Becoming Like God in Christ: Nicene Theology and Christian Virtue in Gregory of Nyssa

Author: Jonathan Michael Bailes

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Jonathan Michael Bailes

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Jonathan Bailes

Advisor: Khaled Anatolios

ABSTRACT

Within the context of his controversy with Eunomius of Cyzicus, Gregory of Nyssa articulated a distinctly pro-Nicene conception of the perfection of God. Gregory identified divine perfection with the philanthropic goodness that is manifested in the economic activity of God and that is witnessed most vividly in the saving incarnation and death of Jesus Christ. Yet, while this particular understanding of divine perfection served Gregory's defense of Nicene trinitarian theology, its influence was not limited to that element of his theology alone. To the contrary, Gregory's pro-Nicene conception of the nature of divine perfection finds a perfect corollary in his discussion of the nature of human perfection. Thus, in his anthropological writings, Gregory interprets humanity as a living and active mirror of the characteristic goodness and love of divine power. Similarly, in his ascetical literature, he suggests that the goal of the Christian life is the attainment of godlikeness through participation in divine perfection, and that the form which this participation takes is an imitation of the virtues of Jesus Christ. And in his writings on the spiritual ascent of the soul, Gregory identifies the summit of the virtuous life as active participation in the philanthropic goodness of God. Christian virtue, therefore, is nothing other than imitation of and participation in the perfection of the one whom Gregory calls "the God of the gospel," the God of Nicaea, the God made known in the person of Jesus Christ.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Nicene Theology and Christian Virtue
An Introduction

In his 1979 study of the history of Christian spirituality, *The Wound of Knowledge*, Rowan Williams observes that Gregory of Nyssa drew more frequently than most previous Christian writers on the classical notion of virtue to articulate the nature of the Christian life, which he conceived of as a progressive growth in participation of and likeness to God. Yet in Gregory's hands, the ideal of virtue was purged from its Hellenistic associations with aristocratic dignity and infused with the language of humble service to God and to one's neighbor. This reconceptualization of virtue hinged, argues Williams, on two important aspects of Gregory's theology. First, while the idea of participation in or kinship with God was a prominent theme in the religious framework of many people in Gregory's day, the bishop of Nyssa revised this concept by directing attention to participating "not in what God is, but in what he does." Second, Gregory rooted his dynamic conception of the divine nature in his identification of God with the crucified and risen Jesus Christ. To become like God for Gregory is then "to act as God acts," more specifically, to act after the pattern of the God known in Jesus Christ, "in love, in poverty, in compassion."[1]

Williams is right to underscore the centrality of virtue in Gregory's writings on the Christian life. For Gregory, it is through the life of virtue that a person may ascend to the goal of Christian existence, which is participation in and likeness to God. For instance, in his first homily on the beatitudes, he writes, "This has in some way also been

[1] Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge*, rev. ed. (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1990), 62-71.

said before and will now be said again, that the end of the life of virtue is to become like God."[2] Similarly, in the *Life of Moses* he comments, "Certainly whoever pursues true virtue participates in nothing other than God, because he is himself absolute virtue."[3] Gregory even goes so far as to define Christianity by this very goal: "If one can give a definition of Christianity, we shall define it as follows: Christianity is an imitation of the divine nature."[4] The question that naturally arises from this claim is, How does one understand the nature of God and what sort of human virtues would reflect this nature? Put differently, how does Gregory's pro-Nicene theology of God influence both his description of the process of Christian progression in virtue and his characterization of virtue(s) itself? The answer provided by Williams, and the one which I aim to explore further in this dissertation, is that Christian virtues are those which conform to the nature of the God made known in the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, or, in Williams's preferred phrasing, conformed to the activity of God "after the pattern of Christ."[5]

Despite the theological insightfulness of William's argument that I have here highlighted, the brevity of his treatment leaves much to be explored. For instance, the

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[2] *Beat* 1, trans, Hilda Graef in *St. Gregory of Nyssa: The Lord's Prayer, the Beatitudes*, ACW 18 (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1954), 89.

[3] *Vit Moys* 1.7, trans, Everett Ferguson and Abraham Malherbe in *Gregory of Nyssa: The Life of Moses* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1978), 31.

[4] *Prof*, trans, Virginia Woods Callahan in *St. Gregory of Nyssa: The Ascetical Works* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1967), 85.

[5] Williams is not the first theologian to make this connection. In a five-page excursus in his *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, Karl Barth suggests that the identification of true divinity with the manifestation of humility in the incarnation holds significant ramifications for an understanding of Christian ethics, and he acknowledges Nyssa as one of the few ancient Christian thinkers to state this point with clarity: "It is the deity of the true God revealed in the humility of Christ which as such can and must find its confirmation in our own humiliation. But the confirmation is of something which so far as I know Gregory of Nyssa (*Or. Cat.* 24) was the only one of the Church fathers expressly to mention: that the descent to humility which took place in the incarnation of the Word is not only not excluded by the divine nature but signifies its greatest glory." *CD* IV/1, 192.

only textual evidence he provides for his interpretation consists of a few scattered quotations from varying treatises, and he offers no extended analysis of any single text from Gregory's corpus. Also, his insistence that Gregory conformed his characterization of the divine nature to the economic activity of the crucified and risen Christ is supported by no reference to Gregory's dogmatic and apologetic trinitarian works. Instead, Williams uses quotations from Gregory's spiritual writings to highlight the instrumentality of Christ in the experience of the vision of God and the centrality of imitation of Christ in the virtuous life. In this dissertation, I will attempt to extend the central intuition of Williams's analysis and to make more explicit the connection between Gregory's teaching on the virtuous life and his pro-Nicene theology. The title of the project, "Becoming Like God in Christ," reflects the thesis which I will develop in at least two ways. First, I will suggest that Gregory's theology presses him to understand the means of becoming like God not simply as imitation of, but as participation *in* Christ. Second, I will give a more extended analysis of how the person of Christ mediates our understanding of the divine nature—thus the God made known "in Christ"—and thereby shapes the particular form of Christian virtue(s). As the subtitle of my project indicates, I am interested in the relationship between Gregory's understanding of virtue and his pro-Nicene theology. Whereas Williams more assumed this connection than demonstrated it, I will draw upon the most recent interpretations of pro-Nicene theology to argue for a more explicit relationship between the trinitarian theology that Gregory develops in his apologetic and polemical treatises and his understanding of the nature of Christian virtue.

State of the Literature

Once relatively neglected as a subject of academic study, Gregory of Nyssa has for the past several decades been the topic of an incredible number of studies across a range of academic disciplines, from history to theology to contemporary philosophy.[6] Since 1969, a total of fourteen international colloquia dedicated to the thought and writings of Gregory have been held in various locations around Europe, almost all of which have had their proceedings subsequently published in edited volumes.[7] Notable syntheses of some of the recent scholarship on Nyssa have also appeared, including a volume edited by Sarah Coakley, entitled *Re-thinking Gregory of Nyssa*, and *The Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa*, edited by Lucas Francisco Mateo-Seco and Giulio Maspero.[8] Of the innumerable topics which have occupied scholars interested in Gregory's thought, a few themes in particular relate to this project. First, and most important for the purpose of the dissertation, are the recent interpretations of Nicene

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[6] In the introduction to his 1942 *Présence et Pensée: Essai sur la philosophie religieuse de Grégoire de Nysse*, Hans Urs von Balthasar witnesses to the rarity of scholarship on Gregory at the time: "Only a very small number of initiates have read and are aware of Gregory of Nyssa, and they have jealously guarded their secret. Scarcely a handful of studies, and quite austere ones at that, have appeared on him, mostly in German." Balthasar, *Presence and Thought: Essay on the Religious Philosophy of Gregory of Nyssa*, trans. Mark Sebanc (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 15. Morwenna Ludlow has dedicated an entire book to modern theological, philosophical, and ethical engagement with Gregory in *Gregory of Nyssa, Ancient and (Post)modern* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). A helpful overview of three different "trajectories" of twentieth century scholarship on Gregory is provided in J. Warren Smith, *Passion and Paradise: Human and Divine Emotion in the Thought of Gregory of Nyssa* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2004), 11-18. Also, a recent bibliography of the scholarship on Gregory's Trinitarian theology can be found in Sarah Coakley, *Sexuality and the Self: An Essay on the Trinity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 301-303.

[7] The most recent bibliography for these colloquia can be found in *Gregory of Nyssa, Contra Eunomium III: An English Translation with Commentary and Supporting Studies. Proceedings of the 12th International Colloquium on Gregory of Nyssa (Leuven, 14-17 September 2010)*, eds. Johan Leemans and Matthieu Cassin (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 731-732. The proceedings for the most recent conference, held at the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross in 2014, are as yet unpublished.

[8] Coakley, *Re-Thinking Gregory of Nyssa* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003); Mateo-Seco and Maspero, eds. *The Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa*, trans. Seth Cherney (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

theology and of Gregory's theology in particular in the work of Lewis Ayres, John Behr, and Khaled Anatolios.[9] Ayres's 2004 monograph, *Nicaea and Its Legacy*, critiques the frequent textbook division of eastern and western approaches to trinitarian theology and the simplistic historical narratives that portray Arius as simply a theological innovator who was resisted by a unified "orthodox" party.[10] Ayres also insists that the debates over Nicaea concerned more than the question of whether or not Christ was "divine" or "not divine" and that the theologians involved would have resisted categorizing the questions at hand as either "christological" or "trinitarian". Recognizing that the development of pro-Nicene theology included shared reflection on the nature of Scripture, human speech about God, cosmology, soteriology, anthropology, and more, Ayres suggests that we should understand fourth-century Nicene theology not simply as a debate about the relation of the Son to the Father, but as the creation of a "theological culture."[11] Regarding Gregory of Nyssa in particular, Ayres argues that his pro-Nicene theology has an immediate relation to his theology of deification. It is on account of his pro-Nicene and anti-Eunomian arguments, for instance, that Gregory characterizes deification as the soul's participation in the *power* and *activity* of God.[12]

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[9] Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); John Behr, *The Way to Nicaea* (Crestwood, NY: Saint Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001); *idem*, *The Nicene Faith*, 2 vols. (Crestwood, NY: Saint Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2004); and Khaled Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea: The Development and Meaning of Trinitarian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011).

[10] Sarah Coakley has helpfully summarized some of the textbook accounts that Ayres and others are responding to and how recent scholarship has shifted our understanding of Gregory's trinitarian theology. Cf. Coakley, "Introduction—Gender, Trinitarian Analogies, and the Pedagogy of *The Song*," *Re-thinking Gregory of Nyssa*, ed. Sarah Coakley (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 1-6.

[11] Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy*, 1-7.

[12] *Ibid.*, 305-308. This argument is expanded in Ayres, "Deification and the Dynamics of Nicene Theology: The Contribution of Gregory of Nyssa," *SVTQ* 49:4 (2005), 375-394.

Behr's work departs from Ayres in significant ways, but also shares many of the latter's interpretive decisions.[13] For instance, like Ayres, Behr questions the categorization of the fourth-century debates in either "christological" or "trinitarian" terms and instead portrays the pro-Nicene theology of Athanasius and the Cappadocian fathers as a continuation of the attempt to answer the question Christ asked his disciples and the theological question which drove the development of Christian theology: "Who do you say that I am?"[14] Behr also highlights the significance of the recognition of divine power for Gregory, and he argues that Gregory's Nicene instinct can be seen precisely in his insistence against Eunomius that the power of God is known in and through, not apart from, the mystery of Christ's passion and resurrection.[15] Gregory's primary emphasis is on the "God revealed through the Cross" and on the revelation of power that is manifested in the transformation of Christ's humanity through his death and resurrection. Finally, Behr also insists that Gregory's Nicene theology extends beyond his doctrine of God proper to his soteriology, for in the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ is made known not only the transformative power of God, but the transformed end of all those who are called to become like Christ through participation.[16]

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[13] For a helpful account of some of their differences, see the discussion in the *Harvard Theological Review* 100 (2007), 145-158.

[14] Behr, *The Nicene Faith*, 475.

[15] Informing both Ayres's and Behr's emphasis on divine power is the influential study by Michel Barnes: *The Power of God:* Δύναμις *in Gregory of Nyssa's Trinitarian Theology* (Washington, DC: CUA Press, 2001).

[16] All of these points are helpfully summarized in the following quote: "Gregory's reflection on the contemplation of the eternal Christ is as much a 'soteriology' as it is a 'Christology.' This is clear from several important points that we have seen him establish. First, that the locus for our contemplation of the activity of God is the Cross, for it is 'the God revealed through the Cross' that is the subject of Christian theology. But this is not, as it were, static, neither for one contemplated nor for the one who contemplates Christ, imitating his death in hope of imitating his Resurrection. Second, the God who is revealed in this way, through the transformative Passion of Christ, is known by his transcending and overwhelming power…Christ's death becomes the means of life, the darkness is illumined, flesh becomes Word…His transformation, as a human drop of vinegar in the sea of divine power, is the leaven in the lump of human

Finally, and most importantly for the purposes of this dissertation, is the recent interpretation of Gregory in Khaled Anatolios's *Retrieving Nicaea*. Especially significant is Anatolios's systematic synthesis of two shared themes that I have highlighted in the work of both Ayres and Behr, namely, the comprehensive character of Nicene theology (what Anatolios refers to as its "systematic scope") and the understanding of divine power and activity in relation to the crucified and risen Christ. In his own elucidation of the shared principles animating pro-Nicene theologians, Anatolios emphasizes the particular interpretations given to the "primacy of Christ" and the reconception of divine transcendence that this led to, as well as the development of a shared theological epistemology. For Anatolios, Gregory of Nyssa's particular contribution is not in the development of a theological vocabulary to denote three-in-oneness, which some interpreters have focused on, but rather in his depiction of the Father-Son relation in terms of divine goodness and in the Christological impact that this has on his construal of the divine nature. It is this identification of the divine nature, Anatolios writes, "which enabled Gregory to assimilate Platonic characterizations of the good to the biblical narrative of the God of Israel and Jesus Christ."[17] Again, "Gregory's distinct challenge therefore is to advance from an affirmation of the simplicity of divine goodness to a properly trinitarian conception of this simplicity, and he does this by way of reinterpreting the category of divine goodness with reference to the christological narrative."[18] To understand Gregory in this way not only highlights his particular contribution in relation to the achievement of his brother, Anatolios suggests, but also

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nature, the beginning and means of our own transformation; the 'approaching body' of the Coming One is what we are called to become." *Ibid*., 457-458.

[17] Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, 183.

[18] *Ibid*, 185.

relates Gregory to the task perceived by some modern theologians of giving a genuinely "trinitarian" account of divine attributes.

For Gregory, the upshot of this identification of divine goodness with the christological narrative is a renewed understanding of the nature of divine perfection. This can be seen, on the one hand, in the language that Gregory uses to describe the divine nature. As Anatolios points out, Gregory draws upon the christological titles as descriptors of the transcendent God, so that "to speak of God *from within scriptural language*, we must say that God's goodness is his wisdom, power, light, and so on."[19] Yet it is not simply the development of a christological vocabulary that emerges, but an actual reconstruction of the very notion of transcendence. In other words, Gregory allows the christological narrative to shape his understanding of the character of the divine nature, thus rejecting Eunomius's *a priori* conception of transcendence as "unbegottenness" for a dynamic understanding of transcendence as "divine power efficacious for doing good," which is most poignantly manifested in the gospel narrative as "the power of kenotic love (φιλανθρωπία)."[20] Further, extending his analysis from the anti-Eunomian literature to Gregory's *Catechetical Oration*, Anatolios suggests that this christological understanding of divine goodness is not only what Gregory considers to be the "distinctly Christian conception of God," but that it also informs his understanding of human perfection. "Just as divine goodness is interpreted christologically, so is human goodness interpreted as the human aptitude for 'mingling' with the divine, a mingling that achieves its consummation in sacramental communion with Christ. The appearance

[19] *Ibid*, 186.
[20] *Ibid*, 194.

of Christ thus represents the intersection of both divine and human goodness and the fulfillment of the latter."[21]

The revisionary scholarship of Ayres, Behr, and especially Anatolios provides a helpful vantage point from which to investigate Rowan Williams's thesis that Gregory equates human virtue with likeness to God and that he describes this virtue in terms that are both active and focused on the service of others. As all three scholars observe, the comprehensive scope of "Nicene" theology in general and Gregory's in particular transcends the specific questions regarding the Father-Son relationship. Gregory's trinitarian theology extends to his theological epistemology, his approach to scriptural reasoning and speech about God, and his understanding of human salvation as participation in God through Christ. It is only natural, then, to assume that one can elucidate the relationship of his trinitarian theology to his characterization of human perfection and his exhortations to Christian virtue. Likewise, his focus on the economy of Christ as the manifestation of divine power and activity, a theme central in both Behr's and Anatolios's analysis, led to a reinterpretation of the nature of divine goodness and power, such that divine φιλανθρωπία became a central defining characteristic of the divine nature. As I aim to show in this dissertation, this reinterpretation can also be traced to Gregory's writings on the Christian life, where the same strategies for speaking about the nature of God "from within scriptural language" that Anatolios highlights become the primary means for describing the specifically Christian account of the life of virtue.

[21] *Ibid*, 204. Anatolios makes the connection to virtue even more explicitly when he writes, "Once again, the conception of God as infinite goodness is fundamental; correlatively, human virtue is conceived as limitless progress in participating in God's infinite goodness." *Ibid*, 236.

Another trend in Nyssen scholarship with which this dissertation will be in conversation is the literature focused on Gregory's theology of salvation as deification. As a number of scholars have now noted, Gregory rarely draws upon the technical language of deification in his writings, especially in comparison with his friend Gregory of Nazianzus, and some twentieth-century scholars argued on this basis that Gregory shied away from speaking about union with God or that he actually rejected the entire idea of divinization.[22] On the other hand, the most substantial studies of the doctrine of deification in the Greek tradition have included Gregory as one of its most significant proponents.[23] In a similar vein, while David Balás makes note of Gregory's hesitancy to speak of union with God and his avoidance of deification terminology, he argues that the entirety of Gregory's theology rests upon a metaphysic of "participation" in the perfections of God, a framework which John McGuckin has suggested is ultimately equivalent to deification.[24] Further, of all the perfections in which humans participate, it is that of divine goodness, argues Balás, that takes central stage: "Among the divine perfections participated, it is doubtlessly Goodness which occupies the most important place in the works of Gregory."[25] Balás then goes on to suggest that the category of

[22] Perhaps the most prominent opponent of the idea of divinization in Gregory's theology is Ekkhard Mühlenberg. Cf. Mühlenberg, *Die Unendlichkeit Gottes bei Gregor von Nyssa* (Göttingen, 1966). For a brief review of the twentieth-century debates, see Lewis Ayres, "Deification and the Dynamics of Nicene Theology," 375-377. Ayres would be another proponent of the importance of deification to Gregory's thought.
[23] For instance, Jules Gross, *La Divinisation du chrétien d'après les pères grecs: contribution historique á la doctrine de la grace* (Paris: J. Gabalda, 1938) and, more recently, Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004).
[24] Balás, *ΜΕΤΟΥΣΙΑ ΘΕΟΥ: Man's Participation in God's Perfections According to Saint Gregory of Nyssa* (Rome: I.B.C. Libreria Herder, 1966); J.A. McGuckin, "The Strategic Adaptation of Deification in the Cappadocians," *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Traditions*, eds. Michael J. Christensen and Jeffrey A. Wittung (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2007), 104-108.
[25] Balás, *ΜΕΤΟΥΣΙΑ ΘΕΟΥ*, 54.

"Goodness" for Gregory is principally understood in "moral and religious" terms, and thus as "virtue."[26]

This "moral" framework for understanding Gregory's theology of deification has received attention in a number of studies on Gregory's thought. Norman Russell, for instance, argues that, like the other two Cappadocians, Gregory's commitment to the radical alterity of God hindered him from conceiving of deification in "realistic" terms of ontological transformation.[27] Instead, Gregory adapted the doctrine of deification to the Platonic notion of attaining moral likeness to God through overcoming the passions and imitating the divine nature "as far as is possible for human nature."[28] In Gregory's writing, then, deification largely consists of an imitation of God through virtue. While John McGuckin is less inclined to draw the distinction between ontological and moral transformation than Russell, he too understands the Cappadocian approach to deification as a "strategic adaptation" of the Platonist conception of *homoiōsis theōi*, and he highlights the moral character of deification as an imitation of God through the life of virtue.[29] In an older but still important study, Hubert Merki likewise claims that the notion of "likeness to God" which is so central to Gregory's soteriology plays a significant role in his depiction of Christian morality as well. In his "more popular

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[26] "[Goodness's] primary connotation, as we have seen already in CE I ch. 22, is *moral and religious goodness*, 'virtue', also in the sense of sanctity." *ΜΕΤΟΥΣΙΑ ΘΕΟΥ*, 68. According to Verna Harrison, divine goodness is a broad concept that includes all the divine perfections "as well as moral excellence." Harrison, *Grace and Human Freedom According to St. Gregory of Nyssa* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), 31. Warren Smith, similarly, suggests that the *structural likeness* of the soul's rational nature to God renders it capable of bearing the "*moral likeness* to the beauty of God's perfection…the beauty of God's nature is, Nyssen says, contemplated in terms of God's *aretē*." Smith, *Passion and Paradise*, 25.
[27] "For the Cappadocians, deification never went beyond a figure of speech." Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*, 13. Russell does think that Gregory has a place for "realist" deification, but that he applies it only to the humanity of Christ, which is transformed because of its hypostatic union with his divinity.
[28] *Ibid*, 233.
[29] J.A. McGuckin, "The Strategic Adaptation of Deification in the Cappadocians."

writings" especially, Merki argues, Gregory portrays the Platonic ideal not so much as a "static-ontological" goal, but as a dynamic and ethical imitation of God.[30]

These recent studies of Gregory's doctrine of deification have done much to underscore the centrality of divine goodness and of moral imitation, and yet, despite the clear connections between Gregory's doctrine of deification as participation in divine goodness and the exposition of his trinitarian theology in the work of Anatolios, little attention is given to how Gregory's christological reconstruction of goodness informs his articulation of the virtuous life and the character of Christian virtue.[31] An important exception to this general rule is the work of Brian Daley. In an influential article, he has convincingly argued that the key to understanding Gregory's Christology is to attend to the transformative role that Christ plays in his understanding of salvation as "the process of coming to be like Christ, sharing all his moral and spiritual characteristics, through a combination of intimate, contemplative knowledge and disciplined imitation."[32] The Christocentrism of Gregory's soteriology, for Daley, consists in Christ's role as both the instrumental means of human transformation—instrumental in regards to both the economic activity of the crucified and risen Christ and human participation in that

[30] Merki, *Ομοιωσις θεῷ: Von der platonischen Angleichung an Gott zur Gottähnlichkeit bei Gregor von Nyssa* Paradosis: Beiträge zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur und Theologie 7 (Freiburg: Paulus, 1952), 124-135.

