

# SAVING BODIES: ANAGOGICAL TRANSPOSITION IN ST. GREGORY OF NYSSA'S COMMENTARY ON THE SONG OF SONGS<sup>1</sup>

*Hans Boersma*

Whatever the precise reason Olympias, the pious deaconess of Constantinople, requested that St. Gregory of Nyssa expound for her the Song of Songs, she can hardly have been oblivious to the paradoxical character of the situation. Having been widowed several years earlier after only a very brief marriage and still only in her early or mid-twenties, she refused Emperor Theodosius's request that she marry his Spanish relative Elpidius. Olympias reacted to the Emperor's suggestion with the comment: "If my King had desired me to live with a male He would not have taken away my first husband. But He knew that I cannot make a husband happy, so He liberated him from the bond and me likewise from the most bothersome yoke, and He freed me from subjection to a man, while He laid on me the gentle yoke of chastity."<sup>2</sup> Olympias's attitude incurred Theodosius's wrath, but he eventually came around, and Olympias was widely rumoured to have remained a virgin throughout her life. The wealthy deaconess was no stranger to the ascetic life of renunciation, and it is quite likely that she expected Gregory's exposition on the Song of Songs to assist her, as well as other Christians in Constantinople, in the life of virtue.<sup>3</sup> Certainly she

1. I want to express my appreciation to Markus Bockmuehl and Ron Dart for their comments on a draft of this paper and to Mark Husbans for his helpful response to my presentation.

2. In *Palladius: Dialogue on the Life of St John Chrysostom* (ed. Robert T. Meyer; Ancient Christian Writers 45; New York: Newman, 1985) 114 (no. 17). For background information on Gregory's homilies, I rely on J. B. Cahill, "The Date and Setting of Gregory of Nyssa's Commentary on the Song of Songs," *JTS* 32 (1981) 447–60.

3. Gregory demurs that although he eagerly takes up Olympias's request, she herself hardly needs the commentary: "The reason I accept your proposal with alacrity is not that I may be of assistance to you in the conduct of your life—for I am confident that the eye of your soul is clean of any passionate or indecent thought and that by means of these divine words it gazes without hindrance on the undefiled Beauty—but rather that some direction may be given to more fleshly folk for the sake of the spiritual and immaterial welfare of their souls" (*Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on the Song of Songs* [trans. and ed. Richard A. Norris; Writings from the Greco-Roman World 13; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, n.d.] 13; hereafter referred to as *Homilies*). This manuscript remains as yet unpublished; I am grateful to the series editor, Prof. David Konstan, for providing me with a copy of this new critical edition. In

must have realized that Gregory was not about to present her with a literal interpretation of the Song of Songs. The mystical theologian from Nyssa consciously took his stance in the tradition of Origen, the Alexandrian interpreter, and while some fourth-century preachers from the Antiochian tradition may have been inclined to a more literal reading, Gregory was known not to have any sympathies for what to his mind was far too narrow an approach to the interpretation of Scripture.

Olympias was not alone in her recognition of the paradox inherent in the fact that she, an ascetic widow (and perhaps a virgin), would request a commentary on a biblical book that more than any other appealed to fleshly desires and passions. For Gregory himself such paradox lay at the heart both of his understanding of the Song of Songs and of his view of salvation, which, as we will see, he considered closely related to each other. Thus, Gregory comments in the first of his fifteen homilies: “[W]hat could be more incredible [*paradoxoteron*] than to make human nature itself the purifier of its own passions, teaching and legislating impassibility [*apatheian*] by words one reckons to be tintured with passion [*empathōn*]?”<sup>4</sup> Gregory goes on to explain that Solomon “so deals with the soul that she looks upon purity by means of instruments that seem inconsistent with it and uses the language of passion to render thought that is undefiled.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, whereas the Septuagint had modestly restricted itself to the language of *agapē*, Gregory in his commentary goes beyond this and introduces the language of *erōs*, thus accentuating the paradox. Clearly aware of the audacious character of his undertaking, the bishop comments: “Therefore since it is Wisdom who speaks, *love* her as much as you are able, with your whole heart and strength; *desire* [*epithymēson*] her as much as you can. To these words I am bold to add, *Be in love* [*erasthēti*], for this passion [*pathos*], when directed toward things incorporeal, is blameless and impassible [*apatheis*], as Wisdom says in Proverbs when she bids us to be in love [*erōta*] with the divine Beauty.”<sup>6</sup> Gregory is speaking of an erotic love that we may describe with the paradoxical expression “dispassionate passion.”<sup>7</sup>

---

each reference to the *Homilies*, the first number will indicate the number of the homily, which is then followed by the page number.

4. *Homilies* 1, 31.

5. *Homilies* 1, 31.

6. *Homilies* 1, 25.

7. Jean Daniélou has retrieved the significance of *erōs* for Gregory of Nyssa, highlighting that it is consistent with *agapē* and really constitutes *agapē*'s most intense form, which carries the soul beyond herself toward God, on whom she dependently relies (*Platonisme et théologie mystique: Doctrine spirituelle de Saint Grégoire de Nysse* (rev. ed.; Théologie 2 [Paris: Aubier, 1944] 199–208).

The paradox is more than an interesting peculiarity; it points to what Gregory is convinced is the Song's ultimate concern, salvation itself. In his first homily, Gregory contrasts salvation through fear [*dia phobou*] of punishment in hell with salvation through love [*dia tēs agapēs*] of God himself rather than merely of his rewards: "For by what is written there, the soul is in a certain manner led as a bride toward an incorporeal and spiritual and undefiled marriage with God. For he 'who wills all to be saved and to come to the knowledge of truth' (1 Tim 2:4) manifests in this work the blessed and most perfect way of salvation—I mean that which comes through love."<sup>8</sup> For Gregory, salvation comes through love, and it is a love that can be daringly expressed in the nuptial language of the Song of Songs. The sensuous words and images of the biblical text cannot be discarded; it is through erotic desire that God brings about salvation. For Gregory the sometimes sensuous body of the text is an indispensable means of salvation precisely inasmuch as it paradoxically opens up the way into the goodness and beauty of God himself.<sup>9</sup>

According to Gregory of Nyssa, then, God saves us through bodily means. However, this should not be taken to mean that Gregory's ultimate focus is on earthly or material bodies—whether bodily texts of passion (such as the Song of Songs) or bodily acts of pleasure (as represented in the surface level of the text). To focus on the body itself—whether the obvious, surface-level meaning of the text or the bodily passions—would be precisely to discard in rationalist fashion the paradoxical character of Gregory's "dispassionate passion" and to ignore the fact that for Gregory both biblical exegesis and the process of salvation involve a profound transposition (*metastasis*).<sup>10</sup> This transposition implies that, although bodily means are indispens-

8. *Homilies* 1, 15–17. 1 Tim 2:4 is a key text for Gregory; he uses it five more times in his homilies: *Homilies* 1, 35; 4, 143 (2x); 7, 227; 10, 321. God's desire that all be saved is connected, on Gregory's understanding, to the final restoration of all things (*apokatastasis*). Cf. Morwenna Ludlow, *Universal Salvation: Eschatology in the Thought of Gregory of Nyssa and Karl Rahner* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

9. The Song's physical descriptions of the Bridegroom's beauty led to speculation about God's "heavenly body" both in Tannaitic literature and elsewhere. See Markus Bockmuehl, "The Form of God' (Phil 2:6) Variations on a Theme of Jewish Mysticism," *JTS* 48 (1997) 1–23, at 17–19.

10. Cf. Gregory's comment that Paul "says that the movement [*metastasin*] from corporeal to intelligible realities is a turning toward the Lord and the removal of a veil (2 Cor 3:16)" (*Homilies* Preface, 5). Similarly, Gregory comments that the soul must learn to "turn passion into impassibility" (*Homilies* 1, 29). Bart vanden Auweele rightly comments: "Elle se comprend davantage comme une traduction que comme l'abolition de la lettre" ("L'Écriture sous le mode du désir: Réflexions sur le statut de l'Écriture dans les *Homélies sur le Cantique des cantiques*," in *Grégoire de Nyssa: La Bible dans la construction de son discours: Actes du Colloque de Paris, 9–10 février 2007*, ed. Matthieu and Hélène Grelier, Collection des Etudes Augustiniennes, Série Antiquité, 184 [Paris: Institut d'Études Augustiniennes, 2008] 275–83, at

able for salvation, to remain strictly with the body would mean, ironically, to lose sight of the intended transposition and thereby to lose the purpose of salvation.

In the light of contemporary Gregory of Nyssa research it is important to make the point that salvation involves an anagogical transposition away from bodily text and bodily desire—the Greek term *anagōgē* means “leading upward.” Recent Gregory research has tended to highlight the embodied character of human existence.<sup>11</sup> Again, it is not my intention to dispute the fact that for Gregory we are saved through bodily means. Nonetheless, some contemporary re-readings of Gregory decisively misinterpret Gregory’s understanding of salvation, rendering it overly this-worldly by wrongly insisting on the centrality of this-worldly bodily and emotional realities. For instance, Mark Hart has argued that Gregory’s encomium on virginity in his early treatise *De virginitate* should not be taken at face value but serves as a rhetorical ploy.<sup>12</sup> Gregory, in Hart’s view, has a relatively low view of celibacy: it really is meant for the weak, for those who are unable to control their sexual passions. The truly wholesome life, on Hart’s reading of Gregory, is that of marriage. This reading seems to me almost to turn Gregory’s understanding on its head.<sup>13</sup>

---

281). Cf. also Richard A. Norris’s comment: “[A]n exegesis involving ‘transposition’ is seen as necessary because (1) the text at hand gives an account of perceptible realities, but (2) the reality it ultimately concerns is of the intelligible order. It is the gap between these that ‘allegory’ bridges” (“Introduction: Gregory of Nyssa and His Fifteen Homilies on the Song of Songs,” in *Homilies*, xlii–xliii).

11. In addition to the three authors discussed below, the reader may also consult Jeremy William Bergstrom, “Embodiment in Gregory of Nyssa: His Anthropology and Ideal Ascetic Struggle” (Th.M. thesis, St. Vladimir’s Orthodox Theological Seminary, 2008); Sarah Coakley, *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2002) 127–29; *idem*, “Re-Thinking Gregory of Nyssa: Introduction—Gender, Trinitarian Analogies, and the Pedagogy of the Song,” *Modern Theology* 18 (2002) 431–43; Verna E. Harrison, “Gender, Generation, and Virginity in Cappadocian Theology,” *JTS* 47 (1997) 38–68; *idem*, “A Gender Reversal in Gregory of Nyssa’s First Homily on the Song of Songs,” *StPatr* 27 (1993) 34–38; *idem*, “Male and Female in Cappadocian Theology,” *JTS* 14 (1990) 441–71; Martin Laird, “The Fountain of His Lips: Desire and Divine Union in Gregory of Nyssa’s *Homilies on the Song of Songs*,” *Spiritus* 7 (2007) 40–57; *idem*, “Under Solomon’s Tutelage: The Education of Desire in the *Homilies on the Song of Songs*,” *Modern Theology* 18 (2002) 507–25; Morwenna Ludlow, *Gregory of Nyssa: Ancient and (Post)modern* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); *idem*, “Gregory of Nyssa and the Body: Do Recent Readings Ignore a Development in His Thought?” *StPatr* 41 (2006) 369–74.

