

# *St. John Chrysostom on Genesis*

*Andrew J. Hayes*

*November 10, 2021*

**Please bring your Bible so that you can follow the key passages from Genesis!**

St. John Chrysostom (349-407) was one of the most colorful figures of the patristic age. A native of Antioch, he became famous for his skill as a preacher while still a deacon and a priest, and it was this reputation that led to his being spirited away from his city to be installed as Archbishop of Constantinople. His works constitute the largest extant corpus of any of the eastern fathers. Like Ephrem, he shares many of the same themes and details on Genesis, and he also adopts a very similar understanding of the divine pedagogy at work in the Scripture of Creation.

Chrysostom was the author of two series of preaching on Genesis, both probably from early in his career in Antioch, one of which even predated his presbyteral ordination at the hands of Meletius of Antioch. One short series of eight homilies,<sup>1</sup> treats only the first three chapters of Genesis. His larger series of 67 homilies proceeds through Genesis passage by passage from the beginning.<sup>2</sup> The following numbered selections are some of the most important passages quoted in the lecture. They come from both published translations of these works, with attention to the Greek where it is helpful

<sup>1</sup> Chrysostom and Hill, *Eight Sermons from the Book of Genesis*

<sup>2</sup> Chrysostom and Hill, *Homilies on Genesis, 1-17*; Chrysostom and Hill, *Homilies on Genesis 46-67*; Chrysostom and Hill, *Homilies on Genesis 18-45*

## *Overview of Chrysostom on Genesis 1-11*

Chrysostom's *Sermons on Genesis* do not follow the strict sequence of the text. Thus, the following outline highlights the points in the order in which they will be presented, rather than in the order of the Genesis narrative itself.

- Getting started: the divine considerateness
  - St. Ephrem (recapitulation from last time)
  - St. John Chrysostom
- The purpose of Genesis
- The importance of creation from nothing
- Man and woman in the image and likeness of God
  - the purpose of human existence
  - the sin of Adam
  - the possibility of restoration
- The story of Cain and Abel

### *Passages Selected for Illustration*

1. For him who would tell of it there is no other means  
but to use the names of things that are visible,  
thus depicting for his hearers a likeness of things that are hidden.  
For if the Creator of the Garden  
has clothed His majesty in terms that we can understand,  
how much more can His Garden be described with our similes?

If someone concentrates his attention solely  
on the metaphors used of God's majesty,  
he abuses and misrepresents that majesty and thus errs  
by means of those metaphors with which God clothed himself for his  
benefit  
and is ungrateful to the Benevolence which stooped low  
to the level of his childishness; although it has nothing in common with  
him,  
yet Benevolence clothed itself in his likeness in order to bring him to the  
likeness of itself.<sup>3</sup>

2. What is the meaning of that verse, "On the seventh day he rested from all the works he had done"? Notice how Sacred Scripture narrates everything in human fashion even out of considerateness to us (διὰ τὴν πρὸς ἡμᾶς συγκατάβασιν). I mean, it would not have been possible for us in any other way to understand anything of what was said had not such considerateness been thought fitting. . . . It says he stopped creating and bringing from non-being into being; he had produced everything he had to, after all, and *had created the being destined to enjoy it* (καὶ τὸν μέλλοντα τούτων ἀπολαύειν ἐδημιούργησε). "God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it for the reason that on that day he rested from all the works God had begun to do." You see, when he stopped creating, he had out of his own loving kindness (φιλανθρωπίαν) brought forth at his own command everything he had intended, and had brought creation to a close on the sixth day; there was nothing else he intended to produce on the seventh day for the reason that everything he intended had been fulfilled. . . . Already at this point from the outset God provides us with *instruction* in a cryptic manner (ἐκ προοιμίων αἰνιγματωδῶς διδασκαλίαν ἡμῖν ὁ Θεὸς παρέχεται), teaching us that he set aside the whole of one day in the cycle of the week and marked it off for the *performance of spiritual works* (τῆ τῶν πνευματικῶν ἐργασίᾳ).<sup>4</sup> (emphasis added)

3. Why did this blessed author [i.e., Moses], born many generations later, put this to us? Not idly or without good reason. You see, 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 understanding him. This was the way, for example, that he came to Adam, the way he upbraided Cain, the way he conversed with Noah, the way he accepted Abraham's hospitality. And even when all humankind fell into evil ways, the creator of all did not abandon the human race. Instead, when they then proved unworthy of his converse with them, he wanted to renew his love for them; he sent them letters as you do to people far away from you, and this drew all humankind back to him again.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Beck, *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen de Paradiso und Contra Julianum* (HdP 11.5-6)

<sup>4</sup> Chrysostom and Hill, *Homilies on Genesis, 1-17, 138-39* (10.16-17)

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, 31 (2.4).

