

Liebeschuetz, J.H.W.G, *Ambrose and John Chrysostom: Clerics between Desert and Empire.*

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The subtitle of this fascinating book highlights its focus on the ascetic motivations and the ‘political’ activity of the bishops, and how these two related themes affected their connections with the Roman Empire. Liebeschuetz’s monograph can be compared to the excellent work on Chrysostom by Pauline Allen and Wendy Mayer which focuses more on his pastoral work and preaching. This work, however, is complementary in that it approaches both bishops through the specific lenses of *parresia* (boldness) and political relationships, especially with emperors and governors.

Comparing Ambrose and Chrysostom makes a lot of sense as they were near-contemporaries and because they played similar roles in confronting imperial wrongdoing, and in asserting the freedom and influence of the church. Despite a few differences in emphasis and despite their geographical and linguistic distance, they are clearly seen as very similar in worldview and impact.

The book contains seventeen chapters, two on the themes of *parresia* and asceticism, two on Ambrose, ten on Chrysostom, and two on conclusions. The first chapters provide a concise but excellent introduction to the ascetic context and to the social relevance and impact of *parresia*. The two chapters on Ambrose then show these themes worked out in his life, especially in regards his clashes with the local authorities and with the emperor himself. The sections on Chrysostom give more detail on the specific ascetic worldview and practice of the Syrian region, cover his life and writings in some depth, and then address the main themes in his life in relation to his conflict and cooperation with state and court. The concluding chapters compare and contrast the pair and summarise their long-term influence especially on church-state relations.

The two chapters on Chrysostom’s thoughts on the state and his interaction with the authorities show how well nuanced his views were. The author avoids simplistic summary and discusses Chrysostom’s sermons, and his debates with Eudoxia and

the degeneration of their relationship. Of particular note is his chapter on Chrysostom's attitude to the city and his role during the Riot of the Statues. The author discusses Chrysostom's views of vainglory and conspicuous consumption and the contrast of ascetic humility. This view also entailed an educational approach for boys designed to instill in them a rejection of applause, which would have been seen as undermining the very notion of classical citizenship. Liebeschuetz presents a well-nuanced analysis of Chrysostom's thinking about the city and its social mores, and notes the idealism yet realism in his vision of a Christian metropolis.

Liebeschuetz is also to be congratulated for highlighting the specific flavour of asceticism that existed in Syria, including the emphasis on monasticism as living the 'life of the angels' now on earth, and its heightened emphasis on celibacy. He is one of the few authors who notes the impact of Stoicism on Chrysostom's writings.

He also points out areas of inconsistency in Chrysostom's ascetic thought, particularly on marriage and celibacy, and quotes frequently from his writings as well as from secondary literature. Overall this is a well-researched book with plenty of depth and good analysis.

The author makes only a few errors, for example attributing a line to Ephrem that should be Aphrahat (p. 98), and stating that monasticism only became popular after Constantine, forgetting that a large portion of monks were living outside the Empire in Persia, as evidenced in Aphrahat's writings describing conditions of the early fourth century (p. 48). Other than this, however, the author has extensive and accurate footnotes and historical detail that makes the work a delight to read.

This book does not cover every angle on these two famous bishops, but that would be impossible in 300 pages. Instead, by focusing on two closely-linked themes, he can highlight key aspects of their teaching and life. This provides much meat for ongoing debates about the roles of church and state.

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