[31] An example of this inattention to the connection between Gregory's trinitarian/christological theology and his account of human transformation is on display in Morwenna Ludlow's *Gregory of Nyssa: Ancient and (Post)modern*, which is a survey of recent theological interpretations of Gregory. Although she makes note of Brian Daley's emphasis on the Christological framework of Gregory's soteriology and Rowan William's emphasis on the imitation of Christ, her chapters on Gregory's soteriology, spirituality, and ethics are almost entirely void of references to how Christ informs Gregory's conception of human goodness, or how imitation of Christ functions in his spirituality.

[32] Daley, "Divine Transcendence and Human Transformation: Gregory of Nyssa's Anti-Apollinarian Christology," *Modern Theology* 18:4 (October 2002), 499.

work—and the form that defines human virtue, so that Christ serves as "both a model and an anchor" in the mystery of human salvation.[33]

While Daley's attention to the Christocentrism of Gregory's understanding of divinization stands out in comparison with other recent Anglophone scholarship, his work has strong affinities with a wide variety of older studies that address the importance of the *imago Dei* in Gregory's anthropology and the imitation of Christ as the key to its restoration.[34] Perhaps most influential in this category is Jean Daniélou's pioneering work, *Platonisme et théologie mystique*, a study of Gregory's spirituality that argued for a three-stage framework of mystical ascent with a goal of achieving "likeness to God."[35] Daniélou characterizes the first stage of the spiritual life as one of purification, of the

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[33] In an earlier article, Daley summarizes his Christocentric account of Gregory's soteriology in a way that coheres perfectly with the intuitions of this dissertation: "The key to this ability of the soul to be for itself a reflection of the divine reality is clearly, in Gregory's view, moral purification: growth in virtue, which reaches its summit in freedom from passion. In the preface to the *Life of Moses*, Gregory makes the bold assertion that since the divine nature is goodness itself, 'God himself is perfect virtue.' So the 'garment' of virtues we so laboriously weave for ourselves, he suggests in the ninth homily on the Song of Songs, 'imitates the divine blessedness and resembles the transcendent divine nature by [its] purity and freedom from passion.' And the *way* by which the believer accomplishes this purification, the pattern for this growth in virtue and freedom, is for Gregory the way of Christ; for Christ is the embodiment and revealer of virtue, the 'founding source of passionlessness'. For every disciple, the key to restoring the inner beauty that reflects the divine reality is to imitate him." Daley, "'Bright Darkness' and Christian Transformation: Gregory of Nyssa on the Dynamics of Mystical Union," *The Studia Philonica Annual* 8 (1996), 92. This project has significant overlap with Daley's work, yet, as I hope to show below, can still make a contribution that Daley's work does not offer.

[34] Other than Daley, another recent interpretation of Gregory that emphasizes the connection between his Trinitarian theology and the reflection of the divine nature in the Christian's virtuous imitation of Christ is David Bentley Hart, "The Mirror of the Infinite: Gregory of Nyssa on the *Vestigia Trinitatis*," *Modern Theology* 18:4 (October 2002), 541-561. Hart's article, like Daley's, is excellent in its treatment of the theological coherence of Gregory's Nicene theology and his conception of renewed humanity's "specular" function, but he does not treat how this influences Gregory's exhortation to and characterization of the virtuous life.

[35] Part of the difficulty in Daniélou's study is the ambiguity in his judgment of whether "likeness to God" constitutes the ultimate end of the spiritual life, or merely the end of the first stage of the spiritual life, focused on the rehabilitation of the image of God through virtue and "practical philosophy." Thus he writes, "Tout ceci peut aussi bien désigner le terme de la premiére voie, qui est l'*apatheia*, que celui de toute la vie spirituelle. La 'philosophie pratique', en effet, a pour objet la recuperation de l'*eikōn*, de 'l'image divine', par l'*apatheia*—et 'l'assimilation á Dieu' a précisément pour but cette restauration. Nous voyons ailleurs Grégoire faire de cette *homoiōsis* l'essence du Christianisme. Elle ne spécifie donc pas un aspect particulier de la vie spirituelle." *Platonisme et théologie mystique: Essai sur la doctrine spirituelle de Saint Grégoire de Nysse*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Aubier, 1944), 19.

restoration of the image of God in the human person, which comes about through sacramental participation in the death and resurrection of Christ and the imitation of Christ and is ultimately achieved in the reflection of divine purity through *apatheia*.[36] Although more philosophically oriented than Daniélou's study, Hans Urs von Balthasar's *Présence et pensée* likewise forefronts the theme of *imago Dei* as the key to Gregory's entire religious philosophy, and he highlights the incarnation as the mediation of that image and the means by which the Church comes to share in reflecting it in the world. Roger Leys goes even further than Daniélou and Balthasar in demonstrating the foundational role that the theology of image plays not only in Gregory's anthropology, but also in his trinitarian doctrine and his ecclesiology.[37] More recently, Lucas F. Mateo-Seco has written a host of articles focusing on the centrality of the *imago Dei* for Gregory and the imitation of Christ in Gregory's spirituality.[38] Mateo-Seco even goes so far as to

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[36] One criticism of Daniélou's work has been that he tends to separate Gregory's "spirituality" from this theology, as is evidenced by a comment he makes in his introduction to an edited collections of Gregory's spiritual writings: "Once freed from administrative burdens and the heat of theological controversy, Gregory now turns himself wholly towards the life of the spirit." *From Glory to Glory: Texts from Gregory of Nyssa's Mystical Writings*, ed. and trans. Herbert Musurillo, SJ (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961), 9.

[37] Leys, *L'image de Dieu chez Saint Gregoire de Nysse* (Bruxelles: Edition universelle, 1951). Leys's study is very helpful for this project precisely because it connects Gregory's deployment of the idea of the Son as the image of the invisible God in the anti-Eunomian literature with the anthropological application of the doctrine of humanity as the image of God. At the same time, perhaps because Leys does not give attention to how significant is Gregory's reinterpretation of divine goodness in light of the Christological *oikonomia* (he primarily focuses on the logic behind Christ's visible manifestation of the invisible image), he finds little textual evidence for the role of love or mercy in Gregory's discussion of humanity as the *imago Dei*, citing only a few diverse passages from some of Gregory's homilies. Yet, despite what he regards to be a surprising lack of textual evidence, he still claims that these few passages demonstrate that love of God and neighbor is "le premier des biens" and that "seule l'âme acommplie en dilection possède aussi toutes les autres vertus et porte en elle le signe de Dieu." Leys, *L'image de Dieu chez Saint Gregoire de Nysse*, 76. More textual support can be given than Leys gives and, as I hope to show, this element of Gregory's thought has more direct connections to his trinitarian theology.

[38] Mateo-Seco's summary of Gregory's soteriology has strong affinities with the interpretation of Brian Daley: "[T]oda la obra de la salvación consiste en devolver al hombre al esplendor de la primitiva imagen; el Verbo de Dios se ha hecho imagen visible de Dios para hacer a los hombres conformes con la belleza del arquetipo; Cristo es la imagen *protoípica* de Dios y nosotros somos imagen de Dios por imitación, por *mimesis*, convirtiéndonos así también en imágenes de esa belleza arquetípica." Mateo-Seco, "Imágenes de la Imagen: Génesis 1,26 y Colosenses 1,15 en Gregorio de Nisa," *ScrTh* 40:3 (2008), 685.

claim that, "The imitation of Christ appears as the fundamental question of Gregory's theology."[39]

Contribution of this Project

From this review of the state of scholarship, it may not be immediately apparent why this project is even needed. After all, my thesis is in some sense the extension of a previous argument made by Rowan Williams; my interpretation of Gregory's Nicene theology is heavily dependent on the work of Ayres, Behr, and Anatolios; and my understanding of his soteriological doctrine of participation could fairly be summarized as a synthesis of the work of David Balás and Brian Daley. Even my focus on the connection between the imitation of Christ and the life of virtue is unoriginal, and has in fact been the subject of a number of (primarily non-English) studies in the twentieth century. Of course, even as a work of synthesis, the project could make a contribution to the state of contemporary scholarship by reasserting a theme that has become increasingly neglected in studies of Gregory's spiritual theology.[40] But this dissertation aims to do more than synthesize. The originality and contribution of this study will be in its clarification of the relationship between Gregory's Nicene theology and his conception of Christian sanctity. The recent studies on Gregory's trinitarian theology, especially that of Khaled Anatolios, highlight particular strategies Gregory utilizes to narrate the character of divine goodness in Christological language and suggest that this theological move had a significant effect on Gregory's understanding of the nature of

[39] Mateo-Seco, "Imitation," *Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa*, 504.
[40] Most recent studies of what might be termed Gregory's "spiritual theology" have tended to focus on themes of desire, passions, apophaticism, embodiment, and sexuality.

divine perfection. By extending this insight into his writings on Christian virtue, I will demonstrate how Gregory's Nicene theology informs not only his conception of the avenue by which Christians become virtuous, but also his identification of the particular form Christian virtue should take. Inasmuch as some scholars, such as Brian Daley, have already underscored the role of Christ as both the "anchor and model" of salvation, this is not a wholly new argument. But what neither Daley nor others have done is to apply this insight to an extended analysis of Gregory's writings on the Christian life. Furthermore, no one to my knowledge has shown how Gregory's Nicene theology contributes to his depiction of virtue both in the terms of purity and in the call to compassionate and merciful treatment of others, which will be a principle burden of this dissertation. Finally, while I am not offering a novel interpretation of Gregory's trinitarian theology as it arises from his polemical writings or from his catechetical lecture, this project can make a contribution to the retrieval of his pro-Nicene theology by attending to its presence in his ostensibly non-dogmatic writings on the Christian life. The primary texts of this study have received little to no attention in the recent accounts of Gregory's trinitarian theology, and by considering how it appears in them, this dissertation can further our understanding of Nicene theology itself.

Scope and Method

The scope of this project is, on the one hand, rather broad insofar as its stated goal is not simply to elucidate one aspect of Gregory's thought, but to demonstrate the coherence of his dogmatic trinitarian theology with his conception of the Christian life as a progress through virtue toward likeness to God. That said, several methodological

principles of the study help to narrow the focus to a manageable level. First, while I do make occasional comparisons between Nyssa's understanding of virtue and that of the philosophical and theological traditions he inherited, this is not a comparative study of virtue or the related concept of "likeness to God."[41] Second, the specificity of the stated question—how the christological reconstruction of divine perfection in Gregory's pro-Nicene theology informs his articulation of Christian virtue—presumes a host of other questions one might pose and that have indeed been posed by numerous scholars who study Gregory's writings on the Christian life, while it does not treat them directly.[42] Third, this is a theological study of the relation between aspects of Gregory's thought and, as such, it presumes a certain level of coherence and continuity in his theology. Such presumption does not deny the modification of Gregory's views over time, nor does it expect to find systematic rigor in the diffuse collection of primarily occasional writings that make up Gregory's corpus.[43] In terms of the scope of the study, however, this means that I will not attempt to trace the developments of Gregory's theology and how it changes in relation to the influence of specific polemical situations.[44] This is not to say

[41] Two such studies have been published: Hubert Merki, *Homoiōsis Theō: Von der platonischen Angleichung an Gott zur Gottähnlichkeit bei Gregor von Nyssa*; and Evangelos Konstantinou, *Die Tugendlehre Gregors von Nyssa im Verhältnis zu der Antik-Philophischen und Jüdisch-Christlichen Tradition*, Das östliche Christentum, NS 17 (Würzburg: Augustinus, 1966).

[42] I am thinking of, for instance, Hans Boersma's recent study on the relation of virtue to embodiment and materiality, or the host of studies on passion and desire that Warren Smith refers to as the "Erotic Phase" of Nyssen studies, or the scholarly disputes on Gregory's approach to gender, or the character of Gregory's apophaticism and the role it plays in his mystical writings. Cf. Smith, *Passion and Paradise*, 14-18; Boersma, *Embodiment and Virtue in Gregory of Nyssa: An Anagogical Approach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Ludlow, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 163-246; Martin Laird, *Gregory of Nyssa and the Grasp of Faith: Union, Knowledge, and Divine Presence* (New York: Oxford University Pres, 2004).

[43] Thus, following Anthony Meredith, "I assume that it is licit to view Gregory's writings and thought globally, without denying that with the progress of time the expression of his views, if not his actual views, *was* modified, partly under the pressure of outside challenges, partly through the different audiences he had in mind." Meredith, *Gregory of Nyssa*, ECF (New York: Routledge, 1999), 17.

[44] While Gregory's thought does undoubtedly develop, those who wish to trace its development face the problem of the chronology of his works, which is a perennial scholarly debate. Cf. Pierre Maraval, "Chronology of Works," *Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa*, 153-169.

that I will neglect his polemical contexts, which would be impossible given my interest in his anti-Eunomian theology, but rather that I will not attempt to theorize on how his conception of the ideal of virtue evolves in relation to such contexts. Finally, while the chapters of the study will be organized thematically, they will also be focused on sustained readings of specific texts.[45] As a hermeneutical principle, this attention to particular texts will allow for a more faithful interpretation of Gregory's statements regarding virtue in the light of the broader context of a work, while bringing with it the added benefit that it will necessarily narrow the scope of my analysis.

Summary of the Argument

The basic thesis which I advance in this dissertation is that there exists a distinct and discernible correspondence between the christological reconstruction of divine perfection which Gregory advances in his trinitarian writings and his account of Christian perfection as a virtuous participation in the characteristic activity and perfect goodness of God. I develop this argument over the course of four chapters. The first chapter, "God of the Gospel," focuses on Gregory's pro-Nicene account of divine perfection as it emerges in the course of his dispute with Eunomius of Cyzicus. Drawing on the work of the recent revisionary scholarship regarding Gregory's Nicene theology, mentioned above, I advance my own interpretation of Gregory's positive account of divine perfection by juxtaposing it with that of Eunomius. More specifically, I compare Eunomius's definition of the character of divine perfection as "unbegottenness" and his method for

[45] In choosing to focus on close readings of specific texts, I am following the methodology on display in works such as Behr, *The Nicene Faith*; Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*; Boersma, *Embodiment and Virtue*; and Rowan Greer, *One Path for All: Gregory of Nyssa on the Christian Life and Human Destiny*, assisted by J. Warren Smith (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015), 135-225.

arriving at this definition—namely, a process of *a priori* logical deduction—with Gregory's own account of trinitarian perfection. What becomes clear through this comparison is that, although Gregory expressed significant concerns with Eunomius's attempt to articulate a "precise" definition of the divine nature, he did not remain silent or agnostic regarding what Khaled Anatolios has referred to as the "character of divinity." To the contrary, Gregory provided his own account of divine perfection on the basis of the revelation of the life-giving goodness of divine power made known in the economic activity of God, and in the philanthropic love witnessed in the pro-Nicene narrative of Christ's incarnation and crucifixion for the sake of humanity. This is what Gregory identifies as the characteristic perfection of the "God of the gospel."

In the second chapter, I turn my attention from Gregory's doctrine of God to his anthropology. Fundamental to Gregory's account of human nature is the biblical description of humanity as the image of God, and in this chapter I demonstrate the continuity between his interpretation of this motif and the elements of his Nicene theology that I explored in chapter one. More specifically, I argue that Gregory interprets the *imago Dei* motif to mean that human beings were created to serve as living images of the perfect goodness and characteristic activity of divine power. This can be seen, as I show, in both of Gregory's major anthropological writings, *De hominis opificio* and *De anima et resurrectione*. What is more, this same account of human creatures as living "mirrors" of divine perfection also occurs in Gregory's explicitly pro-Nicene *Oratio catechetica magna*, which is a lengthy apologetic defense of the incarnation as an expression of the philanthropic goodness of the divine nature. Humanity's created "likeness to God," therefore, consists precisely in its mimetic participation in the active

goodness of God. As a created image, however, humanity is also unlike God in that its participation in and reflection of this perfect goodness is a mutable reality that varies "more and less." In its fallen state, moreover, humanity has grown further unlike God in that its reflection of divine perfection has become compromised through sin and thus it has ceased to properly function in its created purpose.

Chapter three begins a discussion of the restoration of humanity's participation in divine goodness by looking at Gregory's treatment of the theme of perfection in the virtuous life in two of his most significant ascetical writings: *De professione Christiana* and *De perfectione*. Both of these texts focus explicitly on the theme of the imitation of Christ and, as such, have frequently been studied in tandem with one another as paradigmatic examples of Gregory's Christocentric spirituality. At the same time, in both of these texts Gregory depicts the goal of the virtuous life not merely as an imitation of Christ, but as an imitation of and participation in the divine nature. This dual focus on the imitation of Christ and the imitation of the divine nature, and Gregory's apparent equivalence of the two, has led to some confusion among modern scholars, who frequently suggest that Gregory understands the motif of *imitatio Christi* to refer to an imitation of the virtues particular to Christ's humanity, or who attempt to distinguish between which of the perfections discussed by Gregory refer to the humanity of Christ and which refer to his divinity. In my analysis of these texts, however, I argue that such confusion regarding these christological perfections and the imitation of Christ is unnecessary because of the fundamental Nicene logic undergirding Gregory's approach. When Gregory speaks of imitating Christ, he has in mind the imitation of divine perfection—or, to speak more specifically, the imitation of the characteristic goodness

and "good activities" of the divine nature—because Christ is the visible manifestation of that perfection. The reason that Gregory can so seamlessly equate the imitation of Christ and mimetic participation in divine perfection is precisely because, as he argued against Eunomius, it is in the person and work of Jesus Christ that the nature of God is most perfectly beheld.

This leads me to my fourth and final chapter, and also the lengthiest chapter in this dissertation, "Spiritual Ascent and Philanthropic Descent: Nicene Theology and Christian Virtue." In this chapter, I study three of Gregory's most important writings on the spiritual life: *De beatitudinibus*, *De vita Moysis*, and *In Canticum canticorum*. These three writings share some common features. All three take the form of commentary on specific biblical texts; all three are focused on the topic of growth and perfection in the virtuous life; and all three utilize the motif of ascent to describe the soul's progressive contemplation of and union with God. In my analysis, however, I argue that all three of these texts also share highly significant element in common. In each of them, Gregory provides an account of the soul's contemplation of God that is both focused on the active manifestation of divine power and explicitly christological. What is more, in each of these three texts, Gregory suggests that the active reflection of God that comes about as the result of the soul's transformation consists in a virtuous participation in the life-giving goodness and philanthropic love of God. At the height of its ascent, the soul finds itself transformed into what it was created to be: a living and dynamic mirror of divine perfection. And this results in nothing less than the soul's philanthropic descent to those in need, in imitation of the God it has come to reflect, the God made known in the incarnation and death of Jesus Christ, the God of Nicaea, the God of the gospel.

Chapter 1
God of the Gospel
Nicene Theology and Divine Perfection

In recent years, the fourth-century controversy over Nicaea has been the subject of an enormous amount of revisionary scholarship.[1] One common trend in this scholarship has been a repeated emphasis on understanding these fourth-century disputes as more than conflicts over whether or to what extent Jesus Christ is or is not divine.[2] Instead, at the center of these disputes lay the more fundamental question of the nature of divinity itself.[3] The conflict over the deity of the Son was simultaneously a conflict over the nature of God's transcendence, divine simplicity, theological epistemology, human speech about God, and more. For this reason, Lewis Ayres suggests that it is more helpful to describe the fourth-century as a dispute over the "grammar" of divinity than simply over the "divinity of Christ."[4] Khaled Anatolios likewise counsels against portraying the debate over Nicaea as a conflict over whether or not Christ was "God,"

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[1] Summaries of some of the most important studies and theses in this recent scholarship can be found in Stephen R. Holmes, *The Quest for the Trinity: The Doctrine of God in Scripture, History, and Modernity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Pres, 2012), 82-120; J. Warren Smith, "The Trinity in the Fourth-Century Fathers," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Trinity*, eds. Gilles Emery, O.P. and Matthew Levering (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 109-122; and Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay 'On the Trinity'* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 301-303.

[2] See comments to this effect in Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 3-4, and Khaled Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea: The Development and Meaning of Trinitarian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic Press, 2011), 36-41.

[3] As Richard Hanson puts it, the controversy was a dispute over the "Christian doctrine of God" on the basis of two seemingly incommensurable facts of Christian faith and experience: an "unyielding monotheism" and the "worship of Jesus Christ as divine." Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God* (London: T&T Clark, 1988), 874. This emphasis on how the underlying tension between a strict monotheism and the worship of Christ as God pressed fourth-century Christians to a fundamental reconsideration of the nature of divinity finds a parallel in recent studies of earliest Christian theology. See, e.g., Richard Bauckham, *God Crucified: Monotheism and Christology in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998); Larry Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003); and idem, *God in New Testament Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010).

[4] Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy,* 14.

noting that all parties involved would have readily agreed on this point.[5] Rather, what was under dispute was what the identification of Christ as God and the worship of him as such implied for the whole of Christian faith and experience. In language similar to that of Ayres's, Anatolios suggests that the key proponents of Nicene trinitarian theology were engaged in an interpretation of the very "character of divinity itself," and how the character of that divinity needed to be understood in light of the person and work of Jesus Christ.[6]

Also, with regard to the theology of Gregory in particular, recent studies have placed more emphasis on the polemical context of his trinitarian writings, especially on the dispute that he and his brother Basil both engage in with Eunomius of Cyzicus.[7] Thus, while earlier interpretations of Gregory focused predominantly on some of his minor texts, such as the *Ad Ablabium*, and on the technical vocabulary and trinitarian metaphors he developed in those texts, more recent interpretations have given more attention to his lengthy *Contra Eunomium* and to the major themes of that text, such as metaphysics, Christology and philosophy of language. On the one hand, this shift has meant that the theme of apophaticism, which is so pervasive in studies of Gregory's mysticism and spirituality, has taken a more central role in interpretations of his trinitarian theology.[8]

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[5] Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, 36-37.

