

St Paul and the Jews According to St John Chrysostom's Commentary on Romans 9-11

by Fr. Vasile Mihoc
University in Sibiu, Romania

St John Chrysostom is known not only as the greatest preacher in a Christian pulpit¹, and the most prominent doctor of the Orthodox Church, but also as the preacher of the eight sermons *Adversus Judaeos*. These discourses were delivered in Antioch in 387, when Chrysostom was a priest². In them Chrysostom accumulates against the Jews bitterness, sneers and jibes. Yet, it clearly appears that Chrysostom didn't have personal relationships with the Jews, as, for example, was the case with Justin the Martyr, Jerome or Augustine. His attack aims stopping his flock's tendency of sharing in the Jewish festivals, and this tendency says much about the relationships of the two communities in Antioch – unthinkable in later times and maybe difficult for us to understand.

1. *The Christian anti-Judaism of the time*

Starting with the 4th century speaking against the Jews was 'fashionable'. 'The whole Christian literature relating to differences between Jews and Christians – writes Lev Gillet – falls under two possible headings. Such writings belong either to the type *Tractatus adversus Judaeos*, or to the type *Dialogos pros Tryphona*³. They are either polemics against the Jews,

¹ His surname 'Chrysostom' occurs for the first time in the 'Constitution' of pope Vigilius in the year 553 (cf. Migne, P.L. 60, 217).

² Very probably in the beginning of 381 the bishop Meletius made him deacon, just before his own departure to Constantinople, where he died as president of the Second Ecumenical Council. In the year 386 Chrysostom was ordained priest by Flavian, the successor of Meletius, and from that dates his real importance in ecclesiastical history. His chief task during the next twelve years was that of preaching, which he had to exercise either instead of or with Bishop Flavian. The earliest notable occasion which showed his power of speaking and his great authority was the Lent of 387, when he delivered his sermons *On the Statues* (P.G., XLVIII). But the usual preaching of Chrysostom consisted in consecutive explanations of Holy Scripture. To that custom we owe his famous and magnificent commentaries, which offer us such an inexhaustible treasure of dogmatic, moral, and historical knowledge of the transition from the fourth to the fifth century. These years, 386-98, were the period of the greatest theological productivity of Chrysostom, a period which alone would have assured him for ever a place among the first Doctors of the Church. A sign of this may be seen in the fact that in the year 392 St Jerome already accorded to the preacher of Antioch a place among his *Viri illustres* ('De Viris illustribus', 129, in P.L., XXIII, 754), referring expressly to the great and successful activity of Chrysostom as a theological writer. From this same fact we may infer that during this time his fame had spread far beyond the limits of Antioch, and that he was well known in the Byzantine Empire.

³ The *Dialogue with Trypho* deserves a special place in the history of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity, because it is a model of intelligent discussion and seemly demeanor. We hear Trypho saying to Justin: 'I know that the commands given to you in what is called the Gospel are so admirable and great that I suspect that none can keep them. For I took some trouble to read them...' And near the end: 'Now Trypho paused a little and said: you see, it was not by design that we entered into a discussion over these matters. I acknowledge that I have been extraordinarily pleased with our intercourse... For we have found more than we expected or that it was possible to expect. And if we could do this more often, we should receive more benefit... Do not hesitate to think to us as your friends'. Before leaving, Trypho and his party prayed for Justin. And Justin

or irenic conversation with them. The first type has been largely prevalent⁴. Till the 4th century there is – with the exception of Tertullian and the pseudo-Cyprian – no ill-feeling against the Jews. The *Acts of Philip*, a production of the 3rd century, are almost friendly to them. It is true that the apocryphal *Epistle of Barnabas* warns its readers, with passion, against all compromise between Judaism and the Gospel, and even denies the historical connection between the two, but it is not a piece of insulting polemics. After the 4th century the background becomes definitely hostile. The Syrian compilation of the 4th century called *Apostolic Canons* forbids the clergy to share in Jewish fasts or feasts, or to receive from Jews unleavened bread. A council of Carthage, probably the fourth, expelled from the Church those ‘clinging to Jewish superstitions and festivals’⁵. St Hillary was so ‘orthodox’ that he would not even answer the salutation of a Jew on the street⁶. He asserted that ‘the Jews were possessed of an unclean devil, which the Law for a time drove out, but which returned immediately after their rejection of Christ’⁷. Sidonius Appollinarius sends letters to a Jew ‘who would be dear to my heart if it were not for his abominable religion’⁸. *The Rhythm Against the Jews*, falsely attributed to St Ephrem the Syrian, compares the synagogue with a harlot and indulges in allusions suitable to this theme⁹. In the West, Augustine – as everybody – wrote a treatise *Adversus Judaeos*, which, however, is not so much an attack against the Jews, but a defense of the right of Christians to use the Old Testament, even if they do not keep the Law¹⁰. If intended to safeguard the Judaism and the Jews, the Augustinian teaching of Jewish legitimacy (based on their proclamation of the validity of the Hebrew Bible, but also on the argument that the Jews offer Christianity incontrovertible evidence for the working of human sin and divine punishment) reflects many of the negative themes bequeathed from earlier Christian history.

‘prayed also for them’ and expressed the hope that they should follow the same way as the Christians. See A. LUKYN WILLIAMS, *Justin Martyr. The dialogue with Trypho*, translation, introduction and notes, London, 1930.

⁴ Lev GILLET, *Communion in the Messiah. Studies in the Relationship Between Judaism and Christianity*, London and Redhill: Lutterworth Press, 1942, p. 1.

⁵ Mansi, III, 958.

