

Domestic and public violence in Chrysostom's community



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Peter Brown describes Late Antiquity as 'a world characterized by a chilling absence of legal restraints on violence in the exercise of power'. Among numerous studies investigating structural and institutional violence in the ancient world, this article, however, investigates one-on-one violence in private and public spaces in Chrysostom's community. Chrysostom advises his congregation, for example that should they hear: 'any one in the public thoroughfare, or in the midst of the forum, blaspheming God, they should go up to him, rebuke him, and should it be necessary to inflict blows, they should not spare not to do so (De stat 1.32)'. He also considers instances of spousal violence. In one specific case the neighbours came running to the house in response to the cries and wailing of a wife who was beaten by her husband (Hom. 1 Cor 26.7). Pauline Allen, Wendy Mayer and others have shown how Chrysostom's writings act as a window affording us a glimpse of social life in the fourth and the 5th century. Although scholars know that Chrysostom would sometimes make very radical comments merely for rhetorical effect, his writings nevertheless shed light upon the role of violence in his community.

Introduction

Having both grown up in the Eastern Cape province, Jan van der Watt and I have known each other since our school days. Jan became an accomplished scholar of the New Testament, and I would like to honour him for his friendship, collegiality and scholarship with this article. Drawing on information from my field of specialisation, I might shed more light on the world in which the New Testament was embedded. It is commonly accepted that the world of the New Testament was characterised by relative peace and prosperity (Furnish 1984:365), and yet the New Testament contains several references to violence. Jesus told his disciples that should anyone slap them on the right cheek, they should let the person slap their left cheek too (Mt 5:39). Selvidge (1984:214) points out that 'there are many statements in *Matthew* that contain violent implications, both physical and verbal', adding that 'readers of the gospel are not normally aware of (much less outraged by) the violent traditions preserved in *Matthew*'. In a parable Jesus refers to disobedient servants being beaten with many blows (see Lk 12:35–48). Paul describes how false teachers slap the Corinthians in the face (2 Cor 11:20). We also read in Acts 23:1 that the High Priest (of all people) ordered those who were standing close to Paul to strike him on the mouth. We can interpret some of these instances metaphorically, but the reality is that violence was quite common in the ancient world. Peter Brown (1992:50) describes late antiquity as 'a world characterized by a chilling absence of legal restraints on violence in the exercise of power'. Pinker (2011:xxi) even argues that 'today we may be living in the most peaceable era in our species' existence'.

Amidst numerous published studies on structural and institutional violence in the ancient world (such as Drake 2006 and Sizgorich 2009) I shall in this article focus exclusively on non-official and impulsive one-on-one violence in public and private spaces in Chrysostom's community. I shall therefore investigate both spousal and other forms of violence within the family, not only in private spaces, but in public places too.

Pauline Allen and Wendy Mayer (1993), Mayer (2001) and others have shown that Chrysostom's writings can serve as a window affording us a glimpse of social life in the 4th and the 5th century. One has to be aware of course of the fact that Chrysostom would sometimes make quite radical comments merely for rhetorical effect. Our ancient sources are sometimes social constructs, and do not always reflect realities, and texts should therefore not be read too literally (cf. Fonrobert 2005; Mathisen 2006; Pohl 2006 and Retzleff 2003). Rylaarsdam (2014:18; see also Mayer 2015b:338) argues that Chrysostom appropriated the Greco-Roman culture of rhetoric and philosophy and reconstructed it according to the needs of Christianity. According to Rylaarsdam Chrysostom transformed the classical process of *paedeia* and rhetoric to form people and to change practices of

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the Christian community. Yet despite the metaphorical language, Chrysostom does provide evidence from which one can assemble a picture of daily life in late antiquity (Petropoulos 1989). Even Fonrobert (2005:238) who says that Chrysostom's stories do not always reflect historical events, also says that from Chrysostom's remarks 'we can easily deduce what was transpiring in his community'.