[6] *Ibid.* This phrase comes from p. 122 and is used by Anatolios on multiple occasions in his treatment of Athanasius, but it could just as easily summarize the conclusions of his interpretation of Gregory of Nyssa.

[7] The anti-Eunomian context is explicitly emphasized in Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy* and Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, as well as Michel Barnes, *The Power of God: Δυναμις in Gregory of Nyssa's Trinitarian Theology* (Washington, DC: CUA Press, 2001) and Andrew Radde-Gallwitz, *Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and the Transformation of Divine Simplicity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). The importance of this polemical context is also acknowledge by Giulio Maspero, whose study of the *Ad Ablabium* interprets it in conversation with *Contra Eunomium*: Maspero, *Trinity and Man*, VCS 86 (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

[8] For an example of a recent interpretation of Gregory's trinitarian theology that lays heavy emphasis on the unknowability of God, see Scot Douglass, *Theology of the Gap: Cappadocian Language Theory and the Trinitarian Controversy*, American University Studies 235 (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2005).

Yet, as laudable as the integration of Gregory's epistemology and trinitarian theology might be, the apophatic interpretation of his Nicene writings has the potential to undermine a clear connection between Gregory's trinitarian theology and his positive description of the character and perfection of God. In response to this apophatic interpretation of Gregory, several recent studies of Gregory's response to Eunomius have insisted that Gregory's arguments for the ultimate incomprehensibility of God do not preclude all positive knowledge of and speech about God.[9] The apophatic critique that he levels at Eunomius does not leave Gregory agnostic about the divine nature. On the contrary, one of the key elements in Gregory's response to Eunomius's definitive characterization of the essence of God is his own positive description of God.

Following these recent trends, I suggest that we can best understand the relationship between Gregory's trinitarian theology and his understanding of divine perfection by comparing it with that of his primary opponent: the anti-Nicene theologian and bishop Eunomius of Cyzicus. Both Eunomius and Gregory articulate distinct understandings of the perfection of God and both attempt to correlate these understandings to the person and work of Christ, yet with radically different results. Eunomius's understanding of divine perfection creates a barrier between God the Father and God the Son with the result that the being of God is not implicated in the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Gregory, on the other hand, continually

[9] Though not without their differences, the recent studies of Barnes, Radde-Gallwitz, and Anatolios all emphasize this positive element of Gregory's theology. Francesca Murphy captures the importance of this corrective trend well in her review of Anatolios's work: "This means that Anatolios can rescue survivors of many a Ph.D. thesis plane-crash by harnessing Gregory of Nyssa's supposed agnosticism for multiple modern causes. He also rescues Gregory from apparent self-contradiction: on the one hand, using the unknowability of the divine essence in itself as a hammer against Eunomius's 'Unbegotten-Essence,' but on the other hand, committed to multiple assertions about God's character and identity." "Book Forum," *Theology Today* 71:4 (2015), 442.

emphasizes the continuity between divine perfection and the economy of Christ. He understands the person and work of Christ to constitute the fullest manifestation of the being of God in act and the highest exemplification of divine perfection.

The first part of this chapter will focus on Eunomius. He was the principle opponent in the Nicene debate for both Gregory and his brother Basil, and it was his critique of Basil that provoked Gregory's lengthiest exposition of his own trinitarian theology. My interest here is not in Eunomius's thought as a whole, but more particularly in his definition of the divine nature through the term ἀγέννητος (unbegotten). This term serves for him as a definitive short-hand for the perfection of God, so that all other attributes of God come to be understood as nothing more than synonyms for this one all-embracing idea. Gregory takes exception to this definition of divine perfection, of course, but he also objects to Eunomius's method for arriving at it. To understand the difference between Gregory and Eunomius, we must understand both these disagreements, that of content and that of method.[10] In what does the perfection of God consist and how do we come to an understanding of that perfection?

Divine Perfection and Trinitarian Theology in Eunomius of Cyzicus

The literary battle that took place between the two Cappadocian brothers and Eunomius of Cyzicus began in the year 360 or 361, when Eunomius published an account of his anti-Nicene theology entitled the *Apology*.[11] This work was meant as a public

[10] It is common to treat the difference of method between Gregory and Eunomius as a difference of epistemology. I have no objection to this, but prefer here to use the word "method" in order to stress the form of logic and theological reasoning and not (primarily) the possibility or extent of knowledge.
[11] A critical edition and translation of this work can be found in Richard Paul Vaggione, *Eunomius: The Extant Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987). My own citations of the text of the *Apologia* will be taken from this edition. On the dating of the treatise, see Vaggione, *Eunomius: The Extant Works*, 5-9 and Manuel Mira, "Eunomius," *The Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa*, eds. Lucas F. Mateo-Seco and

defense of the theology that he and his mentor Aetius of Antioch had presented to the Council of Constantinople in 360 and it cemented Eunomius's reputation as the intellectual leader of the "Heteroousian" party.[12] Whether or not Eunomius actually intended to defend himself from criticism or simply to use the apologetic genre to win sympathy from his potential readers, as Basil suggests, is impossible to know. For the purpose of understanding his thought and the critical response of the Cappadocians, however, the *Apology* is invaluable. In this short work we find a clear expression of Eunomius's reasons for distinguishing between the being of the Father and the being of the Son, and the connection between this distinction and his understanding of the "character" of divinity.

Eunomius's notion of divine perfection is not very difficult to identify, because he himself reduced it to a single word: ἀγέννητος, variously translated as "unbegotten" or "ingenerate". This word communicates not simply a characteristic of God or an aspect of the divine nature, but its essential definition. According to his opponents, Eunomius claimed that a comprehension of the meaning of this term enabled a person to know the divine essence "exactly" (ἀκριβῶς), in the same way that God knows himself.[13] When we refer to God as unbegotten, we are not naming a human observation about God, nor are we describing only a part of God; rather, we are acknowledging the actual nature of God,

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Giulio Maspero, trans. Seth Cherney (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 311-316. Vaggione is also responsible for the most thorough treatment of Eunomius's life and thought: *Eunomius of Cyzicus and the Nicene Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

[12] Aetius and Eunomius were referred to as Heteroousians because they emphasized the difference in being (οὐσία) of the Father and Son. Summaries of the lives and thought of Aetius and Eunomius can be found in Hanson, *Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*, 598-636; Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy*, 144-149; Behr, *The Nicene Faith, Part Two: One of the Holy Trinity* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press), 267-282; and Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, 69-79.

[13] Vaggione questions whether Eunomius's opponents actually understood what was meant by this claim, but he does not refute the claim itself. Vaggione, *Eunomius of Cyzicus*, 254-256.

repaying the debt we owe to him by "the confession that he is what he is."[14] Unbegottenness is not only an essential characteristic of God, it is *the* essential characteristic of God, and therefore it is the most fundamental concept governing Eunomius's doctrine of God. For Eunomius, God is unbegotten and unbegottenness is God.

Two questions confront us when we seek to understand how ἀγέννητος serves as a summary of divine perfection for Eunomius. First, if it is necessary or even possible to reduce the divine nature to a single word, why this word? What logical process led Eunomius and his mentor Aetius to privilege unbegottenness as the single defining property of God? Second, what does unbegottenness mean? On the one hand, to describe something as *un*begotten is to say nothing more than that it is not begotten, or that it did not receive its existence from anything outside itself. Eunomius did not disagree with this interpretation of the term, but for him unbegottenness implied far more than simply a lack of a generating source of existence. In fact, Eunomius insisted that ἀγέννητος, while grammatically a negative adjective, conveyed a positive meaning independent of the notion of being begotten or generated. To name God as unbegotten is to say something specific and positive about God, to define that which sets God apart from everything else. By answering these two questions, the theological method which led Eunomius to define God's nature as unbegotten essence and the positive conceptual content of the term itself in Eunomius's thought, we can gain an appreciation for how a single word could encapsulate the defining perfection of the divine nature, and we can

[14] *Apol*, 8.

begin to see the connection between Eunomius's definition of God and his staunch resistance to Nicene trinitarian theology.

The Logic of Eunomius

Like all participants in the fourth-century theological controversies, Eunomius's arguments consisted of a mixture of both scriptural citation and rational argument. Yet, in the eyes of his opponents, Eunomius erred by submitting the gospel message and the Christian faith to the exactitude of logical demonstration and syllogistic precision. Basil motions toward this critique in the opening paragraph of his *Against Eunomius*: "If all those upon whom the name of our God and Savior Jesus Christ had been invoked had preferred not to tamper with the truth of the gospel and to content themselves with the tradition of the apostles and the simplicity of the faith (ἡ ἁπλότης τῆς πίστεως), there would be no need for our present treatise."[15] The problem is that Eunomius is not satisfied with this truth and is not content with this simplicity of faith, and therefore, as Basil will go on to remark, he places his faith instead in the syllogistic reasoning of Aristotle and Chrysippus.[16] This critique is not unlike those which were levelled against Arius himself, who was portrayed by Epiphanius as the "new Aristotle" and by Athanasius as "a dialectician literally rushing in where angels feared to tread, one more interested in dialectical niceties than the faith once delivered to the saints."[17] For his own part, Eunomius admits that his intention in argumentation is to achieve precision (ἀκρίβεια) in doctrinal expression and understanding, and he regularly employs

[15] Basil, *Eun.* 1.1, trans. Mark DeCogliano and Andrew Radde-Gallwitz, *St Basil of Caesarea: Against Eunomius*, FoC 122 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2011), 81.
[16] Basil, *Eun.* 1.5
[17] Vaggione, *Eunomius*, 95.

dialectical reasoning toward that end. This is not to suggest that Scripture or theological tradition plays no role in governing Eunomius's theology,[18] but it is true that he frequently relies on syllogistic argumentation as the formal means to establish his theology, and it is upon such logic that he builds his doctrine of the unbegotten essence of God.

Several important premises undergird the logic that directs Eunomius to define God as unbegottenness. Stated briefly, we might reconstruct his argument in the following fashion: (1) there is only one God and that God is wholly unique; (2) to understand the nature of that God, we must attend to his name, which defines the characteristic quality that distinguishes his essence from all others; (3) the one thing which distinguishes God from everything else is that he owes his existence to no prior origin, and we name this by saying that God is unbegotten; (4) because God is simple, this characteristic quality is nothing other than the essence itself; (5) therefore, the essence of God is itself unbegottenness. First and foremost in this logic is the assertion that there is only one God, and that God is wholly unique, that he transcends everything else, and that he shares the glory of his nature with none other. This is the first premise that he mentions when he begins to unpack his theology in the *Apology*, and it is also at the forefront of his confession about God in his later work, the *Exposition of Faith*, a presentation of his faith written in response to Emperor Theodius's edicts against heretics in the year 383: "We believe in 'the one and only true God' (τὸν ἕνα καὶ μόνον ἀληθινὸν θεὸν) in accordance with the Lord's own teaching, not honoring him by means of a lying name (for he cannot lie), but reverencing him as he really is: both by nature and in glory

[18] In fact, Eunomius explicitly argues for Christian tradition (παράδοσις) as a standard for theological judgment. Cf. *Apol*. 4.

'one God', beginninglessly, everlastingly, unendingly one."[19] This is a strict monotheism, to be sure, but even more so it is an unyielding insistence on the incomparability of God. Eunomius's God has no peer and brooks no comparison, "having no one who shares in his divinity, no participant in his glory, no coinheritor of his authority, and no co-ruler of his kingdom."[20] This is the first premise in Eunomius's definition of the divine nature and its effect is to emphasize that any true understanding of the divine nature must communicate God's absolute separation from all that is not God.

A second and equally significant premise in Eunomius's argument revolves around his understanding of the nature of language and the relation of names to essences. Names are incredibly significant for Eunomius. As Raoul Mortley puts it, "it could be said that the question of *onomata* [names] is the theme which dominates his Apology."[21] His approach to naming is also one of the most significant differences between his theological method and that of Gregory of Nyssa. True names, for Eunomius, do not originate through the process of human intellectual reflection. They are not products of what Eunomius refers to as "conceptualization" (ἐπίνοια), but are instead "given things" that participate in the reality which they signify.[22] Because of this, to confess the name of God is not to indulge in speculation but to repay a debt to God by confessing "that he is what he is."[23] Only names of this sort, names which precede human use and

[19] *Exp. Fid.* 2, trans. Vaggione (modified), 151.
[20] *Exp. Fid.* 2.
[21] Mortley, *From Word to Silence II: The Way of Negation, Christian and Greek* (Bonn, Germany: Hanstein, 1986), 148.
[22] Eunomius's approach to language may strike us as rather odd, but it is not without precedent. Jean Daniélou has analyzed the similarities between Eunomius's philosophy of language and Proclus's commentary on the Platonic dialogue *Cratylus* and Mortley notes a Christian precedent in the work of Origen. Daniélou, "Eunome l'Arien et l'exégèse néo-platonicienne du Cratyle," *Revue des Études Grecques* 49 (1956): 412-432; Mortley, *From Word to Silence II*, 154.
[23] *Apol*. 8

understanding of them, can truly reflect God, he goes on to say, because only they share the eternal and unchanging character of the object to which they refer. Alternatively, any names which have their origin in human thought depend for their existence upon the thinker, and are therefore both temporally finite and mutable. Also, because they are not external *a posteriori* inventions of human reasoning but are in some way inherent and given properties of things, names define the essence of a thing, and therefore one can know something's essence by knowing its name.

These two premises clarify why Eunomius emphasizes the distinct name of God, that characteristic quality which distinguishes him from all that is not God, and for Eunomius that name is ἀγέννητος. God and God alone owes his existence to no source outside himself, and as the maker of all things that exist, he is prior to everything else. Otherwise, God would not be God but a creature. If we could identify something which preceded God or something other than God to which he in some way owes his own existence, then, reasons Eunomius, that thing "would surely be the first which had the dignity of Godhead (τὸ τῆς θεότητος...ἀξίωμα) rather than the second; for after all, anything which can be said to come into existence by the action of another (if this is true) has itself to be placed among created beings, and must properly be ranked among things which have come into existence by the action of God."[24] What defines God, therefore, is that God has no origin or beginning. God is not a creature, and the term that Eunomius uses to express this fact is ἀγέννητος.[25] Because nothing existed before God and because

[24] *Apol*. 7, trans. Vaggione (modified), 41.
[25] The use of ἀγέννητος to mean "uncreated" already had precedent in the fourth-century trinitarian controversies before Eunomius adapted it. On its importance in these debates, see Barnes, *The Power of God*, 181-189, and Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, 38-39.

he exists before all else, "then what follows from this is the Unbegotten (τὸ ἀγέννητον), or rather, that he is unbegotten essence (οὐσία ἀγέννητος)."[26]

Yet, to say that God is unbegotten is not quite the same thing as saying that "the Unbegotten" or "unbegottenness" is God. In order to understand how Eunomius draws this ultimate conclusion, it is necessary to take account of his fourth governing premise: divine simplicity.[27] The importance of this premise comes out most clearly in a section which I briefly referenced earlier from his *Apology*, but which here deserves a fuller quotation:

> So then, if, as shown by the preceding argument, 'the Unbegotten' (τὸ ἀγέννητον) is based neither on invention nor on privation (μήτε κατ' ἐπίνοιαν μήτε κατὰ στέρησιν), and is not applied to a part of him only (for he is without parts [ἀμερής]), and does not exist within him as something separate (for he is simple and uncompounded [ἁπλοῦς γὰρ καὶ ἀσύνθετος]), and is not something different alongside him (for he is one and only he is unbegotten), then 'the Unbegotten' must be unbegotten *essence*.[28]

Both of the earlier premises that I mentioned are present in this summary of Eunomius's argument. He insists that the knowledge of God as unbegotten is immediate and positive; it is not a product of human intellectual reflection (ἐπίνοια) and it is not simply a "privation" (στέρησις), a negative statement describing something that God

[26] *Apol.* 7, trans. Vaggione, 41.
[27] The significance of divine simplicity has received more attention in recent studies on Nicene theology and the Cappadocian conflict with Eunomius. See especially Radde-Gallwitz, *The Transformation of Divine Simplicity*, and Mark DelCogliano, *Basil of Caesarea's Anti-Eunomian Theory of Names: Christian Theology and Late Antique Philosophy in the Fourth Century Trinitarian Controversy*, VCS 103 (Leiden: Brill, 2010).
[28] *Apol*. 8, trans. Vaggione, 43.

lacks. Further, the attribute of unbegottenness is the true name for God in his radical uniqueness, since "he is one and only he is unbegotten", and it therefore cannot be something other than God which is coeternal with him. The most important premise, however, which Eunomius emphasizes through the use of three separate but semantically parallel words, is that God is a simple being that cannot be further reduced to distinct parts. Eunomius takes this to imply what Andrew Radde-Gallwitz refers to as the "identity thesis", the notion that the attributes or properties of God are identical with the divine essence. It is this premise that allows Eunomius to not only characterize God as unbegotten, but also to go further and suggest that this single property is identical with the divine essence itself, this premise which enables his conclusion that "'the Unbegotten' must be unbegotten essence."

This is the logic that enables Eunomius's identification of God fully and entirely with the single attribute of ἀγέννητος, the definitive name for the unique and perfect nature of God. Whether or not one finds it particularly compelling, this argument certainly possesses the virtue of clarity. As Khaled Anatolios notes, the logic informing Eunomius's argument can be summarized as "a direct and simple path from notions of divine simplicity, oneness, and causal priority to a definition of God's essence."[29] Interestingly, the very premises upon which Eunomius's argument relies wind up constituting the core of its conclusion as well. In his attempt to define the nature of God,

[29] Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, 159. Michel Barnes also has a helpful summary of Eunomius's logic in the *Apology*: "Eunomius' understanding of the fundamental nature of God's essence is to be found in the premises leading up to his conclusion that the identity of this kind of essence is signified by the term *unbegotten*. There are three such premises regarding the nature or kind of God's essence: first, ingenerateness cannot be attributed to only a part of God, since God is without parts; second and conversely, there is nothing in God that is other than ingenerate, because God is simple; finally, God is not both ingenerate and some other state of being, because God is *one*. By this argument Eunomius demonstrates that God's essence can have only one characteristic." *The Power of God*, 180.

Eunomius emphasizes the radical transcendence of God over creation, the absolute freedom from any causal origin, and a simplicity that reductively identifies the nature and perfection of God with a single attribute: unbegottenness. Yet this single defining attribute is not something separate from the radically unique transcendence of God. As I mentioned previously, ἀγέννητος has a positive meaning for Eunomius, and this positive meaning, I suggest, constitutes the core of Eunomius's understanding of divine perfection.

Unbegottenness and Divine Activity

Eunomius identifies unbegottenness as the one attribute, the one distinctive characteristic, which defines the nature of God. As I already mentioned, the need to identify such an attribute, one which is truly distinct, arises from the heavy emphasis he lays upon the absolute singularity and priority of God. His exposition of the faith begins with a confession that God is *one*, that this one God does not share his essence or glory or authority with any other, and that this one God precedes everything else in existence. Were this true of any other being, then it would make that being the true God. It is also for this reason that Eunomius denies that ἀγέννητος be understood as a name derived from a process of "privation" (στέρησις). From Eunomius's perspective, to conceive of ἀγέννητος as a privative implies that some state or property exists prior to unbegottenness, so that being unbegotten relies upon an earlier concept of being begotten: "for if privatives (αἱ στερήσεις) are privatives with respect to the inherent properties of something (τῶν κατὰ φύσιν), then they are secondary with respect to their

positives."[30] To say otherwise, he goes on to remark, would be to destroy the "true notion of God and of his perfection."[31] As Andrew Radde-Gallwitz observes, this argument is logically unsatisfying since it merely assumes as a premise what it is attempting to prove, namely, that "ingeneracy is a positive ontological property and not merely a negation."[32] Yet, regardless of how persuasive we find the argument, it is significant in understanding what ἀγέννητος entails as the single and definitive characteristic of divine perfection. As a positive property, which is not conceptually dependent on any other property, ἀγέννητος denotes primacy, absolute freedom from origin, and a radical distinction from all that is not God.

Eunomius was not the first theologian to gravitate toward the term ἀγέννητος, or the related term ἀγένητος, as a defining characteristic of divine perfection. This word already had a distinct history in the fourth century trinitarian disputes, beginning with Arius himself.[33] In his letter to Alexander, Arius begins his confession of faith with a declaration of the absolute priority and singularity of God in which he uses the same word: "We know one God—alone unbegotten, alone everlasting, alone without beginning…"[34] Arius does not go so far as to explicitly define the essence of God with this property—indeed, his emphasis on the unknowability of the Father would resist any attempt to define the divine essence, a notable difference between him and Eunomius—yet, other theologians, such as Dionysius of Alexandria, do make this move.[35] Various proposals have been given to explain the preference for the term "unbegotten" among

[30] *Apol*. 8, trans. Vaggione, 43.
[31] *Apol*. 8.
[32] Radde-Gallwitz, *Transformation of Divine Simplicity*, 104.
[33] For a brief review of this history, see Barnes, *The Power of God*, 181-189 and Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, 41-79.
[34] *Letter to Alexander* 2, trans. Rusch, 31.
[35] Barnes, *The Power of God*, 186.

anti-Nicene theologians, such as the adaptation of Greek philosophy or the precedent of the second century Apologists, but, as more recent scholarship has suggested, the most likely reason for Arius's and especially Eunomius's preference for this term can be traced to the influential critique of Origen levelled by Methodius of Olympus.[36] Writing in the latter decades of the third century, Methodius expressed strong concerns over Origen's arguments in support of free will, which he thought necessitated a view of matter as co-eternal with God. Such a view would imply the presence of two "uncreated" realities (ἀγένητα). From Methodius's perspective, this idea may have been compatible with Platonic philosophy, but it was anathema to the Christian understanding of God and of the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, which insisted that creation had a specific origin and was therefore not eternal, and thus made a sharp distinction between creation and God, who was alone uncreated and eternal.[37] When Arius and others who opposed Nicaea utilized this word as a descriptor of the transcendence of God, it was Methodius's idea of transcendence to which they were appealing: "the radical difference between God and the world."[38]

Eunomius continues this trajectory of defining divine transcendence as the "radical difference" between Creator and creation. The Creator is eternal and without beginning; the creation is temporally finite and has an origin. What must be avoided at all costs in order to safeguard the singularity and priority of God is the notion of a co-eternal creation. Because of this, Eunomius makes an absolute distinction between the being (οὐσία) and the activity (ἐνέργεια) of God. In his reasoning, anyone who suggests

[36] Barnes, *The Power of God*, 184-188; Behr, *The Nicene Faith*, 38-48; Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, 39.
[37] Methodius, *De libero arbitrio*, 5-6.
[38] Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, 39.

that the productive activity of God is somehow intrinsic to the nature of his being must likewise posit an eternal product (ἔργον) of that activity. This is the mistake of the Greek pagan philosophers, and it is what led them inevitably to the doctrine of an eternal creation.[39] For Eunomius, this is serious indeed, because to follow the Greeks by uniting the being and activity of God necessarily endangers the very notion of God upon which his entire theology is built. God and God alone is unbegotten, without beginning and eternal. But if his being and activity are joined, then the product of this activity is also without beginning, also unbegotten.[40] Therefore, divine activity must not be attributed to the being of God but to his will, for "that will (τὴν βούλησιν) is sufficient to bring into existence and to redeem all things.'"[41] The will of God acts in time and its activity has both a beginning and an end, and this will is something separate from the eternal and perfect essence of God.

