

THE CENTRE OF ALL FESTIVALS

A TRANSLATION AND ANALYSIS OF CHRYSOSTOM'S CHRISTMAS SERMONS

A Thesis submitted to Mrs. Anna K. Van den Broek

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by

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PART 1

TRANSLATION OF CHRYSOSTOM'S CHRISTMAS SERMONS

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In Christi Natalem Diem

The sun of righteousness rises today, and it was hidden before rising. I was covered by darkness, and now I cannot handle the rays. The light was born anew for me, and I am made dim with fear. I exalt the birth, but tremble because of the manner of the birth. I see the new stream going forth and the old plague fleeing.¹ I saw the baby who was born, and heaven falling down to worship him. And the mother brought forth without her womb opening. I saw the child seal his own conception. I saw the husbandless mother, and the fatherless son. The savior being born, and a star being created. The infant being swathed, and the infinite growing. The cradle being formed into a heavenly throne, and the flocks representing the Cherubim. I saw the light shining, and the miracle being celebrated. The angels proclaiming before, and the shepherds prophesying. The magi speaking of God,² and the priests fighting for God.³ Herod falling, and death bewailed. Adam set free, Eve rejoicing, and the serpent lamenting. The prisoners being released and tyrants in punishment. The baby nursing, and making the grower grow. He who was carried around with hands carrying the one who bore him. Creation witnessing, and nature fearing. This is why I am beside myself with amazement, trembling because of the mystery. I take courage with Gabriel, and banish my fear.

The words spoken to Mary, interpreting the miracles. She asked “what is the nature of this?” And he said, “Greetings, blessed one, unreaped land of heavenly grain. Greetings, blessed one, virgin mother, truthful, unlying vine. Greetings, blessed one, faultless one carrying the unchangeable divinity. Greetings, blessed one, spacious room for the uncontainable nature. Greetings, blessed one, new bride of a widowed world, undefiled offspring. Greetings, blessed one, weaving by nature a crown not woven with hands. Greetings, blessed one, holy habitation of fire. Greetings, blessed one, return of the fugitive world. Greetings, blessed one, free supply for the hungry creation. Greetings, blessed one, infinite grace of the holy virgin. Greetings, blessed one, adorned lampstand, inextinguishable light brighter than even the sun. Greetings, blessed one, challenge of minds. Greetings, blessed one, wise bearer of glory. Greetings, blessed one, golden cross, having heavenly manna. Greetings, blessed one, sweet drink ever flowing, filling up those who are thirsty. Greetings, blessed one, intellectual expanse who holds the heavenly gem, Christ. Greetings, blessed one, heavenly light, having the one uncontained by the heavens in herself, God confined and unconfined. Greetings, blessed one, pillar of cloud concealing God and guiding Israel in the wilderness.

What should I say, and what should I speak? How should I bless the root⁴ of all? Because she exists above all things, except for God alone. She was thrown into confusion because of the word, and although she turned away her eyes, her body stood still, marking her countenance with a cross-impressed inquiry,⁵ but she placed doubts before the angel, neither daring to flee nor having the courage to stand still. Seeing the one without a body established as a man, being afraid to stay, honoring virginity, she did not dare to question the stranger. She

¹ Chrysostom is making a pun here with the words πηγην (spring/fount) and πληγην (plague/blow).

² θεολογοῦντας.

³ θεομαχοῦντας.

⁴ Referring to Mary.

⁵ This is a pretty ambiguous phrase, which could also be translated “modeling her aspect after the cross-marked story.” The Greek is σταυροτύπω ιστορία τυποῦσα τὴν θεάν.

was reflecting in her face a maiden fear, saying in herself, "What kind of greeting is this? Or who is greeting me? He gleams like the sun, but he converses with clay. He came down from heaven, and greets a girl. He does not have a body, and yet he stands beside the woman, instead of going about the earth with winged feet. Why does he seek someone from the earth? He seems to be an angel, but he sounds like a man. The sound of sacred spirits comes to me. Light adorns his shining face, a garment is thrown before. I see a young man, not dressed, walking the foundation and not making footprints like the living. Without having a tongue, he croaked the greeting to me. Without his lips moving he was the interpreter greeting me. I did not know what I should say to the awful vision. If I do not understand the one who was sent, how will I understand the one who sent him? If the one revealing is fearful, the one who is revealed is more terrifying. If this one flashing forth paralyzes my mind, in what kind of body will I hide the sun of righteousness? If the creature terrifies me, how can I bear the creator? If the servant is afraid, how will I bear the Lord?" But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary."

Do not wither, Mary, as Eve did, for from her came death, but from you comes undying life. From her came the fruit that makes dead, but from you the fruit that makes alive. From her came deceit, but from you comes love. From her came man's separation from God, but from you the inexplicable joining of God and flesh, from her came the dark sleep of Hades, from you the bright light of the world. From her came the curse, but from you the blessing. From her came judgement, but from you forgiveness. From her came oppression, but from you faith. From her came tears, but from you rivers of living water. From her came those who sweat, but from you comes rest. From her came the ancient battle, but from you the living Trinity. From her came hatred for one's brother, but from you love for man. From her came the flood, but from you the washing for eternal life. From her came destroyers, but from you regeneration. From her came the slaughter of the living, but from you the raising of the dead. From her came the hateful twelve tribes, but from you the twelve apostles united in love. From her came death running through the world, but because of you striving will fall. From her came calamity, but from you the resurrection. Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found grace according to God. And behold, you have gathered in your womb the One in the Father and in the flesh. And you will bear the Son of Adam from of old. You will bear a Son of many years. You will bear the highest Son of heaven. You will bear the high Son of the Cherubim. You will bear a Son, the skilled craftsman of the ages. You will bear a Son who rules with the Father. You will bear a Son who is everlasting with the spirit. You will bear a Son, through whom all things exist. You will bear a Son, whom we do not see distinctly. You will bear a Son, who does not take on my form. You will bear a Son before whom I stand trembling." And the days were fulfilled for her to give birth, and she bore her firstborn Son, whom a man did not beget. She bore her Son, whom a father did not raise. She bore the grain, whom a body did not sow. She bore the Creator becoming man.

She gave birth in a cavern, and it was revealed in Persia. For of Christ's birth in Bethlehem of Judea, behold, magi from the East came to Jerusalem and said, "Where is the king who was born of the Jews? Where is he who was not sown, but was born? He who sent his star to his own? Where is he who, by this strange light, drags you to the light you do not know? Where is he who builds the world in the immense palm of his hand? Where is he who is manifest everywhere and hidden in flesh? Where is he who frees you from wandering, and leads to joy? Where is he who revealed from the tree, preaching to the three? Where is he who did not burn up the bush, and does not destroy the mother? Where is he from the Father, who was not seen, and yet is held by his mother? Where is he who dried up the Red Sea, and drinks milk? Where is he who struck Pharaoh, and is hidden from Herod? Where is he who plunged into the dragon, and yet lies swaddled? Where is he whom the archangels did not see, but men observe? Behold, the star, which they saw in the East, it led them forward, until it stood above where the child was. Worshiping, they brought him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. And when it was revealed that they should not return to Herod, they went back by another way to

their place. And we sing praise to God for Christ's birth, together with his Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever, into the ages. Amen.

In Christi Natalem

From the devoted John Chrysostom, archbishop of Constantinople: On Christ's birth

This has a lot of gaps in the text. I marked them exactly as the Greek text on the Migne page marked them. Sometimes there were words in brackets, as if they had been added in. I translated these, but left them in the brackets.

This day is full of fear and trembling, out of both great fear and limitless joy. For the Lord came out of the virgin wife, finding the girl a mysterious bridal chamber. For as he was begotten above [...] without corruption, even so he is begotten below [...] without origin. He who is above, lying in the bosom of the Father, this same one is being raised in the arms of his virgin mother. If anyone then, considers this day, [...], he is reduced to trembling, for the day is full of fear and trembling, as was said before. Today is the disgrace of the unbelief of the Jews, and the beginning and continuation of all [...].⁶ Those who are girded with leaves and wearing skins, in wearing them, they are bearing Christ.

Today, then, is a day of joy and confusion; for it is war with the demons, the clamor of the devil, the destruction of phantoms, the death of death, and the beginning of freedom for all the world from death. But you, behold with me the holy virgin [...], and see the act, how it happens outside of the usual limitations. How is she not torn asunder, when she carries the Lord? How is it that she and her whole womb are not torn apart, but she bears in her womb the Creator [...] [...] of her womb, where he placed himself. If Egypt was not able to lift the finger of God, how can the virgin lift the right hand of God? And if a man cannot lift the small weight of gold, how can the girl lift the treasury of the Father? If she was to come into conversation with Christ, she would say, "You are in a girl's womb. But are you not without origin, and don't you have unconquered strength? Did you not say your throne is heaven? All, then, is unbounded like this in everything, since you have the womb of the girl for a dwelling place. How does he, who is in the bosom of his pure Father, begin in the womb of an unmarried girl?" "[Yes," he says,]" Adam was corrupted, the world was flooded, Sodom was burned, the law was tread upon, prophets were abused, [I] God was not heard, the dragon ruled as lord, the demons were powerful, the earth was utterly destroyed, the angel became like mortals, and was not strong enough to help [...]. Because of this [...], I am taking up the form of a servant [...] [...]."

O wonderful [...], I am amazed, and shudder from so much wonder, my mind is overwhelmed. I find it is enough to say only this, "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and understanding of God." For this is beyond what is ordained and is a very great paradox, the girl is found to be both mother and virgin. She is not sown, but she begets. She is not tilled, but

⁶ Another translation option is, "Today is the beginning and continuation of the disgrace of the unbelief of the Jews and of all [...]."

brings forth. She does not wait for that which happens.⁷ She does not receive corruption. Not receiving corruption [...] [...] not opened in giving birth, because she conceived the Lord without seed, even so the child Lord was from the unwedded ... Truly, in this way, your work was made great, Lord. You made all in wisdom [...] [...]. Consider with me, how Adam danced repeatedly, and threw much in the teeth of the beast [...] and rejoiced to say "O corrupt one, why does stripping me benefit you? Why are you going to do that sometime, stripping me?" See the one wearing fig leaves around the loins, for the first time he is putting on the tunic of the dead, and now behold, the life-making-garment⁸ is worn. Why, he asks, is such a great freedom given? Why did the Lord say to me 'you are my Son?' [...] So that you might count him the Son of the holy virgin, and consider her a true mother in the flesh. Now I proclaim my Lord [...], for he himself happens to be the craftsman even of the blessed Mary. [To him be the glory and power, now and forever and into the ages of ages. Amen].