⁶ Migne, P. L. IX, 187.

⁷ St HILLARY, *Commentary on Matthew*, Migne, P. L. IX, 993.

⁸ *Ep.* III, 4.

⁹ Lev GILLET, *op. cit.*, p. 14, remarks: ‘The apologetics of these Fathers are of a low intellectual level. Ignorant of everything Hebraic, they brought out catenas of texts in which words are everything, little account being taken of historical reference or even of grammatical meaning. At the very moment when they were elaborating a ritual and a discipline as binding and almost as complicated as the priestly code, they thought Jewish observances laughable and contemptible. Their conception of Judaism was a parody. They produced an insulting anti-Jewish vocabulary [...]. And acts began to correspond with the mental attitude’.

¹⁰ Augustine also accuses the Jews, for example, of being guilty of Jesus’ crucifixion: ‘And so all who cried out with impious voices for the crucifixion of Christ slew Him, not, indeed, directly with their own hands, but personally through him who was compelled to such a crime by their clamour.... They were implicated in the crime from which they tried to hold themselves aloof; for Pilate would have done no such thing, save to implement what he perceived to be their fixed desire’ (St AUGUSTINE, *On the Gospel of Saint John*, 114, 115). And: ‘Let not the Jews say, “We have not crucified Christ.” For to this end they gave Him to Pilate the judge, in order that they themselves might seem as if they were guiltless of His death.... But if he is guilty because he did it against his will, are they innocent who compelled him to do it? By no means. But he gave sentence against him, and commanded him to be crucified: and in a manner himself killed him; you also, O you Jews, killed him. Whence did you kill Him? With the sword of the tongue: for ye did whet your tongues. And when did ye smite, except when ye cried out, “Crucify, crucify”? This is the whole of the Jews sagacity, this is that which they sought as some great matter. Let us kill and let us not kill: so let us kill, as that we may not ourselves be judged to have killed’ (St AUGUSTINE, *On the Psalms*, 63:4,5).

2. St John Chrysostom, man of his time

St John Chrysostom was, in this respect, very much a man of his time. It is true – as I had already said – that the purpose of his attacks in the eight sermons against the Jews was to prevent Christians from joining with Jewish customs, and thus prevent the erosion of his flock in Antioch. From these sermons we learn that some Christian groups were still feeling great respect for the synagogue¹¹. A recent thesis is that he instead tried to persuade Jewish Christians (who for centuries had kept connections with Jews and Judaism) to choose between Judaism and Christianity¹². In any case, in Antioch of the time the ark of the Nicene Christianity which constitutes the flock of Chrysostom very much seemed threatened by oppositions of different kinds¹³. If the great preacher outwardly seems to be brash and self-assured, his language sometimes betrays uncertainty; for example, in one of the sermons addressed to the Jews, he pleads with his followers not to speak about Christians attending the synagogue, for by mentioning this practice it will seem more spread than it actually is, attracting others¹⁴. Much of the abuse in his sermons has to be understood as being due to this specific context of opposition and division. But Chrysostom's attacks are no less painful, not only for the Jews, but also for so many contemporary Christians, who are rightly rejecting any form of anti-Semitism. St John Chrysostom – as many other Christian teachers and leaders of the time, continuing ancient anti-Semitism¹⁵, but now from a new perspective, that of the opposition between Judaism and Christianity – accused the Jews that they corporately murdered Christ¹⁶, that they are morally degenerate, and this 'because of their hateful assassination of Christ'¹⁷; he considered them as being cursed and outcasts because their unbelief¹⁸, and, as such, rightly enslaved¹⁹, and so on.

¹¹ Other sources confirm this respect. From the prohibitions of the council of Elvira (A. D. 300) it appears that not only was intermarriage taking place between Christians and Jews, but that clerics and laymen accepted Jewish hospitality, and even that Christian had their fields blessed by Jews.

¹² See Rodney STARK, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries*, Princeton 1997, pp. 66-67.

¹³ See Robert L. WILKEN, *John Chrysostom and the Jews. Rhetoric and Reality in the late 4th Century*, Berkley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1983, pp. 10ff.

¹⁴ St JOHN CHRYSOSTOM, *Eighth Homily Against the Jews*, 4, Migne, PG, XLVIII, 933).

¹⁵ Anti-Semitism was very much present in the Greco-Roman world. What are the reasons of ancient anti-Semitism? This is something which is 'extremely complex and in some ways paradoxical. As the Jewish scholar Isaac Heinemann has observed, "The roots of hate and love were the same." Antipathy and sympathy stood side by side. As a religion, Judaism had great success among the peoples of the Greco-Roman world, appealing strongly to the religious instincts of large numbers of men and women. Even critics respected Jews for the antiquity of their traditions. But alongside of this admiration and esteem for the Jews, and the privileges they were granted under the law, there was an undertone of hostility and ill-will that cannot be ignored' (Robert L. WILKEN, *op. cit.*, p. 40).

¹⁶ 'For as though they were afraid lest they should seem to fall short at all in the crime, having killed the prophets with their own hands, but this man with the sentence of a judge, so they do in every deed; and make it the work of their own hands, and condemn and sentence both among themselves and before Pilate, saying: 'His blood be on us and on our children,' and insult Him, and do despite unto Him themselves, binding Him, leading Him away, and render themselves authors of the spiteful acts done by the soldiers, and nail Him to the cross, and revile Him, and spit at Him, and deride Him. For Pilate contributed nothing in this matter, but they themselves did everything, becoming accusers, and judges, and executioners, and all' (St John Chrysostom, *On the Gospel of Matthew*).