Eunomius's understanding of divine perfection exists quite independent of the activity of God. For this reason, what God *is* must not be confused with what God *does*. As John Behr puts it, "This means, finally, that the essence of God itself is both non-productive and unrelated to the willed activity of God: what he does is not related to, or derived from, what he is."[42] This stands in sharp contrast to Gregory of Nyssa, for whom the perfection of God consists in and is understood from his productive activity, but more of that soon. For now, it is important to emphasize that this distinction between the being and activity of God, and hence the being and the will of God, carries significant

[39] *Apol*. 22.
[40]"Indeed, on these premises only two conclusions can follow: either the action of God is unproductive (ἄπρακτον) or the product (ἔργον) of God is unbegotten." *Apol*. 23, trans. Vaggione 65.
[41] *Apol*. 23, trans. Vaggione, 65.
[42] Behr, *Nicene Faith*, 280.

consequences for Eunomius's trinitarian theology. What is the relationship of the Son to the Father? In what sense is the Son an image of the Father? These questions push us to the heart of the Nicene debate and the answers that Eunomius and Gregory will give, which differ substantially, are inextricable from the question of divine perfection and the relationship between the being and activity of God.

The Perfection of God and the Person of Christ

Anyone acquainted with Eunomius's definition of the divine nature could likely guess what his answer would be to the question of whether Christ is God. If to be God is to be unbegotten and if Christ is begotten, then Christ must not be God. Yet, as I mentioned before, no participant in these fourth century debates would deny the Son's divinity entirely, not even Eunomius. He does not altogether reject language describing the Son as divine. Indeed, he will occasionally refer to him as the "only-begotten God" (μονογενῆ θεὸν). But, this does not mean that Eunomius considered the Son to be *equally* God with the Father. Far from it. He insists that the Son is not equal to the Father and to support this, he appeals straightforwardly to Christ's words in John 14: "the Father who sent me is greater than I."[43] Further, while it is true that he will refer to Christ as "God", this is not meant to suggest that Christ is in any way equal to *the* God. The Father and the Father alone is "the only true God, the only wise God, who alone is good, alone mighty, who alone has immortality."[44] The Father, not the Son, is the "God of all" (τὸν τῶν πάντων θεόν).[45] For this reason, rather than asking whether Eunomius considers

[43] *Apol*. 11
[44] *Apol*. 21, trans. Vaggione, 61.
[45] *Apol*. 25-26.

Christ to be divine or not, it is more helpful to ask in what way he understands the Son to be similar to the Father and in what way they are dissimilar.

As I have already mentioned, Eunomius places great stock in the importance of names. Names identify and define the natures to which they refer. From this premise, he can make a rather straightforward argument against the equality of the Father and the Son: "Each name pulls in its own direction and the other has no common meaning with it at all: if the one name is 'Unbegotten' it cannot be 'Son', and if 'Son' it cannot be 'Unbegotten'."[46] The defining name of God is unbegotten; the name of Christ is begotten; therefore, Christ is not God. As both Basil and Gregory will point out in their responses to Eunomius, however, the argument from names is not this straightforward. Just as it is possible to distinguish between the Father and the Son on the basis of their description as "unbegotten" and "begotten", so it is possible to observe their similarity on the basis of a variety of shared names such as "light", "life", and "power".[47] In response to this objection, Eunomius proposes a governing hermeneutical rule. Whenever the Father or Son is referred to by a title such as "light", "life", and so on, the meaning of that term must correspond to the underlying essence to which it refers. To call the Son "light" is to refer to begotten light, whereas to call the Father light denotes unbegotten light. Furthermore, since the nature of God is simple, the ultimate meaning of these terms are homonymous with the nature itself. Ultimately, then, to refer to the Father as light is to say nothing more than "unbegotten", and the same rule applies likewise to the Son.[48] The

[46] *Apol*. 11, trans. Vaggione, 47.
[47] Eunomius anticipates this objection: "Even granting the necessity of paying attention to the names (τοῖς ὀνόμασι) and of being brought by them to the meanings of the underlying realities, still, by the same token that we say that the unbegotten is different from the begotten, we also say that 'light' and 'light', 'life' and 'life', 'power' and 'power' are alike with respect to both." *Apol*. 19, trans. Vaggione, 57.
[48] *Apol.* 19

upshot of this is that, despite common titles attributed to the Father and Son, their essences remain distinct. Also, because the simplicity of God renders all of these titles as conceptually equivalent, these other titles communicate nothing new about the perfection of the being of God.

The dissimilarity of the Father and Son is clear enough. They do not share the same nature and the interpretation of their common titles must be subjected to this distinction of nature. But this is not the limit of Eunomius's trinitarian theology. While he rejects the notion of a "similarity of essence" (τὴν κατ' οὐσίαν ὁμοιότητα) between the Son and the "God of all", he does not reject all talk of similarity. Eunomius too must account for the scriptural designation of Christ as the image of the invisible God and to do so he draws on the previous distinction he made between being and act:

> Accordingly, if this argument has demonstrated that God's will is an action (ἐνέργειαν), and that this action is not essence but that the Only-begotten exists by virtue of the will of the Father (βουλήσει τοῦ πατρὸς), then of necessity it is not with respect to the essence but with respect to the action (which is what the will is) that the Son preserves his similarity (ὁμοιότητα) to the Father.[49]

The Son is a product not of the Father's essence but of his will. For this reason, it is the act and the will of the Father that the Son "images", not his nature or being. It is

[49] *Apol*. 24, trans. Vaggione, 65. Similarly in the *Exposition of Faith*, "Only [the Son] resembles his begetter with a most exact likeness (κατ' ἐξαίρετον ὁμοιότητα) in accordance with the meaning which is proper to himself: not as Father to Father (there are not two Fathers), nor yet as Son to Son (there are not two Sons), neither as Unbegotten to Unbegotten (only the Almighty is unbegotten and only the Only-begotten is begotten), but as the image and seal (ὡς εἰκόνα καὶ ὡς σφραγῖδα) of the whole activity and power of the Almighty, the seal of the Father's deeds, words, and counsels." *Exp. Fid.* 3, trans. Vaggione, 155.

through the Son that God acts in the world. In Eunomius's words, the Son is the "most perfect minister" (ὑπουργὸν τελειότατον) of all of God's providential activity in creation, including its preservation and redemption.[50] The Son is a mediator of the benevolence of God toward all of his creation and his mediation is characterized by perfect obedience. Also, it is on account of this benevolent activity that we refer to the Son with such attributes of perfection as life, power, and goodness, attributes that disclose the character of the will of God, but not his essence.[51]

Eunomius is not unique in describing the similarity of God and Christ as a unity of will. As Anatolios has pointed out, it is this approach to the relationship between the Son and the Father that unites a variety of Nicaea's detractors, such as Arius, Asterius, and Eusebius of Caesarea, but it was Eunomius who followed the logic of the distinction between will and being most consistently.[52] Eunomius is the one who categorically rejected any similarity of the Son and the Father with regard to their being and who insisted that this similarity resides only in the realm of volitional activity. Anatolios is also right to point out that this has significant consequences for Eunomius's understanding of divine perfection. What was merely implicit in Arius's thought becomes explicit in the writings of Eunomius: "the attribute 'unbegotten' becomes the crucial description of the divine essence."[53] This not only means that the Son does not share in this crucial description, but also that the person and activity of Jesus Christ cannot reveal the perfection of the divine nature. For Eunomius, just as we must not

[50] *Apol*. 27
[51] *Exp. Fid*. 3
[52] Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, 41-79.
[53] *Ibid*., 78.

confuse what God does with what God is, so we must not confuse the person and work of Christ with the perfection of the being of God.

As recent scholarship has reminded us, the doctrinal debates that embroiled the fourth century were not simply arguments over "Christology" or "Trinity" as distinct elements of Christian belief. The Nicene controversy was, as Richard Hanson puts it, a "search for the Christian doctrine of God," or, in the words of Khaled Anatolios, a disagreement over the "very character of divinity" and how the character of divinity might relate to the primacy of Christ in Christian faith and worship. Eunomius's rejection of Nicene trinitarian theology was a natural conclusion to his understanding of the character of divinity and its characteristic perfection. Given his simple equation of the divine nature with the property of unbegottenness, the strict distinction he makes between the Father and the Son is quite inevitable. Further, because he separates the being of God from the will and activity of God, he can maintain that the economic activity of the Son reflects the will and activity of the Father without being revelatory of the Father's nature.

Gregory rejects Eunomius's trinitarian theology and, along with it, the latter's understanding of the nature and perfection of God. Part of the reason that Gregory gives in this rejection is a negative one. He criticizes Eunomius's claims to definitive knowledge of the divine essence, arguing that the infinite nature of God simply cannot be comprehended by finite human minds. Yet, Gregory also mounts a positive argument against Eunomius's trinitarian theology by articulating a theology of divine perfection that is compatible with the person and work of Jesus Christ. It is this alternative understanding of the nature and character of God, one which takes its cues from the

economy of God's activity and the person of Jesus Christ, that constitutes Gregory's Nicene theology of divine perfection.

Trinitarian Theology and Divine Perfection in Gregory of Nyssa

Approximately four years after the publication of Eunomius's *Apology*, Basil of Caesarea published a critical response entitled *Against Eunomius*.[54] Eunomius did not respond immediately to this critique, but he did ultimately publish his own rejoinder, the *Apology for the Apology*, in intervals between the years 378 and 380. It is unlikely that Basil read any of Eunomius's response before his own death in September of 378, but Gregory did read it and in defense of his brother he composed his own *Against Eunomius*.[55] In what follows, I shall analyze the positive description of divine perfection that Gregory develops in this response, and the role that this positive description plays in his broader trinitarian theology. My analysis will proceed in three parts, roughly corresponding to the thematic focuses of the three books of *Contra Eunomium*.[56] The first

[54] For dating, see DelCogliano and Radde-Gallwitz, *Basil of Caesarea: Against Eunomius*, 33.

[55] The *Contra Eunomium* of Gregory consists of three separate books, hereafter simply referred to as *CE* 1, *CE* 2, and *CE* 3. The critical edition of these three books can be found in Jaeger, *Gregorii Nysseni Opera*, vols. 1 and 2. Any references I make to the Greek text will be to this critical edition. The most recent translations of the *Contra Eunomium* are those of Stuart Hall, published in three separate conference proceedings: *El "Contra Eunomium I" en la produccion literaria de Gregorio de Nisa*, eds. Lucas F. Mateo-Seco and Juan L. Bastero (Pamplona: Ediciones Universidad de Navarra, 1988); *Gregory of Nyssa:* Contra Eunomium *II: An English Version with Supporting Studies*, eds. Lenka Karfíková, Scot Douglass, and Johannes Zachhuber, VCS 82 (Leiden: Brill, 2007); and *Gregory of Nyssa:* Contra Eunomium *III: An English Translation with Commentary and Supporting Studies*, VCS 124 (Leiden: Brill, 2014). References to the translation of Hall will be references to these volumes.

[56] The composition and publication of the books of *Contra Eunomium* corresponded to the publication in three parts of Eunomius's *Apologia Apologiae* and the thematic focus of Gregory's response is governed by the content of Eunomius's work. I do not wish to imply, then, that Gregory intended any certain systematic structure to these books. Nevertheless, a number of scholars have suggested a rough thematic division: *CE* 1 is principally focused on general metaphysical and trinitarian themes; *CE* 2 is primarily devoted to epistemology and philosophy of language; and *CE* 3 devotes the most amount of attention to the person of Christ and to the exegesis of controverted biblical passages. For this division, see Bernard Pottier, *Dieu et le Christ selon Grégoire de Nysse: Étude systématique du «Contre Eunome» avec traduction inédite des extraits d'Eunome* (Namur: Culture et Vérité, 1994), 23-25; Juan Ignacio Ruiz Aldaz, "*EUN* III" in *The*

section will focus on the significance that a positive identification of divine perfection played in Gregory's metaphysical argument regarding the divinity of the Son and Spirit. Recent attention to Gregory's apophaticism has the potential of diminishing the importance of Gregory's positive understanding of the divine nature, yet, as I hope to demonstrate, Gregory repeatedly appeals to a positive description of the divine nature in defending the equality of the divine persons. A second section will consider Gregory's theological method and how it differs from that of Eunomius. Whereas Eunomius identifies the perfection of God by way of deductive logic, Gregory argues that positive understanding and speech of God is grounded in contemplation of the economic activity of God. This difference in method leads to an alternative description of divine perfection, one that is in harmony with the person and work of Jesus Christ. This pro-Nicene understanding of divine perfection and its christological character will be the topic of the third section.

Trinitarian Unity as Shared Perfection in Contra Eunomium *I*

The connection between Eunomius's notion of divine perfection and his trinitarian theology is readily apparent. Eunomius equates divine perfection with the absolute priority and distinction of God in comparison with everything which proceeds from him, including the Son and Spirit. God's defining attribute is unbegottenness, which, as I have already observed, is conceptually identical with his being uncreated. The Son, being begotten, does not share this perfection and, instead of being uncreated, is

Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa, 307; and Matthieu Cassin, "*Contre Eunome* III: une introduction," in *Gregory of Nyssa:* Contra Eunomium *III*," 23-24.

an "offspring" (γέννημα) and a "thing made" (ποίημα).[57] In responding to this argument, Gregory appeals to an his own "grammar" of divine perfection, which articulates an alternative conception of the nature and perfection of God. Like Eunomius, Gregory will make a sharp distinction between the transcendent Creator and his creation. Yet, unlike Eunomius, he does not think that this distinction exists among the persons of the Trinity. In the first book of his *Contra Eunomium*, Gregory makes the case that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit all belong to the class of uncreated being precisely because they all share in the same perfections that characterize the nature of God.

In order to establish the unity of the trinitarian persons, Gregory begins by identifying distinct categories of beings. The first and "most important" distinction, he notes, is that between intelligible (νοητὸν) and sensible (αἰσθητὸν) beings.[58] Both these categories may also be further distinguished. Sensible beings are differentiated on the basis of variations in empirically observable qualities, whereas intelligible beings fall into two basic categories: created and uncreated. The fundamental difference between these two intelligible beings lies in their capacity for variation, for "more and less" (τὸ πλέον καὶ τὸ ἧττον) participation in the good to which they are directed. Whereas created beings may receive a greater or lesser share of goodness on the basis of their free choice, this is not the case with uncreated being. What distinguishes uncreated being (God) from everything else is that it possesses all goodness essentially and not by participation in some other source.[59] In Gregory's words,

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[57] *Apol*. 18

[58] *CE* 1.270. This ontological distinction has biblical precedent in Gregory's mind, since the apostle Paul refers in Colossians 1:16 to all things "visible and invisible" (τὰ ὁρατὰ καὶ τὰ ἀόρατα).

[59] For further analysis of the division of beings and how essential possession of perfection frames Gregory's understanding of the Creator/creature distinction, see David Balás, *ΜΕΤΟΥΣΙΑ ΘΕΟΥ: Man's Participation in God's Perfections according to Saint Gregory of Nyssa* (Rome: Pontificium Institutum S. Anselmi, 1966), 23-53.

> Since the intelligible nature on the created side stands at the border between good things and their opposite, so as to be capable of receiving either by inclining to those which it prefers, as we learn from scripture, there is room to speak of more and less in the one who excels in virtue in proportion to his rejection of the worse and approximation of the better. The uncreated nature is far away from such a distinction, inasmuch as it does not have the good as something acquired, nor does it receive beauty into itself by participation in some higher beauty, but because it is itself by nature that which is good (αὐτὸ ὅπερ τῇ φύσει ἀγαθὸν οὖσα), and is perceived as the good, and is attested even by our opponents to be the fount of goodness, simple, uniform and uncompounded.[60]

Gregory frequently uses the overlapping terms of goodness and beauty as a shorthand way to express divine perfection, especially insofar as that perfection is participated in by intelligible beings.[61] Those beings who share in this perfection to a greater extent "excel in virtue", as Gregory observes, and to be virtuous is nothing less than to participate in this goodness and beauty. This is not true for uncreated being, because it does not possess goodness and beauty "by participation" (κατὰ μετοχὴν) in a higher source. Uncreated nature is naturally good and is the source of goodness for everything that is created. The Son and Spirit, insists Gregory, must be recognized as uncreated precisely because they also possess their perfection "essentially" and not by way of participation.[62]

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[60] *CE* 1.276, trans. Hall, 75, modified. Hall chose to translate τὸ καλὸν here as "moral virtue". Although I think that this preserves the thrust of what Gregory comprehends in pairing the terms "goodness and beauty", it can lead to confusion since Gregory also frequently uses the word "virtue".
[61] See Ilaria Ramelli, "Good/Beauty" in *Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa*, 356-363.
[62] Origen makes the same argument for distinguishing the Son and Spirit from the rest of creation in *De princ.* 1.2.13.

Gregory frequently emphasizes the essential perfection of God and it is the principle reason he gives for affirming the ontological equality of the Father and the Son. When elaborating on the character of this perfection, however, Gregory does not confine himself to the language of goodness and beauty. Goodness (τὸ ἀγαθὸν) is a shorthand expression that includes a variety of attributes that describe the essential perfection of God. Responding to Eunomius's suggestion that the Father and Son should receive differing honor on the basis of their distinct natures, Gregory writes:

> But with the divine nature, because every perfection in respect of goodness appears together (δὶα τὸ πᾶσαν τὴν κατὰ τὸ ἀγαθὸν τελειότητα συθνεμφαίνεσθαι) in the designation as divine, it is not possible for our mind to discover the manner of priority in honor. Where no greater or lesser possession is conceived of power, glory, wisdom, love (φιλανθρωπίας), or any other good one can think of, but every good thing the Son has belongs to the Father, and everything the Father has is seen in the Son, by what shift shall we show the greater share of honor in the Father?[63]

Here we find an example of Gregory's positive description of divine perfection: goodness, power, wisdom, glory, and love. As he eludes to in his reference to "any other good one can think of," it is clear that he does not mean this to be an exhaustive description of the perfection that characterizes the divine nature. He will also frequently include such other "goods" as light, life, truth, justice, and incorruptibility.[64] Regardless of which perfection is under consideration, however, his main concern is to affirm that

[63] *CE* 1.334, trans. Hall, 84.
[64] Andrew Radde-Gallwitz cites a variety of representative lists of these "goods". Radde-Gallwitz, *Transformation of Divine Simplicity*, 182n.22.

the Father and Son both deserve equal reverence because their possession of these perfections is identical. Every perfection of the Son belongs to the Father and every perfection of the Father is witnessed in the Son. No variation in perfection, no "greater and less", exists between them, and it is for this reason that Nicene Christians affirm their unity.[65]

To this, Eunomius might have responded that the so-called "goods" identified by Gregory are only revelatory of the divine will. Certainly the Son is referred to as good and wise and just, but these names only indicate a similarity of will and action with the Father, not a shared nature. As I noted earlier, Eunomius's rejection of this argument rests upon his absolute separation of being and volitional activity. Gregory's response to this distinction comes most fully in the second book of *Contra Eunomium*, but in this first book we already begin to see how he will respond. It is by observing the benevolent providence of God, argues Gregory, that we come to a recognition of divine goodness, and it is through a recognition of the same benevolence expressed in the providential activity of both the Father and the Son that we assert an identity of nature. "If the Father of all provides (προνοεῖ), and the Son also similarly provides (for what he sees the Father doing, the Son does likewise), the identity of purposes (ἡ τῶν προαιρέσεων ταὐτότης) surely indicates the common nature of those who have identical purposes."[66]

Similarly, to return to the passage quoted above, the reason that equal honor is due to both Father and Son is that they are both credited with a goodness that is

[65] Numerous examples of this argument from Gregory's text could be adduced. I will limit myself to one such example: "In the case of God the Father and God the Only-begotten Son, I am at a loss as to where the opposition lies. One goodness, wisdom, justice, care, power, imperishability and all that that are of sublime import, are equally applied to both, and in a way each has its force in the other: the Father does all things through the Son, and the Only-begotten, being Power of the Father, performs everything." *CE* 3.5.47

[66] *CE* 1.441, trans. Hall, 99, modified.

manifested in activity toward humanity. Honor is the proper mode for human discourse about divine perfection and Gregory defines this honor as "a loving posture (ἀγαπητικὴ σχέσις)" and the "acknowledgement (ὁμολογία) of the good things that belong to [the divine]."[67] Yet, whereas Eunomius insisted that the Father must be honored for his status in a way above the Son, and is so indeed honored *by* the Son, Gregory suggests that the Son and Father are rightly given equal honor because they display the same goodness in their activity. After noting the titles that David gives to God in the psalms, titles such as "strength", "refuge", "hope", and "shield", which are honorific expressions of the active goodness of God, he writes,

> If it is not the Only-begotten that has become these things to men, then let abundance of honor be withdrawn from him on this account as heresy decrees. But if our faith is that the Only-begotten God is, and is named as (ὀνομάζεσθαι), all these things and more besides, deemed equal on every consideration of good that exists or can be conceived, with the majesty of the goodness in the Father (πρὸς τὸ μεγαλεῖον τῆς ἐν τῷ πατρὶ ἀγαθότητος), how could it be said reasonable not to love such a one, or to dishonor the one loved?[68]

Once again, Gregory insists that the equality of the Father and the Son, here an equality of honor, derives from their equal and common possession of perfect goodness. The evidence for this lies in the economic activity of the Son. It is the Only-begotten, suggests Gregory, who has become "strength" and "shield" and "hope" and "refuge" to

[67] *CE* 1.337, trans. Hall, 84, modified.
[68] *CE* 1.339, trans. Hall, 85.

men, thereby proving his equality with the "majesty of the goodness in the Father." And, whereas Eunomius distinguished between a similarity of activity and a similarity of essence, Gregory takes the former as evidence for the latter. As I have already noted, it is in his second book against Eunomius that he will offer his justification for why this is a legitimate method of theological reasoning. Already in *Contra Eunomium I*, however, the character of divine perfection and the relationship between being and activity are inextricably connected. Gregory's grammar of divine perfection focuses not on the absolute aseity of God, but on his perfect goodness, and whereas unbegottenness is not a quality that can observed in act, goodness can be and indeed is observed in the benevolent, providential activity of the one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Naming Divine Being in Act: Perfection and the Knowledge of God in Contra Eunomium II

Theological epistemology is a central theme of Gregory's debate with Eunomius. Yet while Gregory's apophatic critique of Eunomius's claims to "exact" knowledge have received significant attention, it is important to recognize that this critique did not lead him to think that God was unknowable. Gregory frequently and consistently responds to Eunomius's claims about the divine nature with his own positive characterization of God. Therefore, it is incorrect to reduce the epistemological differences of Gregory and Eunomius simply as whether or not it is possible to have knowledge about the divine nature or essence.[69] At the same time, this does not mean that Gregory and Eunomius

[69] This mistake is made not only by those who conceive of Gregory as a radically apophatic theologian, but also those who defend Gregory's positive theology by making strict categorical distinctions between knowledge of "essence" and "energies." For further discussion of this point, see n. 78 below.

both approach positive knowledge of God in the same way. As we have seen, Eunomius arrives at the definitive name of God by way of a logical deduction from the premises of singularity, priority, and simplicity. This name, he insists, is not a product of either "privation" (στέρησις) or "conceptualization" (ἐπίνοια). In contrast, Gregory thinks that the titles of divine perfection are indeed products of "conceptualization". This is a key point of divergence in their theological methods and, as I will argue, it is also one of the key reasons that they disagree on the relationship between divine perfection and the person of Christ.

