

VIOLENCE IN CHRYSOSTOM'S COMMENTARY ON THE PSALMS

Hennie Stander

University of Pretoria

Abstract

In this study I will critically discuss Chrysostom's treatment of power and violence in his "Commentary on Psalms". When the Jews suffer from violence, Chrysostom believes that it is justified because they have tortured Christ. However, when God is described as a Warrior in the Psalms, Chrysostom is faced with a problem. On the one hand, he interprets it spiritually, but on the other hand he was a defender of the literal interpretation of the Antiochene School. But neither did he want to support the literal interpretation of the Anthropomorphites which he believed was an attack on the divine character of God. At the end it will become clear that Chrysostom's statements regarding violence are imbedded in his own social, theological and cultural world.

Introduction

We live in an era that has witnessed wars, violence and acts of terrorism that are, in terms of their destructiveness, unparalleled in the history of the world. It is therefore not surprising that violence has become a hotly debated issue. Understandably many people are also asking questions about the violence found in the Bible. But these questions are not new. As early as the second century Marcion was raising questions about the violent character of the God of the Old Testament.

In this short communication I will critically discuss Chrysostom's interpretation of the violence in the Book of Psalms. I will base all my

remarks on his *Expositiones in Psalmos*.¹ There are many descriptions of violence in the Book of Psalms. Chrysostom gave much attention to this matter, not only because violence was prevalent in the ancient world,² but also because he personally experienced much violence in his own life. Chrysostom became a public figure during the difficult times after the riot in 387 at Antioch,³ and he used his eloquence to preach the restraint of violence.

The Violence of God

Many early Christian theologians stated that “there is no violence in God.”⁴ This became a common motif in patristic literature.⁵ Therefore it is not surprising that Chrysostom too could not associate violence with God. However, he admits that God is frequently depicted in the Scriptures as a Warrior-God. Psalm 7, for example, says that “God will wield his sword”, and that “He has strung his bow, and prepared it” and that “He has prepared instruments of death”.⁶ But Chrysostom’s response is that we should not interpret these depictions literally. He says that there are no bows, no arrows, no whetstone, sword or quiver in heaven. God does not need these weapons since he can even melt the rocks by simply looking at the earth (cf. Ps 104.32). Chrysostom believes that the psalmist is using familiar names and images because of the “crassness and the materialism of the listeners”.⁷

Klingbeil⁸ has shown many examples from the Ancient Near East where the god of the heavens was depicted as a Warrior-God. This social and cultural context probably played a role in the work of the psalmist as well. But behind Chrysostom’s explanation of these warrior-depictions lies, of

¹ All the references to Chrysostom’s *Expositiones in Psalmos* are based on the text in J.P. Migne’s *Patrologiaecursus completus, series graeca*, vol. 55 (hereafter called MPG 55).

² Not everybody agrees that violence was more endemic in Late Antique society than before or after. Our ancient sources represent a social and textual construct, and do not simply reflect realities. Cf. Walter Pohl, “Perceptions of barbarian violence”, in *Violence in Late Antiquity. Perceptions and practices* (Ed. H.A. Drake), Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006, pp. 15-26; Ralph W. Mathisen, “Violent behavior and the construction of Barbarian identity in Late Antiquity”, in *Violence in Late Antiquity. Perceptions and practices* (Ed. H.A. Drake), Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006, pp. 27-35.

³ Cf. W. Mayer, “Doing violence to the image of an Empress: The destruction of Eudoxia’s reputation”, in *Violence in Late Antiquity. Perceptions and practices* (Ed. H.A. Drake), Aldershot: Ashgate, 205-213.

⁴ Irenaeus *Adversus Haereses* iv.59; *Ad Diognetum* vii.5; Hippolytus *Refutatio* x.29.

⁵ Cf. Van de Beek, A. “No violence in God? No violence in us?”, in *Christian Faith and Violence*, vol. 1 (Eds. Dirk van Keulen & Martien E. Brinkman), Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2005, 14.

⁶ Ps 7, MPG 55.97A. The numbering system of the Psalms in the Hebrew Bible (rather than the LXX) will be used throughout this article.

⁷ Ps 7, MPG 55.97B.