¹⁷ 'How dare Christians have the slightest doings with Jews, those most miserable of all men! They are lustful, rapacious, greedy, perfidious bandits, pests of the universe. Indeed, an entire day would not suffice to tell of all their rapine, their avarice, their deception of the poor, their thievery, and their huckstering. Are they not inveterate murderers, destroyers, men possessed by the devil? Jews are impure and impious, and their synagogue is a house of prostitution, a lair of beasts, a place of shame and ridicule, the domicile of the devil, as is also the soul of the Jew. As a matter of fact, Jews worship the devil: their rites are criminal and unchaste; their

3. His writings

St John Chrysostom has deserved a place in ecclesiastical history, not simply as Archbishop of Constantinople, but chiefly as a Doctor of the Church. Of none of the other Greek Fathers do we possess so many writings. Outside of the “opuscula”²⁰, and the “letters”²¹, there are his many and so important homilies. Among the ‘homilies’ we have to distinguish commentaries on books of Holy Scripture, groups of homilies (sermons) on special subjects²², and a great number of single homilies²³. In the first group, there are ‘commentaries’ on the Old Testament²⁴, and on the New Testament²⁵.

religion a disease; their synagogue an assembly of crooks, a den of thieves, a cavern of devils, an abyss of perdition! Why are the Jews degenerate? Because of their hateful assassination of Christ. This supreme crime lies at the root of their degradation and woes. The rejection and the dispersion of the Jews was the work of God and because of His absolute abandonment of the Jews. Thus, the Jew will live under the yoke of slavery without end. God hates the Jews, and on Judgement Day He will say to those who sympathise with them: “Depart from me, for you have had doings with My murderers!” Flee, then, from their assemblies, fly from their houses, and, far from venerating the synagogue, hold it in hatred and aversion’ (St John Chrysostom, *Sixth Homily Against the Jews*).

¹⁸ ‘But the Jew totally rejects this testimony. He refuses to admit what Christ said. What does the Jew say? “The man who said this is my foe. I crucified him. So how am I to accept his testimony?” But this is the marvel of it. You Jews did crucify Him. But after He died on the cross, He then destroyed your city; it was then that He dispersed your people; it was then that He scattered your nation over the face of the earth. In doing this, He teaches us that He is risen, alive, and in heaven. Because you were not willing to recognize His power through His benefactions, He taught you by his punishment and vengeance that no one can struggle with or prevail against His might and strength’ (St JOHN CHRYSOSTOM, *Fifth Homily Against the Jews*).

¹⁹ ‘...the Jews three times endured bondage, very harsh and most severe: but none of these came upon them unpredicted.... First, I shall speak of the prediction of their slavery in Egypt. Surely, in speaking to Abraham, God said: “Know for certain that your posterity will be strangers in a land not their own; they shall be subjected to slavery and shall be oppressed four hundred years” (Genesis 15:13)... Come now and let us turn our discussion to the second captivity. What one is that? The bondage in Babylon. Jeremiah certainly foretold it exactly when he said: “Thus says the Lord: Only after seventy years have elapsed for Babylon will I visit you and fulfil for you my promise to bring you back to this place” (Jeremiah 29:10)... What, then, is this third captivity? It is the bondage that came upon them in the days of Antiochus Epiphanes.... When the prophets predicted the other captivities, they spoke not only of the captivity but also of the length of time it was appointed for each bondage to last; for this present captivity, however, they set no time but, to the contrary, said that the desolation would endure until the end’ (St JOHN CHRYSOSTOM, *Sixth Homily Against the Jews*).

²⁰ The chief ‘opuscula’ of Chrysostom date from the earlier days of his literary activity. The following deal with monastical subjects: *Comparatio Regis cum Monacho* (‘Opera’, I, 387-93, in P.G., XLVII-LXIII), *Adhortatio ad Theodorum (Mopsuestensem?) lapsum* (ibid., 277-319), *Adversus oppugnatores vitae monasticae* (ibid., 319-87). Those dealing with ascetical subjects in general are the treatise *De Compunctione* in two books (ibid., 393-423), *Adhortatio ad Stagirium* in three books (ibid., 433-94), *Adversus Subintroductas* (ibid., 495-532), *De Virginitate* (ibid., 533-93), *De Sacerdotio* (ibid., 623-93).

²¹ The ‘Letters’ of St John Chrysostom, about 238 in number (‘Opera’, III, 547ff), were all written during his exile. Of special value for their contents and intimate nature are the seventeen letters to the deaconess Olympias.

²² Five *On Anna* (IV, 631-676), three *On David* (IV, 675-708), six *On Ozias* (VI, 97-142), eight *Against the Jews* (II, 843-942), twelve *De incomprehensibili Dei natur* (II, 701-812), and seven *On St. Paul* (III, 473-514).

²³ These deal with moral subjects, with certain feasts or saints

²⁴ These commentaries are: sixty-seven homilies *On Genesis* (with eight sermons on Genesis, which are probably a first recension) (IV, 21ff, and ibid., 607ff); fifty-nine homilies *On the Psalms* (4-12, 41, 43-49, 108-117, 119-150) (V, 39-498); a commentary on the first chapters of Isaias (VI, 11ff). The fragments on Job (XIII, 503-65) are spurious (see Haidacher, “Chrysostomus Fragmente” in *Chrysostomika*, I, 217ff); the authenticity of the fragments on the Proverbs (XIII, 659-740), on Jeremias and Daniel (VI, 193-246), and the Synopsis of the Old and the New Testament (ibid., 313ff), is doubtful.

