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Relevance of Chrysostom's rhetoric: the use of emotions in *The Commentary on Psalms*

Znaczenie retoryki Chryzostoma: wykorzystanie emocji w *Komentarzu do Psalmów*

Abstract. This paper aims to show the enduring novelty of St. John Chrysostom's rhetorical style by highlighting the predominance of the pathos strategy – or appeal to emotion – in his preaching and, particularly, with his direct interpellation of listeners, the use of rhetorical questioning and the art of storytelling, a resource that is frequently used in persuasive activity today. The first section provides context for Chrysostom's work and his skillful use of ethos, logos and pathos. It then reviews the text of his most famous homilies on the Old Testament: his commentary on the Psalter. The methodology used is content analysis, employing the qualitative analysis software MAXQDA. The results show a sermon in which the rhetorical strategy of pathos predominates as a means of reaching the hearts of his audience and thus moving them to practice Christian life. It concludes that the current lines of persuasive rhetoric can be recognized in the rhetorical style of this Father of the Church, emphasizing the enduring relevance of his style as a guideline for preaching throughout the ages.

Streszczenie. Celem niniejszego artykułu jest pokazanie nieprzemijającej nowości stylu retorycznego św. Jana Chryzostoma poprzez podkreślenie dominacji strategii patosu – czyli odwoływania się do emocji – w jego kazaniach, a w szczególności poprzez bezpośrednie zwracanie się do słuchaczy, stosowanie retorycznych pytań i sztukę opowiadania historii, która jest obecnie często wykorzystywana w działaniach perswazyjnych. W pierwszej części przedstawiono kontekst twórczości Chryzostoma i jego umiejętnego wykorzystania *ethos*, *logos* i *pathos*. Następnie dokonano przeglądu tekstu jego najsłynniejszych homilii dotyczących Starego Testamentu: Komentarza do Psalmów. Zastosowano metodologię analizy treści, wykorzystując program do analizy jakościowej MAXQDA. Wyniki pokazują kazanie, w którym dominuje retoryczna strategia patosu jako środek do dotarcia do serc słuchaczy i skłonienia ich do

praktykowania życia chrześcijańskiego. Wnioskiem jest, że obecne kierunki retoryki perswazyjnej można rozpoznać w stylu retorycznym tego Ojca Kościoła, co podkreśla trwałą aktualność jego stylu jako wytycznej dla głoszenia kazań na przestrzeni wieków.

Keywords: Psalms, Chrysostom, preaching, rhetoric, emotions.

Słowa kluczowe: Psalm, Chryzostom, kazania, retoryka, emocje.

Introduction

A positive and assertive communication style has long been valued within the Church's tradition, and its leaders today highly recommend it (Vázquez Díaz-Mayordomo 2024; Francis 2019). Saint John Chrysostom is renowned in the history of Christian preaching for his skillful use of words. This established him as one of the most eloquent figures of all time, alongside Cicero and Demosthenes (Vandenberghe 1961), as well as the greatest Christian preacher and rhetorician (Petcu 2020). Given this, it is unsurprising that Pope Pius X bestowed upon him the title of 'Golden-Mouthed' and named him the patron saint of Catholic preachers.

This article examines the relevance of Chrysostom's rhetoric today. It aims to highlight the predominance of the 'pathos' strategy employed by the Antiochian preacher, as well as the rhetorical devices used. It also demonstrates the constant presence of storytelling in contemporary persuasive discourse. In this way, it demonstrates the relevance of the persuasive style of one of the greatest Christian orators and shows how his approaches can inform the training of preachers and others addressing issues related to the practice of faith.