12. GNO VIII/1, 247–343; ET: *Saint Gregory of Nyssa: Ascetical Works* (trans. Virginia Woods Callahan; The Fathers of the Church 58; 1967, reprint, Washington, D. C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1999) 1–75.

13. Mark D. Hart, “Gregory of Nyssa’s Ironic Praise of the Celibate Life,” *Heythrop Journal* 33 (1992) 1–19. Cf. also *idem*, “Marriage, Celibacy, and the Life of Virtue: An Interpretation of Gregory of Nyssa’s *De Virginitate*” (Ph.D. diss., Boston College, 1987); *idem*, “Reconciliation of Body and Soul: Gregory of Nyssa’s Deeper Theology of Marriage,” *TS* 51 (1990) 450–67. Hart’s insistence that celibacy is a

Rowan Williams, while not focusing on the body or sexuality per se, similarly downplays the “otherworldly” character of Gregory’s theology by rehabilitating the role of grief (*lypē*) over the loss of loved ones.<sup>14</sup> By means of a detailed re-reading of *De anima et resurrectione*, Williams maintains that because this dialogue presents Macrina as accepting of her younger brother Gregory’s grief, Gregory must regard grief as a positive human passion, a form of desire (*epithymia*) that can lead the soul’s rationality (*logos*) in its search for truth and beauty. The result, according to Williams, is a dynamic and positive appraisal of the human passions and of grief in particular. William ignores, however, the leading role that human reason has in Gregory’s thought; the passions are not supposed to dominate. For Gregory, the human passion of grief does not serve in a positive fashion at all. Grief is, as Warren Smith rightly argues, a *frustrated* desire that paralyzes the soul.<sup>15</sup> While grief over the loss of loved ones may seem appropriate to most Christians today, Gregory’s Platonic and Stoic surroundings made him regard this temporal, earthly life as a mode of existence that death enabled us to transcend. Death, in other words, is for Gregory

---

concession to human weakness misinterprets Gregory at several levels. Most importantly, he misreads the role that weakness plays in Gregory’s argument. On my reading, Gregory believes that if we are realistic about our carnal weaknesses, we may use such weakness as an occasion to learn to practice eschatological virginity already today. In addition, as Karras points out, (1) while Hart takes Gregory’s critical comments about celibacy at face value, he inconsistently takes the bishop’s criticism of marriage as ironic; and (2) Hart ignores that for Gregory the eschaton is a return to a prelapsarian non-biological state without food, sleep, sex, sickness, decay, and death; marriage, while not intrinsically evil, is for Gregory the first step into a postlapsarian, biological state. See Valerie A. Karras, “A Re-evaluation of Marriage, Celibacy, and Irony in Gregory of Nyssa’s *On Virginity*,” *J ECS* 13 (2005) 111–21.

14. Rowan Williams, “Macrina’s Deathbed Revisited: Gregory of Nyssa on Mind and Passion,” in *Christian Faith and Greek Philosophy in Late Antiquity: Essays in Tribute to George Christopher Stead* (ed. Lionel R. Wickham and Caroline P. Bammel with Erica C. D. Hunter; Supplements to *Vigiliae Christianae* 19; Leiden: Brill, 1993) 227–46.

15. J. Warren Smith, “Macrina, Tamer of Horses and Healer of Souls: Grief and the Therapy of Hope in Gregory of Nyssa’s *De anima et resurrectione*,” *JTS* 52 (2001) 37–60; *idem*, *Passion and Paradise: Human and Divine Emotion in the Thought of Gregory of Nyssa* (New York: Herder & Herder, Crossroad, 2004) 15–17, 97–98. In addition, Williams overlooks Gregory’s other writings on death, which clearly display his negative views of grief. See especially Gregory’s *De mortuis* (GNO IX, 28–68; ET Richard McCambly, <http://www.sage.edu/faculty/salomd/nyssa/mort.html>) and his *Oratio consolatoria in Pulcheriam* (GNO IX, 461–72; ET Casimir McCambly, <http://www.sage.edu/faculty/salomd/nyssa/>). Cf. Ulrike Gantz, *Gregor von Nyssa: Oratio consolatoria in Pulcheriam*, Chrēsis: Die Methode der Kirchenväter im Umgang mit der antiken Kultur, 6 (Basel: Schwabe, 1999); Robert C. Gregg, *Consolation Philosophy: Greek and Christian Paideia in Basil and the Two Gregories* (Patristic Monograph Series 3; Cambridge, Mass.: Philadelphia Patristic Foundation, 1975); Monique Alexandre, “Le *De mortuis* de Grégoire de Nysse,” *StPatr* 10 (1970) 35–43.

one of the key moments of advancement in the anagogical ascent to a higher level of participation in the life of God.

Finally, John Behr has argued against the familiar interpretation of Gregory having a low view of sexuality. He disputes the view that Gregory believed sexuality to have originated after the fall. Behr insists that for Gregory sexual intercourse was God's good gift already before the fall. This interpretation—remarkable in the light of all preceding Gregory scholarship—wrongly moves from Gregory's positive evaluation of embodiment to an insistence that the sexual passions of human beings are constitutive of their very identity, which of course implies that the passions are not subject to anagogical transposition into something of much greater and more ultimate concern.<sup>16</sup>

These new readings of Gregory, while amenable to a contemporary western mindset that tends to react sharply against premodern views of salvation due to its alleged dualism between body and soul and its concomitant supposedly low view of embodiment and sexuality, does not do justice to Gregory's overall position. It is true that one finds in the Cappadocian mystic a remarkably integrated anthropology. It is also true, as we will see, that Gregory has a positive view of the human body and that desire is something God uses to bring about human participation in his own goodness and beauty. We must keep in mind, however, the centrality of anagogy in Gregory's approach. Readings such as those of Hart, Williams, and Behr render a sanitized Cappadocian, whose theology is strikingly accommodating to our modern and postmodern views of the body and of sexuality.

16. John Behr, "The Rational Animal: A Rereading of Gregory of Nyssa's *De hominis opificio*," *J ECS* 7 (1999) 219–47. Behr's views center on how to interpret Chapters XVI, XVII, and XXII of *De hominis opificio*. Behr's views do not stand careful scrutiny of the text. First, Gregory maintains that the eschaton is a restoration of paradise. Since there will be no marriage in heaven (Luke 20:35–36) Gregory believes there was no marriage (or sexuality) in paradise. Second, Gregory believes that although God created gendered human existence prior to the fall, he did so *because* he foreknew the fall. Gendered existence was God's way of making provision for procreation after the fall. Third, by means of allegorical exegesis, Gregory argues here that there was no physical nutrition in paradise: Wisdom, or the Good, was the "tree of life." This is in line with Gregory's fascinating exegesis of the two paradisaical trees in his commentary on the Song of Songs (*Homilies* 12, 366–71). For an excellent refutation of Behr's idiosyncratic position, see J. Warren Smith, "The Body of Paradise and the Body of the Resurrection: Gender and the Angelic Life in Gregory of Nyssa's *De hominis opificio*," *HTR* 92 (2006) 207–28. Sutcliffe's 1931 article on paradise in Gregory may also serve as a rebuttal of Behr's reading. Sutcliffe shows that for Gregory paradise is not an earthly reality at all, but is a "supramundane region" without food, biological functions, and marriage; as a result, Gregory allegorizes the account of Gen 2–3. See E. F. Sutcliffe, "St. Gregory of Nyssa and Paradise," *Ecclesiastical Review*, NS 4 (1931) 337–51.

In this essay, I will argue that both the transposition of the human body (and the bodily senses) through deification in Christ and the transposition of the textual body from obvious to hidden meaning imply for Gregory an anagogical ascent from the material to the spiritual realm. Furthermore, these two transpositions are closely intertwined. The reader of the Song of Songs is only able to transpose the textual body of Scripture to the extent that his erotic desires are reoriented in Christ, and it is only an allegorical or anagogical interpretation of the Song of Songs that redirects the reader's desires from "brutish, irrational passions" to "incorporeal and spiritual and undefiled marriage with God."<sup>17</sup> Gregory, I will argue, believes that only by recognizing the significance of this twofold anagogical ascent will we be able to do justice to the saving role of Christ as the new bodily garment and to the church as the body of Christ. This essay is about saving bodies: trying to save the bodily senses and the textual body of Scripture without anagogical transposition renders us unable to recognize sufficiently the saving bodies of Christ (our bodily garment) and of the church (the body of Christ). This seems to be St. Gregory of Nyssa's view, and it is my belief that there is a great deal we can continue to learn from this rather "otherworldly" perspective.

First, I will discuss Gregory's understanding of sense perception (Section I, "Bodily Senses"). I will make clear that Gregory operates with a clear distinction between bodily sense perception and spiritual sense perception. Although both are God's gift and the two are interconnected, Gregory's concern with anagogy means that he prizes the latter above the former. Second, I will turn to Gregory's understanding of interpretation (Section II, "Bodily Text"). Here, I will discuss Gregory's defence of allegory as well as his use of such exegesis in connection with the Song of Songs. Gregory regards the text of Scripture as the divinely given means for participation in the divine life. Third, I will discuss what this participation looks like as we put on the Lord Jesus Christ by training the virtues (Section III, "Bodily Garments"). Gregory is deeply concerned with the life of virtue—not, it turns out, because he is a moralist, but because the life of virtue is itself a participation in the divine life and as such constitutes salvation.

Two caveats are in order, however, before I proceed. The first caveat has to do with the relationship between Gregory's understanding of salvation and traditional atonement models, such as Christus Victor, moral influence, and penal substitution. At first blush, this paper may seem only tangentially related to the theme of atonement. Indeed, this paper hardly discusses the traditional atonement models.

17. *Homilies* 1, 15.

There is a theological reason, however, for the lack of focus on these models. I do not dispute that Gregory regards Christ's life as a model of some kind in order to restore the image of God in human beings, nor do I mean to deny that a certain kind of exchange or substitution does occur in Gregory's writings, including his commentary on the Song of Songs. This paper will touch on both of these aspects. But scouring Gregory's writings to try and fit them in such predetermined frameworks would obscure the pattern (*akolouthia*) of Gregory's own line of thinking, a pattern that is of great importance to him.<sup>18</sup> Gregory's view of salvation simply cannot easily be slotted into one or more of the frameworks that make up our common theologies of atonement. This means that if we are to discuss atonement in Gregory we need to bracket our familiar models in order to determine what in his theology allows for at-one-ment. The answer to this question, which will become clear especially in the third section of the paper, is that Gregory believes it is Christ's uniting himself to our human nature that enables our participation in God's life; we come to God and are deified by being united to the universal human nature of Christ. In other words, it is the incarnation and our being united to Christ's humanity that atones and saves. This so-called "physical" approach to the atonement means that other categories are relegated to the background and perhaps need to be reconfigured (although that is a task beyond the confines of this paper).

