

John Chrysostom's use of the Book of Sirach in his homilies on the New Testament

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Abstract

This article examines how and why John Chrysostom (347-407 AD) cites from the apocryphal book of Sirach in his homilies on the New Testament, and illustrates how he incorporates these citations in his construction of popular, fourth-century monastic rhetoric and identity, which was very critical of the classical virtues of patronage and benefaction as practised in civic society. The nature of the quotations from Sirach in the homilies are discussed and then delineated into the motifs of: a) almsgiving, good speech and benefaction; and b) the sin of pride. The motifs of almsgiving, good speech and benefaction, as well as the pitfalls of the sin of pride, are keystone features of the monastic rhetoric John utilises; this rhetoric represents a small part in the significant shift, in late ancient Christianity, from traditional and classical civic values (based on patronage and benefaction) to a system based on an economic dichotomy that emphasises the rich and the poor, and the moral requirement that the rich treat the poor with compassion.

Introduction

This article specifically looks at the manner in which John Chrysostom (347-407 AD) cites from the apocryphal book of Sirach (or The Wisdom of Jesus Ben Sirach) in his homilies on the New Testament, and describes how he incorporates these citations into his construction of popular, fourth-century monastic rhetoric and identity, a rhetoric that was often extremely critical of classical, civic virtues. It is not an exhaustive discussion of every Sirach-citation in the homilies. It does, however, provide insights into both the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of Sirach and the interesting use of apocryphal scriptures in Christian homilies (which are rarely cited today – in Protestant preaching at least). The homilies produced during this era, even though they were preached to different audiences at different times,¹ bear striking similarities in style and ideology to the extent that it is very difficult to determine the date and location of the sermon.²

An especially consistent feature of the homilies is John's use of scripture (John, like most other homilists of the day in the East, cited from the Septuagint and not from the Hebrew text). John is traditionally classified as an exegete from the Antiochene School of exegesis, which was a reaction to the prevalent Alexandrian technique of interpretation, which characteristically used allegory in the understanding of the Bible (Young 2003:334–353). But one needs to understand that John's Antiochene hermeneutic was not merely some philosophical abstraction. Schor (2007:517–525) has convincingly shown that this exegetical 'school' was a social entity, with its roots possibly in Diodore's *asketerion*, of which John was a member. He was part of this school or fellowship before his retreat to Mount Silpios (Kelly 1995:18–25). The interpretation and use of scripture in homilies was therefore not only a literary and rhetorical act, but was very closely associated with culture and society. After all, rhetoric in itself may be classified as cultural capital in Bourdieu's sense of the term. John aims to establish a popular monasticism, one in which individuals did not need to flee into the shadow of Mount Silpios but, as was the case in his early days at the *asketerion*, one which could be put into practice in everyday life. Scriptural references often fuelled the social rhetoric of monasticism and asceticism, since the scriptures were considered holy and authoritative. It was common to cite many verses from the scriptures, both in the church assembly and in the marketplace, and this served primarily to give symbolic meaning to the life of Christian devotion.

Given the social aspects of the use of scripture, the focus in this paper will specifically be on how Sirach functions within the monastic rhetoric so common in John's homilies. Motifs that stand out

¹ For a full discussion of the audience of Chrysostom, see Mayer (1998, pp. 103–138)

² The difficulty in determining the historical details of Chrysostom's homilies have been described by Quasten (1990) in particular and, more importantly, in the work of Mayer (2005).

from an analysis of Sirach citations are those concerned with almsgiving and benefaction, the sin of pride, how this sin will be judged, and the control of the tongue. Nearly all Sirach-citations in John's homilies on the New Testament can be placed within these motifs, which then need to be discussed. On the basis of these discussions, the article will conclude with a synthesis of how certain Sirachic proverbs functioned in the development and practice of monastic rhetoric.

The Sirach-citations in John Chrysostom's homilies on the New Testament

Sirach is classified as wisdom literature written during the period of tension between Hellenism and Judaism. According to DeSilva (2002:153), Sirach calls

his pupils to seek their fortune, their honour, and their good name through diligent observance of the demands of the God of Israel first and foremost. The path to Wisdom, and to a successful and secure life, was first of all the way of the Torah, supplemented (but never displaced or replaced) by the worldly wisdom learned from many different cultures.

