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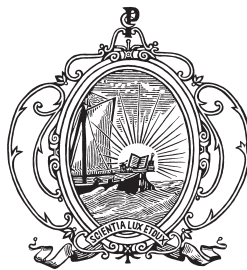
# STUDIA PATRISTICA

VOL. CI

Gregory of Nyssa's Mystical Eschatology

Edited by

GIULIO MASPERO, MIGUEL BRUGAROLAS and  
ILARIA VIGORELLI



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## CHAPTER 9

# Creation, Fall and Redemption

Jonathan FARRUGIA

### 1. Introduction

The original context in which Gregory preached the homilies on the *Song of Songs* is debated,<sup>1</sup> however scholars agree on the point that the reason why they were delivered was to offer his audience a series of meditations on the biblical text, concentrating in particular on the ascetic journey the soul of the Christian is called to make in order to reach perfection.<sup>2</sup> In this long itinerary the Nyssen makes many references to the evil element that has soiled human nature after the fall. Therefore, one of the necessary pre-requisites for the soul to advance in the ascent towards perfection is to free itself of this evil stain.<sup>3</sup>

We shall therefore briefly illustrate how Gregory's interpretation of salvation history – generally associated with his treatises – is given in remarkable detail in this cycle of homilies.

### 2. Man: a divine creature tricked by evil

In about half of these fifteen homilies Gregory speaks of man's original condition in the garden and how this was lost because of his sin. The first reference to this is found in the second homily, where he states clearly with the words of the bride: 'In the beginning I was not created like this. [...] I was not black by nature, but this ugliness was brought on me from outside'.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Daniélou and many who followed him maintain that they were composed upon the request of the lady Olympiades and delivered for her and her friends in Constantinople towards the end of Gregory's life. Cahill has proposed that this was in fact a second stage in the development of these homilies which would have been first delivered at Nyssa as Lenten talks, then, eventually, were re-edited and sent to Olympiades for her and her friends to meditate upon: J.B. Cahill, 'The date and setting of Gregory of Nyssa's Commentary on the Song of Songs', *JThS* 32 (1981), 447-60.

<sup>2</sup> G. Maspero, 'In canticum canticorum', in L.F. Mateo-Seco and G. Maspero (eds), *The Brill dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa* (Leiden, 2010), 121.

<sup>3</sup> Many images are used to describe this stain, the first being the 'blackness' which makes the soul ugly: μέλαιναν οὖσαν ἐξ ἁμαρτίας *Cant II* (GNO VI, 46,11).

<sup>4</sup> *Cant II* (GNO VI, 50,10-6) Note: The English translations of the texts were made by the author.

Man, therefore, was not created a sinner by God. The original beauty of human nature is compared to childhood, because small children know no evil;<sup>5</sup> elsewhere it is compared to a golden stone<sup>6</sup> and a golden vase.<sup>7</sup> The soul, while it was still similar to God in all things, possessed the qualities of will, blessedness and incorruptibility.<sup>8</sup> Being thus endowed with all good things and being completely free from evil, all man had to do was to preserve these good gifts God entrusted to him, not being obliged to provide for himself.<sup>9</sup> As the bride says, it was something external that made man lose his brightness and turn black because of sin.

Along these homilies Gregory makes several references to free will, a quality which God gave to all rational creatures, not only to man. This made them capable of choosing freely and willingly what was pleasing to them.<sup>10</sup> At this point he introduces the devil as the one who used badly this freedom and became the inventor of evil. It was he who opened the path through which evil entered creation, becoming himself the enemy of all who seek to use their free will towards what is good.<sup>11</sup> He is described as a monster, an assassin with a sharp tongue, a dragon, a rebel, hell itself that opens its mouth.<sup>12</sup> In his hatred towards man, who still had a loving relationship with God, the devil tricked the first couple into believing that the prohibition of the fruit of the tree and the offer of an impassible life were wounds inflicted by God on them. He, instead, offered them his 'kiss' of all things that were pleasing and bright.<sup>13</sup> Human nature succumbed to his snare and was thus stripped of its original beauty, becoming black, because it got involved with vice.<sup>14</sup>