The second caveat is that by focusing on only one of Gregory's writings I cannot provide a complete picture of his soteriology. Although St. Gregory is obviously convinced that the Song of Songs is meant to lead to salvation, the homilies focus on the relationship of the individual soul and the church (the bride) with Christ (the Bridegroom). This means that, although the objective work of Christ does enter into the picture, the subjective pole of salvation is much more prominent. Elsewhere in his writings Gregory does pay more attention to what we might want to call the "mechanics" of the atonement, or to what it is about the incarnation—and about Christ's person and work more broadly regarded—that enables us to reach salvation.<sup>19</sup> To

18. For the centrality of *akolouthia* in Gregory's thought, see Juan Antonio Gil-Tamayo, "Akolouthia," in *The Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa* (ed. Lucas Francisco Mateo-Seco and Guilio Maspero; trans. Seth Cherney; Supplements to *Vigiliae Christianae* 99; Leiden: Brill, 2010) 14–20; Paulos Mar Gregorios, *Cosmic Man: The Divine Presence: The Theology of St. Gregory of Nyssa (ca 330 to 395 A.D.)* (1980, reprint, New York: Paragon, 1988) 47–63; Jean Daniélou, "Akolouthia chez Grégoire de Nysse," *Recherches de Science Religieuse* 27 (1953) 219–49.

19. I am thinking, for example, of Gregory's *Oratio catechetica* (GNO III/4; ET: *The Catechetical Oration of St. Gregory of Nyssa* [ed. J. H. Srawley; Early Church Classics; London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1917]). Cf. the following overviews: Lucas Francisco Mateo-Seco, "Soteriology," in *Brill Dictionary*, 694–99; Andrew Klager, "Passive Sacramentalism and Ontological Soteriology in



some extent, therefore, this essay offers a one-sided account. Still, in his other works Gregory tends to be concerned mostly with the human involvement in the process of salvation, and mystical writings such as the homilies on the Songs give us genuine insight, therefore, into what Gregory felt was central to a Christian understanding of salvation.

### Bodily Senses

The notion that the five bodily senses corresponded and referred to spiritual senses originated with Origen and the Alexandrian tradition.<sup>20</sup> The doctrine of the spiritual senses subsequently made its way into St. Augustine's theology and thus became a mainstay in Western spirituality.<sup>21</sup> Although Gregory took a relatively independent stance vis-à-vis Origen, rejecting controversial teachings such as the pre-existence of the soul, the Alexandrian's commentary on the Song of Songs did impact Gregory's homilies. In fact, the influence is such that Gregory mentions Origen's commentary in his preface.<sup>22</sup> The doctrine of the spiritual senses is something that Gregory inherited from Origen's work and puts to pervasive use in his own commentary on the Song of Songs.<sup>23</sup> The numerous descriptions of sense perception throughout the

---

Hans Denck Gregory of Nyssa," *Direction* 35 (2006) 268–78; A. S. Dunstone, *The Atonement in Gregory of Nyssa* (London: Tyndale, 1964).

20. See Origen, *Spirit and Fire: A Thematic Anthology of His Writings* (ed. Hans Urs von Balthasar; trans. Robert J. Daly; 1984, reprint, Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2001) 218–57.

21. Cf. Carol Harrison, "Senses, Spiritual," in *Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia* (ed. Alan D. Fitzgerald; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 767–68.

22. *Homilies* Preface, 11: "If, however, we are eager, even after Origen has addressed himself lovingly and laboriously to the study of this book, to commit our own work to writing, let no one who has before his eyes the saying of the divine apostle to the effect that 'each one will receive his own reward in proportion to his labor' (1 Cor 3:8) lay a charge against us. As far as I am concerned, this work was not put together for the sake of display." For discussions dealing both with Origen's and Gregory's commentaries on the Song of Songs, see Mark W. Elliott, *The Song of Songs and Christology in the Early Church* (Studies and Texts in Antiquity and Christianity 7; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000) 15–18, 24–29; Andrew Louth, "Eros and Mysticism: Early Christian Interpretation of the Song of Songs," in *Jung and the Monotheisms: Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (ed. Joel Ryce-Menuhin; London: Routledge, 1994) 241–54; Richard A. Norris, "The Soul Takes Flight: Gregory of Nyssa and the Song of Songs," *Anglican Theological Review* 80 (1998) 517–32.

23. Cf. Frances Young's comment: "Perhaps the most striking thing about Gregory's exegesis of the Song is his emphasis on spiritual senses. He believes, not unlike Origen, that there is a correspondence between the motions and movements of the soul and the sense organs of the body, and it is soon apparent that this undergirds his positive embracing of the discourse of sexuality to describe the soul's advance towards God and response to the divine allure. The whole point is that our earthly response to

Song of Songs provide Gregory with a good deal of opportunity to describe salvation as a process of anagogy or ascent. As we will see, Gregory regards the various bodily sensations that he finds described in the Song not as literal descriptions of physical pleasure but instead as references to spiritual perception. A spiritual transposition is required to interpret properly the biblical allusions to physical perception and to the pleasure that it yields.

Gregory first comments on the spiritual senses when he discusses Song 1:2 (“Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth, for your breasts are better than wine, and the smell of your perfumed ointments is better than all spices.”<sup>24</sup> Gregory interprets the Bridegroom’s kisses as identical to the milk that flows from his breasts: by kissing the bride, the Lord touches the soul, while from his breasts—that is to say, from his heart—he nourishes the soul with divine teaching. The bride’s desire for the Groom’s mouth stands for the virginal soul’s thirsting for the fountain of truth, in accordance with John 7:37 (“If any one thirsts, let him come to me and drink”). The result of this teaching of the truth of Christ is that the soul comes to share in the virtues of God, the odours of the divine perfumes mentioned in the text.<sup>25</sup>

Since the Song itself thus mentions the senses of touch, taste, and smell, Gregory uses the opportunity to discuss the doctrine of the spiritual senses:

We also learn, in an incidental way, another truth through the philosophical wisdom of this book, that there is in us a dual activity of perception, the one bodily, the other more divine—just as Proverbs somewhere says, “You will find a divine mode of perception.” For there is a certain analogy between the sense organs of the body and the operations of the soul. And it is this that we learn from the words before us. For both wine and milk are discerned by the sense of taste, but when they are intelligible things, the power of the soul that grasps them is an intellectual power. And a kiss comes about through the sense of touch, for in a kiss lips touch each other. There is also, though, a “touch” that belongs to the soul, one that makes contact with the Word and is actuated by an incorporeal and intelligible touching, just as someone said, “Our hands have touched concerning the Word of life” (1 John 1:1). In the same way, too, the scent of the divine perfumes is not a scent in the nostrils but pertains to a certain intelligible

---

beauty gives us a taste of what it would mean to transcend surface appearance and discern the Lord as the object of beauty *par excellence*” (“Sexuality and Devotion: Mystical Readings of the Song of Songs,” *Theology & Sexuality* 14 [2001] 90–96, at 96).

24. For the Song of Songs I am following Norris’s translation (see footnote 3); for other biblical passages I am using the RSV.

25. *Homilies* 1, 34–41.

and immaterial faculty that inhales the sweet smell of Christ by sucking in the Spirit. Thus the sequel of the virgin's request in the prologue says: *Your breasts are better than wine, and the fragrance of your perfumed ointments is better than all spices.*<sup>26</sup>

Gregory speaks in this passage of an analogy (*analogia*) between sense organs of the body and operations of the soul.<sup>27</sup> The latter enable us to take in the divine teaching (through taste and touch) and to participate in the virtues of God (through smell).

In Homily 6 St. Gregory again finds occasion to elaborate on his understanding of the five spiritual senses, since Song 3:7 mentions “sixty mighty men” standing around Solomon's bed: “Behold Solomon's bed: sixty mighty men surround it out of the mighty men of Israel.” Convinced that the number of soldiers mentioned here must have a spiritual meaning, Gregory notes that five multiplied by twelve gives the number sixty, and he concludes from this that each of the twelve tribes must have five armed warriors guarding the royal bed.<sup>28</sup> Although on this interpretation of the number sixty, the text may seem to suggest five warriors from each tribe, Gregory explains that, really, there is only one man from each tribe:

Now is it not plain that these five warriors are the one human being, with each of its senses deploying the weapon proper to it for the consternation of its enemies? The eye's sword is to look across and through everything toward the Lord, and to contemplate what is right, and not to be defiled by any unseemly sight. Hearing's weapon, similarly, is hearkening to the divine teachings and refusal to take in vain talk. In this way it is also possible to arm taste and touch and smell with the word of self-control, protecting each of the senses in the appropriate manner. So come terror and amazement upon the dark enemies, whose plot against souls finds its opportunity in darkness and at night.<sup>29</sup>

Gregory's rendering of the spiritual senses is clearly moral in character. Spiritual sight looks to the Lord instead of anything unclean. Spiritual hearing listens to divine precepts rather than to vain words. Spiritual tastes, touch, and smell protect our

26. *Homilies* 1, 35–37.

27. Richard T. Lawson highlights the fact that Gregory's homilies regard all speech of God as analogous in character (“A Guide for the More Fleshly-Minded”: Gregory of Nyssa on Erotic and Spiritual Desire” [M.S.T. thesis, School of Theology of the University of the South, 2009] 31–46).

28. *Homilies* 6, 207.

29. *Homilies* 6, 209.

temperance. Since the text seems to have the twelve tribes in view, Gregory explains that this signifies the entire church. The one bed refers to the unity of all who find rest and so are saved. After all, the Lord comments in his parable that “the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed” (Luke 11:7). The Lord’s mentioning of children must, according to Gregory, refer to those who have reached the state of dispassion (*to apathes*). Whether one has never experienced passion (children) or has driven away passion (warriors), either way, one has found true happiness. Thus, Gregory concludes his homily by commenting that in such persons “there is found the child, or warrior, or true Israelite who has come to blessedness: the Israelite who with a pure heart sees God; the warrior who stands guard in invulnerability and purity over the royal bed—that is, his own heart; the child taking rest upon the blessed bed, in Christ Jesus our Lord, To whom be glory to the ages of ages. Amen.”<sup>30</sup>

We should not miss the strong sense of duality on which Gregory’s understanding of the senses is based. His theology of the spiritual senses displays the paradoxical character that he believes lies at the heart of the Song of Songs. God uses the material senses of the body to fortify the life of virtue and so to give us a share in his impassibility (*apatheia*). This means for Gregory that in an important sense the spiritual is opposed to the material and that salvation lies in the perfection of the former. In Homily 6 Gregory divides all of reality into two categories. On the one hand, the intelligible and nonmaterial has neither limit nor bound; on the other hand, the perceptible and material is limited and determined by quantity and quality. Gregory then subdivides the spiritual between the uncreated or First Cause, which is immutable, and the created, which changes for the better by being enhanced in perfection and in participation in that which transcends it.<sup>31</sup> Likewise, in Homily 11, when commenting on the beloved putting his hand through the opening and the bride’s belly crying out for him (Song 5:4), Gregory explains that the human soul has two natures: “One of them is incorporeal and intelligent and pure, while the other is corporeal and material and nonrational.”<sup>32</sup> He immediately follows up on this by mentioning the need for anagogical transposition: “When, therefore, cleansed as soon as possible of her inclination toward a gross and earthly life, the soul looks up with the help of virtue toward what is akin to her and closer to the divine.”<sup>33</sup>

30. *Homilies* 6, 211.