Spousal violence

Many scholars have argued that wife-beating was frowned upon in the ancient world. Fisher (1998:77), however, contests this belief, arguing that wife-beating occurred quite regularly. Chrysostom's sermons seemingly support Fisher's point of view, since Chrysostom frequently alludes to domestic violence. He describes how the man sometimes 'ravages like a wild beast inside the house', to the extent that 'shrieks and wailings' are heard in the alleys. Both neighbours and passers-by would then run to the particular house of the person who is disgracing himself (*Hom. 26 on 1 Cor.*, MPG 61.222.42–47). The husband, Chrysostom adds, would later feel ashamed when having to appear in the forum (*ἐπ' ἀγορᾶς*). One must bear in mind that Chrysostom might be exaggerating for rhetorical effect, but even so it does not belie the fact that wife-bashing did occur, and that it also happened in Christian communities. As Llewellyn-Jones (2011) points out, the propensity for violence escalates in societies where personal and familial honour and shame play an important role.

Husbands gave many reasons to justify the beating of their wives, according to Chrysostom. Some would say that their wife acts like a harlot (*πορνεύη*), or that she steals (*κλέπτει*), is a drunkard (*μέθυσος*), or a railer (*λοιδορος*), or a gossip (*λάλος*), evil-eyed (*βάσκανος*), or extravagant (*πολυτελής*) or a squanderer of her husband's substance (*σπαθῶσα τὴν οὐσίαν*). But for each of these accusations Chrysostom gave the husbands an alternative solution that would preclude beating the wife. If one's wife steals, for example he advised that one should rather take care of one's possessions, and not 'punish her so much' (*Hom. 15 on Eph.*, MPG 62.110.5–26).

Though Chrysostom always condemned violent actions between a husband and a wife, he nevertheless accepted the reality. He advised women who were beaten by their husbands 'not to take it ill', since they should rather consider the reward that would be waiting for them if they endure the beatings, and also know that people will praise them (*Hom. 26 on 1 Cor.*, MPG 61.222.15–20). This should be seen in the context of the domestic *kyriarchy* (= 'intersectional structures of domination') which De Wet (2015:17–24 *et passim*) regards as normative in the society that Chrysostom addressed. Laird (2012) has also shown that according to this mindset Chrysostom believed that God inspects the inner being, since it is the interior disposition that determines one's salvation. Tracy (2006:281–2) correctly argues that where 'female subjugation and male control has been institutionalized in the patriarchal family', women are very vulnerable to violence and abuse.

But for men who were married to a certain kind of woman, marital life was indeed difficult. Chrysostom advised husbands whose wives were a *talker* (*λάλος*), for example to bear with her (*Hom. 15 on Act.*, MPG 60.126.22). Such a husband should regard his wife as a 'school for training and exercise' (*Hom. 15 on Act.*, MPG 60.126.23). A difficult wife gives one the opportunity to 'practise exercises at home' (*Hom. 15 on Act.*, MPG 60.126.25–26). To these men Chrysostom gave the advice of one of the *heathen philosophers*, namely Socrates who also endured a difficult relationship. Socrates' wife was 'a trifler and a brawler'. Yet Socrates regarded his wife as his 'school and training-place for philosophy' (*Hom. 26 on 1 Cor.*, MPG 61.224.3–7). We can again detect the subtle underlying belief that it is the interior disposition of the husband that counts for salvation.

On their part the women in the church were admonished not to rail against their husbands for being unsuccessful and unable to provide for them to the same extent that other husbands provided for their wives. From the husbands of those wives who vilified their husbands nonetheless, Chrysostom asked restraint 'never once to lift a hand against the spouses' (*Hom. 20 on Eph.*, MPG 62.144.36–63). Chrysostom admonished the couples in his congregation 'not to fight', saying that this applied especially to the men (*Hom. 10 on Col.*, MPG 62.365.57–59).