So human nature was created good, in the image of God, but before it grew its roots in the good and acquired unflinching stability there, it was tricked by the devil, disguised as the serpent, who brought him to neglect the goods he received from God and consequently was stripped of the goods it had been given.<sup>15</sup> Man's brightness was burnt, and his natural beauty shrivelled, just as a plant is burnt and dried by the onslaught of the sun. So, Gregory says in homily VII, the seed of sin was created by the curse of the serpent, and thus, along with the products of the good seed created by God, man found a further option: that of evil.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>5</sup> *Cant* II (GNO VI, 52,18-53,1).

<sup>6</sup> *Cant* IV (GNO VI, 100,16).

<sup>7</sup> *Cant* VII (GNO VI, 208,12).

<sup>8</sup> *Cant* XV (GNO VI, 448,5-9).

<sup>9</sup> *Cant* II (GNO VI, 54,5-7).

<sup>10</sup> *Cant* II (GNO VI, 55,4-7).

<sup>11</sup> *Cant* II (GNO VI, 55,7-16).

<sup>12</sup> *Cant* V (GNO VI, 165,7-14).

<sup>13</sup> *Cant* XIII (GNO VI, 378,6-9).

<sup>14</sup> τοῦ ἀρχετύπου κάλλους ἀποξενωθεῖσα τῇ πονηρᾷ γειτνιασεὶ τῆς κακίας πρὸς τὸ εἰδεχθῆς ἡλλοιωθήης. *Cant* IV (GNO VI, 102,1-3).

<sup>15</sup> *Cant* II (GNO VI, 54,7-9).

<sup>16</sup> *Cant* VII (GNO VI, 241,12-3).

Speaking of free will in man, the bishop of Nyssa seeks to explain how this quality was involved in man's sin and how eventually it became the prime impulse for man's attraction to evil. First of all, in the second homily, when the bride is explaining how she lost her original beauty and became black, he says that this process of blackening was initiated by man's free will, not by God.<sup>17</sup> Later on, in the fourth homily, Gregory explains how human nature has been created in such a way as to be able to transform itself into the shape of that which it follows through its free will, just as the reflection in a mirror takes the form of what stands in front of it. Therefore when the soul gives in to an impulse towards a certain passion, it *becomes* the passion itself. Gregory does not fail to point out that this quality of the soul is not in itself negative, since it works both for virtues and vices.<sup>18</sup>

In man there is a movement which rises towards heaven (caused by the spiritual nature of the soul) and another that descends towards the ground (caused by the material nature of the body). Thus for one to go forth, the other must give way. Free will is found half way between these two and according to its choices it will give strength to one and relaxation to the other. So we understand that for Gregory free will is neutral. It is not pre-ordained towards evil or good; it will follow the greater impulse according to the strength of the person's reason and will in controlling his passions. The winning impulse will be the one with which free will sides.<sup>19</sup> But, since virtues and vices are opposites, these cannot abide simultaneously in the same person.<sup>20</sup> So when a person's free will tends towards evil, the good ceases to exist and vice versa.<sup>21</sup>

In short, therefore, man was created good and free. When confronted with a choice between good and evil, since he had no experience of evil and only a little experience of good, man's reason and will were not strong enough to control the impulse towards the sensual pleasure promised by the fruit, so he

<sup>17</sup> ἀσφαλίζεται τὴν τῶν μαθητευομένων διάνοιαν μὴ τῷ δημιουργῷ τὴν αἰτίαν τοῦ σκοτεινοῦ εἶδους ἀνατιθέσθαι ἀλλὰ τὴν ἐκάστου προαίρεσιν τοῦ τοιοῦτου εἶδους τὰς ἀρχὰς καταβάλλεσθαι. *Cant II* (GNO VI, 50,6-9).

<sup>18</sup> *Cant IV* (GNO VI, 102,4-103-5).