Scholars are divided on Sirach's attitude towards Hellenism. Scholars such as Hengel (1980:30–41) and Tcherikover (1959:220–231) regard Sirach as an opponent of Hellenistic tendencies, while others, such as Mack (1989:65–86), Lang (1983:76–82), Skehan and Di Lella (1987:54–67), and Middendorp (1973:173–174), regard Sirach as sympathetic to Hellenistic culture, and cite many parallels in Sirach with Greek literature of the time. DeSilva's balanced statement above is therefore not without merit, and may be a pointer as to why Sirach was so popular and influential in the early Christian monastic tradition (DeSilva 2002:193–197). Sirach was probably more sympathetic toward Hellenism and its positive social values.

The golden age of Greek patristic literature, that is, the fourth and fifth centuries, are no exception as far as the popularity of Sirach. Besides John Chrysostom, nearly all of the most prominent authors of this period cite from Sirach, including, inter alia, Clement of Alexandria,³ Ambrose,⁴ and Augustine.⁵ Clement of Alexandria even believed that Sirach had influenced the Greek philosopher Heraclitus (*Strom.* 2.5; Bright 1999:1064). Sirach was also popular with authors such as Tertullian, Origen and Cyprian. Jerome, however, rejected the canonical status of Sirach. The first full commentary on Sirach was only completed in the ninth century by Rabanus Maurus (Bright 1999:1064).

The citations in John's homilies are often sporadic proof-texts. But what is interesting is the constant repetition of certain citations, citations that seem to have remained in John's memory. The homilies on the books of the New Testament come in the guise of a sermonic commentary, with verse-by-verse expositions. But inside these expositions one finds many other citations which were probably quoted from memory and not necessarily from a text (Ramsey 1985:22–41). It is therefore problematic to speculate from which text or version a citation originates, since John probably memorised many Sirachic proverbs during his monastic retreat or ministerial period. This obviously does not rule out the possibility that John probably had a written text at his disposal (which he may have read for study and devotion). Some proverbs are cited or alluded to more often than others. The more popular citations, which occur frequently in the homilies, are Sirach 1:22; 5:6; and 18:16–17. Other citations occurring more than once include Sirach 2:4; 3:30; 4:8; 9:9, 13, 15; 10:9, 12–13; 11:3; 13:15; 15:9; 16:3, 12; 18:30; 19:10–11; 21:2; 23:10, 17; 28:3; and 34:23. There are a total of 65 individual verses cited from Sirach in John's New Testament homilies, only slightly fewer than the 77 verses cited from Proverbs.

Sirach proved to be a very useful book as far as John was concerned, since much of the wisdom it reflects (wisdom that came from the Jewish sages) was congruent to the monastic values he wants to promote. Moreover, the author of Sirach is obviously not ignorant of classical Greek civic values and philosophical virtues (Crenshaw 1981:159; Sanders 1983:58; DeSilva 2002:165), both of which were often the target of John's polemic. Sirach was especially useful in John's polemic against the classical, civic values of patronage and benefaction. This point was made clear in Evelyne Patlagean's

³ *Paed.* 1.8.9; 3.3, 4, 11; *Strom.* 1.4, 10.

⁴ *Off.* 1.2, 3, 14, 16, 33; 2.7, 8, 14; *Ep.* 63.32.

⁵ *Enarrat. Ps.* 1.4; 19.14; 84.1; 116.6; 119.7, 9, 18, 51, 96, 101; 126.7; 131.3; 133.8; 139.18; 144.5; 145.7, 6; *Gest. Pelag.* 4, 7; *Ep.* 3.11; 130.12; *Conf.* 10.31; 13.21; *Grat.* 3, 31, 32; *Civ.* 13.11, 24; 20.10; 21.9, 14, 26, 27; *Doctr. Chr.* 3.17.25.

groundbreaking study, entitled *Pauvreté économique et pauvreté sociale à Byzance: 4e - 7e siècles* (1977) which

sketched out the manner in which a late Roman society, whose elites were still largely committed, in the fourth century, to a “civic” model of the community, gave way to a society seen in terms of an all-embracing, frankly ‘economic’ model that juxtaposed the “rich” with the ‘poor’ in town and country alike (Brown 2002:7).

Late ancient Christianity, especially those “Christianities” influenced by the monastic movement, disliked the notion of the rich being patrons and benefactors, since much of this patronage was simply a pompous display of wealth, power, pride and privilege. The ideal society is one which has a special inclination towards the poor, a culture that has recently been dubbed an “emotional culture of compassion” (Blowers 2010:1–27). The wealthy are vilified as being proud and greedy, only interested in displaying their social status and wealth in the marketplace and the church. The Sirachic proverbs John quotes often serves in favour of the monastic rhetoric aimed specifically at these civic values.