⁸ M. Klingbeil, *Yahweh fighting from heaven: God as warrior and as God of heaven in the Hebrew psalter and ancient Near eastern iconography*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999.

course, his theological debate with the Anthropomorphites.⁹ These late fourth-century monastic figures believed that God had a human form. Chrysostom almost certainly had them in mind when he said “What will those say at this point who claim God is in human form on the basis of the reference to his having hands and feet and eyes?”¹⁰ Chrysostom was actually in a very awkward position, because on the one hand he defended the literal and historical interpretation of the Antiochene School against the allegorizing of the Alexandrian School, but on the other hand he also denounced the literal interpretation of the Anthropomorphites, which he believed was an assault on the divine character of God. Similarly, Chrysostom also defended the complete divinity of Christ against the Arians, and his complete humanity against the Apollinarists.¹¹

Chrysostom concedes that the psalmist’s statement that “God has strung his bow, and prepared it” can be interpreted as being indicative of characteristics that are inappropriate for God. It can be used, for example, as proof of God’s anger and wrath. However, Chrysostom says that this verse should rather be seen as proof of both God’s anger and His long-suffering, since the psalmist does not say that God “fired” His bow, or “dispatched it”, but that “He has strung and prepared it”, meaning merely that He is ready for firing. Chrysostom probably again targets the Anthropomorphites with this remark, since they believed that God did not only have a human form, but also that He had human emotions such as anger, wrath and jealousy.¹²

To prove his point, Chrysostom also refers to the Ninevites.¹³ In that case, too, God “strung his bow, wielded the sword, prepared the arrows, but he did not deal the blow.” It is interesting that many Church Fathers also interpreted the rainbow in Genesis 9:13, 16 as an archer’s bow. They then pointed out that the bow in the clouds is without a bow string to remind the people that God is now at peace with them.¹⁴

The Violence of the Psalmist

We do not encounter only a violent God in the Book of Psalms, but also a violent psalmist. In Psalm 137 the psalmist calls out “Blessed is the person who will take and dash your infants against the rocks”. Chrysostom is clearly not comfortable with curses and requests for revenge in the Book of Psalms. He argues that these words did not come from the psalmist himself.¹⁵ He says

⁹ Cf. R.C. Hill, *St. John Chrysostom. Commentary on the Psalms*, 1998, p. 151.

¹⁰ Ps 7, MPG 97B.

¹¹ J. Quasten, *Patrology*, Utrecht: Spectrum, vol. 3, p. 475.

¹² Cf. “The Church Fathers on pity”, *Studia Patristica*, 2010, vol. xlv, pp. 415-420.

¹³ Ps 7, MPG 55.99B.

¹⁴ Stander, “Die (reën)boogna die sondvloed (Gen. 9:12-17)” [“The (rain)bow after the deluge (Gen. 9:12-17)”], *Hervormde Teologiese Tydskrif*, 58 (4), 2002, pp. 1447-1458.

¹⁵ Ps 137, MPG 55.407B.

that the psalmist merely describes the feelings of the captives in exile! Chrysostom then reminds his congregation that the New Testament teaches us differently: namely that we should give food and drink to our enemies, and that we should even pray for those who abuse us (cf. Luke 6:28). By putting the pleas for revenge in the mouths of the captives, rather than in the mouth of the psalmist, Chrysostom argues that there is no conflict between the message of the Old and the New Testament. It was customary for the ancient exegetes to always attempt to harmonize the message of the Scriptures, since they believed that Scripture interprets itself.¹⁶

Psalm 109 is also full of curses. Chrysostom says that all these curses can be summed up in the phrase “kill him, slaughter him, do away with him.”¹⁷ But again Chrysostom refuses to acknowledge that the psalmist himself is the source of these curses. He argues that these curses come from Judas and other people who plotted and rebelled against the priesthood. They bring these afflictions on themselves. In verse 13 the psalmist says “may his offspring meet with utter destruction.” Chrysostom says that one should not understand this as a wish that children should be punished. He says that the term ‘children’ does not refer to those who are children by nature, but rather to those who are linked by wickedness, as one would also say “you are children of the devil.” Chrysostom also says that it is obvious to everyone that a child is not punished for the father, nor a father for his son. Eli was not punished for his sons, but for his indifference. Chrysostom rationalizes to make his point, because he should know that there are several verses in Scriptures which teach that children are punished for the sins of their parents (cf. Ex. 20:5; Jer. 31:29-30). Moreover, there are several instances where God’s anger and wrath are quite prominent in the Scriptures. But Chrysostom wants to make a point, and uses only what he wants to use.

The Violence of Human Beings

Chrysostom says that one should always refrain from violence.¹⁸ Christ exhorts us to be willing to accept blows, and offer ourselves for suffering.¹⁹ One may not even call down curses on one’s foes.²⁰ The apostles set us a good example. They suffered many hardships. Yet, they never said “Smash them”, or “Kill them”. They did exactly the opposite, and asked God to forgive their torturers. Though Chrysostom based his condemnation of

¹⁶ R.C. Hill, Chrysostom, interpreter of the Psalms”, in *Estudios Biblicos* 56 (1998) 61-74.

¹⁷ Ps 109, MPG 55.259D.

¹⁸ Ps 141, MPG 55.429BC.

¹⁹ Ps 7, MPG 55.103B.