²⁵ Homilies on the New Testament: ninety homilies *On St. Matthew* (about the year 390; VII), eighty-eight homilies *On St. John* (c. 389; VIII, 23ff, probably from a later edition), fifty-five homilies *On the Acts* (as preserved by stenographers, IX, 13ff), and homilies *On all Epistles of St. Paul* (IX, 391ff). Connected to the last, we have to mention also the seven famous homilies *On St. Paul* (III, 473-514).

4. Chrysostom commentary on Rom 9-11

The best and most important biblical commentaries are those on the Psalms, on St. Matthew, and on the Epistle to the Romans (written c. 391). The 32 homilies on Romans offer a followed commentary of the whole of this letter of St Paul. The commentary on Rom 9-11 is contained in the homilies 16th-19th.

The language in Chrysostom's commentary on Rom 9-11 is sensibly different of that in his sermons *Against the Jews*. Here we see no more the orator presenting a *psogos*²⁶ against the Jews, a rhetoric of abuse, but the deep theologian and the unparalleled interpreter of St Paul.

5. Rom 9:1ff: Does Paul truly love his kinsmen?

Is the 'great sorrow and unceasing grief' in the heart of St Paul (Rom 9:2) caused by his love for his kinsmen? This seems very clear when reading Rom 9,11ff. That he is speaking about his fellow Jews and that he has a heart for them is clearly stated in v. 3, where they are identified as his 'brethren', and his 'kinsmen according to the flesh'²⁷. And that he infinitely loves them and suffers for their unbelief, clearly appears from what he says about his 'desire' of being himself 'separated (*anathema*) from Christ' for their salvation. But for St John Chrysostom things are not so simple, and this mostly because this passage is immediately following Rom 8:38f, where St Paul expresses his 'conviction' that *nothing* shall be able to separate him 'from the love of God, which is in Christ our Lord' (8:39). How can he now express the 'desire'²⁸ such a separation? There is a 'riddle', he says:

'What sayest thou, O Paul? From Christ, thy beloved One, from Whom neither kingdom nor hell, nor things visible nor intelligible, nor another world as great, would separate thee, is it from Him that thou wouldst now be accursed? What has happened? Hast thou changed, hast thou given over that love? No, he replies, fear not. Rather I have even made it more intense. How then is it that thou wouldst fain be accursed²⁹, and seekest a separation, and a removal to such a distance, that after it there is no possibility of finding a more distant one? Because I love Him exceedingly, he may reply. How, pray, and in what manner? For the things seem a riddle'³⁰.

And he explains this riddle through a 'paradox'³¹. We cannot really perceive what the apostle means – says St John – without considering 'the cause' for which he wished to be *anathema* from Christ, namely because he so highly and infinitely loves Christ that he cannot endure more that 'all' (and by this he means the Gentile) accuse God of 'casting' and 'disgracing' his

²⁶ If in rhetoric the *encomium* was designed to glorify and honor, the *psogos* was supposed to present unrelieved denigration of subject. The *psogos* is 'only condemnation' and sets forth only the 'bad things about someone' (Apthonius, *Rhet. Graeci*, 2,40, in Robert L. WILKEN, *op. cit.*, p. 113).

²⁷ For biblical quotations, outside of the quotations in the text of St John Chrysostom, I use the English translation of the *New American Standard Bible*.

²⁸ St John Chrysostom notes that St Paul 'does not say merely that „I could be willing”, but using a stronger term, he says even, „I could wish” (or pray)' (*On Romans*, Hom 16, in 'Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers' [NPNF], Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, First series, vol. 11, 1889, second printing 1995, p. 459).

²⁹ In this sense understands here St John Chrysostom the word *anathema*. He knows that this word can also be used 'in the case of a thing dedicated..., which is set apart for God' so that as 'no one would venture so much as to touch it with his hand or even to come near it'. But in this text, the apostle 'calls him by this name *anathema* in a contrary sense', 'as being estranged from God, and broken off from the Church', similarly to the use of the same word in 1 Cor 16:22: 'If any man love not our Lord Jesus Christ, let him be accursed (*anathema*).' (Hom 16, NPNF, 11, p. 459).

³⁰ Hom 16, NPNF, 11, p. 459.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 460.

people, to which he granted in the past so many privileges (cf. Rom 9:4-5a), and he cannot endure more that the Jews, in their lack of faith, blaspheme God. Being ‘cut to the heart’ by these situations, and ‘vexed for God’s glory sake’, St Paul ‘wished that he were accursed, had it been possible, so that they might be saved, and this blasphemy be put a stop to, and God might not seem to have deceived the offspring of those to whom He promised the gifts’³².

The way Paul speaks here doesn’t mean at all that the apostle is Judaizing. St John’s intention by this ‘paradoxical’ interpretation of Rom 9:1-3 is evidently not to deny Paul’s love for his fellow Jews, but, firstly, to help his hearers not to see a contradiction with what Paul was saying at the end of the precedent chapter, and secondly, to avoid the interpretation that Paul is Judaizing. If he circumcised Timothy (Acts 16:3), or if he shaved himself and sacrificed (Acts 18:18; Acts 21:24), we have to see the intention and the circumstances of those acts of him, and not to condemn him as Judaizing, but ‘upon this very score have the best reason for crowning him as quite an alien to Judaism’³³. In what he says, is actually Jesus himself who is so beloved and if he says ‘my kinsmen’ he makes this only to ‘conceal his high aim (πλεονεκτημα)’³⁴.

It is difficult not to see in this ‘paradoxical’ interpretation some anti-Jewish tendency present in other places too in St John Chrysostom and mainly in his eight sermons against the Jews³⁵. And yet, his language is different.