31. *Homilies* 6, 185–87.

32. *Homilies* 6, 353.

33. *Homilies* 6, 353. Cf. *Homilies* 12, 365: “For in us there is a dual nature. The one is fine and intelligent and light, while the other is coarse and material and heavy. Hence it is inevitable that in each of

Thus, through the interpretation of Scripture and through participation in divine virtues, the soul experiences a transposition away from the sensible or material and toward the intelligible and spiritual.<sup>34</sup> Salvation, for Gregory, implies ascent from the sensible to the intelligible, from the material to the spiritual. We can only properly understand Gregory's theology of salvation if we do justice to this twofold character of human nature. For Gregory, salvation itself is the anagogical transposition from the one to the other.<sup>35</sup>

It should not surprise that when St. Gregory looks for a place in the text that might legitimately expound this salvific transposition, he lingers on images of sleep and death. Since both these states imply inactivity of the bodily senses, Gregory interprets descriptions of sleep and death in the Song as indicative of the transposition from bodily to spiritual perception. For instance, when Gregory reads, "I sleep, but my heart is awake" (Song 5:2), he explains, "This sleep, though, is a stranger and alien to the ordinary course of nature. For in the usual sort of sleep, the sleeper is not awake, nor does one who is waking sleep: rather, sleep and wakefulness both come to an end in each other—they alternate in withdrawal from each other and come to each person by turns."<sup>36</sup> Mentioning each of the five senses, Gregory insists that sleep is an image of death since there "is no activity of seeing, or of hearing, or of smelling or tasting, or of touching in the season of sleep."<sup>37</sup> Gregory then explains how it is that one can be asleep and awake at the same time. He mentions the beautiful objects that we see in the created world and comments:

When vision of the truly good leads us to look beyond all such things, the bodily eye is inactive, for then the more perfect soul, which uses its understanding to look only on matters that are beyond seeing, is not drawn to any of the things to which that eye directs its attention. In the same way

---

these there be a dynamic that is proper to itself and irreconcilable with the other. For that in us which is intelligent and light has its native course upwards, but the heavy and material is ever borne, and ever flows, downwards."

34. Thus, Gregory comments in connection with interpretation that we "should not stick with the letter but, by a more deliberate and laborious way of understanding, transpose [*metalabein*] what is said to the level of spiritual comprehension, after distancing the mind from the literal sense."

35. Cf. the comment of Franz Dünzl: "Erlösung bedeutet in den *CantHom* vor allem 'Erziehung,' 'Aufstieg' und den 'Heilsweg der Liebe' . . ." (*Braut und Bräutigam: Die Auslegung des Canticum durch Gregor von Nyssa* (Beiträge zur Geschichte der biblischen Exegese 32; Tübingen: Mohr, 1993) 396.

36. *Homilies* 10, 327.

37. *Homilies* 10, 327.

too the faculty of hearing becomes a dead thing and goes out of operation when the soul occupies itself with things beyond speech.

As to the more bestial of the senses, they are hardly worth mentioning. Long since, like some graveyard stench attached to the soul, they have been put away: the sense of smell, scenting out odors; and the sense of taste, bound to the belly's service; and the sense of touch as well, the blind and servile organ that nature, we may think, created only for the sake of the blind. When all these are as it were bound in sleep by disuse, then the working of the heart is pure, and its discourse is focused on what is above it, untroubled and unaccompanied by the noise that stems from the stirrings of sense perception.<sup>38</sup>

Anagogical transposition implies a sharp disjunction. We now look beyond *all* perceptible things. The more perfect soul now looks *only* on matters that are beyond seeing, and the more bestial of the senses have "long since" (*porrōthen*) been put away.

In like manner, since hair lacks sensation, Gregory links the Bridegroom's comment, "Your hair is like flocks of goats" (Song 6:5) with St. Paul's comment that a woman's glory is her hair (1 Cor 11:15). The woman's hair in both texts refers to the believers' pursuit of the beautiful and the good: for the wise,

[s]ight does not serve as their criterion of beauty, taste does not provide their assessment of goodness, their judgment of virtue does not depend on smell or touch or any other organ of perception; on the contrary, all sense perception is done to death, and it is through the agency of the soul alone that they touch the good things and yearn for them as they are manifested in an intelligible form. In this manner they bring glory to the woman, the church, being neither puffed up by the honors accorded them nor shrunken down by pusillanimity in the face of pain.<sup>39</sup>

The transposition from physical to spiritual senses involves bodily renunciation. The denial is of such a radical character that Gregory latches on to hair as one of the few bodily elements that are without sensation in order to describe the required attitude toward the bodily senses.

Furthermore, since myrrh is a spice used for burying the dead, Gregory looks to the Song's references to myrrh as also indicative of the denial of the passions, and

38. *Homilies* 10, 329.

39. *Homilies* 15, 479.

he contrasts it with frankincense, which is used to praise God. Thus, myrrh stands for mortification while frankincense implies vivification. Gregory comments that

the person who intends to dedicate himself to the worship of God will not be frankincense burned for God unless he has first become myrrh—that is, unless he mortifies his earthly members, having been buried together with the one who submitted to death on our behalf and having received in his own flesh, through mortification of its members, that myrrh which was used to prepare the Lord for burial. When these things have come to pass, every species of the fragrances that belong to virtue—once they have been ground fine in the bowl of life as in some mortar—produces that sweet cloud of dust, and he who inhales it becomes sweet-smelling because he has become full of the fragrant Spirit.<sup>40</sup>

Anagogical transposition implies for Gregory a mortification of the bodily senses, so that one becomes dead to that which one perceives by means of these senses. Conversely, as we participate in the virtues of Christ, our lives begin to give off the odour of frankincense and other sweet-smelling perfumes.

In this discussion, Gregory carefully balances the otherness of God with the fact that we genuinely image him. Commenting on Song 1:12 (“My spikenard gave off his scent”), Gregory distinguishes between the spikenard itself and its scent: “[T]he words of the text are teaching us this, namely, that that Reality, whatever it is in its essence, which transcends the entire structure and order of Being, is unapproachable, impalpable, and incomprehensible but that, for us, the sweetness that is blended within us by the purity of the virtues takes its place because by its own purity it images that which is by nature the Undeified.”<sup>41</sup> St. Gregory also uses the sense of sight to describe this same participation by way of imitation. The eye functions as a mirror. When the Bridegroom says that the bride’s eyes are doves, he refers, according to Gregory, to the fact that when a person looks at an object, its image is reflected in the eye. We do not gaze upon the divine glory itself. Nonetheless, explains Gregory, when the soul’s “purified eye has received the imprint of the dove, she is also capable of beholding the beauty of the Bridegroom.”<sup>42</sup> When in Song 5:12 the Bridegroom’s

40. *Homilies* 6, 202–03. Cf. *Homilies* 7, 253–55; 8, 263; 12, 363–67; 14, 427–31.

41. *Homilies* 3, 99. Cf. *Homilies* 1, 39: “For whatever name we may think up, she says, to make the scent of the Godhead known, the meaning of the things we say does not refer to the perfume itself. Rather does our theological vocabulary refer to a slight remnant of the vapor of the divine fragrance. In the case of vessels from which perfumed ointment is emptied out, the ointment itself that has been emptied out is not known for what it is in its own nature.”

42. *Homilies* 4, 117.

eyes are compared to doves (“doves by pools of waters, washed in milk, sitting by pools of waters”) Gregory comments on the fact that, unlike water, milk does not reflect any image. This should stir in us the highest praise for the Bridegroom’s eyes, that is, for the church’s teachers: “[T]hey do not mistakenly image anything unreal and counterfeit and empty that is contrary to what truly is but look upon what *is* in the full and proper sense of that word. They do not take in the deceitful sights and fantasies of the present life. For this reason, the perfect soul judges that it is the bath in milk that most surely purifies the eyes.”<sup>43</sup> As a result, in the clear mirror of the church one indirectly sees the Sun of Righteousness itself (Mal 4:2).<sup>44</sup> While human beings’ virtuous lives genuinely mirror God, our spiritual senses do not grasp the essence of the divine glory itself.

A word of caution may be in order at this point. Gregory’s focus on the spiritual senses does not mean that he regards the bodily senses as unimportant. Contemporary Gregory of Nyssa research is right to highlight the commonality between animals and human beings in terms of embodiment, and it is also true that Gregory regards the human passions positively in that they serve to draw us closer to God.<sup>45</sup> Nonetheless, Gregory’s theology of the spiritual senses makes clear that he regards anagogical transposition as absolutely essential to the process of salvation. We do not do justice to the Cappadocian mystic by domesticating his theology. We must keep his focus on bodily renunciation as central. Embodied existence and bodily senses are important for Gregory precisely because they allow for a transposition to spiritual perception, which is to say, to a life of participation in divine virtue. Without the sensuous images of the Song of Songs, we would have no way to express the transposition that characterizes the Christian life. For Gregory, it is the body and its senses that allow for anagogical ascent. But to regard the bodily senses themselves as ultimate would be, according to St. Gregory at least, to misconstrue the nature of the good and the beautiful. Bodily passions serve bodily pleasure. For Gregory, a focus on bodily passions involves a radical misconception of the nature of salvation. Salvation means transposition of our passions from this-worldly to otherworldly

43. *Homilies* 13, 417–19. Cf. *Homilies* 7, 229–31. Gregory uses the language of a reflecting mirror not only for the eye but also for human nature as a whole. Thus, human nature either reflects Beauty or it reflects the image of the Serpent (*Homilies* 4, 115; 5, 163; 15, 467–69).

44. *Homilies* 8, 269–71.

45. It also appears that there is some development in Gregory’s thought, with later works being more positive than earlier works with regard to human embodiment. See, for instance, Ludlow, “Gregory of Nyssa and the Body.”



realities. Such a transposition from bodily to spiritual senses demands a radical re-orientation of human desires and passions.