One may ask to what extent Chrysostom's acquaintance with acts of violence by women (and men) was based on actual situations. The stereotyping of domineering women in his society could also have influenced him (Schroeder 2004:424). On the other hand, it is quite possible that Chrysostom based his views on conversations that he had had with victims (2004:419). Allen (1996:419) has shown that Chrysostom had a sound knowledge of what was going on outside the church buildings in which he preached. Nevertheless we have to remember that these descriptions all came from a male cleric.

Karras (1991:139) believes that when Chrysostom argues for the woman's subjection to man, it is not because Chrysostom believes that the woman is 'by nature inferior to man or that her ontological relationship to him is one of subjection and domination', but he merely wants to encourage her to use her subjection to her own spiritual benefit. I do not agree with Karras. It is clear that in Chrysostom's mind, a woman is inferior. He says, for example that if a wife abuses (*ὕβριζει*) her husband, he should not react in a womanly way, because to be abusive is womanly, and 'it is a disease of the soul, an inferiority' (*Hom. 15 on Act.*, MPG 60.126.27–29). Chrysostom adds that if one does manage to bear it, it is 'proof of one's strength' (*Hom. 15 on Act.*, MPG 60.126.31–33). Chrysostom clearly regarded women as inferior to men. Clark (2006:169) argues that Chrysostom's conviction that the male is superior to the female is based on his interpretation of Genesis 2 that the *imago dei* refers to men's ability to govern and dominate. It seems that Chrysostom did not believe that Eve shared in this divine image (Dunning 2015:83). It also ties in with Chrysostom's understanding of gender, and that women should be regarded as 'not-men' (De Wet 2014).

Violence against children

Fathers would *frighten* their children, and ‘threaten them with a few stripes’, if they did not duly observe a law (*Hom. 20 on Stat.*, MPG 49.196.51–54). Beating children was not limited to fathers; mothers (*Hom. 62 on Matt.*, MPG 58.601.7–8) and grandfathers (Saller 1991:161) did so too. Children could receive blows for almost any transgression. One would, for example beat a child upon seeing him holding a knife (*Hom. 17 on Matt.*, MPG 57.256.41–44). Children also ‘suffered severe blows’ for neglecting their learning (*Hom. 23 on Matt.*, MPG 57.319.23–25).

Some scholars argue that given the powerlessness of children, physical punishment was a daily reality that was socially accepted as a form of discipline (Bakke 2006:148; see also Leyerle 1997:257). Though moderation was practiced, the beating could easily become excessive (Leyerle 2013: 565). However, one should not think that the beating of children would happen every day. The beating of children was often used as a rhetorical technique to make a very strong point. Chrysostom refers to a father who would ‘chide and scourge’ his son, and who would even expel the child from the house (*Paralyt.*, MPG 51.51.4–7). Yet he remains a father of the son. Similarly when God chastises us, we should still thank him. This picture of the fathers’ treatment of their children is therefore more severe than what the reality was. This image merely has a rhetorical function to convey a specific meaning.

Moreover fathers had the intention to help their children. Chrysostom compares the actions of kidnappers (*ἀνδραποδιστῶν*) who want to steal children and therefore lure them with sweets, to the actions of fathers who subject their children to harsh discipline that eventually bears fruit. Chrysostom uses this image to describe God, who acts like a father and not like a kidnapper. God allows us to suffer tribulation, but at the end we inherit the kingdom of heaven. Chrysostom even urges his congregation to fear God as sons fear their father (*Hom. 19 on Stat.*, MPG 49.196.56–58). Horn (2009:110 and 123) shows in his study of children in the 4th century, that the relationship between children and parents (and specifically fathers) was generally speaking very good, and often there was a very close relationship between fathers and their children. There was very seldom open conflict with and opposition to parents (Vuolanto 2009:289). Parents valued their children because they were regarded as important for the biological continuity of the family, and they also would be able to take care of their parents in their old age (Vuolanto 2015:177ff.).

