Context

Chrysostom also urges his audience to pay attention to the context in the interpretation of Scripture. When he comments on Genesis 2:7 about the phrase, "God breathed into him (Adam) a breath of life," he reminds his readers not to listen to senseless interpretation of the phrase, but "let us follow the direction of Sacred Scripture in the interpretation

³⁹ Chrysostom 1986, 107.

⁴⁰ Chrysostom 1986, 136.

⁴¹ Chrysostom 1986, 195.

⁴² Chrysostom 1986, 195.

⁴³ Chrysostom 1990, 380, 390.

it gives of itself."⁴⁴ Later on in the homily, when he dwells on why the Scripture inserts the name "Eden" in Genesis 2:8, he again comments that "Sacred Scripture...whenever it wants to teach us something like this, gives its own interpretation, and doesn't let the listener go astray... So, I beg you, block your ears against all distractions of that kind, and let us follow the norm of Sacred Scripture."⁴⁵ One good illustration of Chrysostom interpreting the Scripture by context is found in his comment on the creation of man in the image of God. Chrysostom points out that since "let them have control..." follows "let us make a human being in our image and likeness," "image" should be understood as "controlling and having all creatures under subjection."⁴⁶ It is interesting that Skinner, while commenting on this phrase, mentions Chrysostom, and remarks that his view that the divine image consists in dominion over the creatures is not acceptable.⁴⁷ In any case, let the Scripture interpret itself is definitely one hermeneutical principle that Chrysostom adopts.

Now and then, Chrysostom would allow for more than one possible interpretations. Commenting on the last clause of Genesis 4:7 (translated by Hill as "His movement is towards you, and you will be superior to him"), Chrysostom allows two possibilities as to what the third person singular would refer to. It would either refer to Abel's subjection to Cain or to the offering, and in this case, Chrysostom leaves his audience to make the choice.⁴⁸

Again, Chrysostom sometimes would not exactly follow his own principle in letting the Scripture to give its own interpretation. Instead he would give his own interpretation of the text. One obvious example is his remark that the text about eating and not eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil refers figuratively to fasting,⁴⁹ which is totally irrelevant as far as the context of Genesis 2 is concerned. Also, he considers intemperance and sloth (ἀρθημία) as the original sin of Adam and Eve. In Homily 1, Chrysostom states "from the beginning it was from intemperance that death had its entry,"⁵⁰ and then in his homily on

⁴⁴ Chrysostom 1986, 172.

⁴⁵ Chrysostom 1986, 175.

⁴⁶ Chrysostom 1986, 132.

⁴⁷ Skinner 1910, 32.

⁴⁸ Chrysostom 1990, 23.

⁴⁹ Chrysostom 1986, 23.

⁵⁰ Chrysostom 1986, 24.

the Fall, he again comments that "the human being trampled underfoot the instruction given him, out of his great intemperance and sloth."⁵¹ As a moral preacher, Chrysostom considers intemperance and sloth as the greatest vices, and cannot avoid reading his preunderstanding into the text of the Fall.

***Interpreting by the Broader Context –
The Context of the Whole Bible***

Being a faithful supporter of literal interpretation, Chrysostom seldom reads typology into the text. In his homily on the famous messianic verse, Genesis 3:15, Chrysostom never mentions a word about the verse being a prophecy of the Messiah. This is a good illustration of how the Antiochene school preserves the literal meaning of the text at the expense of some of the most precious and significant messianic prophecies in the Old Testament. Nonetheless, Chrysostom does concede to the unanimity of the Old and New Testament. For example, he would say that there is great commendation of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the Old Testament as well as in the New.⁵² Elsewhere, he asserts that "The New Testament and the Old come from the same Spirit, and the same Spirit which gave utterance in the New spoke also here."⁵³ And then, Chrysostom's understanding of progressive revelation definitely allows for typology in the Old Testament. In his homily on Genesis 22, the passage of Abraham sacrificing Isaac, Chrysostom spends eight pages of comment on the literal meaning of the incident. Nonetheless, with the support from New Testament passages, he also concludes:

All this, however, happened as a type of the Cross. Here Christ too said to the Jews, "Your father Abraham rejoiced in anticipation of seeing my day; he saw it and was delighted (John 8:56)." How did he see it if he lived so long before? In type, in shadow: just as in our text the sheep was offered in place of Isaac, so here the rational lamb was offered for the world.⁵⁴

Chrysostom explicitly acknowledges that there are three kinds of passages in Scripture:

⁵¹ Chrysostom 1986, 187.