In Natalem Christi Diem

This is the Christmas sermon that has already been translated into English. That translation, however, is a lot shorter than the Greek version, so apparently some was cut out or maybe it came from a shorter Greek version of the same sermon. Either way, the Greek is much longer than the well known English translation, and so this translation will be much longer as well.

I see a new and amazing mystery; my ears resound to the shepherds - not playing a plain song, but singing a heavenly hymn. The angels sing, the archangels harmonize, the cherubim sing hymns, the seraphim give praise, all are celebrating God seen on earth, and man in heaven. He who is above is now below because of stewardship and the one below is above because of the love for man. Today Bethlehem is a type of heaven, receiving the hymning of angels in place of the stars. In place of the sun, making room for the true sun of righteousness. And do not ask how, for where God wills, the order of nature yields. For He willed, He was able, He came down, He saved. All things meet together in God. Today he who is, is born, and he who is, becomes what he was not. For, being God, he became man without setting aside his divinity. For he did not become man by putting off divinity, nor again did he become God by advancing from man, but being the word, through impassibility, he became flesh, while remaining unchangeable by nature. But when he was born, the Jews denied the young child, as did the Pharisees who study the divine scriptures, and the scribes spoke contrary to the law. Herod sought for the child, not so that he might honor him, but so that he might kill him. For today they saw all in opposition.

For he was not hidden, according to the psalmist, from their children to the following generation. For kings came, and marveled at the heavenly king, at how he came to earth, not

⁷ The noun παθος is neuter, so it could be nominative or accusative. I took it as acc. "Mary did not wait for that which happens," but it could also be translated, "that which happens did not wait." Παθος can have the meaning of suffering, but literally means "what befalls."

⁸ ζωοποιονφορον is a clever combination of three words meaning life, create and bear.

with angels, or archangels, thrones, dominions, powers, or principalities, but walking a new and untraveled way; he came from an uncultivated womb. He did not leave his angels desolate without faith, nor in becoming man for you did he set aside the divine habitation, but the kings came to worship the heavenly king of glory. Soldiers honored the high commander of might. Women honored him born of a woman, that the labor pains of women might turn quickly to joy. The virgins honored the child of the virgin, because the creator of milk and breasts made the springs of her breasts to come flowing forth, and he took nourishment from the maiden mother child. The infants honored the one who became an infant, so that, from the mouth of infants and nursing babies praise should be restored. Children honored the boy, witnessing his work through Herod's madness. Men honored the one who put on man's nature, and did the hard work of servants. Shepherds honored the good shepherd, the one who set aside his life for the sake of the sheep. Priests honored the one who became a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek. Servants honored the one who took on the form of a servant, that he might honor our bondage with freedom. Fishermen honored the one who made fishermen into fishers of men. Farmers honored him who displayed the messenger from the farmers. Prostitutes honored the one who offered his feet to harlots for their tears. And, to cut short what I'm saying, all the sinners came to see the lamb of God who took away the sins of the world; the magi guarding, the shepherds praising, the farmers telling the good message, the harlots pouring myrrh, the Samaritan woman thirsting for the running water of life, the Canaanite having unhesitating faith.

Because everyone is dancing around, I also want to skip, I want to dance, I want to celebrate. But I dance, not striking the lye, not waving a bough, not having a flute, not kindling a fire, but, in place of the musical instruments I carry the swaddling-clothes of Christ. For this is my hope, this is my life, this is my salvation, this is my flute, this is my lyre. This is why I go bearing these, because when I speak of the strength in them, I am taking strength with the message I say. Glory to God in the highest. With the shepherds, also, peace on earth, goodwill to men. Today the one who was inexplicably begotten of the Father was born of a virgin. I can not explain it, but he, as begetter, knows. According to nature he was begotten before eternity by the Father. But today, again, he was born according to nature, in this way the grace of the Holy Spirit is established. And the engendering above is unconcealed, and the engendering below is without deceit. And truly God, from God he was begotten, and truly man, he himself was born of a virgin. Above he is the only begotten of the only One, below he is the only begotten of the virgin alone. For as it is unholy to think on the generation above by the mother, so it is blasphemy to try to interpret the engendering of the Father below. The Father begot without changing, and the virgin gave birth without corruption. For in begetting, God did not admit change, for he begot in a divine way. Nor did the virgin admit corruption in bearing, for she bore of the Spirit.

Because his above generation is not recorded, neither is his coming forth held up to be inquired into in later times. For I know today that the virgin gave birth, and I believe that God begot him outside of time, but the manner of the begetting I have noted in reverent silence, and do not meddle with in my speech. For with God it is not fitting to devote oneself to the nature of his works, but rather to believe in the power of his work. For the normal custom, when a woman has intercourse in marriage, is that she might bring forth, but whenever an unmarried virgin gives birth, the virgin should be exposed, because it was a natural act. Some things, then, according to nature should be sought, but other things according to nature should be respected

in silence; not as a thing to be shunned, but as sacred, and worthy to be honored in silence. But please forgive me in wishing to end this speech while still in the introduction. For I am afraid of a greater search, I do not know how or where I will turn the rudder of words. What should I say, or what should I speak? For I see the mother, I see the one who is born, but I do not see or understand the manner of the begetting. For nature is conquered, the usual custom is conquered in whatever way God wants. For the work did not come about according to nature, but it is a miracle in place of nature. For nature rested, and the will of the Lord worked. O marvel of grace! The only-begotten before the ages, the inexpressible, the twofold, the one without a body, he assumed my perishable and visible body. Why? So that, being seen, he might teach, and teaching those who do not see, that he might lead them by the hand. For men put more trust in their eyes than their ears. That which they do not see, they doubt. Because of this he is upheld to their eyes, for their sight, by having a body, so that he might set free the dispute. And he was born of the virgin without her understanding the act. For neither was she working together with the one being born, nor was she united with the one passing through, but she was a mere instrument of his unspeakable might. She only knew what she learned from asking Gabriel, "how will this be to me, considering that I do not know a man?" And he said, "You want to know this? the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you." And how was it with her, and a little later, from her?

As a craftsman finds wood useful to finish a beautiful vessel to perfection, in the same way Christ found both the body, and the life of the virgin, holy. Having life in himself, he set in order the inner temple, that place willing to form man in the virgin, and he put the man on. Today he came forth, not being ashamed of the ugliness of nature. Nor was he too proud to wear his own work, and the body bore great fruit for praise, becoming a garment for the craftsman. For in the first creation it was not possible for man to be created, unless God first took clay into his hands, even so the destructible vessel was not able to be changed unless it became a garment of the maker. But what should I say, or what should I speak? For the miracle astounds me. Today the Ancient became a child; the one on the highest throne, who was set up above, is placed in a manger. The indescribable, the simple, the uncompounded, the one without a body, is turned over to men's hands. He who tore apart the bonds of sin was wrapped in swaddling clothes, because that is what he wanted. For he wished to turn dishonor into honor, to make contempt put on praise, to make the measure of violence show the way of goodness. For this reason he came to my body, so that I will make room for his Word. And he took on my flesh, that he might give me his own spirit; that with him giving, and me receiving, he might impart the treasure of life to me. He took on my flesh, that he might make me holy. He gave me his spirit, that he might preserve me.

But what should I say, and what should I speak? Behold, the virgin is with child. It is no longer said how he will come into being, but it is wondered at how he was brought about. According to the Jews he was formed. According to them, it is also said, he is believed only on account of us, but according to them he is not the one prophesied. Behold, the virgin is with child. The writing of the synagogue, the possession of the church. The church found the twofold, she discovered the pearl of great price, she dipped the wool, she put on the purple robe. For Judea bore him, and the inhabitants received him. The synagogue brought him up, and he was nourished, and the church claimed possession, and bore fruit. The branch of the vine is with her, and the fruit of truth is with me. The church gathered the grapes, and the nations drink the

mysterious draught. She sowed the kernel of grain in Judea, and the nations reaped the corn with the sickle of faith.

The nations piously take the rose, but the thorn of unbelief remains with the Jews. The young bird flies away, but the senseless sit beside the nest. The Jews interpret the pages of writing, but the people gather in the fruit of the spirit. Behold, the virgin will conceive in her womb. Tell me, you Jews, tell me the rest, who gave birth? Entrust it to me, even as to Herod. But you do not entrust it, and I know why; because it is a plot. For you told it to him, that he might destroy the baby, but you do not tell me, so that I might not worship him. But who gave birth, and to whom? To the Lord of nature. But even should you keep silence, nature would shout out. For she gave birth, because he who was born wanted to be born. For he was not submitted to nature,⁹ but as the Lord of nature, he introduced the new way of engendering, that he might display it. Because he became man not as man being born, but as God begotten. From the virgin today came forth conquered nature, going beyond marriage. For it is fitting that the leader of the holy comes first of all the pure and holy births. For he is the one who long ago formed Adam from the virgin earth, and from Adam who had no wife, he formed a wife. For just as Adam brought forth a wife without having a wife, so also today the virgin bore a man without having a husband. "For he is man," she said, "and who will recognize him?"¹⁰

For when the race of womankind owed thanks to men, since Adam produced a wife when he did not have a wife, because of this, today the virgin gives birth without a husband, paying the debt to men on behalf of Eve. So that Adam might not think himself great without a wife, he produced a wife. Because of this also the virgin without a husband bore a man, so that, to the public, he might show forth by nature the equalness of the miracle. For as he took the rib from Adam, and did not diminish Adam at all, in the same way he formed the temple of life in the virgin and did not unbind her. Adam remained safe and well even with the removal of the rib, so also the virgin remained incorrupt with the going forth of the baby. Because of this a different temple was not provided for him, nor did he prepare and put on another body, so that he should not seem to insult Adam's frame. For when man was deceived it was the work of the devil, because of this he took on the fallen living temple, that through union with what he has made he might separate man from intimacy with the devil. However, becoming man, he was not born as man, but he was begotten as God. For if he came from a common union, as I, he would have practiced a lie to many. But now, because of this, he is born of the virgin, and even while being born, he watches over his mother unchanged, and guards the virgin without loss. So that the strange way of conception becomes for me a great testament of faith. For this reason even I, the Greek, and also the Jew should ask, how Christ, being God according to nature, became a man according to nature. I summon the witness of the word to the unstained seal of the virgin. For this is God conquering the order of nature. This one from her womb is the potter, the inventor of the virgin, because even the manner of begetting he kept undefiled. And he built for him a marvelous house, a temple, which was wanted for the way. Tell me then, oh Jews, did the virgin

⁹ this is literally more like "turned by nature" or "given up under nature"

¹⁰ This is a literal translation. It is probably a quote from another work, and has connotations that Chrysostom's audience would have understood. The Greek is "Ἄνθρωπος γὰρ ἐστι, φησὶ, καὶ τίς γνώσεται αὐτόν;"

bear or not? For if she gave birth, you confess the strange birth. But if she did not bring forth, why did you deceive Herod? For you, at his inquiring where was Christ born, said "In Bethlehem of Judea."