The ‘dividing lines’ between children’s and adults’ live in the ancient world were not very clear (Aasgaard 2009:5). That is perhaps why it is often argued that a slave and a son held almost the same legal position in a household. Saller (1991) contests this perception and says that a slave was obliged to be obedient, while the relationship between a child and his father was ruled by *pietas*, which demanded much more than mere submission. Among others, *pietas* demanded reciprocal affection.

It seems that most of the beating of children took place at school. Wiedemann (1989:28) maintains that throughout Antiquity, schooling was associated with beating. Horn and Martens (2009:233) believe that ‘Christian masters were not necessarily better than their pagan counterparts’. Chrysostom says that when ‘fathers send their children to school, they set masters over them, threaten them with stripes and encompass them with fear on all sides’ (*Hom. 16 on Stat.*, MPG 49.168.17–19). Children were beaten at school when their knowledge of their work was tested and they failed (*Hom. 4 on Col.*, MPG 62.329.43–45). Children were tested individually to determine whether they knew their work. If they did not, they were beaten ‘for their idleness’ (*Hom. 6 on 1 Tim.*, MPG 62.532.12-18). Children could also be beaten, even severely, by play-fellows at school, but in that event they would not complain to their master (*Hom. 6 on 1 Tim.*, MPG 62.532.18–23).

The ancient assumption was that corporal punishment generates knowledge (Frilingos 2009:54). Christian households had an additional motivation for using physical force, because it was believed that the Bible instructed them to use the rod. Moreover it was modelled on God’s relationship with the world, which entailed both punishment and love (Bakke 2006:157). It was also believed that the Christian upbringing of one’s children has implications for the parents’ salvation (2006:60).

Chrysostom believed that the responsibility to educate children rested with three important institutions, namely the home, the church and the school. Of these the home played the most important role (Repp 1951:938). Though Chrysostom believed that a parent should not only set rules but enforce them as well, he did not think that inflicting the rod was the only means to teach one’s child. There were also other ways of disciplining (1951:940).

It seems that when Chrysostom speaks about the use of harsh discipline on children, he makes no distinction between teenage children and younger children (Bakke 2006:60). Though both parents had the obligation to discipline their children, Chrysostom focused on the father who, as *paterfamilias*, had the primary responsibility with regard to this task (Schlager 1991:46). Since older girls were kept away from men, it was the mothers’ task to educate their daughters (Repp 1951:941). The parenting of girls was done by the women. The main objective was to teach the girl to be an honourable woman in society; one who would not shame her father, brothers or husband (Pilch 1993:105).

To beat a slave or a child was to dishonour the person. Often the honour of the father depended on his ability to impose his will upon all the members of the household (Pilch 1993:101–113).

The flogging of slaves

Chrysostom provides us with a rich ‘source for the realities of Roman slavery’ (Harper 2011:205). At the time, slaves were still subjected to public violence. Chrysostom, who wanted to

move the violent domination of slaves from the public sphere to the house, proclaimed that 'one should dismiss evil through private violence' (*Hab. Eun. Spir.*, MPG 51.287.7–8). De Wet (2015:170ff.) contextualises the flogging of slaves in Chrysostom's time and says that slaves were regarded as inferior *unmen*. To discipline slaves was seen as 'the domestication of the animalized human' (cf. 2015:171). Chrysostom believed that the house should become a reformatory (cf. De Wet 2013:360). It was therefore not unusual to read about the beating of slaves at home – in fact, a slave was often even referred to as a 'flogging-post' (μαστιγία) (*Hom. 51 on Jo.*, MPG 59.286.17–18).