⁵² Chrysostom 1990, 45.

⁵³ Saint John Chrysostom, "Homily on Ps 115," in *Patrologiae cursus completus: Series graeca*, vol. 55, ed. J.P. Migne (Paris: Brepols of Turnout, 1857-1866), 321, quoted by Robert C. Hill in Chrysostom 1992, 45.

⁵⁴ Chrysostom 1992, 21-23.

Some passages must be interpreted literally. Some must be interpreted in a different sense to that which lies on the surface, as with the words, "The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb." Yet again others must be taken in a two-fold sense...as in the case of the figurative history of Isaac.⁵⁵

The Antiochene school represented by Chrysostom designates such understanding of the text as *θεωρία* (insight), "by which they meant the power of perceiving, in addition to the historical facts set out in the text, a spiritual reality to which they were designed to point."⁵⁶ Thus, they distinguish themselves from the arbitrary, allegorical approach of the Alexandrian school.

Once in a while, however, Chrysostom would fall into the trap of arbitrary allegorizing. Commenting on the process of birth of the two sons born to Judah and Tamar recorded in Genesis 38, he says that it was not idly or to no purpose (the exact phrase he uses to call his audience's attention to the precision of the text) that these things happened. Rather, it was a type of things to come, revealing the events themselves. He believes that after Zarah's hand was bound with crimson, for him to draw back again and give way to the one after him would have been impossible, unless there were some divine power arranging this in advance, so he comes to the conclusion that:

It was also prefiguring...the fact that right from the outset Zarah, which means sunrise (he is after all, a type of the Church) began to peer ahead; as he moved gradually forward and then retired, the legal observance denoted by Phares made its entrance. After that had held precedence for a long time, the former one – I mean Zarah...came forward, and the whole Judaic way of life in turn yielded place to the Church.⁵⁷

And Chrysostom calls the above interpretation a type (*τύπος*), not an allegory.

Application

That Chrysostom's homilies are lengthy is unquestionable. Out of his sixty-seven Genesis homilies, he preaches eighteen homilies on only

⁵⁵ Cited by Chase 1887, 55; also cited by Duane A. Garrett, *An Analysis of the Hermeneutics of John Chrysostom's Commentary on Isaiah 1-8 with an English Translation* (Lewiston/Queenston/Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), 215.

⁵⁶ J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1958), 76.

⁵⁷ Chrysostom 1992, 202.

the first three chapters of the book. The main reason is that Chrysostom is always applying the text to his audience as he interprets, and he would digress from his passage to exhort his audience to lead a moral life worthy of the saints of God and to be a doer of the Scripture rather than a hearer.

In any case, in Chrysostom, we find basically a sensible and balanced exegete who pays attention to almost all the hermeneutical principles we believe to be important today. Of all the Fathers, Calvin awards Chrysostom first place in the exposition of the Scripture, saying that the outstanding merit of Chrysostom lies in "his supreme concern always not to turn aside even to the slightest degree from the genuine, simple sense of Scripture and to allow himself no liberties by twisting the plain meaning of the words."⁵⁸

συγκατάβασις or ἀκρίβεια?

After looking at the way Chrysostom handles Scripture based on his ἀκρίβεια principle, it is time to discuss further the intricate relation between the two concepts, συγκατάβασις and ἀκρίβεια. Now on the one hand, Chrysostom reminds his audience to take note of the condescension of Scripture in employing words to our limitations, and therefore should not "take what is said in human fashion...and should not remain at the level of the words alone, but understand everything in a manner proper to God."⁵⁹ But then on the other hand, Chrysostom also advises his audience to "interpret everything precisely and...not to pass by even a brief phrase or a single syllable contained in the Holy Scriptures."⁶⁰ Is there any contradiction between the two principles? According to Chrysostom, obviously not. In fact the above two quotations are from the same homily, Homily 15 of Genesis. It appears that Chrysostom usually applies the first principle only to those passages with anthropomorphic expressions, which is one of the major manifestations of God's condescension, and the second principle to all other passages. But things are not always so black and white. Take for an example the serpent mentioned in Genesis 3. Should we use the first

⁵⁸ Quoted by John Robert Walchenbach, *John Calvin as Biblical Commentator: An Investigation into Calvin's Use of John Chrysostom as An Exegetical Tutor* (Ph.D. diss., University of Pittsburgh. 1974), 30.