The mention by St Paul of the privileges of the Jews in vv 4-5 means for St John a new reason for his ‘paradoxical’ interpretation. Why the apostle doesn’t say that he is willing to be *anathema* also in the Gentiles’ behalf? Is this not because of his special relationship with the Jews, his ‘kinsmen’? Not at all, says St John, but because many are blaspheming, accusing him of not remaining faithful to his promises made to the Jews, the apostle, ‘hearing it, and being cut to the heart, and vexed for God’s glory’s sake’ is ready to be accursed himself for the salvation of Israel, so that ‘the promise of God might not seem to fall to the ground’³⁶. V. 6-7, ‘Not as though the word of God had taken none effect’, is taken as proof for this interpretation. As Moses was pleading for Israel ‘for God’s glory’³⁷, so also does Paul. This is why he did not speak of the Gentiles, for to them no promises had been made by God, nor had they been brought into closer connection with Him, as it is the case with Israel. Promises were given to Israel, yet the Gentiles are beneficiaries of them:

³² Ibid., p. 60.

³³ Hom 16, NPNF, 11, p. 460.

³⁴ St John is perfectly aware of the grammatical difficulty of the interpretation he proposes. ‘And yet he does not say *for* him; for what he says is, “I would wish that I were accursed *from* Him for my brethren”. And this comes of his humbleness of mind. For he has no wish to make himself conspicuous, as if he were saying something great, and doing Christ a favor in this’ (Hom 16, NPNF, 11, p. 460).

³⁵ Robert L. WILKEN arguments that these sermons are actually not directed to the Jews, but to the Judaizers, and he concludes his study saying that without an appreciation of the setting in Chrysostom’s Antioch ‘we cannot understand why John preached the homilies and why he responds to the Judaizers with such passion and fervor. The medieval image of the Jew should not be imposed on antiquity’ (*op. cit.*, p. 163).

³⁶ ‘For what he has said he has not said nakedly; but since all were talking and accusing God, that after being counted worthy of the name of sons, and receiving the Law, and knowing Him beyond all men, and enjoying such great glory, and serving him beyond the whole world, and receiving the promises, and being from fathers who were His friends, and what was the greatest thing of all, having been forefathers of Christ Himself (for this is the meaning of the words, “of whom, as concerning the flesh, Christ came”), they are now cast out and disgraced; and in their place are introduced men who had never known Him, of the Gentiles. Now since they said all this, and blasphemed God, Paul hearing it, and being cut to the heart, and vexed for God’s glory’s sake’ (NPNF, 11, p. 460).

³⁷ ‘For he says: Lest they say, Because He was not able to save them, he led them forth to destroy them in the wilderness (Deut. 9,28), stay Thy wrath’ (NPNF, 11, p. 460).

‘He promises to one, and gives to another. He was sprung from one race, He saved another. It was to the forefathers of the Jews that He made the promises, and yet He has deserted their descendants, and put men, who never at any time knew Him, into their good things. They labored in the practice of the Law, and reading the Prophets, while men who have come but yesterday from heathen altars and images have been set up above them. What foresight is there in all this? Now that these things may not be said of my Master, he means, even if they are said unjustly, I would willingly lose even the kingdom and that glory unutterable, and any sufferings would I undergo, as considering it the greatest consolation possible no longer to hear Him Whom I so long for, so blasphemed’³⁸.

If Paul says, ‘to whom pertaineth the adoption, and the glory, and the giving of the Law, and the service of God, and the promises’, it means that ‘God willed them indeed to be saved, and this he showed by His former dealings, and by Christ's having sprung from them, and by what He promised to the Fathers’. But they, by their unbelief, thrust away from them all God’s blessings. Saying, in v. 1, ‘Brethren, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for Israel is, that they might be saved’, and calling the Jews his ‘kinsmen’ and ‘brothers’, the apostle ‘quits himself of all suspicion’ of enmity to them³⁹.

6. *Who are sons of Abraham?*

The true sons of the promises, the ‘seed of Abraham’, are not simply children (according to the flesh) of Abraham, but children of God (cf. v. 8). So, even Isaac was not merely Abraham’s son. It was the promise and the word of God that fashioned (begat) Isaac. In the same way, the Christians are gendered by the words of God, in the water of the holy baptism. And this birth is not of nature, but of the promise of God (John 3:3; Eph 5:26; James 1:18; 1 Pet 3:21). If, says the apostle, the Jews take the words, ‘In Isaac shall thy seed be called’ (Gen 21:12), as meaning that those born of Isaac should be reckoned to him for a seed, then the Edomites too, descendants Esau, son of Isaac, are to be reckoned as ‘the seed of Abraham’. So ‘the generation by means of baptism from above was sketched out beforehand’⁴⁰.

Why many of Israel are now ‘cast out after so great promises’⁴¹? Why are the Gentiles taking the place of Israel? For as the apostle has already shown, both Jews and Gentiles were unworthy, ‘For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God’ (Rom 3:23). It is a ‘new thing’ that ‘when all were unworthy, the Gentiles were saved alone’. The answer is given by Paul himself ‘by showing what the Israel is to whom He made the promise’⁴². ‘For they are not all Israel that are of Israel’ (Rom 9:6). He ‘does not use the name of Jacob, but that of Israel, which was a sign of the virtue of that just man, and of a gift from above, and of having seen God (Gen 32:28).