Do I not know the village, or the place? Do I not know the worth of the one born? Does not Isaiah thus think of his God? "For the Son will be born, he says, "and they will call his name Emmanuel." Are you not ignorant enemies of the truth? Are you not the scribes and Pharisees who guard the accuracy of the law, and teach everything about it to us? Do we not know the tongue of the Hebrews? Do you not remember the writings about the virgin's giving birth, and after the birth, that he should not praise the grace of God, which is said in order to be remembered. Are you not those questioned by Herod who brought out Micah the prophet as witness, that the word would be proclaimed by you? For even you, he said, Bethlehem the house of Ephratha, are by no means the least among the tribes of Judah. For from you will be raised a leader, who will build up my people, Israel. The prophet said well, from you. For he comes out of you, and comes into the inhabited region. For he who is, goes out, but he that is not, is inhabited. But he was, and was before, and always was, but he was always as God, managing the cosmos. But today he comes forth, as a man tending men, and as God preserving those living in the land. O beneficial hostility! O contradicting love for man! Those hiding the one born in Bethlehem bring God to light. Those concealing the one in a manger make the Lord known. They unknowingly reveal the one placed in a cave, but they do not want that which is found, wishing to cover what is uncovered. Do you see the ignorant teachers? They are teaching, but they do not know, They feed the hungry, and give water to the thirsty, but they are working only to earn riches.

Come then, let us feast, come let us celebrate. For the guest is the way of the feast, the paradox also is the word of the begetting. For today the bond is loosed at last, the devil is disfigured, demons flee, death is loosed, the garden is opened, the curse is done away with, sin is put out of the way, the wanderer has gone astray, the truth has returned, the word of piety is spread and runs everywhere. The citizenship above is planted in the earth, angels have fellowship with men, and men speak with angels without fear. Why? Because God came to earth and man into heaven, and all became mixed. For he came to earth, being completely in the heavens. But while he is completely in heaven, he is completely on earth. Being God, he became man, not denying his deity. Being the unchangeable word, he became flesh. Through dwelling with us, he became flesh, for God did not come into being, but was. Because of this, he became flesh. Because heaven did not contain him, a manger received him. Because of this he was placed in a manger, so that as he grew up, he should receive all of the food of a child from his virgin mother. Because of this the everlasting father as a nursing infant was upheld in the virgin's arms, so that easy access should come even to the magi. For today the magi came forward, first scorning the tyrant, and heaven spoke aloud by the star revealing the same ruler. And the Lord sitting upon the light cloud of his body, runs above Egypt; in this he seems to be fleeing from Herod's plot, but in truth he was fulfilling that which was spoken by Isaiah. "For it will be in that day," he says, "that Israel is third among the Assyrians, and among the Egyptians my people will be well spoken of in that land. His praise was for the Lord of Sabaoth, saying, my people will be praised in Egypt and among the Assyrians, and in Israel." What are you saying, Oh Judah? The first became third? The Egyptians and Assyrians are placed first, and the firstborn, Israel is counted less? Yes. The Assyrians are suitably first, since they first

worshipped the baby through the magi. Then the Egyptians with the Assyrians, for they received him when he fled from Herod's treachery. But Israel is counted last, because after his coming up out of the Jordan, they knew it was him through the apostles. But he went into Egypt, shaking the hand-work of Egypt at one blow, because of when he shut the gates of Egypt by the destruction of the firstborn. Because of this, today he came as the firstborn, that he might loose the grief from their gloominess of old. And it is said that Christ is the firstborn. Luke, the evangelist, gives witness today, saying, "and she bore her son, the firstborn, and she wrapped him, and laid him in the manger, because there was not room for them in the inn." He went then, into Egypt, that he might loose the grief from their old gloominess. He put grace in place of the whips, willingly offering the light of salvation in place of the night and darkness. The water of the river was then impure on account of the slaughter of babies before their time. He, the one who reddened the water, went into Egypt and made the flow of the river produce salvation. Their cursed and impure he cleansed by the power of the Spirit. The Egyptians were distressed, and raging, denied God. He went, then, into Egypt, and filled the divinely favored lives with the knowledge of God. The river was made to produce an abundance of corn as a witness. Because of the groaning there, I wanted to stop the word. But I will stop thus, fulfilling the word, because the Word without change became flesh while remaining of unchanging nature. But what am I saying, or what will I speak? I see a carpenter and a manger, and a babe in the womb, and swaddling clothes. The childbirth of a virgin, desolate, with needs, having complete beggary, all full of poverty.

You saw the wealthy in much poverty. How, being wealthy, was he a beggar among you? How did he not have either a seat or bed, but he was cast to the earth in a manger? O poor fount of riches! The wealth without measure bearing poverty as a cloak. He was laid in a manger, and he caused the world to turn. He was wrapped in swaddling clothes, and shattered the bond of sin. He has not yet spoken his first words, but he taught the magi, and sent them on a different way for the return journey. What should I say and what should I speak? Behold, the baby is wrapped in swaddling clothes, and is placed in a manger. Mary is present, being both a virgin, and also his mother, and Joseph is present, being called his father. He is called husband, she is said to be his wife, but legally it is an empty union. The extent of the words is known to me, but not the extent of the deeds, only that he was betrothed, and the holy spirit overshadowed her. Therefore, not having passage, Joseph did not know who brought about the baby. He did not have the cruelty to speak of adultery, he was not able to hold that slanderous word up against the virgin. He did not dare to call the child his own. For he knew it was good, that which I do not know, how or where the babe was conceived. When he was at a loss about what had happened, a heavenly oracle was brought by the voice of the angel, "do not fear, Joseph, for the one who is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit, for the Holy Spirit overshadowed the virgin." But why is he born of a virgin, and makes sure that she is without corruption? Because the devil long ago deceived a virgin, Eve. Because of this, Gabriel brought the good news to this virgin, who is Mary. However, Eve was deceived by the word and bore the responsibility of death, but Mary, being told the message, bore the Word in the flesh, who is the protector of everlasting life for us. The word of Eve portrays the tree, through which Adam is

thrown out of Paradise. But the Word which is of the virgin Mary portrays the cross, through which the robber led the image of Adam into paradise.¹¹

For at that time neither the Greeks or the Jews or the children who were able to choose, believed that God, being stable and unchanging, begot. Because of this, today he came forth from a changeable body, keeping, without change, his changeable body. This was so he might portray that, just as he was born of a virgin without taking away her virginity, so God remained unchangeable and immutable, as she remained pure. As God, he begot a Godlike God. For when men leave him they carve a man-like image, and they worship these in violent pride against the Creator. Because of this, today the Word of God, being God, is seen in the form of a man, that he might set free even the lie, and secretly turn their service to himself. In this work, then, a way is made through the impassable. Let us send praise up to Christ, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever and into the ages of ages. Amen.

In Natale Domini Nostri Jesu Christi

On the birth of our Lord, Jesus Christ

Whenever the heat of spring shines through from an icy winter, then also the land produces green grass, and the trees bloom out with flowering branches, and the air is bright, shining in the sun, and all of the birds dance, flying up to the sky and singing out their melodies. Then the cattle will occupy the hills, and also the shepherds, coming out from under their dwellings, changing their appearances in the beauty of the air, and the lyre players closely imitating with their reeds the many notes of the sweet voiced birds. Delighting the senses of the mute flocks, they carry the lambs onto the grass with a gentle step.

Then also the farmer, sharpening the sickle against the rock in his hut, comes to the vineyard to cut the unfruitful twig off of the vine. Then also the sailors, seeing the sea unmuddied, leave dry land, entrust their own lives to wood and water and wind, they bloom on the expanses of the sea, flying over it without fear. And, so that I do not drag out the prologue, all skill, and every habit for the need of life has been provided for men, the shining of the calm air has unhindered motion for the continuation of work. Here also, therefore, it is a heavenly spring for us when Christ rose up out of the womb of the virgin, and scattered the cold and fog of the devil, and established beams of light in the sleeping hearts of men, out of worthless ignorance we urge our minds on to heavenly and blessed praise.

But the birth of Christ is the course for my tongue, it flashes forth divinity, and is drawn to her. For whenever I draw out the discussion of his appearance, who was born of the virgin, and the virgin without a husband, and the girl being found with child, then I am meddling in the work, and upon not finding the way, I close that inquiry in faith. For the miracle is concealed and all goes over the understanding - the virgin conceiving, and being found with child. And that she bore, the baby proved the pregnancy. And that the virgin happened to be pregnant her house of the natural body teaches. Behold then the mystery visible and invisible, the one grasped and

¹¹ The Greek for the *word* of Eve is ῥῆμα, while the *word* of Mary is Λόγον. Λόγον is typically used in reference to Jesus as the *Word* of the Father.

ungrasped, the one searched after and not found. For who does not see and grasp both the baby and the mother? Who, seeing the virgin mother, and the infant child of the virgin, understands the mystery by busy inquiring? O mystery truly from heaven and from earth, grasped and not grasped, seen and not made clear! It was like this, and Christ was born today, heavenly and earthly, grasped and not grasped, visible and invisible. Heavenly according to his divine nature, earthly according to his humanity. Seen according to the flesh, invisible according to the spirit. Grasped according to the flesh, ungrasped according to the word.

Christ, being God, is all powerful. As he willed, he was revealed to the same world by being born. The virgin's birth pangs amaze my full mind, because the virgin did not come down out of heaven, but she was seen from the seed of David. Did she not receive in her womb, not the coming to be of spirit, but of body and spirit together? While the size of her womb proves the matter, he who planted the baby inside is not revealed. For heaven inhabits, and mysteriously brings about the babe in the virgin's womb. He was born by nature, and the midwives examined both the mother by nature, and the baby, and they did not find the loss of virginity as with other women.¹² For it was God who came forth from her. O bush, which Moses saw burning on the mountain, but not consumed! Virgin Mary, bearing and not corrupted. O stone, which Daniel saw being cut from the mountain without a human hand! O virgin mother bringing forth in virginity, and sacrificial child of the unmarried mother! Where are the busybodies? Let them tell us how the virgin conceived a baby without a man, and was pregnant without being corrupted.

If the matter is unsearchable, because the child was of the Spirit, the marvelous generation of the Word by the Father is even more unsearchable. But although you believe, making sure that she was pregnant without being corrupted, you speak against God, saying, "If the uncorrupt Father begot his Son, he was corrupted (according to your foolishness); much more, the virgin, being corrupt by nature, was corrupt in bearing." But if you yourself witness the virgin bearing without corruption, you should believe even more that the uncorrupt Father begot the uncorrupt Son without corruption. But after permitting vain words, we should run back to the theologians who taught of Jesus Christ's birth in Bethlehem of Judea, in the days of Herod the King. The evangelist necessarily marks both the place and the time, that anyone who does not believe the conception of the savior according to the flesh, in searching out the place and time, might find the thing to be true.