### Bodily Text

The “obvious sense” (*procheiros emphasis*) of the text, as St. Gregory repeatedly calls the literal meaning,<sup>46</sup> functions in a manner analogous to the role played by the physical body. Like the physical body, the “obvious sense” of the text—or, as I will call it here, the “bodily text”—is indispensable.<sup>47</sup> Without the bodily text, Gregory does not believe it is possible for the text to serve in the useful way that it is meant to serve. At the same time, we will see that the “obvious sense”—the bodily text—is not ultimate. It is not just the physical body that must be anagogically transposed; the bodily text of Scripture too undergoes a transposition that allows us, through a redirection of the passions to move away from the straightforward meaning of the text in order to contemplate its spiritual reality. For Gregory salvation requires us to be in tune with the purpose of Scripture. Since salvation involves a redirection or transposition of the passions, our reading of Scripture should follow the same anagogical pattern. What is more, the ascent from the bodily senses enables the anagogy of the biblical text and vice versa.

Gregory is well aware of the controversial character of what is often called allegorical interpretation. He introduces his commentary with a preface in which he defends the practice over against certain church leaders (*tisi tōn ekklēsiastikōn*)—likely some of the more literalist interpreters from the Antiochian tradition—who “stand by the letter” (*paristasthai tē lexei*) of Holy Scripture rather than take into account the “enigmas and below-the-surface meanings” (*ainigmatōn te kai hyponoiōn*).<sup>48</sup> For Gregory, what is important is the biblical precedent for a deeper or spiritual meaning, not the terminology used to describe it. Most of the preface consists of an appeal to biblical passages that, on Gregory’s understanding, support the use of anagogical transposition in the exegesis of Scripture.<sup>49</sup>

46. *Homilies* Preface, 3; Preface, 5; Preface, 7; Preface, 11; 1, 31; 1, 33; 5, 153; 12, 381.

47. Throughout this essay, my “bodily text” and Gregory’s “obvious meaning” will be regarded as identical. Thus, my phrase “bodily text” does not refer to the *words* on the page; instead I mean the surface-level or literal *meaning* of the text.

48. *Homilies* Preface, 3. Cf. Cahill, “Date and Setting,” 447–60; Ronald E. Heine, “Gregory of Nyssa’s Apology for Allegory,” *VC* 38 (1984) 360–70.

49. Gregory appeals to the following passages: Rom 7:14; Gal 4:24; 1 Cor 10:11; 9:9–10; 13:12; 2 Cor 3:16, 6. In addition, he also appeals to various OT texts that he believes do not make sense if taken literally.

With regard to terminology, Gregory shows himself clearly indifferent. The Antiochians tended to regard the term “allegory” (*allēgoria*) with suspicion because of its allegedly arbitrary and ahistorical connotations and preferred to speak of “contemplation” (*theōria*) instead. Gregory, although influenced by the allegorical tradition of Origen and the other Alexandrians, refuses to make terminology an issue. He often adopts the language of *theōria*, most famously in the twofold division of *De vita Moysis*, where the first part gives a historical rendering of Moses’ life (*historia*), while the second part provides the contemplative meaning (*theōria*).<sup>50</sup> In the preface to his Songs commentary, Gregory reiterates his indifference regarding terminology: “One may wish to refer to the anagogical interpretation of such sayings as ‘tropology’ or ‘allegory’ or by some other name. We shall not quarrel about the name as long as a firm grasp is kept on thoughts that edify.”<sup>51</sup>

While Gregory restricts his defence to an appeal to biblical precedent, much more is at stake. Interpretation, for Gregory, is not primarily a search for authorial intent. He reads Scripture for the sake of the usefulness that it has with regard to salvation. St. Paul is concerned, maintains Gregory in his preface, to interpret “in accordance with what gives him satisfaction [*areskon*] in his search for what edifies [*ōphelimon*].”<sup>52</sup> The latter aspect, the “usefulness” of Scripture, is an important category for Gregory. This “usefulness” is something we come to know “by spiritual inquiry and discernment” (*dia tēs pneumatikēs theōrias*).<sup>53</sup> Thus, when he discusses Song 2:3 (“As the apple among the trees of the wood, so is my kinsman among the sons”), Gregory rhetorically questions what this text could possibly be driving at: “[W]hat guidance in virtue would there be in this, unless there were some idea profitable [*ti noēma tōn ōphelountōn*] for us contained in the words?”<sup>54</sup> This passage makes clear that usefulness has to do, for Gregory, with growth in virtue (*aretē*). Drobner rightly comments that “Gregory’s allegorizing is based on soteriology and ethics. At the beginning, the question of the utility (*ōpheleia*) for believers is asked.”<sup>55</sup> For Gregory, right interpretation is useful interpretation.

50. See Gregory’s *De vita Moysis* (GNO VII/1; ET: *The Life of Moses* [trans. Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson; Classics of Western Spirituality; New York: Paulist, 1978]).

51. *Homilies* Preface, 3–5.

52. *Homilies* Preface, 5.

53. *Homilies* 15, 463.

54. *Homilies* 4, 139.

55. Hubertus R. Drobner, “Allegory,” in *Brill Dictionary*, 21–26, at 24. Cf. also Manlio Simonetti, “Exegesis,” in *Brill Dictionary*, 331–38.

This moral usefulness, the aim of virtue, can hardly be overestimated. Anagogical transposition means, according to Gregory, transposition into the goodness and beauty of God himself. Anagogical interpretation thus leads to participation in divine virtue. Throughout his homilies Gregory comments on the centrality of virtue, noting that virtue is the deeper meaning to which the words of the Song refer. Whether the talk is of perfumes,<sup>56</sup> of the vine's branches that shoot out,<sup>57</sup> of necklaces,<sup>58</sup> of cedar beams,<sup>59</sup> of blossoms,<sup>60</sup> of Solomon's crown,<sup>61</sup> of a pomegranate,<sup>62</sup> of honeycomb,<sup>63</sup> of a paradisaal garden,<sup>64</sup> of the bride's teeth,<sup>65</sup> or of lilies,<sup>66</sup> in each case Gregory sees a reference to the soul's life of virtue. We store the fruit of Wisdom in our hearts as in a beehive, imitating the wise bee in the "noble work of the virtues."<sup>67</sup> To the modern reader, such omnipresence of virtue may well seem arbitrary.<sup>68</sup> To Gregory, however, the recognition of virtue in the biblical text is simply a matter of being faithful to its purpose or scope, namely, the salvific transposition of the soul into the life of God. As David Ney puts it: "When we interpret Gregory's spiritual interpretations in light of his hermeneutic of virtue, we find that they are all simply different expressions of his allegorical impulse to transform the

56. *Homilies* 1, 37–39; 3, 101; 4, 137; 9, 281–83; 9, 287; 10, 323; 12, 363–65.

57. *Homilies* 2, 67.

58. *Homilies* 3, 91.

59. *Homilies* 4, 121–23.

60. *Homilies* 5, 165–67.

61. *Homilies* 7, 225.

62. *Homilies* 7, 241.

63. *Homilies* 9, 285.

64. *Homilies* 9, 289–99.

65. *Homilies* 7, 239.

66. *Homilies* 15, 469.

67. *Homilies* 9, 285.

68. The question of arbitrariness often comes up by way of objection to patristic and medieval allegorizing. A full response to this objection lies beyond the scope of this paper but would have to include discussion of the following elements: (1) the wide variety of results yielded by historical critical exegesis, which opens it up to the same charge of arbitrariness; (2) the often remarkable similarities in approach and actual exegetical outcome among a broad range of pre-modern interpreters; (3) the church's liturgy and "rule of faith" as setting boundaries for what constitutes proper interpretation; (4) the Spirit's guidance of the faithful in the church in adhering faithfully to the divine intentions of the church's book; (5) the function of "usefulness" as simply being more important to the believer than arriving at the exact authorial intent; and (6) many pre-modern interpreters' openness to multiple interpretations of one particular text.

literal text into an agent of perfection in virtue.”<sup>69</sup> In other words, for Gregory, the bodily text is simply an occasion for anagogical transposition into a life of virtue.

Not only is the life of virtue the very *purpose* of the exegetical enterprise, which justifies its allegorical approach, but virtue is also a *prerequisite* for proper interpretation. Searching for the hidden meaning of Scripture is like moving from the outside of the tabernacle into the holy of holies itself. We will only recognize its marvels after “washing off in the bath of reason all the filth of shameful thinking.”<sup>70</sup> When he embarks on Homily 3, Gregory comments that the verses of the previous two homilies were not yet “a pure light” but “were calculated to point us to the rising of the true light.”<sup>71</sup> Gregory then announces:

Now, however, the voice of the Bridegroom himself, like a sun’s orb, rises up and eclipses with the light of its rays all the brightness both of the stars that shone earlier and of the glistening dawn.

To be sure, the previous passages all have the power that belongs to means of purification and lustration. By their agency souls that have been purified are prepared for the reception of the divine. But the words of the present passage are a participation in the Godhead itself, since the divine Word in his own voice confers on the hearer a fellowship with the undefiled Power.

And just as Israel, at Mount Sinai, was prepared beforehand for two days by rites of purification and then, at dawn on the third day, was judged worthy of the theophany (cf. Exod 19:10–11), being no longer busied with the cleansing of garments but openly receiving God himself, for whose sake the soul’s filth had been washed away by the earlier purifications, so now, in our own case, the insight into the prefatory parts of the Song of Songs that we achieved on the preceding two days in our earlier homilies has been of profit to the extent that the sense contained in the words has been washed and scrubbed to remove the filth of the flesh.<sup>72</sup>

69. David Ney, “Gregory of Nyssa’s Hermeneutic of Virtue” (Th.M. thesis, Regent College, 2010) 159.

70. *Homilies* 2, 49. For detailed discussions of Gregory’s description of the Song of Songs as holy of holies, see Martin Laird, “Under Solomon’s Tutelage”; Norris, “The Soul Takes Flight.” The innermost sanctuary (*adyton*) plays an important role in Gregory’s theology since it symbolizes the place where the soul comes to the mystical knowledge of God. Cf. Lucas Francisco Mateo-Seco, “*Adyton*,” *Brill Dictionary*, 6–8.

71. *Homilies* 3, 79.

72. *Homilies* 3, 79–81.

Gregory, preaching his third sermon in the Lenten period, insists that the first two sermons affected the purgation of the believers, just as the Israelites prepared themselves for two days before God would come down for them on Mount Sinai. Only after two days of extensive preparatory preaching are the people ready to enter into the divine presence itself and can take the next step in the interpretation of the Song of Songs.<sup>73</sup>

This spiritual preparation requires not only tremendous human effort, but it likewise means that the anagogical transposition depends on the Spirit's grace. Speaking of the custom of sailors offering up prayer before venturing on a sea journey, Gregory comments:

Before our discourse there stretches the vast ocean of insight and inquiry into the divine words. From this venture we hope for great riches in the way of knowledge, and this animate ship of ours, the church, with its own full crew, looks expectantly forward to its voyage of explication. But no sooner does the helmsman, who is our reason, lay a hand on the tiller than a common prayer is raised to God by the whole company aboard the ship: that the power of the Holy Spirit may blow upon us and stir up the waves of our thoughts, and that by their means it may prosper the voyage of our discourse and lead it on a direct course. In this way, finding ourselves on the high seas in our search for insight, we will traffic in the riches of knowledge, always supposing that in response to your prayer the Holy Spirit comes to fill the sails of our discourse.<sup>74</sup>

It is only when the Holy Spirit blows into the church's sails that the readers of Scripture are equipped to understand it and so to attain to the wealth of saving knowledge, which is the purpose of the voyage.