To this end, a content analysis is carried out of his Commentaries on the Psalms, the varied subject matter of which makes it ideal for rhetorical analysis. Firstly, Chrysostom's work is contextualised in an introductory section, after which his persuasive strategies are analyzed in detail, particularly his use of pathos. The mastery of the art of good oratory displayed by this Church Father is well documented in his works (Valevicius 2016; Delgado-Jara 2022). While other studies have examined the rhetoric of St John Chrysostom (Toczydlowski 1949; Thurén 2001; Stander 2019; Sawhill 2020), none have focused on his commentary on the Psalter in its entirety – his most famous homilies on the Old Testament – nor have they adopted the present approach.

1. Commentary on the Psalms by Chrysostom

John Chrysostom (349–407) was born in Antioch, a major city in the Roman Empire. Regarded by some scholars as the most prominent Church Father of early Eastern Christianity, he is one of the most studied figures in this field (Mayer and Allen 2017). He wrote numerous commentaries on the Holy Scriptures. The corpus of Greek literature is larger than that of any other writer in this language. In these commentaries, he demonstrates his extensive knowledge of the texts (Marti 1961). Most of his commentaries are long series of homilies. These aim to stir emotions and draw moral conclusions. At that time, the purpose of the homiletic genre was to transform listeners' interpretation of the Scriptures (Mayer 2020). Therefore, it is understandable that Chrysostom sought to interpret the Psalter – the most significant book of prayers used by Christians in various public and private contexts (Cornavaca and Peveraro 2024). He finds didactic material for meditation and life in it, enabling him to apply principles of interpretation that prove highly useful for understanding religious texts better than in any of his other works.

John Chrysostom's commentaries on the Book of Psalms are widely considered to be his finest homilies on the Old Testament. Explanations of Psalms 4–12, 41, 43–49, 108–117, and 119–150 have been preserved, totalling fifty-nine homilies of varying lengths. We have used the edition by Jacques Paul Migne (1862)¹ Chrysostom's numbering is based on the Septuagint, which only corresponds to the Hebrew text up to Psalm 8. It should be noted that the Septuagint combined Hebrew Psalms 9 and 10 to form a single psalm. From Psalm 10 onwards, the numbering changes. The Septuagint's numbering is always one lower. Psalms 146 and 147 of the Septuagint correspond to Psalm 147 of the Hebrew text.

In addition to the beauty of the exposition, this work's value lies in the preacher's skill in using the Septuagint and other Greek versions to interpret the psalms. He frequently contrasts the Hebrew text with other Greek versions, primarily those of Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotion. These arose from differences between the Septuagint and Hebrew texts, as well as second-century controversies between Jews and Christians (Martín Sánchez 1980).

¹ Migne, Jacques Paul. 1862. *Patrologiae Cursus Completus. Ioannis Chrysostomy*, V. Petit Montrouge (In the following notes: JPM, V).

Aquila (c. 140 CE) translated the original text very literally, to the point of being almost unintelligible, while Symmachus (c. 200 CE) translated it according to its meaning while remaining faithful to the Septuagint version. Later, the great Alexandrian biblical scholar Origen (d. 254 CE) compiled all these Greek versions into the Hexapla (Cantera Ortiz de Urbina, 1990). Frequent references to ‘Another’ or ‘Another interpreter says’ appear in the text alongside these translations. The commentaries cover a wide range of topics and can be classified into three categories: the greatness of God’s power; his mercy towards all; and the idea that people should lead virtuous lives. The language used is accessible and passionate, and humorous in places. This language is used alongside religious content to highlight the most significant religious discrepancies of the time. Our preacher, Bardenhewer (1910), does this constantly. Chrysostom responds to attacks on key beliefs about God and Jesus, clarifies misconceptions about human nature and establishes the foundations of morality and faith. He has an excellent grasp of the Holy Scriptures (Bady, 2019) and an exceptional command of language.