For the time, they looked into the beginning of the time of Herod to the time of the writings. But the place they found by searching the signs to Bethlehem. For if there were cosmic signs and writings on high, with the moon calculating and the days demonstrating, and the city exactly as that which was said, what more is necessary, than the birth of the savior of the whole world. And the exact time and place will be for them to know later. Matthew describes the generation of Christ according to the flesh in this way. But Luke sets forth the exact time, and then writes when things first took place. For he says this, "In the forty-first year of Caesar Augustus, an order went out from Augustus for all the inhabitants to be registered. This was the first ordinance. So Joseph went up from Galilee to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David. He was to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child." The first decree was marked by Luke, and also the

¹² The idea of midwives examining Mary after the birth comes from a story in the Book of James chapter 14.

exact time, and the great mystery, showing the unseen from what was seen. For he said first he was registered by force, becoming a man. When Christ was born, the flesh left was made by God, and when the devil was thrown out, and death was loosened, he bound the lives of the righteous, and the names of the faithful were registered in the scrolls of the heavens. While Caesar commands below, the Father above appoints the angels. Wherefore also the Lord gave this message to his disciples, saying, "Do not rejoice that the demons have been subjected under you, but rejoice that your name has been written in the the heavens." After the birth of Jesus, in Bethlehem of Judea, in the days of Herod, magi came from the east, saying, "Where is the king of the Jews who was born? For we saw his star in the East, and we come to worship him." Alas! I am overcome with the miracles, I collapse with the thought, and my tongue does not know what to say next, or what to leave aside.

If I closely examine his conception, I am driven back, because before the child was born by nature, he fulfilled a sign. For is this not the greatest sign, that the virgin, while bearing, remained a virgin, and the silent heaven spoke by a star? And for the thirsty to see the one being born, he sent a star to the travelers and reveals the child to those longing for him. And while Matthew records the magi coming from the east, Luke records the angel. For he said, "the shepherds were out in the fields, standing guard and watching over their flocks in the night. And the angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord fell all around them, and they were afraid with a great fear. And the angel said to them, "do not be afraid. For behold, I bring news to you of great joy, which is for all people. Jesus Christ was born for you today, in the city of David." And suddenly with the angel there was a multitude, an army from heaven, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth, goodwill to men." Christ was born, the things on earth are joined to the things in heaven, angels dance with men. Shepherds are in the field and the magi are worshipping, heaven shines, and the earth lifts her bright fruit upon a manger. And then that which was written was fulfilled on earth, which is, he raised up truth out of the earth, for Christ is truth, who says, "I am the way and the truth." Out of the earth, that is, out of the virgin, he is raised up according to the flesh. I seek where the magi were taught about the star, they were instructed that the same star would be their guide for finding the child they were seeking.

For it was not as some imagine, saying that the star was deceptive and that the magi did not seek the true child. For how, if the star was misleading, did it show the true Christ? For until he came, it was set in its course. But why did the magi, if they did not go in truth, offer so much to him, providing from their houses' hard work, revealing his divinity and humanity, and fulfilling that which was prophesied? Which was, "He will live, and they will give to him of the gold of Arabia." The stars do not rise again with each of the births of men as the legends say of them.¹³ For these are not those spoken of by the Greeks, who are equal to astrologers. But of those who think they are the faithful, of them we ask, "O philosophers, if they are what you say they are, tell us how, from Adam and Eve, being only two people, could the heaven be full of stars by them? And when the flood came, and all men died because of the water, the stars did not fall, and of all the stars dancing there, were they only of Noah and his three sons and his wife?" But it is necessary to hold to the scriptures, and to understand the mystery. For Balaam was a

¹³ Chrysostom seems to be referring to a common idea that the stars represent Christians, and that each time a baby is born another star will rise.

prophet, who, when he was summoned, the king of the Moabites called down curses on Israel from the land of Egypt. Whenever he blessed them, they were blessed, and whenever he cursed them, they were cursed. Coming near the encampment of Israel, and going up to the ridges of the mountain, while Israel encamped watching, he took up his parable, and prophesied, saying, “a star will rise from Jacob, and a man will be raised up out of Israel, and he will destroy the princes of Moab, and will plunder the sons of Ammon.” These magi who spring from the line of Balaam the prophet, having followed the scrolls and the prophets, they know that when the star rises, then also the man will rise. He is plainly the king of the Jews, who not only will destroy the princes of Moab, but will also reduce all the kings of the devil, and will crush them, according to Daniel. They watched the time carefully, and seeing the new star rise with the others, they knew him to be the one prophesied long ago, and they followed it. When they found the one who was born, they rejoiced, finding him to be the one prophesied from of old.

It seems to me that the magi are a sign of the nations turning away from impious wandering, not being guided by the perfect light, but as much by the radiance of the light through John, as by a star, they are guided to the Christ who was born in the flesh. For see with me that the star came as far as the child, and was placed on its course. For in John also, the path of the star gives light to the preaching, and indicates Christ, saying, “behold the lamb of God, who takes the sin of the world, and makes an end of the course¹⁴, for he said ‘it is necessary for this one to increase, but I will be decreased.’ And when they came, he said, the magi found the child and the mother, and falling down they worshipped him. For it is necessary for those who come to Christ from a Gentile life, first to fall from the heights of ungodliness, and then, when they are raised from the earth, to confess the birth of Christ according to the flesh, and then to look into the upper portion, his heavenly deity. And opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh, gold as for a king, frankincense as for God, myrrh for the one who suffered for you.

And Christ received the gifts, not because he was in need, but to benefit those who brought them. He accepted the gold, lest the love of money again turned them back. He accepted the frankincense, delivering them from idolatry. He was provided with myrrh, for washing his death with life. But if it is necessary to also see another mystery, let us examine it closely. They brought the gold and myrrh to the child. When they were around him, this was written, “All things in heaven and on the earth and under the earth will bend the knee to him.” That which was prophesied is completed in these offerings; the gold declares the praise of the angels in heaven; in the frankincense the bending of the knee of men on earth; in the myrrh, the prayers of those who have life in his death.

There are three virtues necessary for those approaching Christ to acquire, which the apostle affirms; faith, hope and love. Opening the treasures of the heart, they bear faith, as gold flashing out; hope, as sweet smelling frankincense; love, as myrrh binding together the members of the church. And being warned by dream not to return to Herod, they went back by another road to their country. For it was necessary for them to come once to Christ, that they should not wander in the footsteps of ungodliness. But for the pure, working out faith and order,

¹⁴ It appears that Chrysostom is comparing John to the star. Both run their race in order to point out Jesus, and then decrease so that Jesus can increase.

escaping the notice of the man slaying serpent, to return to the inheritance of Christ. For praise is fitting for him, into the ages of ages. Amen.

In Natale Domini et in Sanctam Mariam Genitricem

Today the indescribable vastness of the ages is revealed, beginning deeper than the human search. I put my hand to the work of draining the hidden deep, and when I search through, the depth is made clear. The investigation of the unspeakable, and wisdom to observe that which is buried - in seeking such things, I am dipping into the ages. The powerful did not understand such a mystery and how I could undertake to describe the indescribable things. Let the festival keep the answers which surpass human understanding. The unnavigable storm lies on the seas, springing from the unseen depths. Let the creation praise the Creator today, and supplicating voices send up a song. The heavenly treasure is seen in a field. We hurry to look down on such a great mystery. See how the earth portrays heaven, for the sun competes with the morning star to throw it down. This illumination shines down on everything, beginning the dawn, and the bright tribute of light. The divine-inspired brilliance bends down from heaven and runs through to all the borders of the inhabited world. Mary received the one completely without dimension, and bears in her womb the one who suspends the ages. Now the seed was sown in a fruitful place, and the grain grew, bearing much by the knowledge of God. She received such a proposition by sight, the sea encompassed the unfathomable. O pearl of great price, joined to the earthen vessel, whom Joseph, as a traveller, investigates. The child is searched for in the arms of his mother, and she supplies all his needs with her milk. The blossoming rod grew and put down deep root, the Star is set forth by a star, and the manger welcomes the child. The swaddling clothes wrap around fire and do not diminish because of this. Living life was formed in secret, and light was received. He goes first to Babylon, receiving gifts out of Persia, but Ethiopia comes, receiving God in her hands. The angels sing hymns, and the shepherds play. Men bring praise to God, and make peace known on earth. Salome¹⁵ collapsed in fear and the judge is appeased by the sound, he confessed the Lord who was born, and is set free from the house of conflict. He lifts the undefiled in his hands, he witnessed the saving grace. The lives of the righteous are glorified, the dances of mortal men are blessed, the desert city is known, the kingdom is established. As the childbirth is indescribable, and the mother undefiled, also through these indescribable things, the vast inquiry of man through the ages is made manifest, beginning deep.

O indescribable conception and unknowable childbirth. O worthy matter, and terrible miracle. O virgin without husband, the only one pure in childbirth.

I see the virgin city which the king conceived. I see the God-filled temple, encamped in the heights and those sacrificing in it. I see the holy ark binding together the covenant. I see the golden vessel set forward for manna. I see the unmoved stone lifting the engraver.

¹⁵ Salome, in the Book of James, accompanies the midwife when she comes to see Mary after the birth of Jesus. She may be the same Salome who is said to be the daughter of Herod who requested John's head.

It is miraculous. Fire is ignited from the dew, and flame is kindled from mud. The bush is covered with flames on the mountain, and is not diminished. The footprints of God are spied out, and the thing searched for is not known.

I sail upon the earth which lies under heaven, I see another heaven on earth. That heaven is raised up without strife by the word of the Lord, but this heaven is enlightened inexplicably in the birth of the Lord. That one has the visible sun, but this one shines outside the sun's reach.

Instead of the morning star she brings to light him who was before the morning star. Instead of the moon, the mother wife. Instead of the stars, the purity of her womb. Instead of the clouds, the covering of the body. I actually see heaven, the virgin today filled with the one flashing forth in goodness on the earth.

The two-fold grasping with hands the stone carved out of the mountain, into which Daniel the wise inquired. A man is not present at the union, and the mother bore truth. The gate of the palace was watched and made secure, and inside, in the cradle, the king made known.

You take root, virgin, as a cedar tree in frankincense, just like an enclosed park of the Lord with sweet smelling aroma. You are like a phoenix lifted up in glory, and the inhabited world is filled with your sweetness. You are like a beautiful olive tree, bringing forth fruit of praise, and your blossom is a sweet smelling aroma.