Both manservants (τὸν οἰκέτην) and maidservants (τὴν θεραπαινίδα) could be flogged (*Hom. 14 on Stat.*, MPG 49.145.2–12). The wife of the master could also dish out punishment. She was allowed to 'chasten [a maidservant] with a rod and with stripes' if the servant was not willing to be corrected (*Hom. 15 on Eph.*, MPG 62.110.36–37). When a servant, for example did anything wrong at dinner, the wife would swear at the servant, threatening that he would be flogged, but her husband could overrule this by not permitting it (*Hom. 14 on Stat.*, MPG 49.145.5). Slaves were sometimes beaten so severely that 'it could cause the rending of the slave's coats to rags' (*Hom. 15 on Act.*, MPG 60.126.45–48).

Free women were also caught up in the hierarchical system. As a consequence they too could become perpetrators of household violence, meting out severe punishment. According to Chrysostom 'the female sex are easily seized by (anger)' (*Hom. 15 on Eph.*, MPG 62.109.9–10). When 'women are angry with their maid-servants, they fill the whole house with their own clamour' (*Hom. 15 on Eph.*, MPG 62.109.10–12). If the house was built along a narrow street, all the passers-by would hear the mistress' scolding and the maidservant's weeping and wailing. Moreover the women who were in the vicinity would even come to watch the beating of the maidservant (*Hom. 15 on Eph.*, MPG 62.109.12–18). These women sometimes *lashed* (μαστιγίζειν) the slaves to such an extent that the bruises would still be visible after a day. They would even strip the maid-servants of their clothing, and often tie them to pallets before calling their husbands to beat the servants (*Hom. 15 on Eph.*, MPG 62.109.27–31). Chrysostom was very upset to hear that these events also took place in Christian homes.

Sometimes when these servantmaids went to the baths and undressed themselves, the bruises were still visible on their backs (*Hom. 15 on Eph.*, MPG 62.109.50–53). Chrysostom adds that it is 'a disgraceful thing for a woman to be beaten', just as it is 'a disgrace for a man to strike a woman'. It is even more disgraceful for a woman to strike a woman. That is why legislators 'limit a man's anger to smiting her on the cheek' (*Hom. 15 on Eph.*, MPG 62.109.59–60 – 110.5).

Some of the women even uncovered the head of the maidservant, and then 'dragged them by the hair'. Chrysostom was not exaggerating when he said this during his sermon, since all the women in the audience immediately

blushed when he described this. He then asked them why all of them were blushing, and pointed out to them that he was accusing only those who were guilty of 'such brutal conduct' (*Hom. 15 on Eph.*, MPG 62.110.26–31). He added that if they would become gentler in their handling of their maidservants, it will have the added benefit that the discipline thus exercised will help to improve their relationship with their husbands. If a mistress had a maidservant and became too old to punish him, she could merely decide to sell him (*Hom. 11 on 1 Thess.*, MPG 62.464.40–43).

Slaves were beaten for many different reasons. If they said anything filthy and their masters heard it, 'they would receive stripes in abundance' (*Hom. 37 on Matt.*, MPG 57.425.54–55). A maidservant could also be punished if 'she harm[ed] her own soul' (*Hom. 15 on Eph.*, MPG 62.109.20–24). Many maidservants were beaten 'because of gold and ornaments' (*Hom. 89 on Matt.*, MPG 58.786.24–26). This is probably a reference to theft. Sometimes slaves wasted time on the market-place by 'attending to the beggars that do jugglers' feats'. If it caused them to arrive at home late, they would be 'grievously beaten' (*Hom. 4 on Rom.*, MPG 60.421.5–7).

It also happened that one servant would 'beat or assault' another servant. Sometimes they did this justly (*Hom. 15 on Eph.*, MPG 62.105.10–13). Slaves would only beat their fellow slaves when their masters could not see them (*Hom. 16 on 1 Tim.*, MPG 62.590.30–32).