Before turning to the topic of conceptualization, it is necessary to say something about Gregory's argument for rejecting his opponent's approach to knowing the divine nature. To begin with, his response to Eunomius's boast of theological "precision" is clear and categorical: "human nature does not have the capacity for exact knowledge (ἀκριβῆ κατανόησιν) of the divine essence."[70] Any attempt to know God "exactly" (ἀκριβῶς), which was Eunomius's vaunted claim, is a mistaken enterprise because it attempts what is humanly impossible. Yet, it is important to be clear about what the character of such "exact" knowledge is. At first glance, it may sound like a claim about the extent of one's understanding of God, so that to know God "exactly" would be equivalent to knowing God exhaustively. However, Richard Vaggione has argued that this is an erroneous interpretation of what Eunomius means by the word "exact". "Exact" understanding of the divine nature refers not to the extent of understanding, but to the mode of understanding. To know God exactly is to know God immediately, just as God knows Godself. For Eunomius, any other form of understanding would violate divine

[70] *CE* 2.67

simplicity and would therefore not be "real" knowledge of God. Vaggione summarizes these points thus: "To know God in any other way would be to possess individual pieces of knowledge about him, that is, to know him κατ' ἐπίνοιαν…If our knowledge of God is 'real', then, the only way we *can* know him is the way 'he knows himself', immediately and non-discursively."[71] Interpreting Eunomius in this manner may shed some light on the differences between their theological method, because it shifts our attention away from the vexing question of the possible content of our knowledge about God to the proper mode of that knowledge.

To see Gregory's distinction between these two modes of knowledge, one need only pay attention to the metaphors and analogies he uses to illustrate them. Gregory indicts Eunomius' attempt at "exact knowledge" by suggesting that it is a prideful attempt at mastery, an attempt to capture the infinite being of God through the use of logical reasoning. To elaborate on this indictment, he compares Eunomians to children attempting to grasp a beam of sunlight:

> So too the children of our generation, as the parable says, play as they sit in the market place. They see the divine power illuminating their minds through the words of providence and the wonders in creation, like the radiance and warmth issuing from the physical sun; yet rather than marveling at this divine generosity, and worshipping the one made known through these things (τὸν διὰ τούτϛν νοούμενον), they overstep the mind's limitations and clutch with logical tricks at the intangible to catch it (περιδράσσονται), and suppose that they can lay hold of (κρατεῖν) it with syllogisms.[72]

[71] Vaggione, *Eunomius of Cyzicus*, 256.
[72] *CE* 2.81, trans. Hall, 77, modified.

The attempt at "exact" knowledge of God is an attempt at a logical mastery of God, at "laying hold" of God with syllogisms. It is opposed to a posture of reverential worship because it reduces the infinite being of God to something that can be immediately and definitively comprehended. It also leads inevitably to idolatry. By definition, argues Gregory, the being of God is infinite and therefore has no limitation. Yet, the theologians who attempt to define the divine nature, and so achieve an "exact" knowledge of God, have sought to bring God "into a prescribed limit" (εἰς περιγραφήν) and have therefore made a conceptual idol out of their notion of "unbegottenness" (ἀγεννησία).[73] Importantly, though, Gregory does not contrast this idolatrous knowledge with a lack of knowledge. The opposite of the idolater is not one who is ignorant of the divine nature, but the one who conforms her understanding of that nature to the reverential posture of worship, and the model for this reverential knowledge of God is found in the patriarchs and prophets of Scripture:

> When God was yet unknown (ἀγνοούμενον) to the human race because of the idolatrous error (τὰ εἴδωλα πλάνην) which then prevailed, those saints made him manifest and known to men, both by the miracles (θαυμάτων) which are revealed in the works done by him, and from the titles (ὀνομάτων) by which the various aspects of divine power are perceived. Thus they are guides towards the understanding (σύνεσιν) of the divine nature by making known to mankind merely the grandeur of their thoughts about God.[74]

[73] *CE* 2.100
[74] *CE* 2.102, trans. Hall, 82, modified.

How do the scriptural writers differ in their understanding and presentation of God from Eunomius? To be sure, there is a difference in the extent of knowledge that they claim. The biblical authors do not offer a comprehensive definition of the divine nature, and in this way they do not fall into the trap of prescribing the limits of an infinite God. Yet, Gregory does not think that this means that they have nothing to say about God, no positive understanding of the divine nature to make known. The prophets do not leave people in a state of ignorance about God. Rather, the prophets make God known by recounting the wondrous works (θαύματα) of God in history and by the "titles" (ὀνόματα) they use to describe God.

These "titles" or "names" for God are descriptions of divine perfection, yet, as Gregory here notes, they do not so much define the essence as describe the power of God. Michel Barnes has produced an excellent study of Gregory's preference for speaking of the power (δύναμις) of God in his trinitarian theology.[75] According to Barnes, Gregory does not think it is possible to comprehend the divine essence (οὐσία), but it is possible to gain knowledge of the divine power through attention to its active manifestation. Furthermore, unlike Eunomius, Gregory thinks that the divine power is an innate property of the essence. Power and essence are not identical, but because power is a "capacity to act that is distinctive to a specific existent and that manifests the nature of that existent," it is therefore possible to gain knowledge about a nature through its activity of its power.[76] As Barnes puts it, "God's is the kind of being that acts, and activity is the kind

[75] Barnes, *The Power of God*.
[76] *Ibid*, 305. Barnes focuses on δύναμις as an innate property (*proprium*) of the divine essence that, while being distinct from the essence, nevertheless provides some knowledge of it. In his study on divine simplicity, Andrew Radde-Gallwitz expands on this analysis and suggests that other attributes or "goods" of the divine nature, such as goodness, wisdom, justice, life, light, etc., are also *propria* that similarly provide positive (albeit non-comprehensive) knowledge of the divine essence. Radde-Gallwitz, *The Transformation of Divine Simplicity*, 200-212.

of knowledge we know best. There is a happy coincidence between these two facts, so that however unique and unlike anything else God may be, God is recognizable as a Being that acts, and insofar as God acts, we may form meaningful concepts about Him."[77] Eunomius disagrees with this, because he separates the will and activity of God from the divine essence, and it is for this reason that he distinguishes between the perfection of the divine nature and the description of divine activity. In contrast with this, Gregory suggests that the scriptural authors serve as more reliable guides to the "understanding of the divine nature" precisely by attending to the activity of God and by "naming" the perfection of God on the basis of that activity.[78]

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[77] Barnes, *The Power of God*, 237.

[78] Some scholars have argued that Gregory disavows any understanding of the divine nature or essence whatsoever, and that he restricts the object of human knowledge to the activities (ἐνέργειαι) or the attributes of God as distinct from his essence. For examples of this argument, see Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (London: James Clarke and Co., 1957), 67-90; Verna Harrison, *Grace and Human Freedom According to St. Gregory of Nyssa* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), 36-59; and David Bradshaw, *Aristotle East and West: Metaphysics and the Division of Christendom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 153-186. Others, such as David Bentley Hart, have rejected this strict distinction between the essence and the "energies" of God as an alien imposition on Gregory's texts. Hart argues that Gregory, like Aquinas, makes no real distinction between the essence and the energies of God. Thus, he writes, "Logically, if the divine energies are genuine *manifestations* of God, however limited, then whatever names apply to the energies also necessarily apply to the essence, even if only defectively, immeasurably, remotely, incomprehensibly, and 'improperly.' It is true, of course, that for Gregory our words name God only as he acts toward us, and that all of our words fall infinitely short of God (this is true for Augustine as well)…For all of the Cappadocians, we come to know anything of God only through his operations (or energies, if one prefers the Greek word); but none of them ever suggests that what is revealed of God therein is true of the energies alone (the Cappadocians were not Nominalists)." Hart, "The Hidden and the Manifest: Metaphysics after Nicaea," in *Orthodox Readings of Augustine,* eds. George Demacopoulos and Aristotle Papanikolau (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2008), 212n.38. Alternatively, in his *Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and the Transformation of Divine Simplicity*, Andrew Radde-Gallwitz has tried to chart something of a middle path between these two interpretations by suggesting that, while Gregory does think of the activities and resultant "names" of God as distinct from the divine nature, knowledge of these names does indeed provide access to some knowledge of the divine nature. While it is beyond the scope of my chapter here to engage substantively with the numerous interpretive issues in this debate, it should be clear that my reading of Gregory aligns more closely with that of Hart and, for the most part, Radde-Gallwitz. In the above quote from *CE* 2.102, Gregory makes it quite clear that apprehension of the divine names leads to an "understanding (σύνεσιν) of the divine nature." Furthermore, within the context of this particular dispute, it is Eunomius, not Gregory, who insists on an absolute distinction between the activity and the essence of God. Therefore, to suggest that Gregory makes such a strict distinction between the essence and activity of God that apprehension of the latter *cannot* grant understanding of the former is to read Gregory as an unconscious supporter of Eunomius's own position.

After contrasting the conceptual idolatry of the Eunomians with the reverential description of God found in Scripture, Gregory goes on to give a more explicit analysis of the dispute over naming God in *CE* 2.125-195. He begins by affirming his agreement with Basil's approach: "Our position therefore—I am adopting my master's teaching—is that we have a faint and slight apprehension (ἀντίληψιν) of the divine nature through reasoning (διὰ τῶν λογισμῶν), but we still gather knowledge (γνῶσιν) enough for our slight capacity through the titles (ὀνομάτων) which are reverently used for it."[79] The approach that Gregory shares with his "master", Basil, does not deny knowledge of the divine nature entirely, only the "exact" knowledge of God claimed by Euomius and encapsulated in a single word. In Basil's words, "There is not one name which expresses the entire nature of God and is able to encompass it entirely."[80] Such an immediate and definitive comprehension of God is impossible. On the other hand, it is possible to gain a "slight apprehension" of God by attention to the multitude of divine titles: "there are many diverse names, and each one contributes, in accordance with its own meaning, to a notion that is altogether dim and trifling as regards the whole but that is at least sufficient for us."[81] The positive knowledge we have of the divine nature is communicated by the

[79] *CE* 2.130, trans. Hall, 87, modified.
[80] *Eun.* 1.10, trans. DelCogliano and Radde-Gallwitz, 105.
[81] Basil, *Eun.* 1.10, trans. DelCogliano and Radde-Gallwitz, 105. Scot Douglass's study of the Cappadocian philosophy of language, *Theology of the Gap: Cappadocian Language Theory and the Trinitarian Controversy* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), emphasizes their turn toward "*epinoetic* discourse" as a means by which to overcome the problem of having no access to immediate (what Douglass calls *adiastemic*) knowledge of the divine nature. On the connection between the inherently extended (*diastemic*) and dynamic (*kinetic*) ontology of creation and this epistemological approach, Douglass is persuasive. On the other hand, his interest in aligning the Cappadocians with postmodern philosophers leads to some significant distortions of Gregory's argument. Douglass likens Gregory to the contemporary philosopher Gianni Vattimo and suggests that, like Vattimo, Gregory thinks that the positive language with which he describes the divine nature must ultimately and inevitably "fail". Of course, if by failure he meant nothing more than that any such description is inevitably incomplete and that no word or title of God can adequately convey the entirety of his infinite nature, then I would be inclined to agree with him. But Douglass goes further than this, suggesting that Gregory considers the frailty of theological language to be such that "every truth is also a lie, that the best theological utterance is a shadow of the truth and that all

various titles we use to speak of God, each with its own distinct meaning.[82] It is through these titles, which describe various divine attributes, that we come to a "reverent notion" (εὐσεβῆ διάνοια) of God.[83]

Having established some of the fundamental differences between his approach and that of Eunomius—that the positive description he seeks is not the same as comprehensive knowledge and that it exists in a plurality of names, not a single word—Gregory moves on to defend Basil's use of the term "conceptualization" (ἐπίνοια). Eunomius explicitly rejected the process of conceptualization and suggested that knowledge gained by it is unreal, merely ephemeral. Basil, however, had specifically appealed to conceptualization as the normal human process of coming to a clearer understanding of an object and had suggested that our positive language for God is a result of this same process.[84] In agreement with Basil, Gregory points out that this mental process undergirds almost all human knowledge, from theoretical sciences like geometry and arithmetic to such practical sciences as agriculture and shipbuilding. He then gives a definition for this process:

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speaking of God is a maiming of the truth. All theological truth, especially regarding Christ, participates against its will in deception, blasphemy, heresy, and violence." (255-256). On the basis of this interpretation, it is no wonder that Douglass regards the historical appropriation of the Cappadocians as "tools of absolute orthodoxy" to be a lamentable misinterpretation of their thought. Yet, it is not clear to me that Gregory regards his own positive discourse about God with such a thoroughgoing skepticism as nothing but an inevitably failed exercise in theological imagination, or the truths about God understood through the process of ἐπίνοια as deceptions and lies. Gregory certainly thinks that this epinoetic process will never transcend the conditions of creaturehood and attain the immediacy that Eunomius desires, but he does not therefore doubt the truth of that which the patriarchs and prophets speak.

[82] Gregory, in agreement with Basil and against Eunomius, affirms the real semantic distinction of these different titles: τούτων δέ φαμεν τῶν ὀνομάτων οὐ μονοειδῆ πάντων εἶναι τὴν σημασίαν. *CE* 2.131. For further discussion of this point, see *CE* 2.480-485.

[83] *CE* 2.136

[84] Basil, *Eun.* 1.5-1.7

> Conceptualization (ἡ ἐπίνοια) is, according to my understanding, the way for discovering things we do not know, using what is connected and consequent upon our first idea of a subject to discover what lies beyond. Having formed an idea about a matter in hand, we attach the next thing to our initial apprehension by adding new ideas, until we bring our research into the subject to its conclusion.[85]

Whereas Eunomius rejected this common mental process in the construction of a positive description of God, Gregory, along with Basil, suggests that conceptualization is the very means by which we come to a "reverent notion" of God. This has significant implications for Gregory's approach to a positive description of divine perfection. As Raoul Mortley points out, Eunomius and Gregory disagreed on whether the concepts produced by this mental concept were fictitious or true, but both agreed on the posterior character of the knowledge gained. Concepts (ἐπίνοια) are "things thought of after the event."[86] For Eunomius, this posed a serious problem, but for Gregory it was a key characteristic of human understanding of God. Whereas Eunomius had sought for an *a priori* definition of transcendence that could be identified by the use of deductive logic, Gregory's emphasis on conceptualization suggests that a true theological description of God will be the result of *a posteriori* reflection, and the object of that reflection, as already mentioned, will be the manifestation of the power of God in act.[87]

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[85] *CE* 2.182, trans. Hall, 97, modified.
[86] Mortley, *From Word to Silence II*, 151.
[87] Giulio Maspero gets to this difference when he writes, "The ontological ladder that unites Heaven and earth in continuity is broken, and the possibility of raising oneself from below to above by means of human reason alone has disappeared. God can thus be known to man only if He reveals himself, i.e., only through his action. There is therefore no *a priori* knowledge of God, but only *a posteriori* knowledge—as a gift that comes from above." Maspero, "Life from Life: The Procession of the Son and the Divine Attributes in Book VIII of Gregory of Nyssa's *Contra Eunomium*," in *Gregory of Nyssa:* Contra Eunomium III*: An English Version with Commentary and Supporting Studies*, 426. Similarly, Theodor Tollefsen writes, "Now this is an important principle in the theologies of the Cappadocian Fathers: we observe certain

The effect of this epistemological principle can be seen in Gregory's discussion of various divine titles and their origin. As he notes in *CE* 2.151 and again in *CE* 2.583, the multiple positive words by which we describe God arise from a reflection on the providential activity of God in creation. When David describes God in the psalms with words such as "pity" and "mercy", he is giving an *a posteriori* description of God in response to the pitiful and merciful actions of God toward sinful humanity.[88] Similarly, the attribution of God as "good" or "just" or "righteous" likewise originates in human contemplation of divine action. God is called good from a consideration of the good he provides to us and is referred to as a righteous judge because of the scriptural witness to the righteousness of his future judgment.[89] Even the word "God", suggests Gregory, can be explained as a product of human reflection on the divine activity of oversight.[90]
In both of the aforementioned passages, Gregory cites Wisdom of Solomon 13:5 in support of his epistemological approach: "From the greatness and beauty of created things the Originator (γενεσιουργὸν) of all things is analogously contemplated (ἀναλόγως...θεωρεῖσθαι)."[91] This verse illustrates a fundamental principle of his approach to describing divine perfection. The various titles or attributes with which Gregory attempts to give a positive description of God are the product of contemplation on the being of God in act. It is the greatness and beauty of the creative and providential activity of God that gives rise to theological speech and that leads to a "reverential

activities and from these we entertain certain notions of divine attributes. These so-called attributes are, basically, the divine nature being powerfully active." Tollefsen, *Activity and Participation in Late Antique and Early Christian Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 36.
[88] *CE* 2.151-153.
[89] *CE* 2.584
[90] To make this case, Gregory appeals to the verbal similarities between the words for God (θεός) and divine (θεῖον) and the word for watching (θεᾶσθαι). *CE* 2.585-586.
[91] *CE* 2.154

notion" of God. It is this approach that Gregory finds in the prophets and patriarchs, who act as guides toward an "understanding of the divine nature" by means of their witness to God's mighty works and the resultant titles that reflect those works. It is also this approach that he finds in the psalms of David, whose articulation of divine attributes arises from a perception of God's salvific activity toward humanity.

The significance of this theological method can also be witnessed in another of Gregory's important trinitarian texts, the letter *Ad Ablabium*. It is this text which Lewis Ayres focuses on in his exposition of Gregory's trinitarian theology.[92] Many scholars have looked to this letter as a paradigmatic example of a "social" understanding of the Trinity in Gregory, precisely because it is here that he draws most heavily on the analogy of three human persons sharing one nature to explain how a confession of equality among the divine persons does not result in a confession of three gods.[93] According to Ayres's reading of the text, however, the development of a social metaphor for understanding the relation of the divine persons is not Gregory's real purpose. Rather, the primary theme he wishes to focus on concerns human speech and knowledge about God and its source in the activity of divine power. The conclusion that Ayres draws regarding Gregory's theological method is very similar to what one finds in the *Contra Eunomium*. Whereas

[92] Ayres's treatment is very helpful, but his justification for focusing exclusively on this text as representative of Nyssa's Nicene thought is undermined by his own programmatic suggestions for other interpreters. In his introduction, he notes his critical intent: to demonstrate that the appeals to *Ad Ablabium* as evidence of a social trinitarian theology in Gregory are a misreading of the purpose of the text. He then goes on to justify the continued importance of the text by suggesting that it is something of a breviary of Gregory's broader Nicene theology: "the *Ad Ablabium* is paradigmatic because it offers a summary of the positions advocated in such texts as the *Contra Eunomium* and the *Catechetical Oration*." At the end of the chapter, however, he suggests that *Ad Ablabium* ought not function as the primary source for our understanding of Gregory's trinitarian theology: "Rather than turning first to the *Ad Ablabium* I suggest we make far more use of three texts: *Catechetical Oration*, *Refutation of Eunomius' Confession*, and *Contra Eunomium* 2." *Nicaea and Its Legacy*, 345-360.