You are like a grape-vine growing grapes and your cheery wine is drunk and none is left. You are like frankincense. You receive frankincense and fine myrrh, gold and myrrh are brought to you. You are like a terebinth reaching out your branches, and the wandering people run under that shelter.

You are like a plane lifted high above water, for you bore the fount of life in your womb. You are like a fresh rose, raising up womankind, and like an imperishable lily, sending out a sweet smell. You will bear the God who was before the ages, the childbirth will remain until the ages. You are the mother of love.

For the people declare your praises, and the church tells your glory, for in taking up the robe of praise, you bore the son of God to whom the Father cries, "you are my Son, today I have begotten you."

The Lord said to me, "you are my Son, today I have begotten you." I do not inhabit you as you with you, for one comes from one. "Today I have begotten you," for the anointment of those contending, and to be king of those who have been tyrannized. "Today I have begotten you," to be peace for those in war, and glory for the hopeless.

"Today I have begotten you," to avenge those who are persecuted, and to be life for those who are killed, for useful custom and for divine improvement. "Today I have begotten you," joint-heirs together, not preferring one part to another.

Unspoken, unchanging, unutterable, uncorrupted, "you are my son, today I have begotten you." I empty all natural things, having you even as myself, the nursing Son. For being equal, I anointed you a willing King. "Today I have begotten you," he was from strife-hating unity the power for the will, wanting to beget the Son, he begot God fully.

"Today I have begotten you." The ages did not pierce the plan of the conception, not having some mediation that the begetting should come. It was not thought of by angels. The thought began deep, not time, nor distance, nor slowness of sight, but he transferred his whole self to the child. "Today I have begotten you."

“And why are the nations haughty and why do the people think vain thoughts?” Do not all things renew with the Lord’s presence, so that the disordered world might again be made orderly from on high? “And why are the nations haughty?” The form of the body is easily grasped, the misled flock desiring and pressing on.

“And why are the nations haughty?” To subdue those bound before under the king’s presence, so that man might be liberated from the first destruction. “And why are the nations haughty?” Is the shepherd’s presence to protect against the greedy predator, so that the snake from the beginning should not again bite the rib?

“And why are the nations haughty?” In the upright womb you are weaving the divine garment, he put on the world, an incorruptible garment. “And why are the nations haughty?” Above he is the motherless Son, and below the fatherless baby. For man did not advance to God, but God took up man.

“And why are the nations haughty and the people think empty thoughts?” The Greek nations are haughty, the Jewish people think empty thoughts. Why are you haughty and do not tremble, and think vainly and do not take it to heart that from the virgin has come forth the Son, the Demiurge born from on high?

The law showed plainly, and the prophets declared before; such a miracle did not come in silence. And you think “vainly of the Lord and of his Christ.”

If you do not recognize the matter, lawless Jews, you judge and seek the way, not hearing Isaiah of old crying out in the prophets, “Listen then, house of David, lest a small gathering hands you over to men. And how do you hand over the assembly to the Lord? Because of this the Lord gives himself to you today. Behold, the virgin will conceive in her womb and will bear a son, and they will call his name Emmanuel.”

And you who hide the truthful voice of the prophet, you think vainly of the Christ. Behold, the virgin who bore and is still a virgin. Behold the virgin who makes a place in her womb peacefully, an abode for the one without abode. Behold the virgin who received the fire of God in her arms, and, like the bush, is not burned. Behold the virgin who lifts up, like a stone, the image of God who existed before, and she remains unmoved.

Behold the virgin who is raised by the angels, she is increased, she is sealed, she is betrothed, she is guarded, she is made sacred, she is married, and she is counted of the genealogy of the house of God. “For the birth of Jesus Christ was like this.” Like this? How was the birth of Jesus Christ? There was a virgin of the tribe of Judah, in the line of David, from the village of Bethlehem, which is interpreted, house of bread. Her father was Joakim, her mother was Anna.

The girl began the genealogy with the king and arranged all in good order, preserving good from the root of David, a place clean and unviolated. She was raised nobly in the house of her ancestors, a palace surrounded, guarded by the seal of the king, bearing divine lamps she shines down to all the world. Like a royal governess, she oversaw and showed forth the respect in women.

In the temple of the Lord she was distinguished as a dove, she was engaged to a holy man, Joseph, because he was the kin next in David’s line. Joseph received then, the habitation of the mystery, and promised the covenant, not knowing what was destined in the giving.

For what was said? “She will be found bearing in her womb, of the Holy Spirit.” But Joseph, her husband, being righteous, decided not to interrogate, when he was worked in by God, not to make a public example because of the nobleness and greatness of his heart. Not to

report anything because it was of the power overshadowing, but he wished to put her away secretly.

But the angel of the Lord appeared to him by dream and said to him, "Joseph, son of David, why do you seek to put away secretly the lamb that was prophesied long ago by the prophets? Why do you seek to put away secretly the pure land and the one who received heavenly fruit? Why do you seek to put away secretly the one who makes greater room for the fire of God and the one who shows forth the strange presence of God on Sinai?"

But the angel said, "do not fear to take Mary for your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit, she will bear a son and you will call his name Jesus."

O master, why should I not fear to take the virgin? Because she is made full, I do not dare look down on the overshadowing power in her, and should I not fear to take the virgin? The whole flame is given shape, for the one she bears in her womb ignites the top of the mountains in passion, and the flame equips the disembodied with power. And should I not fear to take the virgin?

With a harsh look he can strike down those who see and deny the lineage for divine vision. The girl grows large, and bears the engraver of her appearance. And should I not fear to take the virgin?

You are pledge for the child in the virgin, the advocate of the visible sight. You change the girl's looks. You give an embrace and he receives the atonement. You say a greeting and the Word in her becomes flesh. And if you, above in powers, are not strong enough to face the one sending you, but when I am lying in the woods of life, you say, "do not fear to take the virgin?"

I help at the birth but I did not render service to the way. I look down at the light but I do not inquire how. I consider that which is below me, but I do not examine closely that which is above me. I sigh because of the size of the womb, but I am convinced of its nature by sight.

Should I release her? But we were not brought together. Should I interrogate her? But I do not remain behind. Should I seek? But I will not find it out. Should I approach it by law? But I speak against the king working in her.

Why do you say "Do not fear to take Mary as your wife?" Of what sort is my wife? She is not yoked under a husband, but she is displayed the temple of the Lord. Why do you say she is my wife?

I am the servant of the virgin, O Lord, and am not the husband. Defender, and not master. Guard her, but not united to her. Her household slave and not bridegroom. If she should flee to Egypt, I will not leave her. If she should give birth, she will lay it on me. She seeks and we are amazed. For from the rock that was cut off, she is full of the milk of life, and provides all nourishment.

From this holy virgin came our Lord Jesus Christ. To him be the praise and power forever and ever. Amen.

THE CENTRE OF ALL FESTIVALS

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I. Who is Chrysostom?

Throughout church history John Chrysostom has been regarded as a faithful saint and doctor of the church. His skill with words earned him the title Chrysostom (Χρυσσοστομος, the Golden-mouthed), a title his audiences lovingly gave him. His words were always carefully chosen and directly aimed toward the people listening, and once he started speaking to them he was a man on fire. Chrysostom himself acknowledges his tendency to get carried away, saying, "Preaching improves me. When I begin to speak, weariness disappears; when I begin to teach, fatigue too disappears."¹⁶ Robert William Bush describes his oratory power. He says,

He (Chrysostom) was made for public speaking. He possessed by nature a strong, penetrating, comprehensive intellect, a quick invention, an exhaustless imagination, a rich vein of wit, great self-possession and depth of feeling, a keen faculty of observation and a practical turn of mind, - in a word, all the highest and most indispensable qualities of a good orator... Moreover, these rare gifts of nature received the best culture. From early youth his mother, the gentle and devout Anthusa, infused into his mind the purest principles of virtue and piety, and kindles his upright and benevolent spirit into a flame of zeal for the holy cause of Christianity. He was from childhood very familiar with the Scriptures, and through his own experience, aided by the incalculable teaching of Diodorus, obtained a deep understanding of their import.¹⁷

Not only was Chrysostom a talented and natural speaker, he was also extremely prolific. At one point he taught three sermons a day, thousands of which were written down by his audiences throughout the years of his life, and were circulated long afterward. Aside from his sermons, he also wrote hundreds of commentaries and treatises on subjects both inside and outside the church, and communicated with his friends and acquaintances through letters, which left quite a trail behind as well. Overall, Chrysostom put out a staggering number of works. An estimated 600 sermons and 200 letters still survive in some form, and about 400 of these works

¹⁶ Christianity Today, "John Chrysostom: Early church's greatest preacher," Christian History, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ch/131christians/pastorsandpreachers/chrysostom.html?start=2> (accessed March 27, 1012).

¹⁷ Neander, *The Life of St. Chrysostom*, translated by J. C. Stapleton (London: Seeley and Burnside, 1845), 232-3.

have been scanned and brought to the internet for easy viewing, making him one of the most easily accessible of the early church fathers.¹⁸

No one knows exactly when John Chrysostom was born, but the most common consensus is that he was born sometime in the 340s AD and he died in 407. He was raised by a widowed mother, who was determined to give him the best classical education possible. Because of her determination, he ended up under the world-renowned and respected rhetor, Libanias. A lot of Chrysostom's style and his breadth of knowledge in literature is traced back to his education from Libanias.¹⁹ After training for the bar for some time, he grew discontent with the general practices in that profession, and devoted himself to religious service, at first by secluding himself and living a monastic life, and later by serving the churches at Antioch and Constantinople. After fully turning to the Christian faith, he spent at least three years under Meletius, a very old, Christian bishop who guided him in his study of the scriptures. He was also greatly influenced by Diodorus, who taught him to be clear and straight-forward when interpreting scripture.²⁰

II. Why these works?

One might legitimately wonder why I have chosen only these few Christmas sermons of Chrysostom's to translate, especially seeing that he has so many other sermons, commentaries and other writings out there which might be more applicable to us now, or at least more interesting. So why Christmas sermons?

¹⁸ All of Chrysostom's scanned works can be found online in the Patrologia Graeca collection at http://khazarzar.skeptik.net/pgm/PG_Migne/John%20Chrysostom_PG%2047-64/ (last accessed May 7, 2012).

¹⁹ Robert Wheler Bush, *The Life and Times of Chrysostom* (Piccadilly: the Religious Tract Society, 1885), 30-41.

²⁰ Frederic M. Perthes, *Life of John Chrysostom: Based on the investigations of Neander, Bohringer and others* (Boston: John P. Jewett and co, 1854), 233.