⁵⁹ Chrysostom 1986, 199.

⁶⁰ Chrysostom 1986, 195.

or the second principle to interpret it? How does Chrysostom handle the passage? He regards the serpent as the mouthpiece of the evil spirit:

The author of evil...employed considerable skill so as to pluck the human being from God's favor...What did he do? He discovered this wild animal, namely, the serpent...He made use of this creature like some instrument.⁶¹

Why is it that in Genesis 3, Adam is a man, Eve is a woman, and the tree of good and evil is a tree, but the serpent is not a snake? Such an interpretation definitely cannot be deduced from the context, and is therefore, to a certain extent, a violation of the literal sense of the text and Chrysostom's precision principle. Is Chrysostom aware of that? Anyway, that the serpent is Satan is taken for granted by Chrysostom reflects the uncritical spirit of the fourth century which no longer exists in the nineteenth century. Skinner, for example, understands "the serpent" as a serpent, which possesses supernatural power. He remarks that "the religious teaching of the passage knows nothing of an evil principle *external* to the serpent," and that "the Yahwistic author does not speculate on the ultimate origin of evil."⁶² Likewise, twentieth century commentator von Rad also states:

The serpent...is marked as one of God's created animals... In the narrator's mind it is scarcely an embodiment of a "demonic" power and certainly not of Satan.⁶³

The point of interest is that both Chrysostom and Skinner adopt basically the same approach, the literal approach, in interpreting Genesis. As a matter of fact, both of them refuse to regard Genesis 3:15 a "protoevangelium."⁶⁴ In this particular instance, then, we may be forced to endorse the remark of a modern critical scholar that:

Historical-critical reading demands that Bible stories be read literally, with more precise attention to detail than any ancient rabbi or Tennessee evangelist ever lavished upon them.⁶⁵

It is worthwhile pointing out that Skinner, like Chrysostom, also claims authorial intention in defending his interpretation. And we have

⁶¹ Chrysostom 1986, 208.

⁶² Skinner 1910, 73.

⁶³ Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis, A Commentary*, trans. John H. Marks (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1956), 85.

⁶⁴ Chrysostom 1986, 233; Skinner 1910, 81.

⁶⁵ W. Sibley Towner, "Interpretations and Reinterpretations of the Fall," *Modern Biblical Scholarship: Its Impact on Theology and Proclamation*, ed. Francis A. Eigo (Villanova: The Villanova University Press, 1984), 58.

to admit that Skinner is more consistently literal in his interpretation of Genesis 3. But then Skinner is a child of the historical-critical age. The Bible is to be read as if it is any other book, and anything that reason cannot account for is to be rejected. Inspiration, progressive revelation and typology are all out of the question. Following Wellhausen and Gunkel, Skinner starts off with the basic assumption that the whole book of Genesis is made up of different sources, and allows for errors, discrepancies and contradictions in Scripture, accounting for them by their various sources. For Skinner, Adam and Eve are not historical figures. The creation account is a modified version of ancient cosmological traditions which originate from the speculation of human mind on the origin of the world. Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac is "a legend, explaining the substitution of animal for human sacrifices in some type of ancient worship."⁶⁶

The presupposition of Chrysostom is very different. For Chrysostom, Scripture is the inspired revelation of God for the salvation of humankind. He holds on to its inerrancy and its unity. He admonishes his audience not to think that Sacred Scripture ever contradicts itself, and to close their ears to those who speak against the truth.⁶⁷ True, we must admit that Chrysostom never really tries to solve the discrepancies and apparent contradictions in Genesis. When Chrysostom comes to the two creation accounts in Genesis 1 and 2, he simply remarks that it is because Moses wants to teach us everything with precision that he gives us a second account of creation,⁶⁸ but then never goes further to apply his precision principle to the variations between the two passages. Again, in his comment on the flood passage, Genesis 6 to 8, he does not address the discrepancies concerning the duration of the flood and the number of animals that Noah brought into the ark with him.⁶⁹

Furthermore, Chrysostom also has the tendency of rationalizing when he comes to immoral or irrational behaviors of the patriarchs, whom his Antiochene school probably venerates. He defends Abraham even when he lies to Pharaoh about his wife.⁷⁰ The conspiracy of Rebekah

⁶⁶ Skinner 1910, 332.