[93] For a summary of two examples of such a "social" interpretation of Gregory, see Morwenna Ludlow, *Gregory of Nyssa: Ancient and (Post)modern* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 51-81.

immediate knowledge of the divine nature is impossible, it is possible to learn of and speak truthfully about God through attention to the active manifestation of his "intrinsic power" in creation.[94] This is why Gregory's positive description of the divine nature is rooted in the activity of ἐπίνοια, which is an *a posteriori* reflection on the revelation of God in act. As Ayres puts it with reference to Gregory's argument in *Ad Ablabium*, "We call God 'Giver of Life' and by abstraction [ἐπίνοια] we term God 'Life': by reflecting on God's act of creating all things we learn to speak of God as uncreated."[95]

In both *Contra Eunomium* and *Ad Ablabium*, we find Gregory connecting Nicene trinitarian theology with a particular theological epistemology and method, one that rejects immediate claims to comprehension of the being of God and instead emphasizes the process of human reflection on the revelation of God in act, a stark contrast with the approach of Eunomius. Whereas Eunomius deduced his definition of divine perfection from *a priori* premises of simplicity and aseity, Gregory's positive description of God was the product of reflection on the work of God in history.[96] But how does this difference of approach relate to the central question of Nicaea, the ontological relationship between the Father and the Son? In the first book of his *Contra Eunomium*, Gregory anchored his argument for their equality in their shared perfections, such as power, glory, goodness, wisdom, and kindness. It is on the basis of their equal possession of these perfections that we ought to affirm their equal honor and divine

[94] Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy*, 352-353.
[95] *Ibid*, 352. For a lengthier study of *Ad Ablabium* that comes to some very similar conclusions regarding the centrality of the connection between nature and action and what this entails for Gregory's trinitarian theological method, see Giulio Maspero, *Trinity and Man: Gregory's of Nyssa's* Ad Ablabium.
[96] J. Warren Smith aptly summarizes these conflicting approaches as "Eunomian Rationalism" and "Nicene Apocalypticism" or "Nicene Economic Theology". See Smith, "'Arian' Foundationalism or 'Athanasian' Apocalypticism: A Patristic Assessment," in *Beyond Old and New Perspectives on Paul: Reflections on the Work of Douglas Campbell*, ed. Chris Tilling (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), 78-92.

status. Gregory develops this argument further in *Contra Eunomium II* by addressing the origin of these various attributes of perfection and their relationship to the divine nature. In the third and final book of *Contra Eunomium*, Gregory draws upon these premises to address the specific question at hand. How can Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God, be equal with God? It is this question, the status of Jesus Christ, that Gregory perceives to be the fundamental point of dispute, and his response to it will build upon the arguments of the first two books. Gregory's response, in short, is to interpret the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ as the fullest active manifestation of divine perfection.

The Perfection of God and the Person of Christ

We are now in a position to address the central question of this chapter: how does Gregory's Nicene commitments regarding the person of Christ relate to his positive description of God, what I have been referring to as his theology of divine perfection? Earlier in the chapter, I noted that Eunomius's distinction between the Father and the Son was a natural and necessary conclusion to his prior definition of divine perfection as sheer unbegottenness and his strict separation of the being and activity of God. Gregory's response to Eunomius emphasized the posterior character of theological knowledge and speech: our understanding of divine perfection comes in response to God's own self-presentation in productive activity. Yet, how does this emphasis on the active manifestation of divine power (as Barnes would put it) relate to Gregory's Nicene commitments regarding the equality of the Father and Son? After all, as Gregory reminds us in *CE* 2.51-66, it is the identity of Christ which is the principal question at hand. To answer this question, I will draw once again on the recent studies of Barnes and

Anatolios. Their work is complementary and is very helpful in understanding the christological account of divine perfection that is central to Gregory's Nicene theology.

Christ, the Power of God

Barnes's study, which I have already referenced earlier in this chapter, investigates the significance of power (δύναμις) in Gregory's Nicene theology. Central to the conflict between Gregory and Eunomius, he suggests, is a conflicting evaluation of the relationship between the power and being of God. Whereas Eunomius strictly separates the essence (οὐσία) or nature (φύσις) of God from his productive power, thereby constructing an account of divine transcendence that is entirely separated from the activity of God, Gregory insists on the inseparability of God's power and nature. The upshot of this, as I mentioned before, is that the nature of God is observed and known in the manifestation of its distinctive and innate productive power through activity (ἐνέργεια) that produces works (ἔργα), and that the transcendent nature of God is conceived of as inherently dynamic and productive. Yet, how exactly does this relate to the defense of Christ's equality with God the Father? Barnes answers these questions in the last fifteen pages of his book, and the answer that he gives is very helpful for our purposes.

To understand the connection between Gregory's emphasis on the singular and innate power of God and the identity of Christ, we must pay attention to the conclusions he draws from Paul's identification of Christ as "the power of God" in I Cor. 1:24. Gregory, like Athanasius before him, will occasionally use this passage in order to buttress claims for the eternity of the Son, the logic being that the eternal God could have

never been without his power or wisdom.[97] Yet, this is not the only conclusion that Gregory derives from the identification of Christ as the power of God. The more important conclusion, argues Barnes, is the one that Gregory makes in passages such as this one in *CE* 3.4, where he reasons from the identification of Christ as the power of God to the unified agency of God in the economic work of the Son:

> If it was not the Father who effected the dissolution of death, do not be surprised; for he also gave all judgment to the Son, himself judging none (Jn. 5:22). It was not because he was unable either to save the lost or to judge the sinner that he did these things through the Son, but because through his own Power by which he does all his works he did this too; the Son is the Father's Power (I Cor. 1:24). Those therefore who are saved through the Son are saved by the Father's Power, and those judged by him undergo judgment by the Father's Righteousness. For Christ is the Righteousness of God revealed by the Gospel, as the Apostles says (Rom. 1:17). Whether you look at the whole world, or at the parts of the world which constitute the whole, all these are the Father's works, produced by his Power, and thus the Scripture is true in both ways, when it says both that the Father makes all things, and that without the Son no existing thing comes to be; for the activity of the Power points back to him whose Power he is.[98]

Because Christ is the power of God, all the economic activity of the Son, from the creation of the world to its redemption, is rightly attributed to both the Father and the

[97] As an example of this argument, see *CE* 3.6.52. For a recent analysis of this passage in the context of mid-fourth century debates, see Anatolios, "'Christ the Power and Wisdom of God': Biblical Exegesis and Polemical Intertextuality in Athanasius's *Orations Against the Arians*," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 21:4 (Winter 2013), 503-535.
[98] *CE* 3.4.33-34, trans. Hall, 129.

Son. Furthermore, because of the inseparability of a nature and its power, the activity of the Son as the power of God is also revelatory of the very nature of God. It is important to note, as Barnes points out, that the identification of the person of the Son as the power of God must be balanced by Gregory's repeated emphasis on the oneness of power in the Godhead.[99] The central focus for Gregory is not the appropriation of power to the person of the Son—as if the Father and Spirit ought to be distinguished from this power—but is rather the unity of power and activity in the one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.[100] Nevertheless, Gregory is quite content to appeal to the scriptural designation of Christ as the power of God in order to underscore the fact that the work of the Son is an act of the productive power of God and, as such, is the means whereby we come to a knowledge of the divine nature.

Christ and the Goodness of God

Michel Barnes identifies a number of differences that separate Gregory's and Eunomius's conceptions of divine transcendence, such as their understanding of the simplicity of God and the relationship between divine nature and productivity. Gregory's anti-Eunomian insistence on the unity of nature and power in God allows him to make an argument for the divinity of the Son and the Holy Spirit: "one nature because one power." At the same time, this argument also makes a notable impact on Gregory's fundamental idea of God. As Barnes summarizes it, Gregory's position leads him to assume that God's activity in creation is a trustworthy source for an understanding of the divine

[99] Barnes, *The Power of God*, 295-296. Barnes's frequent textual illustration of this is Gregory's introduction to *On the Trinity*, where he sets out to defend the teaching of "three Persons…one goodness, and one power, and one Godhead."
[100] See, e.g., Gregory's teaching on the inseparable operations of God in *Ad Ablabium*.

nature "because God is first and foremost a God who acts." It also leads Gregory to posit an understanding of God as intrinsically productive and to identify the perfection of the divine nature precisely with this productivity. Yet, as he writes in his introduction, this productivity could also be characterized by another word that Gregory uses frequently to describe divine perfection: goodness. To quote him in full,

> The last point I want to make is this: in Gregory's view, the inherent productivity of the divine nature (enacted by the Father, manifested in the Son) is a subject matter not very different from that of divine goodness. Denying a real Trinity is fundamentally the same as denying the intrinsic goodness of God: *giving* is the highest good, and *existence* is the highest gift. If the Father does not—indeed, as Eunomius argues, *cannot*—generate existence as full as His own, then the limits of God's goodness have been reached. Gregory's distinctive emphasis on divine infinity is well known to his modern readers, and I need not elaborate on what it would mean to imagine that—of all properties—God's goodness had a limit.[101]

[101] Barnes, *The Power of God*, 15. This identification of life-generating goodness as the core of Gregory's idea of God has precedent in Karl Holl's characterization of Gregory's God as a "life-giving power" (ζωοποιός δύναμις) in three forms Holl, *Amphilochius von Ikonium in seinem Verhaltnis zu den grossen Kappadoziern* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1902), 209. Holl's description has been noted appreciatively and commented on by more recent scholars. See Hanson, *Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*, 730; Barnes, *The Power of God*, 244; Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy*, 361-362; and Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, 187. It is interesting to compare Barnes's characterization of divine goodness as life-giving productivity with David Balás's discussion of the two separate perfections of "goodness" and "life" in his influential study *ΜΕΤΟΥΣΙΑ ΘΕΟΥ*. Of all the divine perfections participated in by humans, Balás suggests that the perfection of goodness is preeminent, and he characterizes this idea of goodness as encompassing "everything which can be considered as a 'perfection' in the sense of positive quality," with the primary connotation of moral goodness or virtue, and that this goodness is expressed in God's benevolent activity in the world. Yet Balás distinguishes this notion from the divine perfection of "life," the understanding of God as Life itself and as the source and bestower of all life. As an aid to the clarity of his study, this distinction makes sense, but on a conceptual level, it appears that the perfections of goodness and life are more synonymous than Balás interprets them to be, so that the life-giving activity of God is simply one aspect of the expression of divine goodness.

Barnes continues to draw connections between the innate power and goodness of God throughout his study, but his primary focus remains the strategic import of Gregory's technical definition of power. Khaled Anatolios, on the other hand, gives significant attention to the role of goodness in Gregory's conception of divine perfection and even argues that it is the central aspect of Gregory's christological "reconstruction of divine transcendence."[102] According to Anatolios, Gregory's distinctive contribution to the development of Nicene trinitarian theology is not in the development of a social metaphor or in the codification of terminology to differentiate the plurality of persons from the unity of being in God. Gregory's own approach is best understood not by attention to how he differentiates three from one, but how he adapts the Platonic characterization of God as "the Good" to "the biblical narrative of the God of Israel and Jesus Christ."[103] Gregory does indeed summarize the perfection of God as essential goodness, and his challenge in the light of the Nicene controversy is to reconcile this understanding of divine perfection with the person and work of Jesus Christ. "He does this," writes Anatolios, "by way of reinterpreting the category of divine goodness with reference to the christological narrative."[104]

To illustrate how Gregory accomplishes this christological reinterpretation of divine goodness, Anatolios focuses on two strategies that Gregory employs in his anti-Eunomian writings: the parallel between divine attributes of perfection and the christological titles and an interpretation of the christological narrative.[105] As I suggested

[102] Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, 182-194.
[103] *Ibid*, 183.
[104] *Ibid*, 185.
[105] *Ibid*, 170-182. As Anatolios demonstrates, this two-fold argumentative strategy mirrors the earlier work of Athanasius, who likewise sought to establish he equality of the Father and Son through attention to their shared names and through a reinterpretation of the christological narrative as a manifestation of the divine attribute of φιλανθρωπία. See *Ibid*, 112-124.

already, Gregory countered Eunomius's single-word definition of the divine nature with his own manifold description of God with a variety of titles, such as wisdom, power, justice, light, life, goodness, and so on. There is nothing particularly unique about Gregory's use of these titles. They have precedent in both biblical and pagan literature and, as Andrew Radde-Gallwitz points out, Gregory also considered them to be notions that people commonly have of divinity.[106] Yet, as Anatolios notes, Gregory draws upon their biblical usage to correlate the perfect goodness of God with the person of Christ. For instance, in a passage I partially cited earlier Gregory writes,

> But with the divine nature, because every perfection in respect of goodness appears together in the designation as divine, it is not possible for our mind to discover the manner of priority in honor. Where no greater or lesser possession is conceived of in power, glory, wisdom, kindness (φιλανθρωπίας), or any other notion of goodness (κατὰ τὸ ἀγαθὸν ἐννοίας) one can think of, but every good thing the Son has belongs to the Father, and everything the Father has is seen in the Son, by what shift shall we show the greater share of honor in the Father? If our mind were to go to kingly power and worth, the Son is a king. If we think of a judge, all judgment is the Son's. If our soul dwells on the magnificence of creation, 'all things came through him' (Jn 1:3). If we contemplate the cause of our life, we know the true Life which descended even to our nature. Even if we inquire about removal out of darkness, we are not ignorant of the true Light, by whom we were made foreigners to darkness. And if anyone thinks wisdom is to be honored, 'Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God' (I Cor 1:24)."[107]

[106] Radde-Gallwitz, *Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and the Transformation of Divine Simplicity*, 185.
[107] *CE* 1.334-335, trans. Hall, 84, modified.

It is through these many titles that the perfection of divine goodness is conceived and, as Gregory argues, it is also through these same titles that Scripture speaks of Christ, who is power and wisdom and light and life and justice and truth and goodness. Gregory's grammar of divine perfection, therefore, is a christological grammar. Anatolios describes this grammar as speaking of God "from within the patterns of scriptural language" and he suggests that, by choosing to speak of God this way, Gregory is making the Son essential to the biblical definition of the goodness of God.[108]

Gregory's second strategy for constructing a trinitarian understanding of divine perfection is a reinterpretation of the christological narrative. From the very beginnings of the Nicene controversy, the "Arians" had drawn attention to the human birth and death of Christ as evidence of the ontological inferiority of his divinity.[109] It is true, as Richard Hanson claims, that early "Arian" theologians such as Asterius were more ready to identify the suffering and death of Christ with his divine nature, yet it is misleading to suggest that this implies that the Arians took the "scandal of the Cross" more seriously than their Nicene counterparts, or that this reflects a deep-seated desire on the part of Arians theologians to embrace a "suffering God."[110] In actual fact, it was the scandal of the cross and the suffering of Jesus Christ that led Arian theologians to distance the nature of the Son from the nature of the Father and to attribute only an attenuated divinity

[108] Anatolios, 186.
[109] See Alexander's description of this strategy in his letter. I am placing the term "Arian" in quotes because it is now quite clear that this term embraces a diversity of theological positions and theologians, many of whom would not be content being identified with Arius. At the same time, one can still find common elements and theological instincts in their writings. Cf. Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, 41-79.
[110] Hanson, *Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*, 40-41, 109-116.

to the crucified One.[111] In response, Nicene theologians were compelled to develop an understanding of the gospel narrative as something worthy of God, as something that manifests not weakness or inferiority, but power and glory.

Anatolios identifies this project as one of the key elements in the work of Athanasius. For Athanasius, the humility and suffering embraced by Christ in the incarnation are understood not as signs of weakness, but as a manifestation of God's natural self-humbling love for humanity.[112] Gregory follows Athanasius's lead and develops this further by reinterpreting such divine attributes as power, goodness, and wisdom through the narrative of Christ's redemptive work.[113] This is most clearly in Gregory's discussion of the crucifixion in *CE* 3.3.30-40 and in his defense of the essential goodness of the Son in *CE* 3.9.1-25.

In *CE* 3.3, Gregory takes up Eunomius's accusation against Basil of being "ashamed of the cross." The origin of this charge lay in Basil's exegesis of Acts 2:36, specifically the phrase, "God has made him Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified." Eunomius had used this verse as evidence that the eternal Son is indeed "something made" and therefore not the same as the unbegotten God. Basil's response was to suggest that the verse had not intended to refer to the Son's eternal essence, but was instead a reference to the economy of the Son's mission, to the incarnate human Christ.[114] This attempt to distinguish the God-man Jesus Christ from the divine essence of the eternal Son led Eunomius to accuse Basil of "being ashamed" (ἐπαισχύνομαι) of the

[111] Hanson willingly admits that the Arian theologians he surveys take the human birth and suffering of Christ as evidence of his inferiority to the "most high" God, which makes his identification of the desire to embrace a "suffering God" as constitutive of the very "heart of Arianism" rather suspect.
[112] Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, 123.
[113] This is a crucial goal of Gregory's famous *Catechetical Oration*. For an interpretation of it along these lines, see Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, 194-204.
[114] Basil, *Eun.* 2.2

crucifixion. Gregory, however, turns this accusation around and suggests that it is not Basil but Eunomius who is truly ashamed of the cross.

> Who is it then who is ashamed of the cross?... So far are we from belittling the Only-begotten God, that, whatever of the lower nature was taken up because of his economy of love towards humanity (διὰ τὴν φιλάνθρωπον προσελήφθη οἰκονομίαν), we believe it was also changed to something divine and pure. He however, who makes the passion associated with the cross a sign of inferiority of being, somehow making the supreme act of [divine] power (τὴν ὑπερβάλλουσαν τῆς δυνάμεως ἐνέργειαν), by which he could do even this, into an indication of weakness, fails to understand that nothing causes amazement as something unexpected…when things go beyond the limits of their nature, more than any they become objects of amazement; to them all attention turns, and every mind strains in wonder at the unexpected That is why all the heralds of the Word point to the wonder of the mystery in this, that God was manifested in the flesh, that the Word was made flesh, that the Light shone in the darkness, that Life tasted death; all such things the heralds proclaim, and by them the wonder abounds at him who revealed his superlative power by what was external to his own nature.[115]

Whereas Eunomius attributes the suffering of Christ to his divine essence, and on that basis considers his nature inferior to that of the Father, Gregory suggests that Christ's passion on the cross is actually the "supreme act of [divine] power." The cross is not a symbol of the inferior nature of the Son, but a manifestation of God's love for humanity (φιλανθρωπία), and for this reason, Gregory argues, "we hold that the God revealed

[115] *CE* 3.3.34, trans. Hall, 113, modified.

through the cross (τὸν διὰ τοῦ σταυροῦ φανερωθέντα θεὸν) ought to be honored just as the Father is honored."[116] This passage is not simply a defense of Christ's divinity; it is a reinterpretation of divinity in line with the surprising work of Christ.[117] Seen through the redemptive suffering of Christ, the character of God is understood as his powerful and effective love for humanity.[118] Christ is God manifested in the flesh, God revealed on the cross, and therefore the activity of Christ is the source for our understanding of the character of God. Gregory portrays Eunomius as someone who operates with a defective understanding of God, a truncated idea of divine perfection that prevents him from seeing the passion of Christ for what it is: a fitting act of God and a reason for praise.

Gregory employs this same argument later when he responds to Eunomius's interpretation of Jesus' words to the rich young ruler: "There is none good but one, God."[119] For Eunomius, this statement was clear teaching from Jesus himself that his goodness did not match that of the Father's. Properly speaking, to the Father alone belongs the title "Good" because the Father alone is the "cause of all goodness."[120] In response, Gregory once again appeals to the harmony between the goodness of God

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[116] *CE* 3.3.30, trans. Hall, 112, modified.
[117] John Behr comes to a similar conclusion in his analysis of this passage: "It is all these things proclaimed by the ministers of the Word that not only persuade us to believe in the divinity of the crucified one, but form the content for how we understand his divinity. The transcendent power of divinity is manifested precisely in the things external to the divine nature—in flesh, in darkness, and in death—for it is here that we contemplate the transforming power of God. Therefore, the Passion of Christ is not a mark of separation between the Father and an inferior Son, but is rather the very expression of the Son's true divinity and equality, in honor and glory, with the Father." *The Nicene Faith*, 439-440.
[118] Walther Völker goes so far as to call φιλανθρωπία the "Hauptcharackteristikum Gottes" in Gregory's thought. Völker, "Zur Gotteslehre Gregors von Nyssa," *Vigiliae Christianae* 9:2 (April-July 1955), 122. It should also be noted, in relation to Anatolios's observation regarding how Gregory's vocabulary of the divine attributes are also titles for Christ in the New Testament, that φιλανθρωπία itself seems to be used as such a title in Titus 3:4: ὅτε δὲ ἡ χρηστότης καὶ ἡ φιλανθρωπία ἐπεφάνη τοῦ σωτῆρος ἡμῶν θεοῦ…
[119] A version of this appears in Matthew 19, Mark 10, and Luke 18. As Stuart Hall notes, it is unclear which of these citations Eunomius or Gregory had in mind, since their quotations do not adhere exactly to any, but Gregory's appeal to the youthfulness of the ruler suggests that he is thinking principally of the Matthean version. Hall, *Against Eunomius Book Three*, 205n.178.
[120] *CE* 3.9.1. Cf. *Apol*. 21.

revealed in creation and the narrative of Christ's redemptive mission. "Is he not good, who, when you were lifeless dust, adorned you with God-like beauty and raised you up as a living image of his own power? Is he not good, who because of you took the form of a slave, and for the joy set before him took upon him the sufferings due to your sins, gave himself in exchange for your death, and was made a curse and sin?"[121]

The rhetorical questions that Gregory poses here defend the divinity of Christ by way of defending the manifest goodness of his redemptive work. Understood as an act of self-giving love and transforming power, the incarnation and death of the Son is in perfect harmony with the goodness of God on display in the act of creation.[122] By interpreting the gospel narrative as evidence of the Son's inferiority, Eunomius is not only demeaning Christ, but also alienating the Father from the very goodness that constitutes the characteristic perfection of God. Gregory puts the dilemma thus:

> If love for humanity (φιλανρωπία) is good, then [Eunomius] is demonstrating that the Father is incapable of the good (ἀδύνατον εἰς τὸ ἀγαθὸν), by saying that he was incapable of enacting this grace through the flesh…If then, just as the Father gives life (ζωοποεῖ), and in the same way and no other the Son exercises this same grace, why does the enemy

[121] *CE* 3.9.9, trans. Hall, 205.

[122] By noting that this active goodness is identical with that of creation, I wish to underscore the fundamental continuity that Gregory sees between the revelation of God found in the created order and in salvation history and the revelation that comes in the economy of the Son's incarnation. Gregory's conception of divine perfection is christological insofar as it takes the person and work of the incarnate Christ to be the fullest manifestation of the divine nature, but it would be a serious misreading of Gregory to suggest that the form of perfection witnessed in the gospel narrative is a *novum* distinct in kind from the goodness and beauty on display in all of the creative and providential activity of God. For this reason, I heartily agree with Warren Smith's caution against separating the "christocentric foundation" of Nicene theology from its appeal to natural theology. See Smith, "'Arian' Foundationalism or 'Athanasian' Apocalypticism," 86-92.

of God use his blasphemous tongue against both, insulting the Father as incapable for the good, and the Son as associated with evil?[123]

Gregory's argument is not simply that Eunomius has misconstrued the identity of Jesus Christ, but that he has fundamentally misunderstood the character and perfection of God. In fact, Gregory goes so far as to suggest that the error of Eunomius even exceeds the error of that most infamous arch-heretic, Marcion. For whereas Marcion also posited the notion of two gods, he at least attributed the more loving (φιλανθρωπότερον) goodness to the self-giving "God of the gospel" (θεός τοῦ εὐαγγελίου).[124] By suggesting that the incarnate mission of the Son is evidence of his inferiority, however, Eunomius has implied that the gospel is somehow unworthy of God. Furthermore, by distancing the being of the Father from the redemptive activity of the Son, Eunomius has undermined the very logic of Christian worship, the eucharistic gratitude that arises in response to Christ's gracious work.