Part of the reason is the practicality and accessibility of these sermons. Although there are so many works to choose from, most of them have been partially translated, as scholars found need of them. Many of them are sourced in scholarly works without being translated at all, and so have been explained and brought out to the world to some extent. Huge portions of his works are in series; collections of commentaries or homilies on various books of the Bible. All of these would be difficult choices for translating, then, because there is no clear stopping point. It is impossible to know how much to do and how far to take it. There are only a handful of Christmas sermons, however, which makes them an easier choice for a translation project. Only one of these Christmas sermons has been translated into English, while the others are still only available in Greek, or possibly Latin, and are currently unknown to the modern Western world.

The other reason these Christmas sermons were chosen is because Chrysostom himself would have thought his Christmas sermons were more important than his other writings. He believed that Christmas was the greatest of all days; the most significant for a Christian to celebrate out of all holidays. He says,

[Christmas] day is pre-eminent, because the event which occurred upon it, was of all events the most stupendous. For that Christ should die, was the natural consequence of his having become man; because, although he had committed no sin, he has assumed a mortal body. But that being God, he should have condescended to become man, and should have endured to humble himself to a degree surpassing human understanding, is of all miracles the most awful and astonishing.²¹

Given Chrysostom's evaluation of this holiday, his sermons on Christmas are the ones which I think we, as the church and his posterity, should be reading. My thesis is an attempt to make them more accessible to English speakers today and to create, as well as satisfy, interest in his ideas. In doing this, I will address the question given by my advisor, which is: *In Chrysostom's Christmas sermons, what is the significance of his focus on the Virgin Mary?*

²¹ William Joseph Walter, *St. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople: his life, eloquence, and Piety* (New York: John Kennedy Publishing, 1843), 198.

III. Chrysostom's Theology and Style

In all of these sermons, Chrysostom describes the two great paradoxes of Christmas, the two great paradoxes of the entire Christian faith. These are God's humbling of himself to become man, and a virgin giving birth. In our day it is not unusual for a theologian or minister to put an emphasis on God becoming man, but it is less common to hear men talk about the mysteries of the virgin birth. If we want to answer the question of what is significant about his focus on the Virgin Mary, we first need to see the focus itself. In what way was Mary the focus of his Christmas sermons?

In his *In Natale Domini Nostri Jesu Christi*, Chrysostom shows how Mary's pregnancy is both understandable and at the same time beyond understanding. The pregnancy is understandable since we know that every other person alive has been born in that way, and yet it's also beyond understanding because she was a virgin. Chrysostom uses this paradox as a description of how Jesus himself, in becoming man, is both comprehensible and incomprehensible. It describes how God has made himself knowable to us, and yet remains hidden at the same time. Mary portrays God to us through her virgin pregnancy. She herself is a sign of what God is doing when he becomes man. Later in this same sermon, *In Natale Domini Nostri Jesu Christi*, Chrysostom says, "for is this not the greatest sign, that the virgin, while bearing, remains a virgin, and that the silent heaven speaks by a star?"²² When Chrysostom speaks about Mary as a virgin mother, he emphasizes that this is the one miracle that clearly shows us that her baby is God become man. Jesus is not just another random kid, he is the Christ, and it is Mary who physically proves that to us.

In his *In Christi Natalem*, Chrysostom describes Christmas as the day that ends death and brings war against the demons. Immediately after saying this, he leads into the subject of Mary's virginity, encouraging his congregation to study her and the mystery of Jesus' birth. The

²² *In Natale Domini Nostri Jesu Christi*, 14.

remainder of this sermon consists almost entirely of his exploration of, and praise for, this paradox.²³

In his *In Christi Natalem Diem*, he spends almost the whole time praising Mary. She is lauded as the mother of Christ, and as the new and more perfect Eve, the Eve who really does listen to God's commands. Chrysostom has the angel Gabriel tell Mary, "for death came from Eve, but from you undying life; from her came the fruit of death, but from you the fruit that makes alive; from her came deceit, but from you truth, from her came man's separation from God, but from you the inexplicable joining of God and flesh."²⁴ This comparison goes on and on, but it's clear from this that Chrysostom sees Mary as Eve's replacement as the mother of life.

In Chrysostom's *In Natalem Christi Diem*, he encourages his congregation to feast and celebrate with him, and with the angels, because such a great and wonderful thing took place on earth. Here again he describes Mary as the new Eve, saying that Eve listened to the deceiver, and because of that brought death to all, but Mary listened to the angel and brought everlasting life. He even says to Mary, "you exist above all things, except for God alone," because she is the "root of all things."²⁵ The whole reason we can celebrate at all, he implies, is because of Mary's role in the world.

IV. How does Chrysostom compare to others of his period (mainly Cappadocians) in his views of Mary?

Obviously, Chrysostom has an extremely elevated view of Mary and her role in the incarnation. In order to see what is really unique about Chrysostom's views, I want to compare him with some of his contemporaries, in particular, with the three men known as the

²³ *In Christi Natalem*, 5.

²⁴ *In Christi Natalem Diem*, 3.

²⁵ *In Natalem Christi Diem*, 7.

Cappadocians because they lived and taught in the same time period as he did. These three, Basil the Great, Gregory Nazianzen and Gregory of Nyssa, are considered, along with him, the fathers of the Eastern church. The differences between the ideas these men have of Mary and Chrysostom's do not always seem to be huge and noteworthy, but considering the kind of church controversies that have come up involving Mary, it is worth looking into the variances of opinions.

1. The Duality of Christ's Nature (how He was fully God and fully man)

In their writing on Mary and on the incarnation of Jesus, the Cappadocians emphasize Christ's dual nature, especially emphasizing the fact that Christ is Mary's real and physical son in order to prove his humanity. They point out that Paul's writings say that Jesus was born *of* Mary, and not *through* her, meaning that Mary was not simply a vessel that God put Jesus into, but that Jesus took for himself part of her actual flesh, as any human child does. According to Basil, if Jesus did not come from Mary herself, then there would be no reason to have Jesus be born of a woman. He says, "If the God-bearing flesh did not have to take from the dough of Adam, what need was there for the holy Virgin?"²⁶ In another place he calls her the workshop for the incarnation. Basil often speaks of a communion of nature between Jesus and Mary, because he wants to make it absolutely clear that Jesus is Mary's child, is connected to her, and comes from her in the same way that any other child does.²⁷ This is part of what it means for Jesus to be fully God *and* fully man.

Proving the same point, Gregory Nazianzen is the first of many theologians to say that, in order to be an orthodox Christian, a man must agree that Mary is the Theotokos, or Godbearer. He says,

²⁶ Luigi Gambero, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church: the Blessed Virgin Mary in Patristic Thought* (Ignatius Press: San Francisco, 1999), 145.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 143-9.

If anyone does not admit that holy Mary is the mother of God (*Theotokos*), he is cut off from the God-head. If anyone claims that Christ merely passed through Mary, as if passing through a channel, but denies that he was formed in her in a divine way (because there was no intervention of a man), and in a human way (that is, according to the laws of conception), he is equally godless.²⁸

And, although Gregory of Nyssa does not use the same vocabulary as Gregory Nazianzen, not demanding that a person has to agree to the title *Theotokos*, he also points out the two distinct natures of Christ. He makes it clear that for Jesus to be really man - really human - he must take on Mary's flesh. He says,

For the divinity does not become earthly, nor does the humanity become something heavenly... the portion of flesh was formed in the immaculate Virgin. For this reason the child that is born of her is called the Son of the Most High. In truth the divine power makes possible a certain affinity of human nature with God, while the flesh makes it possible for God to have a certain relation with man.²⁹

Chrysostom seems to agree with the Cappadocians that Christ is Mary's actual, physical son. He waxes pretty eloquent on how Mary held him in her womb, saying in *In Christi Natalem*, "how is she not torn asunder, when she carries the Lord? How is it that she and her whole womb are not torn apart, but she bears in her womb the Creator of her womb, where he placed himself."³⁰ And in his *In Natale Domini et in Sanctam Mariam Genitricem* Chrysostom makes it clear that Jesus is Mary's real child, he is the fruit of her womb. He describes her in this way: "you are like a beautiful olive tree, bringing forth fruit of praise, and your blossom is a sweet smelling aroma. You are like a grape-vine growing grapes and your cheery wine is drunk and none is left."³¹ He says in a homily on Matthew that, if Christ is not of Mary's own flesh, just like

²⁸ Gambero, 162.

²⁹ Gambero, 55.

³⁰ *In Christi Natalem*, 5.

³¹ *In Natale Domini et in Sanctam Mariam Genitricem*, 18.

any of child is from the flesh of his mother, then Jesus has nothing in common with us and can not even be called David's son.³² From this it seems obvious that Chrysostom sees Jesus as being somehow connected to Mary, but in another place he seems to be saying something completely different. He says, "and he was born of the virgin without her understanding the act. For neither was she working together for the one being born, nor was she united with the one passing through, but she was a mere instrument of his unspeakable might."³³ This seems to be a direct contradiction, as if he's saying that the moon is round, and is not at all the same shape as a volley-ball.

Instead of pitting Chrysostom against himself and trying to figure out why he seems to be contradicting himself in his different sermons, we should note that he is a lot more cautious than the Cappadocians when it comes to theorizing. Chrysostom does not like to theorize. He does not want to claim that Jesus took part of Mary's flesh to form himself, but he would rather leave issues like this a mystery. He makes this point in his *In Natalem Christi Diem*,

Above he is the only begotten of the only One, below he is the only begotten of the virgin alone. For as it is unholy to think on the generation above by the mother, so it is blasphemy to try to interpret the engendering of the father below. The father begot without changing, and the virgin gave birth without corruption. For in begetting, God did not admit change, for he begot in a divine way. Nor did the virgin admit corruption in bearing, for she bore of the Spirit. Because his above generation is not recorded, neither is his coming forth held up to be inquired into in later times. For I know today that the virgin gave birth, and I believe that God begot him outside of time, but the manner of the begetting I have noted in reverent silence, and do not meddle with my speech. For with God it is not fitting to devote oneself to the nature of his works, but rather to believe in the power of his work.³⁴

³² Chrysostom, *On the Gospel of Matthew*, translated by members of the English Church (Oxford: J. G. F. and J. Rivington, 1843), 48-9.

