

## Religion and Power in the Early Thought of John Chrysostom

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My paper explores John Chrysostom's views of the relationship between Church and State in works from the early years of the reign of Theodosius, paying particular attention to the *Discourse on the Blessed Babylas* composed around 379/80. Given the changing fortunes for Nicene Christians during this period, one would expect to find an optimistic view of the relationship between the empire and the Church. Chrysostom's earliest writings, however, reveal that he had a very pessimistic view of this relationship. For example, he says: "When a Christian ascends the imperial throne, far from being shored up by human honors, Christianity deteriorates. On the other hand, when rule is held by an impious man, who persecutes us in every way and subjects us to countless evils, then our cause acquires renown and becomes more brilliant" [*The Discourse on Blessed Babylas and Against the Greeks*, trans. Margaret Schatkin, ed. Thomas P Halton, the *Fathers of the Church*, vol. 73 (Washington D.C., 1985) 42.2]. Chrysostom's assertion that Christianity benefited from a lack of imperial support is central to his understanding of the proper boundaries between the Church and imperial authority. My argument is that Chrysostom's skeptical views resulted from the turmoil caused by the Arian emperors Constantius II (337-361) and Valens (364-378), the brief reign of Julian (361-363) the Apostate, and the fear of future apostates. In short his views were shaped by the tensions of the past. As a result, his definition of the proper relationship between Church and State accounted for hostile emperors.

An emperor hostile to Christianity is at the heart of the *Discourse on the Blessed Saint Babylas*. In this apology centered on the life and relics of Antioch's bishop Babylas, Chrysostom outlines his view of the proper relationship between temporal and spiritual authority and defines the proper relationship between bishops and emperors. Babylas, who was martyred by an unknown emperor in the second century, is portrayed as a model for all future bishops, because he defended the authority of his office in the face of an emperor hostile toward Christianity. A central theme of this work is that spiritual authority and temporal authority are often in opposition to one another. When they conflict, spiritual authority always triumphs over temporal authority, because it is superior. Chrysostom combines the history of Babylas' martyrdom with the more recent history of Julian's failed attempt to restore paganism as evidence of this idea.

The early views of Chrysostom regarding the proper relationship between bishops and emperors are important for understanding his later career as Bishop of Constantinople (398-404). These views, I believe, help to explain his confrontations with Arcadius and Eudoxia while in office. Thus, an examination of Chrysostom's early political thought within its historical context provides important insight for understanding his stormy career as Bishop of Constantinople.