Currently, no major monograph is devoted exclusively to this work, which is usually addressed within the framework of studies on Antiochene exegesis or the Psalter. The standard translation is generally that of Robert Charles Hill (1998). This edition is also used by German and Italian researchers, despite being in English. Notable studies in these languages include Simonetti’s work (1997), which contains sections on Chrysostom as an exegete of the Psalms, as well as the contributions by Zenger (2011) and Dünzl (2019), which situate Chrysostom within the context of patristic exegesis. In 2013, a further complete translation of Chrysostom’s ‘Commentary on the Psalms’ was published in Spanish (Berlanga 2013).

1.2. *Ethos, Pathos, Logos* in Chrysostom

Classical authors originated the concept of rhetoric and outlined the most effective methods of using words to persuade. ‘Ethos’ refers to the speaker’s prestige, based on their behaviour and reputation, which can make the speaker more convincing. ‘Logos’ is about using language to argue logically. If what you say seems true, people will believe you. Finally, ‘pathos’ is about the emotions that words can create, and how these emotions affect listeners, depending on the mood created.

Christian preaching is effective because it is based on the word of God. The Church Fathers, including our author, are renowned for their profound biblical knowledge and accurate interpretations. However, the fourth century also saw the golden age of Christian rhetoric, developing within the Greco-Roman rhetorical tradition. Christian speakers of the time brought Augustine of Hippo's *De doctrina christiana* to life. In this book, Augustine discusses the role of the speaker as a disciple of Christ, stating that the truth should be clear, enjoyable and moving (1967). This is true of those who tell others what to do. Above all, they must prioritise the word of God in their spiritual lives, familiarize themselves with their congregation, and acknowledge their own spiritual limitations, seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit (Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, 2024). As previously mentioned, being a good preacher does not necessarily mean being a great speaker. However, "being a good speaker can make your message more effective" (p. 3).

John Chrysostom's was well versed in classical rhetoric. He possessed the human qualities necessary to deliver effective speeches, as well as the spiritual qualities that elevated him to the status of a great orator. On the one hand, he dedicated his life to helping the most disadvantaged members of his community (Cassady 2009). Despite criticism, he remained courageous and heroic, which made him a credible speaker (Krupp 1985; Kelly 1995). On the other hand, his natural gift for public speaking enabled him to convey his message clearly. But what he really excels at is connecting with his audience. His editor, Bernard de Montfaucon, says the following in his book: "He made people cry, fixed their bad habits, and made them more religious" (1736). Chrysostom knows how to adapt to all his audiences. While his commentaries focus on defending and explaining Christian beliefs, they also demonstrate the preacher's strong leadership skills. Using powerful examples and clear, poetic language, John encourages people to commit to their faith and live as Christians. He presents a positive and logical religion. The Antiochian preacher frequently employs these persuasive strategies in his work to connect with his audience (Leyerle 2020). He is adept at communicating with his listeners, enabling each of them to understand the meaning of his words in their own way.

We believe that direct appeals to listeners, rhetorical questions, and other stylistic devices are the most effective ways to build an emotional connection. So too are the stories and accounts of biblical characters that he incorporates into his sermons. Aristotle set out the basic rules for storytelling in his *Poetics*

as early as the 4th century BC. These rules include the three-act structure that we still use today. According to the philosopher, every story has three parts: an introduction, a middle, and an end.

Dividing a story into three acts is a common approach in today's communication. Storytelling is a powerful tool for evoking specific feelings and shaping the way we think. We find it easy to remember facts if we build a story around them. The latest research shows how important mirror neurons are for storytelling. This is because storytelling is a means of conveying ideas to others. It is the narration of stories designed to elicit certain emotions in the audience. Today, it is a powerful way of engaging audiences. Papadogiannakis (2019) says that John is very good at it. Our preacher often tells a short story about something only mentioned in passing in the Bible. This helps the audience to understand the message. We will now look at some examples of this type of writing. These examples also employ rhetorical devices to clarify the emotions conveyed in Chrysostom's message.