Chrysostom's reaction to these beatings varies. Firstly, Chrysostom accepted slavery as a social institution (De Wet 2013:360). He said one should not even call one's servant a scoundrel (μαρὸν), since it disgraces yourself and not the slave (*Hom. 15 on Act.*, MPG 60.126.40). He also told his congregation that it is a shame for a freeman to inflict blows and lay (violent) hands upon his handmaiden (*Hom. 26 on 1 Cor.*, MPG 61.222.20–25). But in other instances he approved the beating of a maidservant by her mistress, if the beatings met the following criteria: The beating should be neither frequently (μήτε συνεχῶς) nor immoderately (μήτε ἀμέτρως), and neither for the mistakes of the mistress nor for a small mistake (*Hom. 15 on Eph.*, MPG 62.109.20–24). Threatening a slave without beating him was regarded a harsher punishment than to beat a slave. The former agitates and lacerates the mind, which is worse than suffering the blows. The latter punishment is momentary (πρόσκαιρος), the former perpetual (διηνεκής) (*Hom. 12 on Act.*, MPG 60.104.20–21).

It is true that stories about slaves and how they were handled by their owners show remarkable correspondence with other ancient texts and do not necessarily reflect actual events (see Harrill 2003). Several Greco-Roman moralists also condemned cruelty to slaves (2003). It was one of the literary and rhetorical topoi to stereotype slaves and to belittle them. Yet these texts do enjoy some legitimacy as depicting the realities of life. Beating was not merely meant to inflict pain. The main purpose was to insult the *dignitas* of the person who received the lashes (Saller 1991:151). Corporal punishment was about honour and insult. Slaves constantly

lived in fear of beating. The obedience of slaves could be brought about by fear of punishment (Saller 1991:164).

But one should also carefully look at the contexts of each of these passages. In some cases Chrysostom exaggerates the severity of these beatings because he wants to convey another message. He for instance wants to prove his point that if we would rave at servants who are not obedient, how much more obedient we should then be to God, since we are also his servants (*Hom. 51 on Jo.*, MPG 59.286.17–18). It therefore suits Chrysostom to even exaggerate the beatings to emphasise the severity of the eternal punishment, which would exceed these temporal sufferings.

Nevertheless it is clear that the slaves were ruled by violence through fear (De Wet 2013:363). Moreover, the advice that Chrysostom gave to slave owners can be regarded as principles of managing one's property (2013:360). That also explains why one was not allowed to beat the servant of another master, since the latter would regard it an insult (*Hom. 20 on Stat.*, MPG 49.202.43–45). It would be an infringement on his property.

Public violence

Violence was not confined to households. It was quite common to see people fighting on the marketplaces (*Hom. 1 on Stat.*, MPG 49.34.15–17). Christians even enjoyed watching these affrays. People would form their own *amphitheatre* around those who were fighting (*Hom. 15 on Matt.*, MPG 57.236.15–32). These brawls were sometimes vicious. Chrysostom describes how these men would 'tear each other to pieces, rending their clothes, smiting each other's faces' (*Hom. 15 on Matt.*, MPG 57.236.33–35). The fighters sometimes acted like wild boars, by kicking and biting each other (*Hom. 15 on Matt.*, MPG 57.237.44–45; cf. also *Hom. 22 on Rom.*, MPG 60.612.59–613.3). Sometimes the one took the other by the throat, and tried to strangle the person, and threw him publicly on the ground (*Hom. 15 on Matt.*, MPG 57.237.55–57). These fights could even cause the death of one of the two (*Hom. 15 on Matt.*, MPG 57.237.4–5). Elsewhere (*Hom. 16 on Eph.*, MPG. 62.110.61–111.1) Chrysostom again explains how easily evil-speaking can lead to blows which then can lead to wounds which can lead to death. When two men were boxing (*πυκτεύοντες*) in the forum, they would also swear (*ἀντομνύωσιν*) at each other. The one would swear at the other that he would beat him, and the other one would swear that he would not be beaten (*Hom. 14 on Stat.*, MPG 49.145.17–22). Soldiers often had to disperse with a rod the idlers in the marketplace (*Hom. 5 on Act.*, MPG 60.54.19–24).