The argument of the apostle is here against the Jews. If some of the Jews are now saved, and some not saved, the same was in the patriarchs’ times. God is free in His act of election (cf. v. 11-15). He elected Jacob and rejected Esau through His foreknowledge. And St John continues by developing the Isaianic theology of the remnant that will be saved (Isa 10:22). Why then the Gentiles were justified and the Jews were cast out?

‘It is that they (the Gentiles) are of faith, ye of the works of the Law. And it is owing to this obstinacy of yours that ye have in every way been given up. For, “they being ignorant of God’s righteousness, and

³⁸ Hom. 16, NPNF, 11, p. 461.

³⁹ Hom. 16, NPNF, 11, p. 462.

⁴⁰ Hom. 16, NPNF, 11, p. 463.

⁴¹ Hom. 16, NPNF, 11, p. 463.

⁴² Hom. 16, NPNF, 11, p. 463.

going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God” (Rom 10:3)⁴³.

God’s election is not arbitrary. And it is based on God’s knowledge of those who will be worthy:

‘For He that knoweth the secrets of the hearts, He only knoweth for a certainty who deserve a crown, and who punishment and vengeance’⁴⁴.

By this fore-knowledge, God does not deprive us of free-will. If from the Jews some are now vessels of the wrath, and some of mercy, it is from their own free choice. God, being very good, shows the same kindness both to Jews and to Gentiles. Those of the Gentiles who came to Christ were justified because ‘they are of faith’ and many of the Jews were cast out due to their ‘obstinacy’ in trying to be justified ‘of the works of the Law’⁴⁵.

7. Paul’s *eudokia* and his rebuke of the Jews

Chapter 10 of Romans starts with this clear expression of the loving concern of the apostle towards his fellow Jews: ‘Brethren, my heart’s desire and my prayer to God for them is for *their* salvation. For I testify about them that they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge’ (Rom 10:1-2). In his comment on these verses, at the beginning of the 16th homily on Romans, St John Chrysostom, sees in this declaration of the apostle’s *eudokia* rather the intention to avoid ‘every suspicion of hatred’ and of ‘any hostile spirit’ in this point where ‘he is going to rebuke them more vehemently than before’⁴⁶. Trying ‘to find out some shadow at least of an excuse for them’, St Paul is ‘overcome by the nature of the facts’. He therefore ‘favors them in the word, and yet shows their unseasonable obstinacy’⁴⁷. They are guilty because they ‘have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God’, trying instead to establish ‘their own righteousness’ (Rom 10:3). Not even ‘the righteousness from the deeds of the Law’, because ‘the Law was no longer in force’: ‘not able to be justified by the Law either, they were thrown out of all resources’⁴⁸. Proclaiming the saving power of faith and the universality of grace (Rom 10:11-13), the apostle ‘lay their (of the Jews) boasting low’; if they ‘were in the enjoyment of a prerogative over the world’ – as shown at the beginning of chapter 10 –, they ‘should now by the faith be degraded from these thrones, and be no wit better off than others’⁴⁹. The vainglory of the unbelieving Jews, which ‘most especially’ proved to be their ruin, gives the preacher (Chrysostom) the opportunity to teach his flock, up to the end of this homily, about the gravity of the most ‘wasteful’ sin of vainglory⁵⁰.

The not believing of the Jews ‘was their own fault only’, says Chrysostom at the beginning of his next homily (the 18th). For ‘God’s part had been fulfilled completely’⁵¹. The apostle says that the message of faith and of Messianic salvation has been proclaimed to the Jews, but they have not all obeyed the Gospel (Rom 10:14-16). They continue to be the same

⁴³ Hom. 16, NPNF, 11, p. 465; also p. 469.

⁴⁴ Hom. 16, NPNF, 11, p. 465; also pp. 469-470.

⁴⁵ Hom. 16, NPNF, 11, p. 465.

⁴⁶ Hom. 17, NPNF, 11, p. 471.

⁴⁷ Hom. 17, NPNF, 11, p. 472.

⁴⁸ Hom. 17, NPNF, 11, p. 472.

⁴⁹ Hom. 17, NPNF, 11, p. 474.

⁵⁰ Hom. 17, NPNF, 11, p. 475-477.

⁵¹ Hom. 18, NPNF, 11, p. 478.

‘disobedient and obstinate people’ (Isa 55:2; Rom 10:21) as during ‘all the day’ of ‘the former dispensation’⁵².

But God has not cast away His people ‘whom He foreknew’⁵³ (Rom 11:1-2). Like in the time of the prophet Elijah, there are some Jews who believe. But the way the apostle evokes what was in Elijah’s time and applies it to the present situation is a new and stronger accusation of the unbelieving Jews:

‘But consider his judgment. Now in proving what was before him, he covertly augments the charge against them. For this is why he gave the whole passage, that he might parade before them their untowardness, and show that they had been so from of old. For if he had not wished this, but had directed his whole attention to prove that the people lay in the few, he would have said that even in Elijah’s time, seven thousand were left. But now he reads to them the passage further back, as having been throughout at pains to show that it was no strange thing that they did with Christ, and the Apostles, but their habitual practice. For to prevent their saying that it was as a deceiver we put Christ to death, and as impostors that we persecute the Apostles, he brings forward the text which says, “Lord, they have killed Thy prophets, and digged down thine altars” (1 Kings 19:14.) Then in order not to make his discourse galling to them, he attaches another reason to the bringing forward of the text. For he quotes it not as if it was on purpose to accuse them, but as if intent upon showing some other things. And he leaves them without any excuse even by what had before been done. For observe how strong the accusation is even from the person speaking. For it is neither Paul, nor Peter, nor James, nor John, but one whom they held in the greatest estimation, the chief of the Prophets, the friend of God, a man who had been so very zealous in their behalf as even to be given up to hunger for them, who even to this day hath never died. What then doth this man say, “Lord, they have killed Thy prophets, and digged down Thine altars; and I am left alone, and they seek my life”? What could be more brutal cruelty than this? For when they should have besought pardon for the offences they had already committed, they were minded even to kill him. And all these things put them quite beyond pardon. For it was not during the prevalence of the famine, but when the season was favorable, and their shame was done away, and the devils (i.e. false gods) had been put to shame, and the power of God had been shown, and the king had bowed beneath it, that they committed these audacities, passing from murder to murder, and making away with their teachers, and such as would bring them to a better mind. What then could they have to say to this? Were they too deceivers? Were they too impostors? Did they not know whence they were either? But they distressed you. Yes, but they also told you goodly things. But what of the altars? the altars too did not surely distress you? Did they too exasperate you? See of what obstinacy, of what insolence they were ever yielding proofs! This is why in another passage too Paul says, when writing to the Thessalonians, “Ye also have suffered like things of your own countrymen, even as they have of the Jews, who both killed the Lord, and their own prophets, and have persecuted us, and please not God, and are contrary to all men” (1 Thess 2:14-15); which is what he says here too, that they both digged down the altars, and killed the prophets’⁵⁴.

Paul evokes what happened in the time of Elijah in order to prove that even by saving some, ‘a remnant’ (cf. Rom 9:27), God fulfil the promise He made to the whole nation:

‘Wherefore he (St Paul) proceeds to say, Even so then at this present time also, there is a remnant according to the election of grace’. Observe that each word maintains its own rank, showing at once God’s grace, and the obedient temper of them that receive salvation. For by saying election, he showed the approval of them, but by saying grace, he showed the gift of God’⁵⁵.

⁵² Hom. 18, NPNF, 11, p. 480.

⁵³ In Chrysostom’s text, this ‘whom He foreknew’ from v. 2 is present also in v. 1: ‘I say then, hath God cast away His people *whom He foreknew*?’ This addition seems to stress the idea that not all Israel according to the flesh are actually God’s Israel.

⁵⁴ Hom. 18, NPNF, 11, p. 482.

⁵⁵ Hom. 18, NPNF, 11, p. 483.

Even if only some are saved, ‘by grace’ (Rom 11:6), this shows that God ‘was most desirous that they (the Jews) might be saved’, and ‘on this ground bereaves them of excuse’⁵⁶.

At the beginning of the 19th homily, Chrysostom, commenting Rom 11:7-10, continues the same idea. Paul was ‘bold enough to tell with his own voice the casting off of the rest’⁵⁷. But if ‘from this point he declares it in his own person’, still ‘he is not content with his own declaration, but brings Isaiah the prophet again’ in order to explain whence comes the blinding of the unbelieving Jews. They are blind not because God made them so – God only gave ‘permission’ to them to act according to their ‘spirit of stupor’ (Rom 11:8) or ‘slumber’. This last word, ‘slumber’ (καταανυξις lit. piercing), is ‘a name he (the prophet, and St Paul following him) here gives to the habit of soul inclinable to the worse, when incurably and unchangeably so... To slumber here is nothing else but to be fixed and riveted to a thing. In pointing then to the incurable and unchangeable character of their spirit, he calls it “a spirit of slumber”’⁵⁸. Chrysostom explains the harsh words of St Paul (quoting Ps 69:22-23) by making reference to the history of Israel, of its sins and punishments in the past. Those punishments were only temporary. Things are different in the present case, as it is proved by what happened to the Jews during the last centuries (after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A. D.):

‘But now there is nothing of the sort, for the reverse hath happened throughout. And this is ground for the greatest surprise, as the vices have ceased, and the punishment hath been increased, and is without any hope of a change. For it is not seventy years only that have passed away, nor a hundred, nor yet twice as many but three hundred, and a good deal over, and there is no finding even a shadow of a hope of the kind. And this though ye neither are idolaters, nor do the other audacious acts ye did before. What then is the cause? The reality hath succeeded to the type, and grace hath shut out the Law. And this the prophet foretelling from of old said, “And ever bow Thou down their back”. See the minuteness of prophecy, how it foretells their unbelief, and also points out their disputatiousness, and shows the judgment which should follow, and sets forth the endlessness of the punishment. For as many of the duller sort, through unbelief in what was to come to pass, wished to see things to come by the light of things present, from this point of time God gave proof of His power on either part, by lifting those of the Gentiles who believed above the heaven, but bringing down such of the Jews who did not believe to the lowest estate of desolation, and giving them up to evils not to be ended’⁵⁹.

8. God’s purpose, and more of Paul’s accusation of the Jews

In the verses which follow (vv. 11ff) St Paul says that in the fall of the Jews there is a providential purpose, i.e. the salvation of the Gentiles, and by the jealousy it will provoke, the coming to faith of the Jews, which will mean a greater blessing for the Gentiles. The Jews were on the first place in God’s project of salvation (Rom 1:16), which means ‘great honors’ for them. In v. 12, ‘Now if their transgression is riches for the world and their failure is riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their fulfillment be!’, the apostle speak so ‘to gratify them’, showing how great will be the blessing when their ‘fullness’ will come to faith, which, in Chrysostom’s interpretation, means not necessarily all the Jews, but ‘the larger part, or almost the whole’⁶⁰.

⁵⁶ Hom. 18, NPNF, 11, p. 483.

⁵⁷ Hom. 19, NPNF, 11, p. 486.

⁵⁸ Hom. 19, NPNF, 11, p. 487.