²⁰ Ps 141, MPG 55.429BC.

violence on Scripture, he was probably also influenced by contemporary philosophical thinking. Most philosophers disapproved of war.²¹

Late Antiquity was known for legitimized violence, and Augustine, a contemporary of Chrysostom in the West, did much to establish the principles of Just War.²² It is therefore not surprising to find in Chrysostom's writings too some arguments for a just war. Chrysostom refers to the psalmist who says that God "trains my hands" (Ps 144:1). He says that this means that God will be one's instructor in wars, battle and fighting.²³ David serves as a good example, since he conquered Goliath, but it was God who was responsible for the victory.

The Maccabees are also an example of people who fought "for the sake of God and for His glory", since they fought for the Law and the ancestral way of life, according to Chrysostom.²⁴ God was their general. This "army of God" did not put their trust in weapons, but was fortified with spiritual help. One does not really need weapons when God is fighting on your behalf. Yet God sometimes does tell his people to bear arms, as in the case of the assault on Jericho, though He himself was fighting on behalf of his people.²⁵ God allowed them to have weapons, something material to give them confidence lest they would fail to come to faith.

The Justification of God's Violence

Chrysostom admits that sometimes God does act violently, but always for a good reason. Chrysostom refers, for example, to the event when "God made Dathan and Abiram to disappear" (cf. Num. 16). This account was probably often used by critics as an example of Old Testament brutality.²⁶ Chrysostom's answer is that God's violent treatment of these two men is justified because they trampled underfoot the priesthood.²⁷ The undermining of the priesthood was a very touchy issue to Chrysostom, because his own priesthood was often under attack. He therefore frequently defends God's violence as being justified when someone disregards the priesthood. Elsewhere²⁸ Chrysostom again interprets some of the curses in Psalm 109 as referring to those who "rebel against the priests of God and employ deceit and lawlessness against them." And later on²⁹ he again says that "God is

²¹ Harry Sidebottom, "Philosophers' attitudes to warfare under the principate", in *War and society in the Roman World* (eds John Rich & Graham Shipley), London: Routledge, 1993, pp. 241-264.

²² Gillian Clark, "Desires of the hangman: Augustine on legitimized violence", in *Violence in Late Antiquity. Perceptions and practices* (Ed. H.A. Drake), Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006, p. 137.

²³ Ps 144, MPG 55.457A.

²⁴ Ps 44, MPG 55.167D-168A.

²⁵ Ps 44, MPG 55.171D-172A.

²⁶ Hill 1998:209. vol. 2

²⁷ Ps 132, MPG 55.380C.

²⁸ Ps 109, MPG 55.261B.

²⁹ Ps 109, MPG 55.262C.

exasperated when plots are planned against priesthood. “Hill,³⁰ too, argues that the attacks of Chrysostom’s enemies on his own priesthood prompted these remarks. It is therefore odd to read that Hill³¹ (together with Quasten³²) apparently accepts the opinion of the majority of scholars that Chrysostom wrote his *Expositiones in Psalmos* after his ordination at Antioch, and before his move to Constantinople.³³ As Allen and Mayer³⁴ have indicated, the phase of Chrysostom’s life which ended in 397, before he went to Constantinople, was quite happy. I would therefore rather argue that Chrysostom wrote his *Expositiones in Psalmos* during his stormy years in Constantinople. This would explain why he so often interpreted God’s violence in terms of the disparagement of the priesthood.

Chrysostom also condones God’s violence in relation to the Jews.³⁵ According to him, of course, they were the torturers of Christ.³⁶ Chrysostom says, for example, that the sentence “He will crush heads in many peoples’ land” (LXX: “he shall crush the heads of many on the earth” [Ps 110:6]) may be interpreted spiritually in the sense that he is doing away with folly”. But he immediately adds that it could also refer “to the fate of the Jews, whom he utterly ruined with great ferocity”.³⁷ Chrysostom argued that the Jews were not only Christ’s enemies, but also God’s enemies.³⁸ There were still many Jews in the Roman Empire and they were a formidable rival to the Christians.³⁹ It was therefore a very common *topos* in patristic literature to rail against the Jews.⁴⁰ Chrysostom also believed that many of the curses in Psalm 109 were uttered against Judas, and this was also justifiable in his eyes.⁴¹ God as a warrior can also be on the side of the enemy. Chrysostom says that because of the Jews’ sins, God helped the enemy to attack his

³⁰ R.C. Hill, *St. John Chrysostom. Commentary on the Psalms*. Vol. 2, Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1998, vol. 2, p. 209.

³¹ Op. cit. p. 4.

³² J. Quasten, *Patrology*, Utrecht: Spectrum, vol. 3, p. 435.

³³ R.C. Hill, *St. John Chrysostom. Commentary on the Psalms*. Vol. 1, Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1998, p. 4.