2. The Use of Emotions in The Commentary on the Psalms

Below is an analysis of John Chrysostom's commentary on the Psalms. We used a qualitative analysis software (MAXQDA version 24) to create a coding scheme in accordance with the aspects and themes we wanted to examine (Strauss and Corbin 2002), illustrated in Figure 1. MAXQDA tools were then used to visualize the results, which are useful for identifying patterns and trends in Chrysostom's words.

2.1. A direct appeal to the listener

Chrysostom frequently uses questions as a persuasive device. This rhetorical device involves asking a question that is not actually intended to be answered. It serves to reaffirm the speaker's point of view, break the monotony of the discourse and encourage listeners to reflect on or change their behavior. Interrogative pronouns such as 'what', 'why', 'how' and 'who' appear at the beginning of sentences 426, 235, 166 and 63 times, respectively.

He asks his listeners 177 times if they are aware of a certain reality. This is unusual in the present active, where it is replaced by *ὁράω*, meaning 'to see', as it uses the second-person singular perfect tense of the verb *εἰδώς*, meaning 'to

understand' or 'to comprehend'. Thus, we find 'ὀρᾶς', used 92 times, and 'εἶδες', used 85 times.

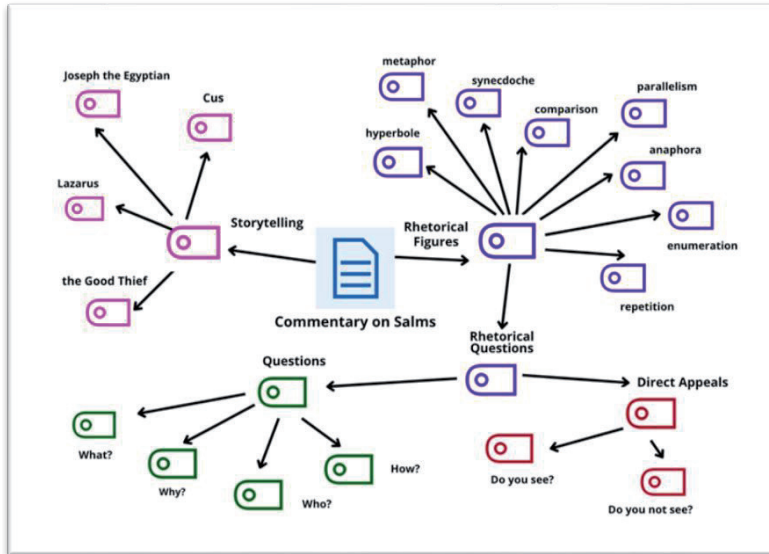


Fig. 1. Coding scheme. Source: own source

Reading his comments on the Psalms reveals the preacher's constant desire to show his listeners God's unfathomable mercy towards mankind. He also uses this formula to emphasize the qualities of the character he is describing, or to reinforce his own exhortations and encourage his listeners to lead a true Christian life. The passages where he calls on his listeners to consider God's power and mercy are the most frequent and powerful. This is usually followed by a brief, positive and encouraging description of the consequences of this providence. Thus, God is portrayed as a benevolent father who is approachable and adept at guiding people from dire situations to salvation.

His mercy is inexpressible, and his goodness is boundless, especially in contrast to our wickedness. His love extends to everyone, including those he punishes, and to all of creation, including the elements and material things. All these things are filled with his goodness. He is therefore generous: "Do you not see the abundant exchange granted by the one who is superior? What can equal that goodness?"².

² JPM, V, 49

Consequently, what God commands is accessible and simple. In the commentary on Psalm 7, we read: “Do you see how easy virtue is and how difficult vice is? How virtue brings tranquility while vice brings confusion”³. In the commentary on Psalm 117, we read: “Do you not see how he has made everything easy for you?”⁴. Similar expressions can be found in commentaries on other Psalms, such as Psalms 134, 135, 142, and 144.