For the sake of historical accuracy, it is important to acknowledge the rhetorical nature of Gregory's argument here.[125] By suggesting that the Son's goodness is not the same as the Father's, Eunomius did not intend to associate the Son with evil. Nor would he have accepted Gregory's conclusion that his distinction between the being of the Father and the activity of the Son amounted to a denial of the Father's capability to act as a giver of life. Yet, it is not necessary to agree with the conclusions that Gregory draws from Eunomius's thought to appreciate the cumulative effect of his rhetoric and the

[123] *CE* 3.10.33-34, trans. Hall, 227, modified.
[124] *CE* 3.9.10
[125] For an analysis of Gregory's rhetorical strategies according to classical conventions, see Morwenna Ludlow, "*Contra Eunomium* III 10—Who is Eunomius?" in *Gregory of Nyssa:* Contra Eunomium *III*, 442-474.

implications it carries for Gregory's own understanding of the nature and perfection of God. The work of Christ's incarnation and death was seen by Eunomius and by many other critics of Nicaea as something irreconcilable with and alien to the transcendent perfection of the Father. Gregory, on the other hand, takes a markedly different approach and argues that the activity of Christ is actually the fullest manifestation of the divine nature, and therefore the definitive form for understanding the perfection of God. In the words of Anatolios, "Rather than let the narrative of Christ's self-humbling detract from the Son's full divinity, Gregory defines divine goodness by that very narrative."[126]

Conclusion

My focus in this chapter has been on Gregory of Nyssa's understanding of the character and perfection of divinity and its relation to the controversy over Nicaea. Yet, as the literary battle between Gregory and Eunomius illustrates, in order to answer the question of what God is like and how this relates to the person and work of Jesus Christ, one must first answer the question of whether and how we can know and say anything about God at all. On this latter question, the answers of Eunomius and Gregory sharply diverge. Whereas Eunomius claimed that we can gain "exact" knowledge of God's very essence, Gregory insisted that the essence of God exceeded any attempt at human comprehension. Yet, as I have argued, the most significant distinction between Gregory and Eunomius lies not in the question of whether it is possible to know or describe the nature of God—indeed, as this chapter makes clear, Gregory does not hesitate to offer his

[126] Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, 189.

own positive description of the divine nature—but in the mode and manner of knowing God, in their theological method.

Eunomius works toward a definition of the divine nature by way of logical deduction: from the conviction that God's nature is entirely distinct from anything else and that God is utterly simple, so that whatever quality is distinctive to God must be equivalent to his nature, he reasons that the essence of God is nothing other than the single attribute of "unbegottenness". To know God as unbegottenness, as pure aseity, is to know God "exactly" because it is to capture the essence of God through the immediacy of a logically necessary idea. Part of the reasoning behind this approach is the absolute distinction Eunomius makes between the being of God and the activity of God. What God does is not revelatory of what God is. The essence of God is to be understood through rational necessity, not through reflection on the activity of God in history.

Gregory, following his brother Basil, devotes extensive attention to critiquing this theological method in defense of Nicene trinitarian theology and in its place he proposes his own alternative. Gregory rejects Eunomius's claims to immediate and "exact" knowledge of the divine essence, insisting instead that such immediate perception of God is beyond human capacity. According to Gregory, positive understanding of God does not arise from the kind of rational deductions modelled by Eunomius, but from a process of reflection on the active power of God in history. This is the method modelled by the prophets and patriarchs, who formulate descriptive titles of God in response to the great and wondrous deeds of God in their midst. Reflection on the acts of God does not yield one definitive and comprehensive title for God, but rather a plurality of titles that each bear witness to the perfection and goodness of God. This does not mean that these titles

are somehow inaccurate or that they fail to communicate genuine truths about the divine nature. For Gregory, these titles name real attributes (*propria*) of God; they speak truthfully about God and provide genuine knowledge about the nature and character of divine perfection. But, they do not grant immediate epistemic access to God. No matter how much progress a person may make in knowing God, the fundamental posture of that knowing will never be absolute mastery, but reverence and wonder at the infinite goodness on display in the active power of God.

These two different theological methods yield two distinct conceptions of the nature and perfection of God and two different answers to the question of how to reconcile the person and work of Jesus Christ with that perfection. Eunomius's definition of the perfect nature of God is encapsulated in the word unbegottenness, a word which excludes by definition the person of the Son and is conceptually unrelated to his economic activity. This is not to say that Eunomius denies all similarity between the Father and Son, only that he limits that similarity to the level of will and activity. By observing the activity of God in the person of Jesus Christ we may gain a sense of the Father's will, but we will learn nothing about the fundamental character and perfection of the divine nature itself.

It is in opposition to this understanding of God that Gregory articulates his own Nicene conception of divine perfection with its distinctly christological shape. According to Gregory, the perfection of God resides not in an absence of origin and activity, but in an inherently dynamic and productive goodness. This life-giving goodness is infinitely active within God's own life in the eternal generation of the Son and is perfectly manifested in the benevolent activity of God in the world. In describing this goodness,

Gregory frequently lists a variety of distinct attributes or "goods" such as light, life, justice, power, and wisdom. Not coincidentally, these attributes are also scriptural titles used of Christ. And it is in the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ where the goodness and glory of the divine nature are on fullest display as transformative power and self-giving love. This is Gregory's trinitarian and christological doctrine of divine perfection; this is the perfect nature of the God of the gospel.

Chapter 2
Mirrors of Divine Perfection
Nicene Theology and Anthropology

In the previous chapter, I explored Gregory of Nyssa's understanding of divine perfection as it took shape in his defense of Nicaea over and against the criticisms of Eunomius of Cyzicus. On one level, it is possible to reduce this conflict, along with the many other fourth-century debates over the interpretation and validity of the Council of Nicaea, to an argument about the nature of Jesus Christ and his relationship to God the Father. Put in question form: Is it true that the Son and the Father share an identical nature, that the Son is "ὁμοούσιος τῷ πατρί" as the creed of Nicaea so famously puts it, or is the Son's nature in some way distinct from or inferior to that of his Father? On that question, Eunomius and Gregory differed sharply, with the bishop of Nyssa answering on the side of the Nicene fathers and his nemesis from Cyzicus on the side of Nicaea's "Arian" opponents. Yet, as my previous chapter illustrated, this disagreement over the claims of Nicaea is symptomatic of more fundamental differences between Gregory and Eunomius regarding the nature of divine perfection and our knowledge of it. While both would have readily acknowledged that God is perfect, their understanding of what this meant and the character of that perfection were highly significant in their approach to Nicaea. Eunomius understood the Father's perfection to reside in that one quality which distinguished him from everything else, the one attribute that precisely and faithfully distinguished his nature, the quality of unbegottenness. Gregory, on the other hand, refused to offer any single, precise definition of the divine nature, but instead drew upon a variety of attributes such as wisdom and justice and mercy and, most especially, life-giving goodness to describe the character of divine perfection. And it was on the basis of

these different understandings of perfection that Gregory and Eunomius arrived at their conflicting judgments on Nicene trinitarian theology. For Eunomius, the Son could not possibly share the Father's perfect nature because the Son lacked the one definitive quality that distinguished the Father from everything inferior. For Gregory, on the other hand, not only did the Son share the characteristic perfections of the Father, it was the Son who most perfectly revealed these perfections in the economy of his life, death, and resurrection.

In the current chapter, I turn my attention from Gregory's understanding of God and God's perfection to his understanding of humanity as the created image of God. In focusing on the subject of Gregory's anthropology, however, I should begin by clarifying that I do not intend to address any number of important and controverted issues that have occupied the attention of many of Gregory's modern readers and which a comprehensive study of his anthropology would necessarily require me to address. So, for instance, I will not address the debated question of whether or not Gregory regards human gender and sexuality as inherent or accidental to human nature or the related question of human embodiment and the status of the body in Gregory's eschatology. Nor, for that matter, will I offer any commentary on Gregory's treatment of the universality of human nature and its role in his soteriology.[1] These are important topics, to be sure, and they have

[1] To appreciate the significance of these topics within modern reception of Gregory, one need only read Morwenna Ludlow's chapter on "Creation in the Image of God" in her study on the reception of Gregory within modern theological scholarship. In that chapter, she divides her survey of modern scholarship into three aspects of humanity's "first creation," and those three divisions focus on the presence or absence of gender in original humanity, the status of the body within first creation, and the unity of human nature, respectively. Ludlow, *Gregory of Nyssa, Ancient and (Post)modern* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 166-181. These topics have also featured heavily in some of the most important recent scholarship on Gregory's account of human creation and general anthropology, such as Verna E.F Harrison, "Male and Female in Cappadocian Theology," *Journal of Theological Studies* 41:2 (October 1990): 441-471; John Behr, "The Rational Animal: A Rereading of Gregory of Nyssa's *De hominis opificio*," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 7 (1999): 227-246; Johannes Zachhuber, *Human Nature in Gregory of Nyssa:*

received significant attention in recent scholarship for good reasons, but they fall outside the purview of this chapter. For the question that I wish to pose focuses precisely on the relationship between Gregory's anthropology and the elements of his Nicene theology which I highlighted in the previous chapter. My assumption in studying Gregory's anthropology with this purpose in mind is that we should naturally expect to find some continuity between these two topics. After all, as numerous scholars have already noted, the principle motif that undergirds Gregory's thought on human nature is the biblical description of humanity as the "image of God."[2] If this is true, if the primary category through which Gregory understands human nature is its designation as the created image of God, then the process of thinking about humanity necessarily entails thinking about God. My purpose in this chapter is simply to show that the particularities of Gregory's account of God and of divine perfection which emerge in his debate with Eunomius are also present in his writing on anthropology.

Philosophical Background and Theological Significance SVC 46 (Leiden: Brill, 2000); and Hans Boersma, *Embodiment and Virtue in Gregory of Nyssa: An Anagogical Approach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[2] Jean Daniélou, for instance, claims that "Le fondement de toute la doctrine anthropologique de Grégoire de Nysse est le texte de la Genèse 1:26: 'Faisons l'homme à notre image (εἰκόνα) et à notre resemblance (ὁμοίωσιν).'" *Platonisme et théologie mystique*, 48. Likewise, Warren Smith: "The *imago Dei* (image of God) is the appropriate place to embark on our study of Gregory of Nyssa's theory of human nature because it is the essence of that nature. For Nyssen, these words establish God's creative purpose for making man and lay the foundation for Nyssen's understanding of man's place in the divine economy." Smith, *Passion and Paradise*, 21. Roger Leys goes even further, arguing that the entirety of Gregory's "spiritual theology" and of his understanding of the relationship between God and humanity finds both its foundation and focus in the notion of the *imago Dei.* "Cette théologie spirituelle de Grégoire de Nysse s'édifie sur le theme de 'l'homme à l'image de Dieu', theme courant dans la littérature patristique (il vient clore déjà, comme un sommet, l'œuvre d'Irénée) mais que Grégoire traite avec une grande originalité, une grande abundance aussi, et don't il fait le foyer où convergent toutes ses conceptions sur les rapports d l'homme avec Dieu." Leys, "La théologie spirituelle de Grégoire de Nysse," *Studia Patristica* 2 (1957): 499.

Like God: A Dynamic Image of Divine Perfection

In discussing Gregory's anthropology, it is only fitting to begin where he so often begins, with the creation of human beings in the "image and likeness of God." This description of the human creature in the Genesis account of creation is absolutely foundational to Gregory's understanding of human nature and it is a theme that has attracted significant attention among his interpreters.[3] Many of these studies on Gregory's interpretation of the *imago Dei* have been quite thorough, and in what follows I will add little by way of new interpretation to what others have written. At the same time, while my observations about this theme in Gregory's thought may not be entirely novel, I do believe that reading his commentary on human creation in light of the previous chapter can yield some fresh insight into the connections between his anthropology and his anti-Eunomian and pro-Nicene doctrine of God. For although numerous scholars have agreed that Gregory interprets the "image of God" motif to mean that human beings participation in the attributes and perfections of God, few have given much consideration to how these perfections, or the manner of participation in them, might relate to Gregory's discussion of divine attributes of perfection in his writings against Eunomius.

[3] Significant studies on this topic include Johann Baptist Schoemann, "Gregors von Nyssa theologische Anthropologie als Bildtheologie," *Scholastik* 18 (1943): 31-53, 175-200; Joseph T. Muckle, "The Doctrine of St. Gregory of Nyssa on Man as the Image of God," *Mediaeval Studies* 7 (1945): 55-84; Roger Leys, *L'image de Dieu chez Saint Gregoire de Nysse* (Bruxelles: Edition universelle, 1951); Hubert Merki, *ΟΜΟΙΩΣΙΣ ΘΕΩ: Von der platonischen Angleichung an Gott zur Gottähnlichkeit bei Gregor von Nyssa*, Paradosis: Beiträge zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur und Theologie, 7 (Freiburg: Paulus, 1952); Gerhart B. Ladner, "The Philosophical Anthropology of Saint Gregory of Nyssa," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 12 (1958): 61-94; Maryanne Cline Horowitz, "The Image of God in Man: Is Woman Included?" *Harvard Theological Review* 72 (1979): 175-206; Jaroslav Pelikan, *Christianity and Classical Culture: The Metamorphosis of Natural Theology in the Christian Encounter with Hellenism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 120-135, 280-295; and J. Warren Smith, *Passion and Paradise: Human and Divine Emotion in the Thought of Gregory of Nyssa* (New York: Herder and Herder, 2004), 21-45.

To appreciate how Gregory's anthropology relates to his Nicene theology of divine perfection, I suggest that we begin by noting how he interprets the *imago Dei* motif to mean not simply that humanity was created to be like God, but more precisely that human beings were created to function as living and dynamic reflections of divine *power* and *goodness*. In the previous chapter, I highlighted the importance of divine power and goodness within Gregory's defense of Nicaea and his positive articulation of the character of divine perfection. In *Against Eunomius*, Gregory identified the activity of divine power as the principle source of human knowledge of the nature of God and that what we come to learn about God from an observation of this activity is the perfect goodness of that power. In a similar fashion, Gregory suggests that human beings were both created and specifically designed with the intention that they would serve as mirrors of the dynamic goodness of God in the created order, and that they would do so by participating in the characteristic activities of divine power. For this reason, Gregory interprets the *imago Dei* motif in Genesis as an inherently dynamic reality. To be the image of God is to actively image God, to actively reflect the perfect goodness of divine power.

Image of Divine Power

Gregory frequently describes human beings as images of divine power. For example, in what most scholars regard to be his earliest extant work, *On Virginity*, Gregory says, "The human was the 'image and likeness', as it has been said, of the power which rules over all beings (τῆς πάντων τῶν ὄντων βασιλευούσης δυνάμεως)."[4] In

[4] *Virg.* 12 (GNO 8,1.298.10-11)

another treatise, he likewise writes that humanity was created to be "a living likeness (ἔμψυχόν τι ὁμοίωμα) of the divine and transcendent power."[5] Or, to cite just one more instance from the *Catechetical Oration*, after narrating the creation of the world and its division into the sensible created order and intelligible angelic beings, Gregory describes the creation of humanity as follows: "Then there was fashioned that figure molded from earth, a representation (ἀπεικόνισμα) of the supreme power. Now this living creature was man, and in him there was the godlike beauty of the intelligible nature blended with a certain ineffable power."[6] As these examples illustrate, it is quite common for Gregory to interpret the *imago Dei* to mean an image of divine power (δύναμις), but what precisely does he mean by this? In what way is the human being a power and how does this relate to his understanding of the power of God?[7]

To understand how human beings—or, more precisely, the human soul—image the power of God, it is helpful to look at Gregory's lengthiest treatment of Genesis 1:26-27, his *On the Making of Humanity*. The treatise is dedicated to Gregory's brother, Peter, and in the preface he explains the reason for its composition as an attempt to complete the work left unfinished by their brother Basil, whose death had prohibited him from finishing his commentary on the account of creation in Genesis 1. Gregory praises

[5] *Infant.* (GNO 3, 2.77.19-20)
[6] *Cat or.* 6 (GNO 3,4.23.2-5).
[7] The connection that I am here drawing between Gregory's account of the human soul as a causal power and his Nicene theology is not wholly original. Michel Barnes, who masterfully analyzed this aspect of Gregory's Nicene theology in *The Power of God: Δύναμις in Gregory of Nyssa's Trinitarian Theology*, has also called attention to the noteworthy similarities in Gregory's account of the soul in two articles, "The Polemical Context and Content of Gregory of Nyssa's Moral Psychology," *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 4 (1994): 1-24, and "Divine Unity and the Divided Self: Gregory of Nyssa's Trinitarian Theology in Its Psychological Context," *Modern Theology* 18:4 (October 2002): 475-496. My analysis here is indebted to the argument Barnes develops in that article, but also differs from Barnes's in that it offers a more comprehensive analysis of this theme in *On the Making of Humanity* and *On the Soul and the Resurrection* and in that it draws attention to the parallels between divine goodness and the *imago Dei* that Barnes neglects.

Basil's *Hexaëmeron* as a work without comparison and customarily bemoans his own relative inadequacy, but nevertheless dedicates himself to the task of taking up where Gregory had left off, with the creation of humanity. After he finishes this preface, Gregory begins with a short summary of the creation of the world prior to the existence of humanity. Following the order of the Genesis 1 narrative, he first addresses the creation of the "heavens and the earth" as the distinct realms of intelligible and sensible beings who possess opposite characteristics, but who are equal in being distinct from God.[8] He then goes on to describe in more detail the sensible world and all its diverse beauty. Despite all this beauty, however, something is still missing, "for not yet did that great and precious thing, humanity, dwell among the world of beings."[9]

This is the transition that Gregory uses to turn to his principle topic: the creation of humanity. Yet, if we are to understand what it means for humans to image divine power, it is important to read this introduction as more than simply an obligatory summary of the earlier creation narrative from which Gregory now departs. The reason for recounting the non-human aspects of creation, including both the intelligible heavens and the sensible earth, goes beyond a simple summary of what occurs in the text before Genesis 1:26-27. It establishes not only the context, but also the needed function of humanity within creation. For, as Gregory goes on to write, it was necessary for the rest of creation to be in place before humanity was brought into existence, since it is the peculiar role of the human to act as a "ruler" (ἄρχων) over the rest of creation, so that

[8] *Hom op*. 1.3-4. Any references to the Greek text of *De hominis opificio* will be to the edition of Jacob Migne in *Patrologia Graeca* 44. My citations of specific paragraphs follow the numbering found in the English translation of William Moore and Henry Austin in NPNF[2] vol. 5.
[9] *Hom op.* 2.1 (PG 44.132)

"first the dominion was prepared, and it was only after this that the king appeared."[10] The first thing that we are taught about humanity, then, is its place and function within the rest of creation. Human beings are created to be intermediaries of a sort between the intelligible and sensible realms, and they are fashioned in a particular way to suit a particular task which they are given.

Gregory goes on to note that the creation of humanity is distinct in the Genesis narrative because only in the creation of the human does the text portray God as engaging in careful deliberation and planning regarding "of what kind it is proper for it to be, and to which archetype it should bear a likeness, and for what purpose (ἐπὶ τινί) it shall be made, and what its activity will be once made, and of what it shall be the ruler."[11] To further emphasize the care given to the human's creation, Gregory then draws attention to the way in which, like a careful craftsman fashioning a tool for a specific purpose, God fashions the human being in a way to perfectly fit his intended purpose of being a created reflection of the sovereign activity of God. So, just as God "beholds and hears and searches all things," humanity is created with the power of apprehension (ἀντίληψις) in order that it might see and hear and with a capacity for intellectual reasoning and discover in order that it might understand.[12] The physical form of humans is also designed in such a way as to serve their intended purpose. For instance, unlike many other animals, humans were not given extraordinary speed, or natural defenses, or skin that protects them from the cold or from attack, or wings to fly. In comparison with other animals, these may appear to be deficiencies, but Gregory argues instead that it is

[10] *Ibid.*
[11] *Hom op.* 3.1 (PG 44.134)
[12] *Hom op.* 5.2 (PG 44.138)

precisely because of the absence of these natural abilities that human beings are required to exercise dominion not through brute force but through their use of rationality.[13] Compared to other animals, it is also noteworthy that humans do not use all of their limbs to move around. Instead, they stand upright and so their hands are free to be used to accomplish all sorts of tasks, such as writing, and also to enable human beings to eat with ease so that their mouths can be designed and used for speaking.[14] In all these ways, God purposefully designed human beings in order that they might fill a specific function, namely, to image God by reflecting the sovereign rule of God within the created order.

On the basis of these early chapters of *On the Making of Humanity*, we may begin to posit an answer to the question with which I began: what does it mean for humanity to be an image of "divine power"? In the examples I mentioned above, Gregory uses this terminology to explain both the nature and the purpose of human beings within creation. In *On the Making of Humanity*, we find something very similar. The nature of humanity is carefully and deliberately crafted with a certain function in mind, that of reflecting God's sovereign rule. Both the rational nature of the soul and the particularities of the human body are designed with this function in mind. It is through the gift of its rational mind and through a body fitted to the exercise of such rationality that human beings exercise dominion over the created world. Even the placement of human creation within the order of the Genesis narrative signifies, for Gregory, both the nature and function of humanity as the image of the one God who rules over all. From this, then, we may conclude that being an image of divine power relates to humanity's created purpose of reflecting the sovereign activity of God in the world.