³⁴ P. Allen & W. Mayer, “John Chrysostom”, in *The Early Christian World* (Ed. P.F. Esler), vol. 2, London: Routledge, 2000, p. 1128.

³⁵ Ps 110, MPG 55.271D.

³⁶ Ps 8, MPG 55.110C.

³⁷ Ps 110, MPG 55.278A.

³⁸ Ps 110, MPG 55.271D.

³⁹ Cf. R.L. Wilken, *John Chrysostom and the Jews: Rhetoric and reality in the late fourth century*. Berkely: Univ. of California Press, 1983, p. 162.

⁴⁰ Cf. Wilken, *op. cit.* See also Andrew S. Jacobs, “Jews and Christians”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies* (Eds. S.A. Harvey and D.G. Hunter), Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2008, pp. 169-185.

⁴¹ Ps 109, MPG 55.261B.

people.⁴² But He prevented them from wiping out the whole race, or utterly destroying the entire city. He allowed them to prevail only to some extent.

Chrysostom therefore admits that God is sometimes “harsh”, but he adds that one should define what is meant by “gentleness” and “harshness”.⁴³ Striking is not always a sign of harshness, nor sparing of gentleness. Nobody would call a physician harsh if he removes gangrene from someone’s body by surgery (p. 2.203).⁴⁴

When God does exercise violent acts, it is because He is beneficent.⁴⁵ He was beneficent when He caused the flood, and beneficent when He brought down fire on the Sodomites. Van de Beek⁴⁶ (2005:1.15) says that if one checks all the contexts where God practised violence, it was always to punish, and never to persuade people to become Christians. Roman emperors would use violence to force people to submit to them, but God never uses violence as a means of conversion. This is also Chrysostom’s line of thinking since he says that when God uses violence, it is merely to correct, instruct, guide and to excise vice.⁴⁷

Violence of Men versus Violence of God

According to Chrysostom, there is a difference between the violence of men and the violence of God. Sometimes human beings show beneficence, but at other times they show hatred and aversion. With God it is different. Everything that God does, is from love.⁴⁸ All God’s actions are meant to benefit people. They are meant to correct, instruct or guide people, or to excise vice. God was therefore beneficent even when he brought down that fire on the Sodomites!

There are two driving forces behind God’s violence, namely his righteousness and his loving-kindness.⁴⁹ If God had righteousness only, everything would have failed. If he had loving-kindness only, most people would become indifferent. Chrysostom therefore says that there is a big difference between the way that God arms himself and the way that soldiers arm themselves. The latter arm themselves to mete out punishment, while God is using fear to bring us to our senses.⁵⁰ Moreover, kings’ dominance lies in the number of their troops, while God’s power is in his nature.⁵¹

⁴² Ps 129, MPG 55.371C.

⁴³ Ps 132, MPG 55.380A.

⁴⁴ Ps 132, MPG 55.380C.

⁴⁵ Ps 111, MPG 55.283D.

⁴⁶ Abraham van de Beek, “No violence in God? No violence in us?”, in *Christian Faith and Violence* (Eds. Dirk van Keulen; Martien E. Brinkman), vol. 1. Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2005, p. 15-17.

⁴⁷ Ps 111, MPG 55.283D.

⁴⁸ Ps 111, MPG 55.284A.

⁴⁹ Ps 111, MPG 55.287B.

⁵⁰ Ps 7, MPG 55.99B-C.

⁵¹ Ps 110, MPG 55.272B.

God allows us to be victims of violence “so that we can be united to him more diligently,” just as mothers induce their recalcitrant children to fly to their arms by frightening them with various masks.⁵²

There is a big difference between the blows coming from men and the blows coming from God.⁵³ Human beings never make the punishment fit the crime. That is why God delivers the blow.

Conclusions

Chrysostom’s own life experiences played a major role in his exposition of the Psalms. His hostility towards the Anthropomorphites and the Jews is reflected in his exegetical comments on the Psalms. Similarly, the attacks on his priesthood prompted him to interpret some of the violent scenes in the Scriptures as proof that God does not allow people to disparage the priesthood. These comments may perhaps indicate that the *Expositiones in Psalmos* was written somewhat later than is commonly believed.

Chrysostom was no pacifist. Though he denounced violence, he also justified the use of violence in some cases. When one fights on behalf of God, God is one’s general. Chrysostom’s handling of the violence in the Book of Psalms required some careful footwork, since on the one hand he stood within the tradition of a literal interpretation of the Scriptures, but on the other hand he could not concede to the Anthropomorphites’ exegesis that would degrade God’s divine character. Chrysostom’s interpretation of the violence in the Book of Psalms is indeed embedded in his own social and theological world.

⁵² Ps 116, MPG 55.316B.

⁵³ Ps 120, MPG 55.341A.