This life of virtue, both as preparation for and as outcome of spiritual interpretation, is itself a participation in the divine life. Western readers (perhaps especially Protestants) may well be put off by Gregory's focus on virtue, especially since it is accompanied with a strong emphasis on free will.<sup>75</sup> We should keep in mind, however, that for Gregory the life of virtue is never something independent from God.<sup>76</sup>

73. Cf. *Homilies* 9, 277, where Gregory enjoins his hearers that they should "attend to today's passage as persons who are dead to the body and draw out no fleshly meaning from its words."

74. *Homilies* 12, 361–63.

75. For Gregory's repeated insistence on free will, see *Homilies* 2, 55; 4, 115; 5, 173; 7, 221; 10, 321; 12, 363–65; 14, 433; 15, 487–89.

76. For discussions on the relationship between grace and free will in Gregory, see Lucas Francisco Mateo-Seco, "Grace," in *Brill Dictionary*, 364–67; Daniel F. Stramara, "Jesus as Moral Exemplar and

Human goodness is a participation in divine goodness, a participation that in no way lessens the transcendence of God, since God's infinity implies that the soul's desire will never be satiated and will always continue to stretch forward in its participatory journey in the life of God. Gregory explains:

As, therefore, the divine Nature draws human nature to participation in itself, it always surpasses that which participates in it to the same degree, in conformity with its superabundance of goodness. For the soul is always becoming better than itself on account of its participation in the transcendent. It does not stop growing, but the Good that is participated remains in unaltered degree as it is, since the being that ever more and more participates in it discovers that it is always surpassed to the same extent.<sup>77</sup>

The progression appears to be an orderly structured entry into God's life. The human race, says Gregory, "does not achieve its perfect state again all at once, as at its first creation. Rather does it advance toward the better along a road of sorts, in an orderly fashion [*akolouthias*], one step after another, and rids itself bit by bit of its susceptibility to that which opposes its fulfillment."<sup>78</sup> This never-ceasing and ordered progression in virtue constitutes Gregory's doctrine of *epektasis*: the soul continuously stretches forth throughout eternity.<sup>79</sup> Salvation, therefore, is not simply the result of moralistic striving. Instead, it is a matter of having one's desires so transposed that the virtuous life becomes a progressive participation in the virtuous life of God.<sup>80</sup> Salvation, for Gregory, is participation in God, a never ceasing deifying participation.

---

Saviour according to Gregory of Nyssa," *The Patristic and Byzantine Review* 25/1-3 (2007) 10-21; Verna E. F. Harrison, *Grace and Human Freedom according to St. Gregory of Nyssa* (Studies in the Bible and Early Christianity 30; Lewiston, N.Y.: Mellen, 1992); Gregorios, *Cosmic Man*, 199-218; Donald C. Abel, "The Doctrine of Synergism in Gregory of Nyssa's *De instituto christiano*," *The Thomist* 45 (1981) 430-48; Ekkehard Mühlenberg, "Synergism in Gregory of Nyssa," *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 68 (1977) 93-122; Adolf Martin Ritter, "Die Gnadenlehre Gregors von Nyssa nach seiner Schrift 'Über das Leben des Mose,'" in *Gregor von Nyssa und die Philosophie: Zweites internationales Kolloquium über Gregor von Nyssa; Freckenhorst bei Münster 18.-23 September 1972* (ed. Heinrich Dörrie, Margarete Altenburger, and Uta Schramm; Leiden: Brill, 1976) 195-239; A. S. Dunstone, "The Meaning of Grace in the Writings of Gregory of Nyssa," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 15 (1962) 235-44.

77. *Homilies* 5, 171. Cf. *Homilies* 5, 151.

78. *Homilies* 15, 487.

79. Cf. Everett Ferguson, "God's Infinity and Man's Mutability: Perpetual Progress according to Gregory of Nyssa," *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 18 (1973) 59-78; Kristina Robb-Dover, "Gregory of Nyssa's 'Perpetual Progress,'" *Theology Today* 65 (2008) 213-25.

80. The notion of *epektasis* comes from Phil 3:13-14, in which Paul comments, "Brethren, I do

Since he regards the soul's salvific process and the anagogical interpretation of the Song as linked, Gregory believes that the Song is structured in such a way as to enable the soul's growth in deification. The Song follows an ordered pattern of ascending steps. We already saw that at the beginning of his third homily, Gregory explained that the first two homilies had been presented by way of purgation, so that now the reader could enter into the innermost sanctuary of the divine presence.<sup>81</sup> This same sense of structured progression comes to the fore when, throughout the text of his homilies, Gregory inserts brief sections that summarize the various steps of ascent that the soul has already taken.<sup>82</sup> Although these steps are orderly and each one allows the soul genuinely to move upward, Gregory's doctrine of *epektasis* means that every ascending step is like a new beginning. When he introduces his fifth homily, Gregory comments: "I reckoned that the soul that had been exalted through so many stages had achieved the height of blessedness. Yet it seems that what has already been accomplished is still the preliminary stage of her climb."<sup>83</sup> The perpetual progression of the soul matches the perpetual progression of the Song.

This orderly "epektatic" anagogy also corresponds to an anagogical transposition from OT to NT. When Song 2:9 says that the Bridegroom "stands behind our wall, leaning through the windows, peering through the lattices," Gregory comments:

The anagogical sense [*hē de kata anagōgēn theōria*] of the words, however, adheres closely to the line of thought we have already uncovered, for the Word follows a certain path and a certain sequence [*hodō gar kai akolouthia*] in adapting human nature to God. First of all he shines upon it by means of the prophets and the law's injunctions. (This is our interpretation: the windows are the prophets, who bring in the light, while the lattices are the network of the law's injunctions. Through both of them the beam of the true Light steals into the interior.) After that, however, comes the Light's perfect illumination, when, by its mingling with our nature, the true Light shows itself to those who are in darkness and the shadow of death. At an earlier stage, then, the beams of the prophetic and legal ideas,

---

not consider that I have made it my own; but one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward [*epekteinomenos*] to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." Gregory often refers to this verse, both in these homilies and elsewhere. Cf. Catherine LeBlanc, "Naked and Unashamed: Epektasis in Gregory of Nyssa's Commentary on the Song of Songs" (M.A. thesis, University of St. Michael's College, 2007); Daniélou, *Platoni et théologie mystique*, 291–307.

81. *Homilies* 3, 79–81. Cf. Norris, "Introduction," xxxii–xxxiii.

82. See, for example, *Homilies* 4, 129; 5, 151; 6, 189–91.

83. *Homilies* 5, 151.

which illumine the soul by way of its windows and lattices, as we have understood, induce a desire to see the sun in the open air, and then, in the way indicated, the Desired steps forward to do his work.<sup>84</sup>

The windows and the lattices, i.e., the prophets and the law, allowed only some of the light to enter. The gospel, by contrast, allows the fullness of the light to shine in on us.<sup>85</sup> The progress of anagogical salvation takes place only in and through the newness of the gospel, that is to say, in and through Christ, the true Solomon.<sup>86</sup>

The bodily text of the Song, its “obvious sense,” is not unimportant to Gregory. Nonetheless, Gregory’s approach clearly hinges on an anagogical transposition away from the bodily text to a spiritual participation in divine goodness and beauty. The words of the text are important for Gregory precisely because of the veiled character of the truth.<sup>87</sup> The “obvious sense” must be taken into account because it is precisely the references to bodily senses and bodily passions that allow the spiritual transposition to take place. The ultimate concern though for Gregory as a preacher is that his hearers move *through* the bodily text in order to attain salvation, the spiritual reality of progressive participation in the life of God.

### Bodily Garments

So far we have seen that salvation for Gregory means anagogical transposition into deifying participation in virtue and in the goodness of God. We have, however, not yet sufficiently asked the question of the role of Christ in this saving process. One way in which to address Christ’s role in saving human beings is by discussing the imagery of a change in clothing, a metaphor that Gregory often uses to describe the saving transposition. Gregory’s soteriology is predicated on a contrast between “tunics of hide” and the “holy garb” of the Lord Jesus Christ. The very opening words of the first homily illustrate the contrast:

You who in accordance with the counsel of Paul have “taken off” the old humanity with its deeds and lusts like a filthy garment [*peribolaion*] (Col

84. *Homilies* 5, 158–59.

85. Cf. *Homilies* 5, 173–75; 9, 281–83; 10, 319.

86. *Homilies* 7, 215–19.

87. Witness, for example, the opening words of Homily 10: “The task now set us of probing these divine words taken from the Song of Songs involves thoughts that are difficult to understand and, because of their obscurity, hidden and ineffable. We have need, therefore, of greater diligence—or better, of greater assistance through prayer and of guidance on the part of the Holy Spirit” (*Homilies* 10, 311).



3:9) and have clothed yourselves by purity of life in the lightsome raiment [*himatia*] of the Lord, raiment such as he revealed in his transfiguration on the mountain (cf. Mark 9:2–3 and par.), or, rather, you who have “put on” our Lord Jesus Christ himself (Gal 3:27) together with his holy garb [*stolēs*] and with him have been transfigured for impassibility and the life divine: hear the mysteries of the Song of Songs.<sup>88</sup>

St. Paul’s mixed metaphor of an “old man” that he encouraged believers to “take off” so they could “put on” the “new man” (Eph 4:22; Col 3:9) was for the Alexandrian tradition reason to interpret the “garments of skin” or “tunics of hide” that God gave to Adam and Eve after the fall (Gen 3:21, *chitōnas dermatinous*) as the human body in its fallen condition. In line with this, the “putting on” of the “new man” became the reversal of the effects of the fall resulting from an identification with Jesus Christ and a renewal of the image of God (cf. Eph 4:24; Col 3:11). Gregory is no exception in this regard, though he is careful how he expresses himself: the human body itself is not a result of the fall but a good gift of the creator God.<sup>89</sup>

The believer’s identification with Christ in the “putting on” of the “new man” is evident not only in the passage already quoted, but also in Gregory’s reflections in Homily 11 on the bride’s words, “I have removed my tunic [*chitōna*]. How shall I put it on?” (Song 5:3). Not surprisingly, Gregory immediately spots here a reference to paradise and sees here a reversal of the effects of the fall. The bride “put off that ‘tunic of skin’ [*ton dermatinon ekeinon chitōna*] that she had put on after the sin (cf. Gen 3:21).”<sup>90</sup> This stripping off of the tunic of hide is, at the same time, one’s identification with Christ. Gregory comments:

88. *Homilies* 1, 15.