Almsgiving, good speech and benefaction

In a recent study on generosity and almsgiving in Sirach, it is stated that Sirach’s views on almsgiving would “have profound consequences for the theological importance of almsgiving in Judaism and Christianity” (Gregory 2010:171). Sirach’s wisdom is a development of almsgiving to such an extent that it becomes part of the sage’s way of life, and does not merely consist of individual acts of generosity or benefaction. Like Sirach, John wants to broaden the meaning of almsgiving and refers, especially, to Sirach 18:16: “A word is better than a gift.” Most of John’s references to almsgiving are spoken against the prosperous marketplace of Antioch and Constantinople, where anything could be bought and sold (Leyerle 1994:29–30). These marketplaces were the showgrounds of the prestigious and the wealthy. But true and everlasting wealth, said John, is bought via almsgiving. Almsgiving is part of the monastic way of life, and even one’s speech should be as sweet as almsgiving. For John, the quality of one’s speech and almsgiving were interlinked, and the citations from Sirach serve as a symbolic adhesive for this, as is clear from the following:

Dishonour not then your tongue, for how will it entreat for you, when it has lost its proper confidence? But adorn it with gentleness, with humility, make it worthy of the God who is entreated, fill it with blessing, with much almsgiving. For it is possible even with words to do almsgiving. For a word is a better thing than a gift [Sir. 18:16], and answer the poor man peaceably with meekness [Sir. 4:8]. And all the rest of your time too adorn it with the rehearsing of the laws of God. Let all your communication be in the law of the Most High [Sir. 9:15]. (*Hom. in Matt.* 51.8 [NPNF]).

In the passage above, there are three separate citations from Sirach to create this new ‘text’, a text that universalises almsgiving, making it a part of life and a necessary command of the law. Gregory (2010:171) remarks that, in the structure of Sirach, he places almsgiving between his discussions of loans and surety because he considers almsgiving as a “special kind of loan” (Sir. 29:8-13). John has this same consideration, that God will repay the one who gives alms. In this instance, John goes so far as to view almsgiving as a form of forgiveness of sins: “For God, being merciful, has even after this given to us various ways of reconciliation, of all which the first is that by almsgiving. By almsgiving, it says ... sins are cleansed away [Sir. 3:30]” (*Hom. in Jo.* 73.3 [NPNF]; *cf. Hom. in Heb.* 9.5). It is John’s aim to bring the benefactor, which should now be the “lover of the poor” (Brown 2002:1–3), closer to the client, the needy and destitute. He even goes so far as to declare it a bond of friendship:

Either then we may say this, or that his meaning is for those who give to be also joined closely to those who receive, and not merely to give without sympathy, but in pity and condescension, bowing down and grieving with the needy. For therefore also has almsgiving been enacted by God; since God might have nourished the poor as well without this, but that he might bind us together in charity and that we might be thoroughly fervent toward each other, he commanded them to be nourished by us. Therefore one says in another place also; ‘a good word is better than a gift’ [Sir. 18:16]; and, behold, a word is beyond a good gift [Sir. 18:16]. And he himself says, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice [Hos. 6:6; Matt. 9:30]. For since it is usual, both for people to love those who are benefited by them, and for those who receive benefits to be more

kindly affected towards their benefactors; he made this law, constituting it a bond of friendship (*Hom. in Ep. I Cor. 32.5 [NPNF]*).

These sentiments were unthinkable in classical, civic society. But John states that God has made it a law that the giver and receiver of alms should be friends. Friends, in classical society, were honour equals, and this was the main difference between being a patron and a friend. This type of rhetoric is both shocking and radical. John enjoys depicting the extreme poles of the wealthy and the poor in his homilies, even though this was not always the reality (Mayer 2006:467; Sitzler 2009:471). This fictive polarisation adds to the shock-effect of his rhetoric – how could the rich benefactor be a friend of the vagrant? It happens when the benefactor bows down and grieves with the poor. Once again, this is an example of the culture of compassion promoted by late ancient Christianity. This compassion and pity was the opposite of the vice of pride, which John also vividly illustrates with many references to Sirach.