⁶⁷ Chrysostom 1986, 56.

⁶⁸ Chrysostom 1986, 165.

⁶⁹ Chrysostom 1990, 463-66.

⁷⁰ Chrysostom 1990, 471-74.

and Jacob to snatch the blessings away from Esau is praised by him as "a mother's insight," and that Rebekah is complying with God's prediction in acting the way she does.⁷¹ He praises Lot's behavior in offering his two daughters to save his guests from insult.⁷² He sides with Lot and his two daughters in their incest, saying that their intent is justifiable, that they did this to preserve their line of offspring.⁷³ Even the translator of his Genesis homilies cannot help calling his precision principle "selective ἀκριβεία."⁷⁴ But at least Chrysostom would admit that while in Scripture, there is nothing written idly and to no purpose,

we can't understand everything precisely; on the contrary, even if we try to assign causes for some things to the extent possible to us, yet it still holds within it some treasure that is hidden and difficult to interpret.⁷⁵

This confession on Chrysostom's part reveals that he does try to struggle with the meaning of the text. If he is inconsistent, it is because the discrepancies or difficult passages of Scripture is more than what the logical mind of a fourth century exegete can handle. Post-Enlightenment men should be aware of all the benefits that are available to them but not to Chrysostom.

Chrysostom is, after all, a faithful interpreter of the Scripture and never intentionally goes beyond the literal and authorial meaning of the text. Also, he tries hard to get across the message of the Scripture to his audience for their edification. In contrast, Skinner's commentary is bogged down with grammatical details and human speculations, and fails to communicate the witness of Scripture and relate its message to modern man. The historical-critical activity, as Fuchs describes, is "striking the text dead."⁷⁶ May be it is because of the "coldness" of the historical-critical method that initiates the call for a deeper engagement of the interpreter with the text? It is intriguing to notice that this subjective element of interpretation is present in the homilies of Chrysostom, who is well trained in rhetoric. See how Chrysostom attempts to "re-experience

⁷¹ Chrysostom 1992, 97.

⁷² Chrysostom 1990, 445.

⁷³ Chrysostom 1990, 463-66.

⁷⁴ Chrysostom 1992, 247.

⁷⁵ Chrysostom 1990, 463-64.

⁷⁶ Quoted by R.A. Piper, "New Hermeneutic," *A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, eds. R.J. Coggins and J.L. Houlden (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), 493.

the mental processes of the author" in his homilies on the passage which describes the encounter of God with Adam after he has sinned:

Who told you that you are naked – unless you have eaten from that one tree I told you not to eat from?... Surely, I didn't inhibit your enjoyment?... Did I not relieve you of every need, give you authority over everything in the garden...What good was that to you? Hadn't I warned you of that in advance?... Didn't I tell you what would be likely to happen?...⁷⁷

Can we say that fifteen hundred years before Schleiermacher, Chrysostom has grasped the gist of hermeneutics, that there are two aspects to hermeneutics, the "grammatical" aspect and the "psychological" aspect?

ABSTRACT

The extant homilies of John Chrysostom number between six and seven hundred. Around 150 are devoted to Old Testament books or Old Testament characters, sixty-seven of which are on Genesis.

A study done on Chrysostom's Genesis homilies, then, should reflect quite accurately Chrysostom's hermeneutics of the Old Testament, if not the New. This paper is a cursory reading on Chrysostom's Genesis homilies, and attempts to show that the concepts behind the two Greek words, συγκατάβασις (translated as "condescension") and ἀκριβεία (translated as "minuteness, detailed significance") tie in so closely with Chrysostom's hermeneutics that they actually form the warp and woof of his hermeneutical principles.

撮 要

屈梭多模現存的講道集約有六百至七百篇；其中有一百五十篇關乎舊約書卷或舊約人物，當中的六十七篇是論及創世記的。因此，研究屈梭多模的創世記講道集，應該可以相當準確地反映出他對舊約（如果不包括新約的話）的釋經原則。這篇文章研究屈梭多模的創世記講道集，並嘗試證明συγκατάβασις（翻譯為「屈尊」）和ἀκριβεία（翻譯為「詳細、詳細的意義」）這兩個希臘詞語背後的理念，與屈梭多模的釋經原則關係密切。這兩個字實際上是屈梭多模的釋經原則的經緯。

⁷⁷ Chrysostom 1986, 229.