This also happened when Christians stood by too quietly. Chrysostom encouraged his congregation to intervene when they see a fight taking place in the forum. He told them that they should then 'go into the midst of it, and reconcile the combatants' (*Hom. 1 on Stat.*, MPG 49.34.15–17). They could also intervene either by paying money or by speaking to the people who were fighting (*Hom. 15 on Matt.*, MPG 57.236.15–18). It is not clear whether the disputes were often

about money, or whether the fighting men would merely be appeased when they received money. Chrysostom acknowledges the possibility that the person who intervenes in an attempt to stop a fight 'would also receive blows' (*Hom. 15 on Matt.*, MPG 57.236.46–51). This does not matter though, since Christ himself also received blows for us.

Chrysostom says that only slaves and people without shame take pleasure in such affrays (*Hom. 15 on Matt.*, MPG 57.236.41–42). However, the fighting was most probably not confined to lower class people. This is merely a rhetorical technique to speak extremely degradingly about these people who were fighting in public spaces. Chrysostom even calls them 'refuse and asses without reason' (*Hom. 15 on Matt.*, MPG 57.236.42–43). He says it is a disgrace when Christians act like this and 'imitate the violent passions of the brutes' (*Hom. 15 on Matt.*, MPG 57.236.58).

The marketplace was definitely a place where one could easily be beaten up. Chrysostom tells us that someone who was not content to live moderately would often decide to go to the marketplace to beg. Although there would be people who were much poorer than himself, he would nevertheless go the market-place 'naked and filthy, squalid and filthy, wailing and lamenting' (*Hom. 23 on 1 Cor.*, MPG 61.198.5–11). In the end he would leave the marketplace 'with many a stripe'. At home he would 'fret the wounds received in the market' (*Hom. 23 on 1 Cor.*, MPG 61.198.22–25). It is not clear why these beggars were beaten up, or by whom they were beaten. However, it does prove that people without honour and status easily became victims of beatings.

Fighting was not confined to marketplaces, but occurred in other public areas as well. Chrysostom therefore advised his congregation to rather not go to horse races. He admitted that this might not look like a crime to most men, but it would often lead to 'fights, railings, blows, insults, and lasting enmities' (*Hom. 15 on Stat.*, MPG 49.159.16–22).

In some instances when God's honour is at stake, Chrysostom encouraged his congregation to act violently. He asked his congregation 'to correct on his behalf the blasphemers' in the city. He said:

And should you hear anyone in the public thoroughfare, or in the midst of the forum, blaspheming God, go up to him and rebuke him; and should it be necessary to inflict blows, spare not to do so. Smite him on the face; strike his mouth; sanctify thy hand with the blow, and if any should accuse thee, and drag thee to the place of justice, follow them thither; and when the judge on the bench calls thee to account, say boldly that the man blasphemed the King of angels! (*Hom. 1 on Stat.*, MPG 49.32.41–53)

His argument is that since one would punish those who blaspheme an earthly king, one should much more so punish those who insult God.

It was always very risky 'to visit the chambers of the harlots' (*Hom. 37 on 1 Cor.*, MPG 61.318.46–50). Rival lovers (*τοὺς ἀντραπαστάς*) were always involved, which could lead

to all kinds of affray (*Hom. 37 on 1 Cor.*, MPG 61.318.50–54). One could end up ‘with wounds and stripes’ (*Hom. 37 on 1 Cor.*, MPG 61.318.50–54), even meted out by a whorish woman (πόρνης γυναικὸς) who would not for a moment hesitate to beat up her client. This would of course be a great shame for the man (*Hom. 37 on 1 Cor.*, MPG 61.318.46–49). Elsewhere we again read about the skirmishes between those who visit harlots: they would be cuffed (ῥαπιζόμενοι) and beaten up (τυπτόμενοι) (*Hom. 79 on Jo.*, MPG 59.431.4–8).