89. While Origen identifies the tunics of hide with the body as such, Gregory is much more circumspect, regarding the tunics of hide as the fallen condition of the mortal body. Cf. Lucas Francisco Mateo-Seco, “Tunics of Hide,” in *Brill Dictionary*, 768–70. In what follows, I analyze Gregory’s discussions of garments in his Songs commentary. He gives more systematic treatments in *De hominis opificio* (PG 44, 124–256; ET: *On the Making of Man*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, vol. 5, *Gregory of Nyssa: Dogmatic Treatises, Etc.* [ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace; trans. H. A. Wilson; 1893, reprint, Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994] 387–427) and in *De anima et resurrectione* (PG 46, 12–160; ET: *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, in *Saint Gregory of Nyssa: Ascetical Works* [trans. Virginia Woods Callahan; *The Fathers of the Church* 58; 1967, reprint, Washington, D. C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1999] 193–272).

90. *Homilies* 11, 347. Elsewhere, Gregory sees a reference to the fall in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10) in which Jesus “relates the downward journey of the human being, the thieves’ ambush, the stripping off of the incorruptible garment [*aphthartou endymatos*], the wounds of sin, death’s occupation of the half of human nature (the soul remains immortal)” (*Homilies* 14, 453).

So whoever has taken off the old humanity and rent the veil of the heart has opened an entrance for the Word. And when the Word has entered her, the soul makes him her garment [*endyma*] in accordance with the instruction of the apostle; for he commands the person who has taken off the rags [*rakōdē*] of the old humanity “to put on the new” tunic [*chitōna*] that “has been created after the likeness of God in holiness and righteousness” (Eph 4:24); and he says that this garment [*endyma*] is Jesus (cf. Rom 13:14).<sup>91</sup>

For Gregory, Jesus is the new tunic that the believer puts on when removing the old tunic of skin. Put differently, Gregory describes the anagogical transposition in such a way that our very bodily existence changes when in and through Christ we regain the immortality lost through the fall.

This identification with Christ in the putting on of bodily garments (a “new man” or “new tunic”) is of great importance for our understanding of Gregory’s doctrine of salvation. He closely aligns salvation with identification with Christ, to the point of insisting that an “exchange” takes place between Christ and the person who puts him on as a new tunic. Thus, when reflecting on the bride’s well-known comment that she is “dark and beautiful” (Song 1:5),<sup>92</sup> Gregory explains the first term as referring to the result of the fall and the second term as a reversal that takes place through the Bridegroom’s identification with his bride:

For she says: “Do not marvel that Righteousness has loved me. Marvel rather that when I was dark with sin and at home in the dark because of my deeds, he by his love made me beautiful, exchanging [*antallaxomenos*] his own beauty for my ugliness. For having transferred to himself the filth of my sins, he shared his own purity with me and constituted me a participant in his own beauty—he who first made something desirable out of one who had been repulsive and in this way acted lovingly.”<sup>93</sup>

Later Gregory has the bride exclaim, “For how shall I not love you, who so loved me—even when I was dark—as to lay down your life for the sheep that you shep-

91. *Homilies* 11, 347.

92. For extended discussion of Gregory’s reflections on this passage (along with racial implications) see Mark S. M. Scott, “Shades of Grace: Origen and Gregory of Nyssa’s Soteriological Exegesis of the ‘Black and Beautiful’ Bride in Song of Songs 1:5,” *HTR* 99 (2006) 65–83.

93. *Homilies* 2, 51.

herd? It is not possible to conceive a love greater than this: to give up the well-being of your life in exchange [*antallaxasthai*] for mine.”<sup>94</sup>

Gregory’s strong christological focus, along with the notion of “exchange,” should not be read through the lens of later Protestant-Catholic debates. Gregory does not have in mind a forensic exchange.<sup>95</sup> Rather, the removal of the tunic of hide is an ontological transposition that allows us to identify with Christ in and through the life of virtue. The growth of virtue is what constitutes our transposition into Christ. Thus, Gregory reminds us in his first homily on Moses’ decree that “no one should dare the ascent of the spiritual mountain until the garments [*himatia*] of our hearts are washed clean and our souls are purified by the appropriate sprinklings of reasoned thoughts (cf. Exod 19:10, 14).”<sup>96</sup> He makes the identification of a “new tunic” with new virtues even more explicit when in Homily 9 he reflects on Song 4:11 (“the fragrance of your garments [*himatiōn*] is as the fragrance of frankincense”). The combination of the mentioning of garments and of frankincense proves irresistible to Gregory. “This statement,” he maintains, “indicates what the goal of the life of virtue is for human beings. For the limit that the virtuous life approaches is likeness to the Divine.”<sup>97</sup> Gregory then goes on to speak about the weaving of a garment of virtues:

Now the virtuous manner of life is not uniform or marked by a single style, but just as in the making of a fabric [*hyphasmatōn*] the weaver’s art creates the garment by using many threads, some of which are stretched vertically and others are carried horizontally, so too, in the case of the virtuous life, many things must twine together if a noble life is to be woven. Just so the divine apostle enumerates threads of this sort, threads by means of which pure works are woven together; he mentions love and joy and peace, patience and kindness (cf. Gal 5:22) and all the sorts of thing that adorn the person who is putting on the garment of heavenly incorruptibility in place of [*metendyomenos*] a corruptible and earthly life (1 Cor 15:53). This is why the Bridegroom acknowledges that the adornment of the Bride’s garment [*esthēti*] is, as far as its fragrance goes, like frankincense.<sup>98</sup>

94. *Homilies* 2, 69. Cf. *Homilies* 15, 471: Paul renounced “his life so as to exchange [*antallaxētai*] his own suffering for the salvation of Israel.”

95. A. S. Dunstone misreads Gregory when he states that for Gregory, Christ’s sinlessness meant “that Christ was able to impute to others His own righteousness” (*Atonement in Gregory of Nyssa*, 26).

96. *Homilies* 1, 27.

97. *Homilies* 9, 287.

98. *Homilies* 9, 287.

For Gregory, there is no difference whatsoever between putting on Christ as a garment, on the one hand, and weaving for oneself a garment of virtue, on the other hand.

The result is that Gregory can apply the doctrine of *epektasis* also to the removal of the tunic of hide and to one's putting on the garment of Christ. We already saw that in Homily 9, Gregory reflects on the bride's comment, "I have removed my tunic [*chitōna*]. How shall I put it on?" (Song 5:3). He refers back to this statement when he notes the bride's comment that "the watchmen of the walls took my veil [*theristron*] away from me" (Song 5:7). Gregory begins by noting an apparent incongruity: "How, then, does one who has been stripped of all covering [*periblēmatos*] still wear the veil [*theristron*] that the *guards* now remove from her?"<sup>99</sup> Gregory explains this by referring to the soul's continuous (*epektatic*) ascent in virtue:

But is it not the case that these words show how much progress upward she has made from that previous state? She who had removed that old tunic [*chitōna*] and been freed of all covering [*peribolēs*] becomes so much purer than herself that by comparison with the purity that now becomes hers she does not seem to have taken off that clothing [*peribolaion*] but again, even after that former stripping, finds something on her to be taken off.<sup>100</sup>

The stripping of the garment and the removal of the veil become simply two stages of the continuous growth in virtue, a growth that Gregory regards identical to the putting on of Christ. For Gregory, it appears, it is impossible to separate the saving exchange between Christ and the soul, on the one hand, and the continuous growth in virtue, on the other hand.<sup>101</sup>

99. *Homilies* 12, 381.

100. *Homilies* 12, 381.

101. Shifting images somewhat, Gregory also adopts the Platonic imagery of "wings" that we have lost in the fall and that we regain through God's grace. The Song comments: "Turn your eyes away from that which is opposed to me, for they give me wings" (Song 6:5). Gregory connects Scripture's attribution of wings to God (Ps 17:8; 91:4; Deut 32:11; Matt 23:37) with our being made in God's image and likeness, and then proceeds to explain that the fall "robbed us of such wings as these" (*Homilies* 15, 475). When, however, God looked on his bride in love, he furnished her with new wings, so that the bride takes up the wings of a dove (*Homilies* 15, 475). Cf. Marguerite Harl, "Références philosophiques et références bibliques du langage de Grégoire de Nysse dans ses Orationes in Canticum canticorum," in *Hermēneumata: Festschrift für Hadwig Hörner zum sechzigsten Geburtstag* (ed. Herbert Eisenberger, Bibliothek der klassischen Altertumswissenschaften NS 2/7; Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1990) 117–31, at 120–21; Gregorios, *Cosmic Man*, 180–84; Jean Daniélou, "The Dove and the Darkness in Ancient Byzantine Mysticism," in *Man and Transformation: Papers from the Eranos Yearbooks* (ed. Joseph Campbell; trans. Olga Froebe-Kapteyn; Bollingen Series 30/5; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964) 270–96, at 276–79.

While this putting on of new bodily garments is clearly something for the individual soul to concern herself with, Gregory's theology of the body is not a purely individual matter. Anagogical transposition of salvation requires the church. Throughout his homilies Gregory moves effortlessly back and forth between an identification of the bride as the individual soul and as the church. The connection with Christ begins in the mystical water of baptism through which one enters into the church.<sup>102</sup> It is through belonging to the church that anagogical transposition takes place and that the individual soul finds salvation from sin and renewal in Christ.

The underlying rationale for this ecclesial focus in Gregory has to do with the incarnation. Christ identifies not just with individual people, but as the good shepherd he takes our entire human nature (*pasa hē anthrōpinē physis*) upon himself.<sup>103</sup> Brian Daley captures it well when he comments:

Gregory assumes . . . that the saving process begins in the revelation of the glory of God, and that the Son has achieved this in a new and unparalleled way in his life, death and resurrection, by the moral and physical transformation of weak human flesh. The real news of the Gospel, Gregory suggests here, is that the Word, who remains transcendent and unchanging, has taken on human nature in the man Jesus and made it his own, so

102. For Gregory, the "laver of rebirth" washes away the bride's "dark appearance" (*Homilies* 2, 53). Similarly, speaking of the Gentiles as represented by the Ethiopian queen, Gregory comments: "Those of the Gentiles who approach by way of faith and who once were far off draw near, having washed off their darkness in the mystical water" (*Homilies* 7, 217). The crossing of the Red Sea is liberation from servitude to the enemy through the "mystical water," from which one must rise up "purified, bringing along in one's subsequent life nothing of the Egyptian self-awareness" (*Homilies* 3, 87). The Jordan River, which springs from the peak of Sanir and Hermon (Song 4:8) "is for us the beginning of our being remodeled for existence at the level of the divine" (*Homilies* 8, 263). When the bride washes her feet (Song 5:3) this means "that she who has once and for all, through baptism, taken off her sandals (for it is the proper business of a baptizer to loose the thongs of those who are wearing sandals, just as John testified that he was unable to do this in the sole case of the Lord, for how could he loose one who had never been bound by the thong of sin?) she has had her feet washed and has shed, with her sandals, all earthy filth" (*Homilies* 11, 351). The Song describes the bride's hands dropping myrrh as she rises up to open the door to her beloved, the Word (Song 5:5) "For by these words she states the way in which the door is opened to the Bridegroom: 'I have risen up by being "buried with him through baptism into his death" (cf. Rom 6:4) for the resurrection does not become actual if it is not preceded by voluntary death"' (*Homilies* 12, 363; cf. *Homilies* 8, 263; 14, 429–31).