4. What relevance to us, you ask, has the account of Creation? Well, it does have relevance to us, dearly beloved: if “the creator is perceived by analogy in the immensity and beauty of created things,” we are guided to the creator by the extent that we dwell upon the beauty and immensity of created things. . . . We are going to speak not only of heaven, earth and sea, but also of our beginnings, whence comes death, whence a hard life, whence disappointments and worries. On these questions, you see, and on many others God composed an explanation and sent this book to us. . . . If the creator is discerned (θεωρεῖται) in created things, much more does he become visible (φανεῖται) through them.<sup>6</sup>
5. It is a great good to know, on the one hand, what a created thing is, and, on the other, what the creator is, what an artifact is, and what the artificer: if the enemies of truth knew how to make a precise distinction between them, they would not confuse everything, putting below what is above—not that they bring stars and heaven down or elevate the earth, but that they thrust down the king of heaven from his royal throne, placed him with creation, and dignified creation with the ranking of divinity. If Manichaeans knew how to exercise their minds properly about creation, they would not have dignified matter that came from nothing, that is corruptible, evanescent and changeable, with the status of being unmade.<sup>7</sup>
6. Notice how the divine nature shines out of the very manner of creation, how he executes his creation in a way contrary to human procedures, first stretching out the heavens and then laying out the earth beneath, first the roof and then the foundation. Who has ever seen the like? Who has ever heard of it? No matter what human beings produce, this could never have happened—whereas when God decides, everything yields to his will and becomes possible. So don’t pry too closely with human reasoning into the works of God. Let the works lead you to marvel at their maker (Μὴ τοίνυν ἀνθρωπίνῳ λογισμῷ τὰ τοῦ Θεοῦ ἔργα περιεργαζώμεθα, ἀλλ’ ἐκ τῶν ἔργων ὁδηγούμενοι, θαυμάζωμεν τὸν τεχνίτην).<sup>8</sup>
7. The Word of God is not only like a treasure, but is also like a spring gushing with overflowing waters in a mighty flood; this we all perceived from what we did yesterday. We began, remember, at the opening of the book of Genesis on the words, “In the beginning God made heaven and earth,” and dealt completely with all its contents, without however, being able to grasp it fully. You see, great is the yield of this treasure and the flow of this spiritual fountain. Don’t be surprised if we have experienced this: our forebears drank from these waters to the limit of their capacity, and those who come after us will try to do likewise, without risk of exhausting them; instead the flood will increase and the streams will be multiplied.<sup>9</sup>
8. These people say that matter was the basis for creation, and that darkness preexisted. What could be worse than this madness? You heard that “in the beginning God made heaven and earth,” and that from nothing things were created, and do you say that matter was the basis for creation? Who in their right minds would come up with such idiocy?<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Chrysostom and Hill, *Eight Sermons from the Book of Genesis*, 23–27.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, 23–24.

<sup>8</sup> Chrysostom and Hill, *Homilies on Genesis*, 1–17, 35 (2.11).

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, 39 (3.1).

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, 42 (3.5)

9. The reason, you see, that he produced all created things and formed us was not that we should perish nor to consign us to punishment, but to save us, to free us from error and reward us with the enjoyment of the kingdom. This, after all, is what he prepared for us, not at this late stage after our coming into existence, but before the foundation of the world, as he himself says: “Come, you blessed of my Father, take possession of the kingdom prepared for you before the foundation of the world.” See the loving kindness of the Lord, how even before creation, even before he produced human beings, he had prepared for them countless good things.<sup>11</sup>
10. You heard that God made the human being in the image of God, and we explained the meaning of the phrase *in image and likeness*, namely, not a similarity of being (ὁμοίωσις ἀπαρραλλασία) but a likeness by way of government (ἀρχῆς ὁμοιότης), and that in likeness means being mild and gentle (ἡμερον . . . καὶ πρᾶον), as far as possible being like God on the basis of virtue (κατὰ τὸν τῆς ἀρετῆς λόγος), as Christ says, “Be like my Father who is in heaven.” In other words, just as in this wide and spacious land some animals are more irrational and some more savage, likewise in the reaches of our soul some thoughts are more irrational and beastly, others wilder and more savage. There is therefore need to take charge and get the better of them, and to entrust government of them to reasoned thinking. And how, you ask would one get the better of untamed thinking? What are you saying, human being that you are? We get the better of lions and tame their spirits, and you are uncertain of being able to transform untamed thinking to mildness? . . . Will the person who drives out of the wild animal what is natural and instills what is unnatural fail to preserve what is natural in their own soul?<sup>12</sup>
11. **[on fasting:]** “Whether sleeping or rising be mindful of the Lord your God.” Do you see how it never becomes us to drive this awareness from our soul, but rather to have it engraven on our conscience.<sup>13</sup>
12. [God] installed them in this position of honor so as to bring out that what was conferred was not a reward for good behavior, but on God’s part was gratuitous, not due to them. While their receiving government (ἀρχή) was the result of God’s lovingkindness (φιλοανθρωπία) alone, then, their forfeiting government was the result of their indifference (ῥαθυμία).<sup>14</sup>
13. God in his goodness entrusted to rulers, like teachers and tutors, our nature that had scorned him, the purpose being for them to correct their neglect (ῥαθυμία).<sup>15</sup>
14. After all, they realized, Adam and Eve both, the degree and significance of the good things they had deprived themselves of through transgression of the command given them, *stripped as they were of that ineffable glory* and that life that was scarcely inferior to the angels’. We saw the Lord’s long-suffering, we learnt the gravity of indifference and how it renders us bereft of goods already in our possession and leaves us desolate, covering us in deep confusion. Hence I beseech you, let us remain alert: may their lapses become an antidote for us, and their indifference prove to be a motive for caution on our part.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, 46 (3:15).