It seems that even pastors were at risk of receiving blows in public from female members of their congregation. Chrysostom, for example rebuked women for causing schisms in the church. He considered it a ‘general failing of women’ to do this (*Hom. 11 on Eph.*, MPG 62.87.28–30). He suggested that if a woman should dislike what he says, she should take revenge on him and ‘buffet me, woman, spit on me, when you meet me in the public way, and aim blows at me’. Although they might shudder at the idea, he says, the Lord also shudders when these women tear asunder the limbs of the Lord (*Hom. 11 on Eph.*, MPG 62.87.28–37).

Though brawls were common, Christians were asked not to become involved. Chrysostom reminds them of Christ who said, ‘If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also’ (Mt 5:39). Jesus ‘singled out the extremest insult’ (τὴν ἐσχάτην ὕβριν):

Chrysostom maintains, calling this blow the: most shameful (ἐπονείδιστον) of all the blows. (*Hom. 18 on Matt.*, MPG 57.266.32–36).

Perhaps the reason why the slapping of one’s right cheek was so shameful, was that one had to use one’s left hand to slap someone on the right cheek, and ‘the left hand was used exclusively for toilet functions’ (Pilch 1999:119).

By contrast, the face was regarded as the most honourable part of one’s body.

Mayer (2015a; 2015b) warns us to be careful not to interpret all these descriptions in Chrysostom’s homilies too literal. She believes that one should rather look at Chrysostom as a medico-philosophical psychic therapist who is adopting the protreptic model to produce good or virtuous citizens. According to this view, John perceived his sermons as therapeutic *logoi* to bring about psychic health. It is therefore difficult to know how much of the narratives are descriptions of Byzantine city life.

Conclusion

Because of a lack of statistical data to compare the level of violence in the ancient world with the violence of the modern world, it is impossible to say whether the ancient world was more violent than the modern world. It may perhaps be fair to propose that, considering modern weapons of mass destruction, the impact of violence would be greater in the modern world. However, it does seem that in Chrysostom’s time individuals were often at the receiving end of violent actions. It is also clear that because of the patriarchal structure of Chrysostom’s world, women, children and slaves were the

most vulnerable people. They clearly did not enjoy any rights that protected them either. When they suffered violence, no one would really intervene to protect them. Even Christians were onlookers when fights broke out. However, one should not overlook the fact that women also enacted violence.

It is true that though Chrysostom’s homilies provide us with valuable evidence of the types of violence that the ancients had to endure, we should be very careful of how we interpret these texts. It is important to remember that homilies are first of all prescriptive and not descriptive (Bakke 2006). Therefore when the preacher teaches his congregation, it does not necessarily mean that the members practise these teachings. Schroeder (2004:440) argues that Chrysostom’s descriptions of excessive spousal violence were perhaps shaded by his ‘ascetic agenda’ to discourage people from marrying. On the other hand, a sermon should be well grounded in the society where it is delivered if the homilist wants it to have any effect. It is therefore likely that these descriptions of spousal violence were close to reality.

One may ask why the early Christians, who initially rejected violence, later became drawn into violence. Derksen (2010) attributes this to the vortex of violence that characterised their world. One should not think that Chrysostom’s congregation always followed his advice to refrain from violence (Repp 1951:944).

It therefore does not really seem as if Christians were less violent than contemporary non-believers. Yes, Chrysostom did not always approve of violence, but the same applies to pagan philosophers who also spoke out against violent actions. It seems that there is not clear evidence of arrays that had a religious basis. This is significant since we know that there was much hostility between Jews and Christians. In 388 some Christians in Callinicum even set fire to a Jewish synagogue (Wilken 1983:53) and Drake (2013:2) says that ‘by the fourth century, the depiction of Jews and Judaizers as carnal, sexual deviants had become a topos in early Christian texts’. Despite this context, it seems that Christians merely fought about the same things that pagans were fighting about.

A few centuries separate the world of the New Testament from the world of Chrysostom, but it is quite likely that public and domestic violence characterised both worlds.

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