³³ *In Natalem Christi Diem*, 8.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

Not only does Chrysostom think that it's impossible to really know the specifics of this conception, he does not want to look too deeply into it because he sees it as a hidden thing that we are supposed to just believe without understanding. He says, "for whenever I draw out the discussion of his appearance, who was born of the virgin, and the virgin without a husband, and the girl being found with child, then I am meddling in the work, and upon not finding the way, I close that inquiry in faith. For the miracle concealed and all goes over the understanding, the virgin conceiving, and being found with child"³⁵ And again in another of the Christmas sermons, "my mind is overwhelmed. I find it is enough to say only this, 'O the depth of the riches and wisdom and understanding of God.' For this is beyond what is ordained and is a very great paradox, the girl is found to be both mother and virgin."³⁶ One of Chrysostom's favorite phrases is that all of this is a great paradox. All of the incarnation, all of coming of Christ and the way that he came, it is all just a big paradoxical puzzle, and it is alright if we don't have a good answer for the hidden details. It's inexplicable, "for the work did not come about according to nature, but it is a miracle in place of nature. For nature rested, and the will of the Lord worked."³⁷

2. Mary's Virginit

On the subject of Mary as a virgin throughout the conception as well as after the birth of Christ, the Cappadocians and Chrysostom are generally in agreement. Gregory of Nyssa compares Mary's virgin birth to the bush that burned on the mountain in Exodus 3. He says, "As on the mountain the bush burned but was not consumed, so the Virgin gave birth to the light, and was not corrupted. Nor should you consider the comparison to the bush to be

³⁵ *In Natale Domini Nostri Jesu Christi*, 13.

³⁶ *In Christi Natalem*, 5.

³⁷ *In Natalem Christi Diem*, 8.

embarrassing, for it prefigures the God-bearing body of the Virgin.”³⁸ Basil, this Gregory’s brother, also held Mary to be ever-virgin. “Those who love Christ,” he says, “refuse to listen to the idea that the Theotokos ever ceased to be a virgin.”³⁹ Not to be left out of the discussion, Gregory Nazianzen also believes that Mary was a virgin even when Christ was born, although it’s not clear whether he thought she remained a virgin for life as did the other Cappadocians.⁴⁰

Chrysostom seems to agree with the Cappadocians in their ideas of the continued virginity of Mary. Like Gregory of Nyssa, he uses the image of a burning bush to describe the way Mary could be pregnant and give birth while still remaining a virgin. He says in his *Natale Domini Nostri Jesu Christi*, “O bush, which Moses saw burning on the mountain, and not being consumed! Virgin Mary, bearing and not corrupted. O stone, which Daniel saw from the mountain being cut without a human hand!”⁴¹ Chrysostom always has beautiful imagery and analogies, but one of the most catching is the one he uses in his *In Natalem Christi Diem*, in the way he describes Mary’s continued virginity. He ties her part of the story back to the beginning of the world’s story, saying, “Adam remained safe and well even with the removal of the rib, so also the virgin remained incorrupt with the going forth of the baby.”⁴² This is a little strange, since he usually compares her with Eve and not Adam, but it is a cool picture of the strange way God creates and recreates in the world.

3. Mary as Fallen

The Cappadocians do not seem to have a lot to say about Mary’s state as a sinful human being. Basil does think that Mary wavered in her faith at the crucifixion. And Gregory of

³⁸ Gambero, 155.

³⁹ Paul Haffner, *The Mystery of Mary* (Chicago: Hillenbrand Books, 2004), 112.

⁴⁰ Gambero, 164.

⁴¹ *In Natale Domini Nostri Jesu Christi*, 14.

⁴² *In Natalem Christi Diem*, 9.

Nazianus says that Mary was sanctified by the Holy Ghost so that she could bear Jesus, which means that she was fallen, but had been perfected to be the mother of Jesus.⁴³

Chrysostom, although he talked extremely respectfully of Mary, did not believe that she was sinless. He always recognized her very human nature, and even while praising her, he attributes sinful motives to some of her questions.⁴⁴ For example, in her request for wine at Cana, he says that she was doing it for vanity's sake. In his sermon, *In Natalem Cristi Diem*, he says that "in begetting, God did not leave behind his nature, and in conceiving, Mary did not leave behind corruption."⁴⁵ In his commentary on the annunciation, he says that Christ's conception was announced to Mary beforehand, so that she would not think that something was wrong and commit suicide.⁴⁶ He also thinks that the birth of Christ was a more natural thing than the Cappadocians thought. He says,

When a Jew asks you: "how did a virgin give birth?" say to him, "how did the old and barren woman give birth?" For in this case there were actually two obstacles: the woman's great age and the weakness of nature. In the virgin, instead, there was only one obstacle: her abstention from marital relations. In this way, the barren woman prepares the way for the Virgin.⁴⁷

It is obvious that Chrysostom did not think Mary was sinless at all. He saw her as a down to earth, fallen human. He saw her as being low enough for us to understand and relate to.

4. Mary as Blessed

⁴³ Philip Schaff *The Creeds of Christendom* (New York: Harper and Bros Publishing, 1919), 117.

⁴⁴ Gambero, 173. Chrysostom says that "Jesus did not want to cause his Mother to doubt; he acted to free her from that tyrannical disease, to induce her, little by little, to form a fitting idea of who he was, persuading her that he was not only her Son but also her Lord."

⁴⁵ *In Natalem Christi Diem*, 8.

⁴⁶ Gambero, 172-4.

⁴⁷ Gambero, 176.

The Cappadocians consider Mary to be a somehow more perfect human than ordinary people, because they don't think that Christ would be born of a sinful mother, the way the rest of humanity is. Gregory Nazianzen says, "He was conceived by the Virgin, who had first been purified by the Spirit in soul and body; for, as it was fitting that childbearing should receive its share of honor, so it was necessary that virginity should receive even greater honor."⁴⁸ It's not clear that he means to say that Mary is perfect, but simply that she is *perfected* to a higher state than the common man. Gregory of Nyssa claims that Mary gave birth to Christ without pain. He says this is because Eve's sin introduced pain into childbirth, but Mary is pure, and therefore she conceives and gives birth in joy.⁴⁹ For the Cappadocians, then, Mary is very blessed and has been raised to a higher status than the rest of humanity. The Cappadocians don't seem to think that Mary should be worshiped because of her purity, but that she has been blessed through bearing Christ, and that she must be perfect *for* that, and *because* of that.⁵⁰

Chrysostom, although he portrays a much more earthy and humble view of Mary, still has an extremely high opinion of her and her role in the incarnation. He sees her as the new Eve, the perfected replacement for Eve in the new creation. He says,

From her (Eve) came death, but from you comes undying life. From her came the fruit that makes dead, but from you the fruit that makes alive. From her came deceit, but from you comes love. From her came man's separation from God, but from you the inexplicable joining of God and flesh. From her came the dark sleep of Hades, from you the bright light of the world. From her came the curse, but from you the blessing. From her came judgement, but from you forgiveness. From her comes oppression, but from you comes faith. From her come tears, but from you rivers of living water. From her come those who sweat, but from you comes rest. From her comes the ancient battle, but from you the living Trinity. From her comes hatred for one's brother, but from you love for man. From her

⁴⁸ Gambero, 163.

⁴⁹ Gambero, 159. This is in reference to Isaiah 66:7 "Before she was in labor, she gave birth; Before her pain came, she delivered a male child."

⁵⁰ Gregory Nazianzen does mention prayer to Mary, in fact, he is the earliest recorded who talks of it, but it's not clear that he would have considered this to be worship of her.

came the flood, but from you the washing for eternal life. From her came destroyers, but from you regeneration. From her comes the slaughter of the living, but from you the raising of the dead. From her came the hateful twelve tribes, but from you the twelve apostles united in love. From her comes death running through the world, but through you strife will fall. From her comes calamity, but from you the resurrection. Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found grace according to God.⁵¹

Chrysostom is clearly not shy in his praise of Mary. Although he doesn't think she's sinless, as we saw earlier, he still is willing to admit that she was greatly blessed. He tells her in his *In Nativitatem Christi*, "you are like a plane lifted high above water, for you bore the fount of life in your womb. You are like a fresh rose, raising up womankind, and like an imperishable lily... you are the mother of love."⁵²

5. What Makes Chrysostom Unique among the Eastern Church Fathers

Now that we have looked over and compared what the Cappadocians and Chrysostom think of Mary's virginity and her personal virtue, we can identify what makes Chrysostom's views unique among the other fathers. First, he is very literal in his reading of scripture, while the Cappadocian fathers are more analytical. Where they talk about the theology of Christmas, Chrysostom talks about how it actually, or most likely, happened. For example, in his *In Natale Domini Nostri Jesu Christi*, Chrysostom gives even small, biblical comments very practical uses. He says, "the evangelist necessarily marks both the place and the time, that the one who does not believe the conception of the savior according to the flesh, in searching out the place and time, might find the thing to be true."⁵³ And in another sermon when he compares Mary to Eve, he says that Mary stands as the new Eve in order to right the imbalance that came about when

⁵¹ *In Christi Natalem Diem*, 3.

⁵² *In Natale Domini et in Sanctam Mariam Genitricem*, 17.

⁵³ *In Natale Domini Nostri Jesu Christi*, 14.

woman first came from man. Now, he says, man needs to come from woman in order fix this inequality. He says,

For when the race of womankind owed thanks to men, since Adam produced a wife when he did not have a wife, because of this today the virgin gives birth without a husband, paying the debt to men on behalf of Eve. So that Adam might not think himself great without a wife, he produced a wife. Because of this also the virgin without a husband bore a man, so that, to the public, he might show forth by nature the equalness of the miracle. For as he took the rib from Adam, and did not diminish Adam at all, in the same way he formed the temple of life in the virgin and did not unbind her. Adam remained safe and well even with the removal of the rib, so also the virgin remained incorrupt with the going forth of the baby.⁵⁴

As we saw, the first thing that made Chrysostom unique was his very literal way of reading scripture. The second thing, then, that makes him unique is that he is very interested in moral and practical applications for his sermons. He sometimes does this by showing his congregation what he himself does, as in his *In Natale Domini Nostri Jesu Christi*, where he says, “upon not finding the way, I close that inquiry in faith.” With phrases like this, he is using his own actions as an example for the congregation to follow. Chrysostom is also willing to ascribe faults to Mary to a degree further than the Cappadocians do in order to use her as an example that his audience will be able to relate to.⁵⁵ He sets Mary on a lower level in order to show that she is human and relatable, but still lives a holy life.⁵⁶ As the *Protestant Dictionary* says, “while strictly orthodox, (Chrysostom) laid a greater stress on practical piety than on purity of doctrine. He was chiefly known for his pulpit oratory and pastoral care.”⁵⁷ Chrysostom speaks

⁵⁴ *In Natalem Christ Diem*, 10.

⁵⁵ Tim S. Perry, William J. Abraham *Mary for Evangelicals: Towards an understanding of the mother of our Lord* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 153.

⁵⁶ Gambero, 173.