<sup>12</sup> Chrysostom and Hill, *Eight Sermons from the Book of Genesis*, 53–54.

<sup>13</sup> Chrysostom and Hill, *Homilies on Genesis*, 1:17, 141.

<sup>14</sup> Chrysostom and Hill, *Eight Sermons from the Book of Genesis*, 62.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, 70.

<sup>16</sup> Chrysostom and Hill, *Homilies on Genesis 18-45*, 3–4.

15. [On the slavery that results from sin:] Do you want me to give you also a third rationale? The first was this, that not only our first parents but also those coming after them have sinned; the second, that the virtuous, even while living in the present life, experience a lighter slavery—or, rather, they are completely exempt from it, as we showed in the case of women, the governed and wild animals. Third after them is this, Christ's coming and promising us greater goods now than the ones of which those in the beginning robbed us by sinning. I mean, tell me, why do you grieve? Because Adam by sinning has driven you from paradise? Live a good life, He says, and practice virtue: not paradise but heaven itself will open to you, and I allow you to suffer no dire consequence of the disobedience of the first-formed. . . . Eve subjected you to her husband, whereas I make you equal in status not only to her husband but also to the angels, if you want it. He stripped you of the present life, whereas I grant you also the future life, ageless and unending, replete with countless good things. Let no one think themselves undone by our first parents. If we are prepared to reach on all he is ready to provide, we shall find what is given more than we lost.<sup>17</sup>
16. [Cain] knew and understood that he should offer from his own possessions some produce to God as to his master, not because God needs them, but for the purpose of demonstrating his gratitude as being himself a beneficiary of such kindness. God, you see, is proof against need, and depends on nothing we have to offer, but in his ineffable love he shows considerateness for us, and for the sake of our salvation, he allows these things to happen so that knowledge of the Lord may be for the human race a school of virtue.<sup>18</sup>
17. “[Abel] for his part, also brought an offering,” the text says, remember, “of the firstborn of his flock, and in fact the fattest of them.” Notice how it hints to us of the piety of this man's attitude, and the fact that he did not causally offer any one of his sheep, but “one of the firstborn,” that is, from the valuable and special ones. In Cain's case, on the contrary nothing of the kind is suggested; rather the fact that he brought an offering of the fruits of the earth,” as if to say, whatever came to hand, *without any display of zeal* (οὐδέμῃαν σπουδῆν) *or precise care* (ἀκριβεία).<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Chrysostom and Hill, *Eight Sermons from the Book of Genesis*, 89–90.

<sup>18</sup> Chrysostom and Hill, *Homilies on Genesis 18-45*, 12–13.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*, 13–14.

## Bibliography

Amirav, Hagit. *Rhetoric and Tradition: John Chrysostom on Noah and the Flood*. Vol. 12. *Traditio Exegetica Graeca*. Louvain: Peeters Publishers, 2003.

Beck, Edmund, ed. *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrerers Hymnen de Paradiso und Contra Julianum*. Vols. 174-175. *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium*. Louvain: Secrétariat du CorpusSCO (Peeters), 1957.

Bouteneff, Peter. *Beginnings: Ancient Christian Readings of the Biblical Creation Narratives*. Baker Academic, 2008.

Brock, Sebastian, ed. *Hymns on Paradise*. Crestwood, New York: St.

Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1990.

Chrysostom, John, and Robert C. Hill. *Eight Sermons from the Book of Genesis*. Boston: Holy Cross Press, 2004.

———. *Homilies on Genesis, 1-17*. Catholic University of America Press, 1986.

———. *Homilies on Genesis 18-45*. Baltimore, UNITED STATES: Catholic University of America Press, 2001.

———. *Homilies on Genesis 46-67*. Baltimore, UNITED STATES: Catholic University of America Press, 1992.

Chrysostom, Saint John. *Baptismal Instructions*. Paulist Press, 1963.

Matthews, Edward, and Joseph Amar, eds. "Commentary on Genesis." In *St. Ephrem the Syrian: Selected Prose Works*, 67–213. Fathers of the Church. Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1994.

Mayer, Wendy, and Pauline Allen. *John Chrysostom*. New York: Routledge, 2000.

O'Keefe, John J., and Russell R. Reno. *Sanctified Vision: An Introduction to Early Christian Interpretation of the Bible*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005.

Tonneau, R.M., ed. *Sancti Ephraem Syri in Genesim et in Exodum Commentarii*. Vols. 152-153. Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium. Louvain, 1955.

Wilken, Robert Louis. *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought*. Yale University Press, 2005.