<sup>19</sup> Μέση δὲ ἀμφοῖν ἐστῶσα ἡ αὐτεξούσιος ἡμῶν δύναμις τε καὶ προαίρεσις δι' ἑαυτῆς ἐμποιεῖ καὶ τόνον τῷ κάμνοντι καὶ ἀτονίαν τῷ κατισχύοντι: ἐν ᾧ γὰρ ἂν γένηται μέρος, τοῦτο δίδωσι κατὰ τοῦ ἄλλου τὰ νικητήρια. *Cant XII* (GNO VI, 345,19-346,2).

<sup>20</sup> *Cant IV* (GNO VI, 103,5-7).

<sup>21</sup> *Cant V* (GNO VI, 157,21-158,7). Discussing this point in some further detail in Homily X, Gregory explains how human nature has two kinds of pleasure: that of the soul which is attained impassibly, and that of the body which is attained through passion. The one chosen by free will shall dominate the other. Those who choose the pleasure of the senses, therefore opting for evil, will not taste divine joy because their worse part will darken the better as we read in *Cant X* (GNO VI, 313,17-24). However, if man chooses to follow the impulses of his soul, his free will shall help him advance further along the way towards the good, changing from the degraded wooden or clay vase in which he was turned by sin back to the silver or golden vase of his original state, cf. *Cant VII* (GNO VI, 208,17-8).

*freely*<sup>22</sup> chose to disobey God's command not to eat from the tree, losing the special gifts God had bestowed on him.

### 3. The effects of evil on human nature

The act of disobedience committed by the first humans distorted not only their nature, but also that of all their descendants. Eating from the forbidden fruit man satisfied his gluttony for a moment, but then the fruit's sweetness turned bitter, filling man with corruption, and leading him to death. Tasting it, man became dead to the better life, exchanging his divine immortal life to an irrational and corruptible one. Hence the legacy the first parents passed on to their descendants was a dead life, because once death was united to human nature, all future generations were tainted with death; all future life was in truth death, being deprived of immortality.<sup>23</sup>

Apart from this, since the first choice made by man's free will was in the direction of evil, somehow free will, which had been created neutral, became warped. Even though man never lost his freedom, his natural impulses turned out to be more inclined towards what is not good rather than towards what is. Man became a slave of his own sin, being afraid to lose his contact with evil, especially the evil brought about by passions<sup>24</sup> which fight on the side of vice.<sup>25</sup> Choosing good did not become impossible, but it became decisively more difficult.

In these homilies Gregory does not make a clear reference to the 'double' creation of man<sup>26</sup> as he usually interprets *Gen* 1:27 in other works, but he does make a reference to the garments of skin with which God dressed man after eating the fruit. These garments of skin represent the passions which make man vulnerable to sin.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>22</sup> It is true that the devil tricked man into believing that the fruit was good for him, but this does not balance out the fact that man freely chose to obey the devil rather than God.

<sup>23</sup> *Cant* XII (GNO VI, 350,17-351,6).

<sup>24</sup> *Cant* II (GNO VI, 58,19-20).

<sup>25</sup> *Cant* II (GNO VI, 56,5-11); X (299,16-300,5).

<sup>26</sup> The biblical text states: 'So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them' (*Gen* 1:27). In *Op hom* chapters 16 and 17 Gregory explains how first God created man in his own image, then he created them male and female. So at a first moment mankind had no gender distinction, just like God; eventually, since God foresaw that man would succumb to sin and would be subject to death, he divided mankind between males and females, in order to make it possible for them to procreate like other animals and thus the species would avoid extinction. At this point, however, human nature was still sinless, immortal and free from passions. These would eventually come after they were covered with the garments of skin (which are not to be identified with the body).

<sup>27</sup> τῆς γὰρ καθαρότητος ἐκπεσοῦσα τὸ ζοφῶδες εἶδος ἐνεδυσάμην (τοιοῦτος γὰρ τῷ εἶδει ὁ χιτῶν ὁ δερμάτινος) *Cant* II (GNO VI, 60,16-8).