Occasionally, the nature of this constant help is specified: “Do you not see miracles happening at different times and in different places?”⁵ and that he helps the humble. “Do you not see that these things happen every day? Do you not see how the humble are lifted up and seated as princes?”. He also describes how he miraculously transforms nature: “Do you not see nature that was crippled and mutilated being straightened, and the barren becoming mothers?”⁶.

In short, Chrysostom asks his listeners if they are aware of God’s help, power, and strength, and the consequences of relying on them.

The direct question ‘Do you see...?’ is often followed by a favor from God and the exhortation ‘Do not lose heart’, usually accompanied by the phrases ‘easy and expeditious’ or ‘easy and speedy’. These expressions describe the outcome of things, actions and events thanks to God’s intervention. This exhortation is found in the commentaries on Psalms 117, 123 and 141. It is offered in the face of life’s difficulties and struggles and is followed by positive consequences. Thus, we read, “When you see evil happening, do not lose heart. You must wait completely, and you will be lifted up in the midst of difficulties”⁷. Contemplating the kind of strategist, king and creator that we have leads to the recommendation not to become discouraged, as ‘nothing can prevent your trophy from standing upright’⁸It is also an exhortation to vigilance: “When you see evils increasing, do not be discouraged, but be more vigilant”⁹. He goes on to explain that God allows these contradictions to arise so that we may shake off our lukewarmness and awaken those who are asleep.

³ JPM, V, 7

⁴ JPM, V, 117

⁵ JPM, V, 113

⁶ JPM, V, 112

⁷ JPM, V, 117

⁸ JPM, V, 123

⁹ JPM, V, 141

2.2. Emotional stories

Next, we identified the occasions when what we now call storytelling is used: emotional stories that connect with the audience. Indeed, among the numerous references to biblical characters in the analyzed work, Chrysostom constructs short stories based on a few brief words mentioned in the Sacred Scripture. These fragments are imbued with evocative descriptions and an abundance of rhetorical devices. We have selected four outstanding stories for analysis, chosen for their beauty and emotional impact: two from the Old Testament and two from the New Testament. Cus, a friend of King David; Joseph the Egyptian; the good thief; and poor Lazarus. To avoid prolonging this investigation and due to lack of space, we will discuss two examples.

Cus. The commentary on Psalm 7 recounts the story of Absalom's betrayal of his father, King David, in detail. John's explanation of this psalm focuses on Cus, so he begins by pointing out that he feels it is necessary to explain, "Who is this Benjaminite Cus, and what are his words, for which David sang this song to God?"¹⁰.

He describes Absalom as intemperate and corrupt, rebelling against his father. He was cruel and harsh, breaking all barriers and transgressing the laws of nature. Thus, he became a wild beast. While David wandered the wilderness as a vagabond and fugitive, a stranger outside the borders where he was tormented by evil, Absalom enjoyed his father's possessions.

Having described the situation, the Antiochian preacher introduces Cus, presenting him as an honorable man and a friend of David who remained loyal to him during these turbulent times. Seeing David constantly wandering in the desert, Cus tore his tunic, covered himself in ashes, wept bitterly, and, unable to do anything else, offered him the consolation of his tears. John specifies that he was not a friend of circumstances or power, but of virtue. Therefore, even though he had been cast out of the kingdom, he did not change his friendship towards David.

Chrysostom breathes life into the sober account in the Second Book of Samuel through successful dialogue that conveys feelings of friendship, loyalty, wisdom and trust. To focus attention and reinforce the discourse, he uses the question as a prominent device.

¹⁰ JPM, V, 7

Hearing these things, Cus obeyed and did not react with a small or cowardly spirit. He did not ask, “What if I am captured? What if my pretense is discovered, or the plot of my deception revealed? Ahithophel is cunning. He will surely refute it and expose me, and I will die in vain”. He did not consider any of this; he went to the tyrant’s camp, abandoned everything to God and threw himself into the midst of danger.

Chrysostom ends his description of these events with a phrase he uses a lot: “For, as I have said before, when God is our guide, even difficult things become easy”¹¹.