Pride as the beginning of sin

DeSilva (2002:187–186) notes that the question of sin, righteousness and judgement was one of the important questions of the day, and one that Sirach specifically wanted to address. Every human being has the capacity to be righteous or sinful, based on his or her own free choice (Sir. 15:14), and therefore every person is responsible for his or her own actions (Sir. 15:16-17). John makes a point of building on this concept of personal responsibility, and also quotes Sirach 15:16 in this regard, by stating that heaven and hell is in the hands of the individual (*Hom. in Ep. I Cor. 14.5*). The crisis here comes from the vice of pride. According to Sirach, pride is the beginning of sin (Sir. 10:12-13), which John obviously links to Satan (*Hom. in I Thess. 1.2*). The vice of pride receives an elevated status since it had the ability to corrupt the devil, and in the same homily previously mentioned, John states that “there is no evil like pride”. The monastic life that John wishes to popularise entails an attitude or spirit of humility, since, in the same way described by Sirach, John states that “the person with a high heart is impure before God, for pride is the beginning of sin” (*Hom. in Ac. 29.4*). John’s theological rhetoric is also aimed at the very uneven distributions of power and wealth in the cities of both Antioch and Constantinople. The practice of humility is an expression of the new view of civic community John was promoting (Brown 1988:306). This community was not to be based on the traditional, classical civic virtues of patronage and benefaction, but one based on a compassion and love for the poor and the suffering (Brown 2002:1–8; Blowers 2010:1–6). But the proud, the rich and powerful oppressors – those who flaunt their wealth and status in the marketplace and even the church – will only receive God’s judgement. Pride is described by both Sirach and John as a passion that cannot be quenched (Sir. 23:7; *Hom. in Ep. I Thess 1.3*). John further states that the proud person does not know God, since by knowing God all pride is lost in the greatness of God. As with most vices of classical and late antiquity, pride is therefore a distortion of the mind, making the proud person irrational and, as John implies, dangerous.

The destiny of these sinners is judgement. In his homilies on Second Thessalonians (*Hom. in Ep. 2 Thess. 3 & 4*), John clearly condemns any belief in an *apokatastasis*⁶, and often uses Sirachic proverbs to affirm this (Sir. 5:6; 15:16; 16:12). One of the charges brought against John in the later part of his life at the Oak was exactly the point that he may have been in league with Origenists, but this accusation was clearly based on his association with the Long Brothers (a group of monks whom John’s chief opponent, Theophilus, truly despised) rather than because he believed in Origenist doctrines such as the *apokatastasis*. Just as almsgiving is reconciliation for sins and justification, pride is a sin that brings with it an everlasting punishment.

Synthesis: John Chrysostom’s monastic rhetoric and the wisdom of Sirach

The motifs of almsgiving, good speech and benefaction, as well as the pitfalls of the sin of pride, are keystone features of the monastic rhetoric employed by John. Thus, the wisdom proclaimed by Sirach was well at home in the monastic rhetoric of John Chrysostom. Because Sirach uses terminology similar to the civic values of classical Greek society, the terms he uses are familiar to both John and his audience. The universal model of almsgiving seen in Sirach also parallels the model of almsgiving in monastic Christianity. John makes it clear that almsgiving needs to be a lifestyle. Almsgiving allows the benefactor to become both a friend of God and a lover of the poor. Almsgiving not only meant

⁶ This was a doctrine originally linked to Origen, which stated that, after an initial punishment, all sinners would be reconciled with God.

giving money, but also involved one's choice of words; controlling one's anger is also a form of almsgiving. There are similarities between the wisdom sage of Sirach and the image of the holy man so masterfully depicted by Peter Brown (1971:100). The very words of the holy man in the late Roman Empire were better than a gift, and more effective than an amulet. John, through his homilies and the strategic selection of scriptural citations, in this case from Sirach, attempts to domesticate monasticism and refute the classical values of imperial civic life. In addition to the value Sirach places on almsgiving, the elaborations on the sin of pride and its judgement are constantly used by John. The behaviour of the monk and the sage are very much the same – they control anger, guard their tongues and do not seek material wealth or status. Many similar allusions and citations are also found in the works of Athanasius, Methodius, Clement of Alexandria and, later, Gregory the Great.

This article has shown how influential the Wisdom of Sirach was in the development and practice of monastic rhetoric. Sirach was particularly helpful in furthering the emotional culture of compassion in late ancient Christianity, and in undermining the classical civic values of patronage and benefaction with its shared model of almsgiving, common dangers of pride and the importance of the anger-management and the control of one's tongue.

Further possibilities for research could include examining how John also uses other Old Testament books in his monastic rhetoric. Sirach is often used with other Old and New Testament books, and its function mentioned in this article is also dependent on the authoritative, literary support of other intra-textual scriptural references.

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