Further discussion is offered regarding other effects of sin on human nature, which we cannot delve into in this study. The strongest among Gregory's comments is probably found in the fifth homily: human nature 'took upon itself the form of the serpent for all the ages it was lying on the ground looking at it'.<sup>28</sup> So from his fall till the time of redemption, man's glance was locked on the serpent, becoming ever more like it. Having stripped himself willingly of his divine image, man became a beast, taking on himself the irrational image through his animal behaviour.<sup>29</sup> Sin itself is a madness that ages the soul, leading it to death, to non-existence.<sup>30</sup>

#### 4. Freedom from sin

Despite man's disobedience, God did not cease to be man's friend<sup>31</sup> and He still considered human nature as a good creation,<sup>32</sup> hence worthy of being saved. Apart from the indispensable role of the Incarnation and the sanctifying grace of the sacraments,<sup>33</sup> Gregory offers some other hints as to how man can strive towards his own salvation.

In the Prologue, Olympiades is praised for her purity of soul and thought, thus being untainted by any passion which dirties human nature;<sup>34</sup> this, then, is the path man has to follow in order to be worthy of enjoying God's salvation. To do this, man has to first shed off his old sinful self,<sup>35</sup> together with its desires and actions, as if it were a dirty garment.<sup>36</sup> Since man entered mortal life after dying to immortal life through sin, he will regain the original life if he dies to mortal life, dying, then, to sin.<sup>37</sup> In so doing, man takes upon himself the commitment to be always vigilant<sup>38</sup> and to strive towards perfection,<sup>39</sup> in order

<sup>28</sup> *Cant V* (GNO VI, 150,13-5).

<sup>29</sup> ἐπειδὴ γὰρ ἀποθέμενός ποτε τὸ θεῖον εἶδος ὁ ἄνθρωπος πρὸς τὴν ὁμοιότητα τῆς ἀλόγου φύσεως ἐθηρώθη. *Cant VIII* (GNO VI, 251,1-3).

<sup>30</sup> *Cant I* (GNO VI, 41,13-8).

<sup>31</sup> *Cant XIII* (GNO VI, 378,3-5).

<sup>32</sup> *Cant XV* (GNO VI, 449,12-3).

<sup>33</sup> In these homilies Gregory makes numerous references to the salvific value of Christ's birth, passion and resurrection, as he had already done in other sermons like the three Easter sermons, *Diem nat* and *Diem lum*. This is clearly a sign of his 'maturer' thought since in the *Homilies on the Beatitudes* – probably his oldest extant exegetical cycle of homilies – he makes no reference to this. Many times he also insists on the value of baptism, confession and the Eucharist in man's journey towards God.

<sup>34</sup> σου καθαρεύειν τὸν τῆς ψυχῆς ὀφθαλμὸν ἀπὸ πάσης ἐμπαθοῦς τε καὶ ῥυπάσεως ἐννοίας, *Cant Prol.* (GNO VI, 4,4-5).

<sup>35</sup> *Cant XI* (GNO VI, 330,16-7).

<sup>36</sup> *Cant I* (GNO VI, 14,13-5); I (25,12-5).

<sup>37</sup> *Cant XII* (GNO VI, 351,9-13).

<sup>38</sup> *Cant XI* (GNO VI, 315,19-22).

<sup>39</sup> *Cant III* (GNO VI, 80,9-13); VI (188,3-4).

to put on the original immaculate garment woven by God<sup>40</sup> when He created human nature. It is important to note that God does not create a new nature for mankind; he will restore the soiled nature to the original state of incorruptibility.<sup>41</sup>

Gregory devises two particular ways how man can advance in this path of perfection. One is that of fear, the other that of love.