103. *Homilies* 2, 69. Gregory uses the same imagery in *Antirrheticus adversus Apollinarium* 16 (GNO III/1, 152–53) and in *Oratio catechetica* 32 (GNO III/4, 78). Cf. the comment of Lucas Francisco Mateo-Seco: "According to Gregory, the Word, in incarnating, unites Himself to his humanity through which He unites Himself to all human beings, taking all of humanity, the lost sheep, on his shoulders" ("Mystical Body," in *Brill Dictionary*, 515–18, at 515).

that “everything that was weak and perishable in our nature mingled with the Godhead, has become that which the Godhead is.”<sup>104</sup>

Christ, for Gregory, is the one in whom humanity and divinity come together so that we can become divine by participating in the deified humanity of Christ.

Gregory beautifully illustrates this significance of the incarnation at several points of his exegesis of the Song. First, the Song’s reference to an apple (2:3) must be a reference to Christ taking on human nature: “He who for love of humanity [*tēs physeōs hēmōn*] grew up in the woods of our nature became an apple by sharing flesh and blood. For in the coloring of this fruit one can see a likeness to each of these. By its whiteness it copies a characteristic of flesh, while its reddish tinge by its appearance attests its kinship with the nature of blood.”<sup>105</sup> Second, when the bride says to the Bridegroom, “Behold, you are fair, my beloved and beautiful, overshadowing [*syskios*] our bed” (1:16), the mentioning of the “bed” is, according to Gregory, a reference to the “blending” (*anakrasis*) or the “union” (*henōsis*) of the divine and human natures. Gregory’s exposition is worth quoting at length:

Then she adds: *thickly shaded [syskios] at our bed*. That is, “Human nature [*hē anthrōpinē physis*] knows you, or will know you, as the One who became shaded [*syskios*] by the divine Economy. For you came,” she says, “as the beautiful *kinsman*, the glorious one, who became present at our couch thickly shaded [*syskios*]. For if you yourself had not shaded yourself [*syneskiasas*], concealing the pure ray of your Deity by the ‘form of a slave’ (Phil 2:7), who could have borne your appearing? For no one shall see ‘the face’ of the Lord ‘and live’ (Exod 33:20). Therefore you, the glorious one, came, but you came in such wise as we are able to receive you. You came with the radiance of Divinity shaded [*syskiasas*] by the garment [*tē peribolē*] of a body.” For how could a mortal and perishable nature be adapted to live together with the imperishable and inaccessible, unless the shadow [*skia*] of the body had mediated between the Light and us who live in darkness (cf. Isa 9:1)?

In a figurative turn of speech the Bride uses the word *bed* to mean the mingling [*anakrasin*] of the human race with the Divine.<sup>106</sup>

104. Brian E. Daley, “Divine Transcendence and Human Transformation: Gregory of Nyssa’s Anti-Apollinarian Christology,” in *Re-Thinking Gregory of Nyssa* (ed. Sarah Coakley; Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2003) 67–76, at 69. Daley’s quotation from Gregory is taken from his letter *Ad Theophilum* (GNO III/1, 126).

105. *Homilies* 4, 139.

106. *Homilies* 4, 119–21.

Gregory here describes the human nature of Christ as a bodily garment (*peribolē*) that overshadows his divinity, so that the incarnation not only permits the divine nature to be present in and with the human nature but also allows us to see the very Son of God.

One of the characteristic elements of Gregory's doctrine of salvation is that he immediately links this union of the two natures to the ecclesial union between Christ and the church. Thus, the homily continues by saying that "the great apostle has the virgin—us—'betrothed' to Christ (2 Cor 11:2), and leads the soul in a bridal procession, and declares that the joining of the two in the communion [*koinōnian*] of one body is the great mystery of the union [*henōseōs*] of Christ with the church (cf. Eph 5:32)."<sup>107</sup> For Gregory the union of the two natures is almost the same as the union between Christ and the church. Christ's taking up of our human nature means, at the same time, that he nourishes his body, the church:

And since he once for all, through its firstfruits, drew to himself the mortal nature of flesh, which he took on by means of an uncorrupted virginity, he ever sanctifies the common dough of that nature through its firstfruits, nourishing his body, the church, in the persons of those who are united to him in the fellowship of the mystery; and those members that are grafted into him through faith he fits into the common body, and he fashions a comely whole by fitly and appropriately assigning believers to roles as eyes and mouth and hands and the other members.<sup>108</sup>

St. Gregory focuses on the union between the two natures of Christ to ground the salvation of the church and of humanity.<sup>109</sup>

Gregory regards, therefore, the ecclesial body as central to Christ's work of restoring human beings to salvation.<sup>110</sup> First Corinthians 12, with its reference to the

107. *Homilies* 4, 121.

108. *Homilies* 13, 403. For a similar move from human nature to the church, see *Homilies* 14, 449. Here Gregory speaks of Ps 92:12 [LXX 91:13], where the just man is described as a "cedar in Lebanon." Gregory comments: "For the truly righteous one (and the Lord is the righteous one who rose from the earth for our sake) the towering palm tree that rose up in the stuff of our nature, became a mountain abounding in the cedars that are people rooted in him by faith; and when these have been planted 'in the house' of God, 'they shall bloom in the courts of . . . God' ([LXX] Ps 91:14)" (*Homilies* 14, 449).

109. Cf. Joseph Munitz's comment: "With surprising facility he [i.e., Gregory] can turn from the individual 'body of Christ' to the whole of mankind" ("The Church at Prayer: Ecclesiological Aspects of St Gregory of Nyssa's *In Cantica Cantorum*," *Eastern Churches Review* 3 [1970/71] 385–95, at 393).

110. This is not the place to enter into a discussion of Gregory's doctrine of *apokatastasis* or restoration, which in most places he regards as universal in character. Cf. Ilaria L. E. Ramelli, "Christian Soteriology and Christian Platonism: Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, and the Biblical and Philosophical

church as Christ's body, is one of Gregory's favourite biblical passages as he reflects on the bride's identity. Gregory fastens on a reference to the Bridegroom's eyes being as doves (Song 5:12) as an occasion to comment on the need for a combination of the contemplative life (eyes) and the active life (hands), since St. Paul maintains that the eyes cannot dismiss the hands as unnecessary (1 Cor 12:21).<sup>111</sup> Repeatedly, Gregory focuses on the leaders of the church as being the "eyes" of the body.<sup>112</sup> The church as the body of Christ is of obvious importance to Gregory for the believers' growth in virtue and so for their participatory journey of salvation in God.<sup>113</sup> It is in and through the church as the body of Christ that the soul exchanges her tunic of hide for the new bodily garment of Christ himself. Or, to put it differently, the new tunic of Christ and the fellowship of the church are essential and closely linked bodily means of salvation.

Gregory thus regards bodily garments (the "new tunic" of Christ) and the body of the church as indispensable means for the anagogical transposition of all humanity. The new tunic and the church are, indeed, saving bodies, though, of course, the church's saving role is entirely dependent on and subservient to that of Christ. Gregory focuses on these bodies, the body of Christ in the incarnation as the "new tunic" for believers and the body of the church, in order to effect a salvific transposition. This transposition means that the life of virtue and bodily renunciation are integral to Gregory's understanding of salvation. A twofold anagogical transposition—of the bodily senses and of the bodily text—lies at the heart of Gregory's understanding of the soul's saving participation in the life of God. The undue focus of some contemporary Gregory of Nyssa scholarship on the physical body, human sexuality, and passions such as human grief misinterpret him at a key point. They underestimate the centrality of anagogical transposition in his theology. In so doing they deprive him of a much needed voice in a cultural context in which it has become

---

Basis of the Doctrine of Apokatastasis," *VC* 61 (2007) 313–56. It seems to me that Gregory does not neatly resolve the tension between the universal reach of Christ's salvation through his human nature and the requirement of the soul and of the church to conform to Christ.

111. *Homilies* 13, 415. Cf. *Homilies* 14, 431 for a similar reference.

112. *Homilies* 7, 227–29; 13, 417.

113. See also *Homilies* 13, 403; 14, 445–47; 14, 449. The significance of the church is such that Gregory, rather like St. Augustine, can describe the church as Christ himself. Thus, in *In illud: Tunc et ipse filius*, Gregory explains the reference to Christ's submission in 1 Cor 15:28 as the eschatological submission of the body of Christ (which he interprets as all of humanity). See GNO III/2, 2–28; ET: Casimir McCambley, "When (the Father) Will Subject All Things to (the Son) Then (the Son) Himself Will Be Subjected to Him (the Father) Who Subjects All Things to Him (the Son) A Treatise on First Corinthians 15:28 by Saint Gregory of Nyssa," *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 28 (1983) 1–25.



difficult to look beyond this-worldly bodies, both in terms of the physical body and its passions and in terms of the body of the biblical text. Gregory's theology offers a salutary reminder that Christ and the church are the saving bodies that graciously lead us upward through the bodily senses and the bodily text into the life of God.



Copyright and Use:

**As an ATLAS user, you may print, download, or send articles for individual use according to fair use as defined by U.S. and international copyright law and as otherwise authorized under your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement.**

**No content may be copied or emailed to multiple sites or publicly posted without the copyright holder(s)' express written permission. Any use, decompiling, reproduction, or distribution of this journal in excess of fair use provisions may be a violation of copyright law.**

This journal is made available to you through the ATLAS collection with permission from the copyright holder(s). The copyright holder for an entire issue of a journal typically is the journal owner, who also may own the copyright in each article. However, for certain articles, the author of the article may maintain the copyright in the article. Please contact the copyright holder(s) to request permission to use an article or specific work for any use not covered by the fair use provisions of the copyright laws or covered by your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement. For information regarding the copyright holder(s), please refer to the copyright information in the journal, if available, or contact ATLA to request contact information for the copyright holder(s).

About ATLAS:

The ATLA Serials (ATLAS®) collection contains electronic versions of previously published religion and theology journals reproduced with permission. The ATLAS collection is owned and managed by the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) and received initial funding from Lilly Endowment Inc.

The design and final form of this electronic document is the property of the American Theological Library Association.