⁵⁷ Charles Henry Hamilton, and Charles Neil, *A Protestant Dictionary: containing articles on the history, doctrines and practices of the Christian Church* (London: Hodder, 1904), 225.

even of Mary's virginity in a practical way so that he may use it as an example for his congregation. In one of his sermons on Matthew (from the nineteenth century Oxford translation), he says

“for straightway when thou hast opened the Book thou shalt see the name of Christ there, and shalt hear one say, “The birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise. When His mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost.” (Matt 1:18) He that heareth this will immediately desire virginity, will marvel at the birth, will be free from earthly things.”⁵⁸

This shows how Chrysostom could take virtually any passage from scripture and figure out how to apply it as a lesson to his flock, even when it might be a passage that no one else would have thought to apply.

Thirdly, Chrysostom is unique because he is content to not know all of the answers to his questions. Perhaps this is because he is a literalist, and is generally unwilling to say anything more than the text itself says. Gambero says, “John Chrysostom perceives that the utterly mysterious conception of Jesus resists every attempt at rationalization.”⁵⁹ And in his sermon *In Natale Domini Nostri Jesu Christi* he shows how God can only ever be partially known. Only known as far as He has revealed himself. He says,

Behold then the mystery visible and invisible, the one grasped and ungrasped, the one searched after and not found. For who does not see and grasp both the baby and the mother? Who, seeing the virgin mother, and the infant child of the virgin, understands the mystery by busy inquiring? O mystery truly from heaven and from earth, grasped and not grasped, seen and not made clear! It was such as this, and Christ was born today, heavenly and earthly, grasped and not grasped, visible and invisible. Heavenly according to his divine nature, earthly according to his humanity. Seen according to the flesh, invisible according to the spirit. Grasped according to the flesh, ungrasped according to the word.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ John Chrysostom, *On the Gospel of St. John*, edited by Phillip Schaff. Vol. 14 of *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2004), 192.

⁵⁹ Gambero, 174

⁶⁰ *In Natale Domini Nostri Jesu Christi*, 13.

Chrysostom is always willing to say that God's mysteries are beyond the possibility of knowledge. He does love to explore the mysteries of Jesus' birth, but he recognizes that he will never know all of the answers, and does not feel the need to theorize about the things that are beyond him.

6. What led to Chrysostom's unique views?

Having considered Chrysostom's unique theology of the virgin Mary, we can now move on to consider what influences in his life may have led to his views. One major influence that impacted both him and the Cappadocians was the text called the Gospel of James, or the Protoevangelium. Written by the early 3rd century, this book teaches that Mary was a perpetual virgin, that Joseph was married previous to his marriage to her, and that the so-called brothers of Christ were really Joseph's sons by that first marriage.⁶¹ In the Gospel of James 10:12, Mary does not know why she is pregnant, an idea Chrysostom picks up in his *In Christi Natalem*. And in his *In Natale Domini Nostri Jesu Christi*, Chrysostom mentions midwives, and a woman named Salome, who come to see and examine Mary after the birth of Christ. This story seems to come from the Gospel of James chapter 14, where the same thing took place.

But Chrysostom also had some more unique influences, influences that would have greatly affected his view of women, and therefore, of Mary. These come from his relationship with his mother, and with some of the wealthy ladies in his congregation who helped financially support him and his work. His mother was a widow by the age of 20, and raised him alone. She insisted that he have a solid, Christian education, and sent him to the best schools to get it.

⁶¹ For information about and a link to the Protoevangelium, see *Early Christian Writings*, at <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/infancyjames.html>

Chrysostom's relationship with her was close enough that she was able to convince him to live with her until she died, even though he had already planned to go live a solitary, monastic life.⁶²

Later on in life, Chrysostom also had fairly close relationships with several wealthy widows and single women in Antioch. No one knows exactly what those relationships looked like, but from the letters he wrote to these women it is clear that he depended on them for financial support, and perhaps even for political influence when he was in various troubles. As Frederic Perthes says,

Among the men and women there were many with whom he had communion of heart and spirit, and who aided him efficiently in his plans and labors for the church. Especially near to him, in this sense, were several elderly women, mostly widows, and in part their illustrious and very wealthy families, who with their strength and ability devoted themselves to the work. In the earliest period of Christianity we find women whose circumstances allowed them to labor as servants in the church. They were called deaconesses...A number of such assistants were found in the church at Constantinople; moreover Chrysostom drew many to himself, who honored in him their spiritual father.⁶³

Chrysostom also mentions that, in his congregation, the women were more faithful than the men.⁶⁴ His view of women then, was fairly high. He respected them, and depended on them to at least some extent. With this in mind, it is not so surprising that he emphasized his focus on Mary. From his experience, he was prepared to both see her as a greatly blessed and faithful woman, but also as completely human and fallen. He was prepared to see her as an earthly but praiseworthy mother.

⁶² "St. Chrysostom Reviewed work(s)." *The Catholic Layman* 6, no. 63 (March 19, 1857). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30066513> (accessed January 16, 2012).

⁶³ Perthes, 63-4.

⁶⁴ Wendy Mayer, *Constantinopolitan Women in Chrysostom's Circle*, in "Vigiliae Christianae," Vol. 53, No. 3 (Aug., 1999), 273.

In *Mary for Evangelicals*, the authors saw that the differences between Chrysostom and the Cappadocians resulted in, or were caused by, a regional difference in theologies. Comparing the theologies of Antioch, where Chrysostom was, and Alexandria, where the Cappadocians were, they say that Alexandria emphasized an allegorical interpretation of the Bible, while Antioch generally stressed the plain meaning of text. In their Christology, Alexandria stressed the divine assumption of human nature in the incarnation, while Antioch stressed the humanity of Jesus Christ. In preaching and writing, where Alexandrians tended toward mysticism and speculation, Antioch emphasized practical Christianity.⁶⁵ From what we've seen of Chrysostom, in both the Christmas sermons and in his other works, he embodies the theology that Antioch is later known for, with his down-to-earth explanations, and practical applications to his flock.

Chrysostom also may be influenced by his status as teacher and leader of his congregation, especially later in life, once he has been in a position of leader long enough for that to shape who he is and what he wants to say.

V. Why Chrysostom is important

The last thing I want to explore is how Chrysostom's ideas and his style of teaching in his sermons are effective. Within his own time frame, his unique approach is effective in three ways. First, he is able to use Mary as an example applicable to his congregation. Secondly, he is able to show his congregation *why* they should celebrate Christmas. And thirdly, he is able to show them *how* to celebrate and worship.

Chrysostom is able to be effective in these three ways because of his unique views of the virgin birth. For the first, he is able to use Mary as a practical example for his congregation

⁶⁵ Perry and Abraham, 153.

because he sees her in a very down-to-earth way. He portrays her as very blessed, but he emphasizes the fact that she was still a sinful, fallen human. This brings her closer to the status of his congregation, and allows him to use her as an example for them in their daily lives. It allows him to basically say “Mary is just like you guys, but she was very faithful. You do the same.”

Secondly, he is able to show his congregation why they should celebrate, through showing them how great of a miracle it is that the almighty and powerful God should become a little, helpless, human being, and be born of a virgin girl. That the creator should take on the flesh of his own creation, in order to become their savior. This is a worthy thing to celebrate and remember. In fact, Chrysostom says it’s the greatest possible thing we can celebrate.

Thirdly, he shows his people *how* they should worship through seeing the way that Mary did. She was the first person Christ was united with when he became man, and her relationship with him shows them what their relationship with him should look like. He speaks of the way she accepts God coming to her, and the way she questions her own worth. Mary receives and wonders, and this is what Chrysostom wants his congregation to do as well.

Within a broader time frame, and throughout the history of the church, Chrysostom must still be greatly effective, as Eldon Epp and Gordon Fee claim. They say, “one can scarcely underestimate the influence of Chrysostom in the history of the Greek church.”⁶⁶ The great things that Chrysostom accomplishes are the building up of the church, giving an example of godly living and in stimulating all who hear to love. Robert Wheeler Bush explains it well, saying,

We believe that among the leading fathers of the early Church, no one has exerted a greater influence among men of his day (with the exception, perhaps, of Augustine in a narrower sphere), or has been more valued, appreciated, and venerated in after ages than Chrysostom. He destroyed no ecclesiastical polity, he founded no sect; but he built up

⁶⁶ Eldon J. Epp and Gordon D. Fee, *Studies in the Theory and Method of New Testament Textual Criticism* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmann Publishing, 1988).

the edifice of the Christian Church on a solid basis, he placed before the eyes of men a pattern of a pure and godly life, and he stimulated all around him to admire virtue, to love justice, to reverence piety, and to practise holiness.⁶⁷

The best example of how effective and influential Chrysostom is is that fact that his one Christmas sermon which was already translated to English (*In Natalem Christi Diem*), is still one of the most commonly read Christmas sermons in our language, 1600 years after he said the words. John Calvin also has high praise for Chrysostom and his sermons. He spent a lot of time making Chrysostom's works known to the public, and even compares Chrysostom's worth to Augustine's, saying,

My reason for selecting Chrysostom as the most preferable needs likewise to be dealt with in passing. From the outset, the reader ought to bear in mind the kind of literary genre it is in which I prefer him to others. Although homilies are something which consist of a variety of elements, the interpretation of Scripture is, however, their priority. In this area, no one of sound judgement would deny that our Chrysostom excels all the ancient writers currently extant. This is especially true when he deals with the New Testament.⁶⁸

Since Chrysostom is a father of the early church, he is not limited to any later sect or division of the church. He is, however, extremely valuable to the Reformation for his view of scripture as the only and very direct rule of faith, and this is one of the reasons why Calvin has such a high opinion of his works.

Chrysostom's words are clearly extremely powerful and valuable for everyone who hears them. He makes his own love for Christ open and obvious for all to see, and a love like that is very contagious. As he explores the mystery of Christ's birth, his curiosity and his reverence for it shine bright, and, like the moon reflects the sun, everyone who listens will light up as well. For

⁶⁷ Bush, 298.

⁶⁸ Kathy Ehrensperger and R. Ward Holder, *Reformation Readings of Romans* (New York: T&T Clark International, 2008), 103.

him, Christmas is the cause and the end for everything. His exhortation for all people is to love.

Love Jesus, love Jesus' mother, love the day of His incarnation, because it is all for you.

“The festival approacheth, the most to be revered, the most awful, and which we might justly term the centre of all festivals - that of the birth and manifestation of Christ in the flesh. Hence the festivals of Epiphany, of holy Easter, of Ascension, and of Pentecost derive their origin and signification... therefore I love and honor this day beyond all others, and I hold up this my love in the midst of you, that ye may likewise be participators in it.”⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Neander, *The Life of St. Chrysostom*, translated by J. C. Stapleton (London: Seeley and Burnside, 1845), 342.

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