Loving God entails primarily drawing back to God<sup>42</sup> and looking at Christ as through a mirror, in order to assume His form in one's soul.<sup>43</sup> Contemplating Christ alone,<sup>44</sup> seeking his kiss,<sup>45</sup> leads to his imitation,<sup>46</sup> and this is the best way to attain perfection. Having a loving passion for God, greater than the other passions which tend towards sin, helps to reverse fallen human nature to its original state.<sup>47</sup> Desire, therefore, can be transformed into an aid to long for God, rather than for material things, and this chases away the evil one.<sup>48</sup> It is a return to the original state of innocence proper to children.<sup>49</sup> Those who follow this path are described as the children, or the queens who obey the Spouse out of love.<sup>50</sup>

Fearing God is the other way to attain perfection; it is good, but inferior to the former one. It is the fear of punishment, of being sent to hell,<sup>51</sup> where there is no memory of God and where there are no good things, that makes some people struggle to lead a good life. These are compared to the concubines of the Spouse, who obey him and are faithful to him out of submission and fear,<sup>52</sup> just like slaves.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>40</sup> *Cant XI* (GNO VI, 329,9-14).

<sup>41</sup> οὐ καινόν τι κάλλος ἐπ' αὐτῆς μηχανᾶται ὁ μὴ πρότερον ἦν, ἀλλ' ἐπὶ τὴν πρώτην ἐπανάγει χάριν, *Cant IV* (GNO VI, 101,1-3). This theme is found in many other of the Nyssen's sermons, particularly the *Diem lum* and the Easter homilies.

<sup>42</sup> *Cant IV* (GNO VI, 100,21-101,4).

<sup>43</sup> *Cant II* (GNO VI, 68,4-10). Earlier reference was made to man taking upon himself the form of the serpent after having looked at it for so long. Looking at Christ is the remedy to reject the serpent's form and regain the original divine image.

<sup>44</sup> *Cant VI* (GNO VI, 197,2-5); XIII (376,17-377,1).

<sup>45</sup> *Cant I* (GNO VI, 33,6).

<sup>46</sup> *Cant III* (GNO VI, 98,6-12).

<sup>47</sup> *Cant I* (GNO VI, 29,3-6).

<sup>48</sup> *Cant IV* (GNO VI, 118,18-119,11).

<sup>49</sup> *Cant VI* (GNO VI, 198,10-3); XIII (395,2-5).

<sup>50</sup> *Cant XV* (GNO VI, 461,7-11).

<sup>51</sup> *Cant I* (GNO VI, 15,18-16,1). It is interesting to point out that in these homilies – as in other works – Gregory seems undecided about what will be the final destiny of the wicked. In his treatises he says that all evil (hence including the evil-doers) will be crushed into non-existence, or that they will be saved nonetheless. Here and in other homilies, however, he makes clear references to the existence of hell (the place of crying and gnashing of teeth) as the place where the souls of the wicked will end up.

<sup>52</sup> *Cant XV* (GNO VI, 461,16-9).

<sup>53</sup> *Cant I* (GNO VI, 16,5-8).

In both cases the gift of memory<sup>54</sup> helps the progress in this path: remembering the sorry state in which man had brought himself will help him strive toward the better<sup>55</sup> in order to avoid falling back in that condition. Consequently, a soul which recognizes true beauty is no longer tricked by what in the world seems beautiful.<sup>56</sup>

In conclusion, Gregory states that at the fulfilment of time, love will erase all fear,<sup>57</sup> so eventually all those who in life seek to distance themselves from sin (be it out of fear or out of love) will have the same prize,<sup>58</sup> enjoying blessedness and incorruptibility for eternity in the presence of the Spouse.

## 5. Conclusion

As we have seen, then, in this exegetical cycle, addressed primarily to ‘common’ folk rather than to fellow theologians, Gregory succeeds in delivering his standard view of how human nature was created, lost its divine imprint and will eventually regain it, using clear and easily understandable language and imagery which fit very well with his mission as a bishop and as a preacher.

<sup>54</sup> *Cant II* (GNO VI, 47,1-5); VIII (252,5-6).

<sup>55</sup> *Cant V* (GNO VI, 160,13-5).

<sup>56</sup> *Cant IV* (GNO VI, 106,11-20).

<sup>57</sup> *Cant XV* (GNO VI, 466,5-9).

<sup>58</sup> *Cant XV* (GNO VI, 469,1-6).