Joseph the Egyptian. The story of Joseph and the Potiphar’s wife is highly expressive. On this occasion, these two characters are also presented and described in the commentary on Psalm 48 through the use of thirteen rhetorical questions, which are made more powerful by the use of other literary devices such as anaphora (‘perhaps... perhaps...’, ‘no... no’), metaphors (‘using someone else’s war’), synecdoche (‘the diadem’, ‘the sceptre’), hyperbole and metaphor (‘thousands of crowns...’).

Was Potiphar’s wife not an Egyptian queen? Did she not rule over all of Egypt? Did she not have a king for a husband? Did she not hold the greatest power? And who was Joseph? Was he not a servant? Was he not a captive? Was he not a purchased slave? Did she not use all her wiles against the teenager, going herself to the battle line rather than using someone else’s war? Who, then, was enslaved and who was free?¹²

Lazarus. By presenting poor Lazarus, a strong contrast is drawn with the rich man. He is rewarded for his patience and moderate attitude, which are considered good deeds. This is described through rhetorical questions once again. The preacher thus manages to highlight the stark contrast between Lazarus’s earthly situation and his entry into glory.

These were the good deeds that Lazarus performed. To the rich man, however, riches were of no use. What could Lazarus do if he needed food? He did not go to prison either. How could he when he could not even stand up? He didn’t

¹¹ JPM, V, 7

¹² JPM, V, 48

visit any sick people either. How could he when he was licked by dogs' tongues? Nevertheless, he won the prize of virtue for enduring everything courageously¹³

The Good Thief. Although little is said about this character in the Holy Scriptures, the commentary introduces him with a rhetorical question to listeners about his existence.

Who was the most wretched thief? Suddenly, he became the most blessed of all. He had committed countless crimes, been condemned to death and been led to his execution. Accused by all, he had wasted his time, and his life had been consumed by crime. Yet because he feared God in a very short time, he was blessed.

His status as a thief – the most wretched of men – is contrasted with that of the blessed in the superlative degree. A long life filled with countless crimes is contrasted with a very brief lapse of time that earned him eternal life.

Conclusion

This research makes several significant contributions. Firstly, we have found no other study focusing on the rhetoric of this work by Chrysostom, nor any considering all the commentaries as a whole rather than limiting itself to a single psalm. Nor have we found any that adopts the same approach as this article. Through a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches, we present a novel method of analyzing this topic that may be of interest to future researchers.

Textual analysis confirms that pathos is the predominant rhetorical strategy employed by Chrysostom. Particular note should be taken of his ability to create emotive narratives, which demonstrates his profound knowledge of Holy Scripture texts. Thus, the 59 preserved commentaries on the Psalms often refer to biblical figures. These references are usually more than a mere mention; they recount the stories of these figures, describe how they behave or highlight some of their personality traits. Presenting virtue in this way makes it seem real and easy to understand for his listeners.

¹³ JPM, V, 127

Another notable aspect of the author is his use of rhetorical devices, especially metaphors and similes, as well as rhetorical questions. At the same time, his texts are full of energetic language that combines emotion and admonition perfectly. John often addresses his listeners directly, speaking to each one personally. This makes his arguments vivid and easy to understand, establishing a clear connection with the audience. This specific narrative technique found in Chrysostom's work, reminiscent of modern storytelling theory, confirms one of the article's premises: the enduring novelty of the Antiochene preacher's style.

We offer these techniques and approaches as a guide for training preachers and others who speak on matters related to the practice of faith.

To demonstrate the enduring relevance and persuasive power of Chrysostom's message, we have translated some selected passages. The rhetorical style of this Church Father reflects modern techniques of persuasion that have remained the standard for preaching throughout the centuries. Readers familiar with Classical Greek are invited to read the excerpts in their original language to better appreciate the power of his rhetoric.

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