

REVIEW

Demetrios E. Tonias

Abraham in the Works of John Chrysostom

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For interreligious dialogue today, the Abrahamic heritage often provides common ground for Jews, Christians, and Muslims. However, Demetrios Tonias reminds us that this was not always the case. His comprehensive study of references to Abraham in the writings of the church father John Chrysostom (d. 407) sheds important light on how early Christians understood the patriarch as a proto-Christian and a figure that should divide, rather than unite, Christians and Jews. The book is a revision of Tonias' Boston College doctoral thesis directed by Ruth Langer and appears in Fortress Press' *Emerging Scholars* series, which is dedicated to highlighting innovative and creative projects by new scholars.

A native of Antioch in Syria, John, a monk and priest, became bishop of Constantinople. He was celebrated for his preaching skills and given the nickname "Chrysostom," meaning "golden mouth" in Greek. He is best known for his skillful and rhetorically-beautiful exegetical works that called Christians to moral goodness and social responsibility, but also for his vicious anti-Jewish attacks in his *Discourses Against the Jews*. Following the oratorical practices of his time, Chrysostom's exegetical works often focus on biblical figures as exemplars of virtue. Pre-eminent among these exemplars is Abraham, whom Chrysostom mentions over seven hundred times in his works. Despite the obvious importance of Abraham for Chrysostom, no single undisputed work of his is devoted to the patriarch. Instead references to Abraham are spread across the entirety of his writings. The footnotes throughout the book attest to the

omnipresence of Abraham in Chrysostom's works. Using the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*, Toniaš produced a comprehensive database, identifying 633 references that were more than passing references and organizing and analyzing them to draw out prominent themes. He concludes that Abraham served Chrysostom as a theological and pastoral tool, ready to be employed in ministering to his Christian flock and competing with his Jewish neighbors.

Toniaš appropriately begins with an examination of the classical and Christian influences on Chrysostom's homiletical and exegetical methods. Trained in Greek language and literature like his contemporaries and a student of the famed pagan rhetorician Libanius, Chrysostom reproduced the practices of Greek *paideia* and oratory. Toniaš notes in particular the prominence of Stoic philosophy and Chrysostom's use of the rhetorical techniques characteristic of the Second Sophistic. As Christian influences, he identifies Pauline theology and the Antiochene school. As a result, Abraham emerges as a model of the "consummate philosopher" from the Greek tradition and presumably would have been recognized as such to his congregations (p. 53). Chrysostom saw in the patriarch's dispositions, actions, and words the enactment of the cardinal virtues of Greek philosophy and the theological virtues of Pauline theology. Here perhaps Toniaš makes too strong of a distinction. Biblical scholars have long taken notice of Paul's familiarity and engagement with Hellenistic philosophy, particularly Stoicism. While distinctions are certainly to be made, it should be noted how the Pauline theology influencing Chrysostom had already encountered Greek thought in important ways.

In presenting the pastoral utility of Abraham, Toniaš singles out several roles assigned to Abraham that would have helped Christians of every status and station in life to relate to him: he is a model child, parent, husband, ascetic, and philanthropist. Abraham was thus a kind of everyman to emulate. In his many works, Chrysostom drew upon, developed, and deployed the

Abrahamic narrative in various ways to communicate to different segments of his audience as needed.

Tonias develops the theological and eschatological significance of Abraham for Chrysostom in Chapter 4. Three themes stand out: the intrinsic connection between virtue and the salvation of the soul; the superiority of the new covenant and the Christian priesthood to the old (Jewish) covenant; and the unity of Old and New Testaments. This discussion reveals how Chrysostom often employed Abraham to draw stark distinctions. For example, he claims that Abraham belongs to Christians but not to Jews. In Chapter 5, Tonias calls attention to Chrysostom's use of the diatribe, a rhetorical device in which the orator engaged in debate with an imaginary interlocutor. Chrysostom often addressed an imaginary Jew who was a negative caricature and foil to Christianity. In these cases, the Jew was unvirtuous, faithless, arrogant, and hypocritical—the opposite of Chrysostom's Abraham and, thus, no longer a worthy descendant of the patriarch. Chrysostom resorts to supersessionist arguments that hardened lines of division between Christians and Jews in Antioch.

The volume concludes with a discussion of the work *De Beato Abraham*, which Tonias argues is an authentic work of Chrysostom. The work has been regarded as spurious, but he makes a strong case for its authenticity on the basis of style, structure, and the presence of similar themes found in the uncontested works surveyed earlier in his book. In two appendices he provides an English translation of the work and a table comparing its contents to Chrysostom's other works.

The book has many strengths. Tonias makes an important contribution to both biblical and patristic studies. It can also serve contemporary interreligious dialogue. It illustrates the importance of Abraham to Christians and Jews, but also exposes an Abrahamic logic behind Chrysostom's anti-Judaism. It demonstrates a sweeping familiarity with Chrysostom's corpus and provides an important perspective on early formulations of Christian identity in relation to pagans and

Jews. The book examines the roles of rhetoric and exegesis in theology, pastoral care, and broader social relations between Jews and Christians. More specific attention might have been given to the last topic. In addition, when discussing sophistic culture, the author relies on some outdated scholarship. Much work has been done in recent decades in Classics and Early Christian Studies broadening our understanding of *paideia* in late antiquity. The work of Raffaella Cribiore, in particular, on the school of Libanius provides a useful perspective on Christian participation in educational circles and philosophical culture. Lastly, there are some formatting mistakes, with many footnotes appearing on a different page from the referring numeral in the body of the text. This is most likely the fault of the publisher, but it unfortunately becomes distracting. Overall, the book provides a masterful treatment of Abraham in patristic literature that will benefit scholars, clergy, and students.