⁵⁹ Hom. 19, NPNF, 11, pp. 488-489. St John Chrysostom here clearly presents the theological interpretation which the Christians of that time and of later times gave to what happened to the Jews starting with 70 A. D. This ‘replacement theology’ had tragic consequences for the Jews during all the Christian history.

⁶⁰ Hom. 19, NPNF, 11, p. 89.

The apostle, who has so much to his heart the salvation of the Jews, his ‘flesh’ (Rom 11:14), wants to make them jealous because of the blessings and the honor received through faith by the Gentiles. But from the fact itself of these blessings and honor of the Gentiles, the Jews deserve ‘the greater condemnation’ for their refuse of taking what was prepared for them⁶¹. And if in v. 15 Paul says that the receiving of them will be ‘life from the dead’, by these words he ‘again condemns them, since, while others gained by their sins, they did not profit by other men’s well doings’⁶². And saying that ‘the firstfruit is holy’ and that ‘the root is holy’ (Rom 11:16), and that only ‘some of the branches were broken off’ (v. 17), while, in fact, the greater part were broken off, the apostle, ‘devising a solace for them, he aims a secret blow at them, and shows that they are devoid of all excuse’, and wishing ‘to comfort them’, he ‘gives a secret stroke at them, and shows them to have fallen from being Abraham’s kinsmen (Matt 3:9). And saying that the Gentiles, ‘were grafted in’ the olive tree, by this Paul is ‘again cutting the Jew to the heart, as showing that the Gentile man was standing in his own tree, and himself lying on the ground’⁶³. Even by saying, in v. 18, ‘Do not be arrogant toward the branches; but if you are arrogant, *remember that* it is not you who supports the root’, while the apostle ‘seems to be comforting the Jew’, he ‘points out his vileness and extreme dishonour... For it is into their place that ye have been set, and their goods that you enjoy. Do you observe how he seems to be rebuking the one, while he is sharp upon the other?’⁶⁴ And again:

‘For, as I said before, while seeming to devise a sort of weak shadow of consolation, and in the very midst of his aiming at the Gentile, he gives them a mortal blow; for by saying, “boast not against them”, and, “if thou boast, thou bearest not the root”, he has shown the Jew that the things done deserved boasting of, even if it was not right to boast, thus at once rousing him and provoking him to faith, and smiting at him, in the attitude of an advocate, and pointing out to him the punishment he was undergoing, and that other men had possession of what were their goods’⁶⁵.

The whole passage, says Chrysostom, ‘is a tissue of objections, in which he (the apostle) clears himself of the suspicion of hatred, and makes his language such as will be acceptable’, but yet, in what seems to be ‘another encomium’ (vv. 20-21), is ‘for the other party an accusation’:

‘For the thing is not matter of nature, but of belief and unbelief. And he seems to be again bridling the Gentile, but he is teaching the Jew that it is not right to cling to a natural kinsmanship’⁶⁶.

9. *St Paul’s ending – ‘in wonder and doxology’*

God does things beyond expectation. He ‘is able to graft them (the Jews) in again. For if you (Gentile) were cut off from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and were grafted contrary to nature into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these who are the natural *branches* be grafted into their own olive tree?’ (Rom 11:23b-24). And this through God’s grace, by faith. ‘If then faith was able to do what was contrary to nature, much more will it that which is according to nature’⁶⁷. There is no advantage for the Jews, because they also are grafted in, if

⁶¹ Hom. 19, NPNF, 11, p. 489.

⁶² Hom. 19, NPNF, 11, p. 490.

⁶³ Hom. 19, NPNF, 11, p. 491.

⁶⁴ Hom. 19, NPNF, 11, p. 491.

⁶⁵ Hom. 19, NPNF, 11, p. 491.

⁶⁶ Hom. 19, NPNF, 11, p. 491.

⁶⁷ Hom. 19, NPNF, 11, p. 492.

they ‘if they do not continue in their unbelief’ (Rom 11:23a). See ‘how inoffensive’ Paul is in this text; he

‘leaves that of harsh aspect, and insists on that of kindlier sound, and in it he ends, putting great hopes before the Jews if they were minded not to abide so’⁶⁸.

On the ‘mystery’ that Paul reveals (Rom 11:25), St John Chrysostom insists that the salvation of the Jews cannot be realized than by faith. What Paul foretells is that they also shall come to faith. In v. 28, Paul ‘does them another kind of favor’⁶⁹, by saying that the Jews are beloved for their fathers sakes. But ‘the virtue of their ancestors has no influence on them, if they do not believe’⁷⁰. Nevertheless, the apostle ‘ceaseth not to solace them with words, that he may bring them over’; and he doesn’t draw the whole to a conclusion at their rejection, but at their having mercy shown them again’ (see vv. 30-32)⁷¹, ending his teaching on the situation of the Jews ‘in wonder and doxology’⁷².

In conclusion, we can say that St John Chrysostom, faithful to St Paul’s text, offer a perspective that is much different of that in his homilies *Against the Jews*. We have here, in the four homilies on Rom 9-11, not an acceptance of the Jews in their unbelief – St John never ceases in accusing their lack of faith in Christ–, but in any case an approach which is truly theological and much more worthy of the great Antiochean’s name.

⁶⁸ Hom. 19, NPNF, 11, p. 493.

⁶⁹ Hom. 19, NPNF, 11, p. 493.

⁷⁰ Hom. 19, NPNF, 11, p. 493.

⁷¹ Hom. 19, NPNF, 11, p. 493.

⁷² Hom. 19, NPNF, 11, p. 494.