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[13] *Hom op.* 7
[14] *Hom op.* 8

Yet as readers of Gregory are well aware, human reflection of divine sovereignty is not only expressed in humanity's interaction with the non-rational or non-sentient creatures. Indeed, while Gregory certainly includes this within his interpretation of humanity as images of divine sovereignty, the more immediate subject of the soul's reign is its own self. The reflection of divine power begins, first and foremost, with the soul's own free reign over the body through the use of its rationality.[15] "For the soul immediately shows its sovereign and exalted character…in that it has no master, and is self-governed, and managed autocratically by its own will."[16] For this reason, Gregory locates the image of God most particularly in what he alternatively refers to as the "mind" or the "soul". The soul reflects the sovereign power of God because, although it is itself incorporeal and is not limited to any particular location within the self, it uses its rational faculties to apprehend the world and to direct the movements of the body toward a desired end. The rational nature of the soul and its faculties of observation, reason, and judgment are central therefore to humanity's reflection of God.

It may be tempting to conclude on this basis that Gregory equates the image of God in humanity with rationality itself. By locating the image particularly in the mind and in the soul's rational rule over the body, it would seem that he does just that. It is significant, however, that Gregory does not identify the image so much with the possession of rational faculties as with their use in the activities of apprehension, judgment, and governance. It is also noteworthy that he does not follow the common

[15] Warren Smith summarizes this point well: "As God's viceroy over creation, humanity exerts dominion over the earth through the governance of reason. The rule of reason perfects material creation by apprehending the proper ends of all things and ordering them to those purposes. The perfecting sovereignty of reason manifests most clearly for Nyssen in the relationship of the rational human soul and the body." Smith, "The Body of Paradise and the Body of the Resurrection: Gender and the Angelic Life in Gregory of Nyssa's *De hominis opifcio*," *HTS* 99:2 (April 2006), 210.
[16] *Hom op*. 4.1 (PG 44.136), trans. NPNF^2 5.391 (modified).

interpretive strategy employed by several other influential early Christian theologians that distinguished between the biblical terms "image" and "likeness," wherein the former term was typically equated with the soul's rationality and the latter with the acquisition of moral perfection.[17] That Gregory chooses not to make this distinction is undoubtedly intentional. After all, it was an interpretation that featured prominently in the writings of some of his most important theological influences, such as Clement and Origen of Alexandria. What is more, even his brother Basil, whose theological project he is attempting to complete in his own writing, identified the "image" with the natural rational faculties proper to every human being and the "likeness" as the imitation of God that we achieve through the proper exercise of these faculties.[18] As has been regularly observed in recent studies, however, Gregory notably abandons this interpretive tradition and treats the terms εἰκών and ὁμοίωσις as more or less synonymous.[19] I think that a number of conclusions about Gregory's anthropology can be drawn from this fact, but for now I would like to just note its significance to the present topic. What the reticence to

[17] For an overview of the development of this distinction and its presence in the writings of Irenaeus, Clement, Origen, see Walter Burghardt, *The Image of God in Man According to Cyril of Alexandria* (Woodstock, MD: Woodstock College Press, 1957), 1-11; and Gerhart B. Ladner, *The Idea of Reform: Its Impact on Christian Thought and Action in the Age of the Fathers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959), 83-89. An illuminating analysis of Origen's approach to this distinction and its role within his theology can be found in Henri Crouzel, *Théologie de l'image de Dieu chez Origène* (Paris: Aubier, 1957), 217-245.

[18] Basil, *On the Human Condition*, trans. Nonna Verna Harrison (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2005), 43-44.

[19] Although Arnold Stucker is often credited with first arguing this thesis, Hubert Merki is probably its most influential advocate. See Merki, *ΟΜΟΙΩΣΙΣ ΘΕΩ: Von der platonischen Angleichung an Gott zur Gottähnlichkeit bei Gregor von Nyssa*, 138-164. Like Merki, Jean Daniélou also calls attention to Gregory's erasure of this distinction and argues that it constitutes not only a departure from the traditional distinction between image and likeness, but also a divergence from traditional Western theology: "Ce qui est remarquable et frappe aussitôt dans cette énumération, c'est qu' elle met sur le même plan des réalités que notre théologie occidentale distingue. Nous y trouvons à la fois des traits qui caractérisent l'esprit comme tel: la raison ou la liberté; d'autres qui se rapportent à la participation à la vie divine que nous appelons la grâce, comme l'apatheia ou la charité; d'autres enfin concernent la glorification finale, comme l'incorruptibilité ou la beatitude. Pour Grégoire ces distinctions n'existent pas." *Platonisme et théologie mystique*, 49.

distinguish between image and likeness illustrates is that Gregory does not identify the image with rationality as such. The soul images divine power not simply through its possession of a rational soul or certain intellectual faculties, but rather through its use of those faculties in activity that is reflective of God's own active rule.[20] When the soul fails to use its faculties in this way, as in the case of those who have been reduced to a "slavish disposition" under the influence of their passions, then, according to Gregory, the soul ceases to reflect the sovereign power of God.[21] What the natural faculties and structure of the soul provide, then, is not the image of God in and of themselves, but the capacity to function as the image of God through imitation of divine activity.[22]

I will return later to this potential loss of the image, but in order to more fully develop the theme of the soul as an image of divine power, let me now shift attention to Gregory's other extended treatment of human nature and the soul, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*. Whereas *On the Making of Humanity* was written for the direct purpose of addressing the meaning of the Genesis *imago Dei* anthropology, the catalyst for this text is rather different. In *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, which is composed in the form of a philosophical dialogue between Gregory and his sister Macrina, the topic at hand is whether or not the soul exists and, if so, what its nature is and how one might gain

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[20] In saying this, I am largely simply repeating Merki's observation that Gregory's collapse of the distinction between image and likeness leads to an inherently *dynamic* conception of the image. "Dem im Grunde dynamischen Motiv der ὁμοίωσις, hat Gregor die εἰκών genähert, indem er dem an sich nur ontisch-statischen Begriff eine gewisse *Dynamik* und Wachstumsfähigkeit einhauchte." Merki, *ΟΜΟΙΩΣΙΣ ΘΕΩ*, 164.

[21] *Hom op* 14

[22] Warren Smith distinguishes between humanity's "structural" and "moral" likeness to God in his study of Gregory's anthropology. In so doing, however, he does not intend to suggest that Gregory thought of these two categories as totally distinct, as if humanity's "structural" likeness could be equated with the image and the "moral" resemblance with its likeness to God. Instead, he suggests that both are necessary aspects of the *imago Dei* and that the structural similarity between God and the human creature (such as rationality and freedom) "enables [humanity] to possess the moral likeness through a sustained and dynamic connection between the soul and its Creator." Smith, *Passion and Paradise*, 27.

knowledge of its nature. Yet as with the previous text, once again we find a focus on the soul as an active power with a nature that is reflective of the transcendent power of its Creator. In this treatise, however, the connection between Gregory's anthropology and his Nicene theology is perhaps even more explicit when we pay attention not only to the similarity between his characterization of both the soul and God as causal powers, but even more with the conclusions that are drawn from this premise. Recall that, within the context of the Eunomian controversy, Gregory's emphasis on divine power arose in response to a debate over the character and mode of theological knowledge. Eunomius strictly distinguished between the unbegotten "essence" of God and the activity of his power. Gregory, in response, insisted on the perfect unity of the nature and power of God in such a way that the nature of God was manifested by the activity of his power and, therefore, that an identity of activity and power between the persons of the Trinity was clear testimony of a common nature.[23] The epistemological upshot of this argument, as I noted in the previous chapter, was an insistence that our knowledge of the divine nature derives not from immediate and *a priori* comprehension, but from an *a posteriori* process of reflection on the revelatory activity of God.

Turning to *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, it is not difficult to see the connection between Gregory's Nicene theology and his understanding of the human soul. The dialogue opens with Gregory's admission of the grief that he experienced upon the death of his brother Basil and the grief that he anticipates in witnessing his sister's mortal illness. Macrina at first tries to console her brother with the reminder that Christians ought not to grieve as those who have no hope, but when she realizes that Gregory

[23] Cf. Barnes, *The Power of God*, 260-307.

remains distraught, she diagnoses the source of his distress as a fear arising from doubts regarding the soul's existence and its continuance after death. How, Gregory asks Macrina, can we be sure that the soul exists as an immaterial substance that does not necessarily dissolve as the physical body decomposes, and on what basis can we gain knowledge about the nature of the soul? Note that these questions are not unlike those which Gregory and Eunomius argued over with reference to the nature of God, and in her response to Gregory's query, Macrina draws upon the soul's similarity to divine power to mount a psychological epistemology that is quite similar to the theological epistemology Gregory uses in his own debate with Eunomius.

The first step in Macrina's argument is to draw Gregory's attention to the manifestation of God's causal power within creation as the Creator and sustainer of all things that exist. Those who observe both the diversity and the harmony of the created order, Macrina argues, are led to acknowledge that there is a "divine power, both skillful and wise, that is manifested in those things which exist."[24] In other words, the effects of divine activity bear witness to the existence of the transcendent power of God.[25] In an analogous way, she goes on, we can be certain of the existence of the soul and learn something of its nature by observing its activity within and through the body. To illustrate what she means, Macrina gives a number of examples: the physician attending her who uses his senses of sight and hearing and touch to make observations about the interior condition of her body and the causes of its ailments, the accumulation of scientific knowledge about the sun and moon based on astronomic observations and

[24] *An et res* 1.28 (Krabinger 14). Here and in what follows, I will be utilizing the paragraph numbering and translation of the text as found in Anna M. Silvas, *Macrina the Younger, Philosopher of God*, Medieval Women: Texts and Contexts 22 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2008).
[25] For another instance of Gregory's use of this argument, see the preface of his *Catechetical Oration*.

logical deduction, the creative genius and skill of inventors who construct machines that can produce movement and sound.[26] What all of these examples demonstrate is the existence of a "certain intellectual power" (τις δύναμις νοητὴ) that is utilizing the body and its physical senses to make observations about the physical world and arrange these observations in such a way to produce understanding. The body and its organs provide the capacity to see and touch and hear and smell, but it is the soul, Macrina suggests, that directs these senses and gains understanding on the basis of the information they provide, and it is through observation of the soul's activities that we come to an awareness of its existence and its character as a causal power.[27]

Further on in the argument, Macrina cites the Genesis 1 reference to humanity as *imago Dei* and interprets it, once again, with reference to the soul's nature as a rational power. Like God, the soul is an immaterial and non-dimensional substance which manifests itself through its characteristic activities. But the resemblance between the soul and God is not merely that the soul is an active power whose presence and nature can be inferred from its activity. As Gregory argues in *On the Making of Humanity*, so Macrina here affirms that being an image of divine power includes participation in those activities that are characteristic of the active power of God. Just as the nature of divine power is witnessed through its life-giving activity in creation, in the same way, "there is no doubt that the life-giving action of the soul (τὴν ζητικὴν τῆς ψυχῆς ἐνέργειαν) pervades [the

[26] *An et res* 2.6-31

[27] Warren Smith has already drawn a parallel between Macrina's argument here and Gregory's Nicene theology: "Against the backdrop of the Neo-Arian controversy, Nyssen's theological analogue as the basis of his description of the soul is understandable. Even as God, though his essence is beyond the comprehension of creatures, is known by his activities, his *energeiai*, in the world, so too the soul, though its essence is a mystery to the intellect, is knowable solely by means of our observation of its activities." Smith, *Passion and Paradise*, 72.

sensible body] according to a principle beyond comprehension."[28] Somewhat later, Macrina makes a similar point with reference to the soul's rational activity of contemplation an discernment. "We say, then, that the contemplative, critical, and overseeing power (δύναμιν) of the soul is proper to it by its very nature, and that it is through the deiform gift of these things that the soul preserves in itself the image. Since reason surmises that the divine, whatever it might be in its nature, is assumed to be in these, that is, in oversight and critical discrimination of the beautiful from the worse."[29] In both of these passages, her focus is on how the soul as an active, causal power images God, and in both of them she suggests that the soul's resemblance to God includes a reflection of the characteristic activities of divine power, such as giving life and exercising oversight and critical judgment.

What are we to make of this description of the soul? On the one hand, it is quite possible, and reasonable, to understand this account of the soul as Gregory's response to the psychological debates between various philosophical schools.[30] When read against this background, Gregory's depiction of the soul as a single causal power whose existence and character may be observed through the diversity of its operations has clear affinity with Aristotelian conception of the soul as a trichotomous, unified causal power.[31] At the same time, when Gregory speaks about the soul's nature as an active, life-giving power, he does so in the context of a discussion of what it means for humanity

[28] *An et res* 2.46 (Krabinger 34), trans. Silvas 185.
[29] *An et res* 3.34 (Krabinger 48)
[30] On the predominance of this background for most studies of Gregory's psychology, see Barnes, "The Polemical Context and Content of Gregory of Nyssa's Psychology," 1-3. For an insightful analysis of how Gregory's account of the soul relates to the regnant Platonic and Aristotelian models of his day, see Warren Smith, *Passion and Paradise*, 48-74.
[31] Both Michel Barnes and Warren Smith have made the case that Gregory falls on the side of the Aristotelians in this debate. Barnes, "Divine Unity and the Divided Self," 481; Smith, *Passion and Paradise*, 70-73.

to be the image of God. For this reason, it is important to place his psychology in another context which revolves around the nature of a causal power and its manifestation in characteristic activities, namely, his debate with Eunomius over the nature of God and the legacy of Nicaea. Once again, I am not the first to make this connection. Michel Barnes has already drawn attention to the parallels between Gregory's psychology and his pro-Nicene account of the Trinity.[32] My interest in drawing these parallels, however, extends beyond the notable evidence they provide for the overarching coherence of Gregory's thought. For the question that I wish to pose to these texts is not merely whether his understanding of the *imago Dei* has any connection to his pro-Nicene doctrine of God, but whether, more specifically, he interprets the *imago Dei* in a way that aligns with his particular understanding of divine perfection as life-giving goodness and philanthropic love. To investigate this question further, I now turn to the relationship between divine goodness and human nature in Gregory's anthropological writings.

Image of Divine Goodness

Thus far, I have suggested a parallel between Gregory's Nicene theology and his anthropology by noting the predominant emphasis on power and activity in both. In response to Eunomius's categorical separation of the divine essence with the active power of God, Gregory constructed an epistemology and doctrine of God on the foundation of the unity of divine nature and power. What we observe about and know of

[32] See n. 7 above. Drawing on the work of Barnes, Lewis Ayres has also emphasized the striking similarities between Gregory's pro-Nicene theology and his depiction of the soul as an active power "Gregory's often varied accounts of the soul all emphasize that the soul has a life-giving power, and that the soul is thus constituted in creation as a mirror of the divine power…These accounts are also both shaped by Gregory's understanding of the unitary activity of the Triune God, developed in an anti-Eunomian context." Ayres, "Deification and the Dynamics of Nicene Theology," *SVTQ* 49:4 (2005): 383-384.

God is that God is a causal power whose nature is manifested in his activity. Similarly, what we know of the soul is that it is a causal power which reflects the nature of God by its participation in the characteristic activities of God's sovereign rule. Yet, as I observed in my previous chapter, this was simply the foundation of Gregory's argument for an identifiably Nicene theology of divine perfection. The content of that theology was what is positively revealed about God through observation of his economic activity. What we learn about God from observing the activity of divine power is that God is perfectly good, and that the character of that goodness is revealed in the economy of God's action in creation, in the generous bestowal of life and in the self-giving love for humanity that finds its most perfect expression in the narrative of Jesus Christ's incarnation and death. And it is in response to and in reflection on the active manifestation of this goodness, Gregory argues, that we describe the perfection of God with a variety of names, such as light, life, wisdom, beauty, power, justice, mercy, and love.

It makes sense, then, that when we turn to Gregory's anthropology and his discussion of humanity as the *imago Dei*, we find him interpreting it to mean not only that humanity is created to be an image of divine power, but also that it is created to be a participant in divine goodness.[33] In *On the Making of Humanity*, for instance, immediately after correlating humanity's role as an image with its task for rational rule, Gregory expands the meaning of the Genesis motif to include humanity's participation in

[33] David Balás suggests that, of all the divine perfections in which humanity is created to participate, it is that of goodness which "occupies the most important place in the works of Gregory." Balás, *ΜΕΤΟΥΣΙΑ ΘΕΟΥ*, 54. Of course, as I have argued in the previous chapter, Gregory uses the term "goodness" both to refer to the generosity and love of God and also to refer more generally to the whole of divine perfection. In his analysis of the *imago Dei* motif, Warren Smith also gives attention to this theme, although he prefers to speak of humanity's participation in divine goodness as its "moral likeness" (as opposed to its "structural likeness") to God. Cf. Smith, *Passion and Paradise*, 25-27.

the virtuous "beauty" of God.[34] Like an artist who utilizes various colors to capture the likeness of an image, God paints the beauty of his own nature and rule onto the canvas of the human creature "by the addition of virtues" (τῇ τῶν ἀρετῶν ἐπιβολῇ). He then goes on to list a sampling of these attributes, such as purity, freedom from passion, and beatitude. These virtues seem to be somewhat different from the list of "goods" or perfections that make frequent appearances in the *Contra Eunomium*, which are often parallel to various titles of Christ. The christological perfections are not far from his mind, however, for he immediately goes on to expand this list of representative perfections by drawing more explicitly on the logic that informs his Nicene writings, whereby the perfections of God are identified with the person and titles of Christ:

> Divinity is Mind (νοῦς) and Word (λόγος), for 'in the beginning was the Word,' and prophets, according to Paul, have the 'mind of Christ' which speaks in them. And humanity is not far removed from these; you see also in yourself reason (λόγον) and thought (διάνοιαν) in imitation of the true Mind and Word. Again, God is love and the fountain of love. For this the great John says, that 'Love is from God' and 'God is love' (ὁ θεὸς ἀγάπη ἐστί). This also the fashioner of [human] nature has made to be our feature, for he says, 'in this way everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love (ἀγαπᾶτε) one another.' Therefore, if this is not present, the whole character of the image is transformed.[35]

[34] On the closely related semantic function of "beauty" (καλόν) and "good" (ἀγαθόν) in Gregory's thought, see Ilaria Ramelli, "Good/Beauty," *The Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa*, 356-363.
[35] *Hom op* 5.2 (PG 44.137B-C).

This passage merits some commentary. First, it is noteworthy that the first two perfections Gregory identifies here are both christological titles as well as natural faculties inherent in the soul as a rational power, and for this reason Gregory can cite as evidence of their existence in humanity the innate presence of "reason" and "thought" within the human psyche. Yet, it does not seem that he intends to refer merely to the faculties of rationality as such, nor to "reason" and "thought" of any sort whatsoever, at least not without qualification, since he equates the image more properly to the "mind of Christ" that speaks in the prophets. Once again, therefore, it seems to be more faithful to Gregory's overall thought to interpret him as identifying the image not so much with the possession of rational faculties as such, but with the virtuous use of those faculties after the pattern of Christ. Second, with the inclusion of love we come quite close indeed to what I described in the previous chapter as Gregory's Nicene theology of divine perfection. Drawing on the logic of 1 John, Gregory includes charitable and active love as one of, if not *the*, primary aspects of the virtuous beauty of God which the human creature reflects. What is more, the example of love makes it even more clear that these virtues are present in the image only insofar as the image actively participates in them. For should the activity of this love cease, the character of the image becomes changed into something else. Taken together with the quotes which preceded it, then, this passage makes it clear that Gregory understands the image of God in humanity to include an active participation in the various virtues of God, the perfections of divine goodness.

Lest it seem that I am reading too much out of a single passage, however, let me offer another example of where Gregory interprets the image to mean a dynamic participation in the active goodness of God. Whereas the above passage occurs near the

beginning of *On the Making of Humanity*, in a section wherein Gregory provides his initial definition of the *imago Dei*, the one I am about to quote occurs eleven chapters later in the treatise. Here, Gregory once again takes up the definition of the image, but this time does so in the context of the apparent discrepancy between the biblical description of human nature and its present condition. This broader context is significant, and I will return to it shortly, but for now let me simply quote the passage in mind:

> God is in his own nature (τῇ ἑαυτοῦ φύσει) everything that we apprehend in our mind as good. What is more, transcending every good of which our mind can comprehend, he creates human life for no other reason than the fact that he is good. And being thus good, and being motivated for this reason to fashion human nature, he did not exhibit the power of his goodness (τὴν τῆς ἀγαθότητος...δύναμιν) in an imperfect way, giving [human nature] only certain of his attributes while refusing full participation. But the perfect form of his goodness is seen in his bringing humanity into existence out of nothing and in perfectly filling it with every good. But since the catalog of individual goods is lengthy, it is difficult to apprehend it numerically. Therefore, gathering them all together, the scriptural word describes [this goodness] with a single, comprehensive phrase when it says that humanity was made 'according to the image of God,' which is to say, that [God] made human nature a participant of every good (παντὸς ἀγαθοῦ μέτοχον). For if deity is the fullness of all goods, and if this one is its image, then the image has its likeness (τὴν ὁμοιότητα) to the archetype by being filled with every good.[36]

[36] *Hom op* 16.10 (PG 44.184A-B)

This passage illustrates well the relationship between Gregory's anthropology and his Nicene theology of divine perfection. Just as the quality of goodness took center stage in Gregory's description of God in his debate with Eunomius, so here what it means for human creatures to be created in the image of God is for them to be participants in "every good" of the divine nature, to share in and to reflect the virtues of God. Furthermore, while Gregory does not here list all the various goods that he often mentions in *Contra Eunomium*—light, life, justice, mercy, love, and the like—he does anchor his discussion of divine goodness in the benevolent economy of divine action, specifically, in the gracious activity of creation. The "perfect form of goodness" (τὸ τέλειον τῆς ἀγαθότητος εἶδος) is witnessed, he says, in the loving generosity that impelled God to bring humanity into existence and to bestow on it the gift of participation in divine perfection. This goodness, then, coheres with that quality of life-giving generosity and philanthropic love that Gregory appeals to when he argues for an identity of nature between the incarnate Son and the God over all. And to be an image of God is to be an image of this goodness, which means to be a participant in all the perfections of the God who is good and who manifests that goodness through his economic activity.

This depiction of the human creature bears remarkable similarity to some of the crucial elements of Gregory's Nicene theology that I highlighted in the previous chapter. To reiterate, in *Against Eunomius*, Gregory responded to Eunomius's strict identification of divine perfection with "unbegottenness" by constructing an alternative account of the nature of God revolving around the quality of "goodness", a quality described through a multiplicity of divine attributes. What is more, this alternative account of God revolved

around the manifestation of divine nature through the activity of divine power. It is through the deeds of God that we learn the characteristic perfection of God as infinite goodness. Here, in his principle writings on anthropology, *On the Making of Humanity* and *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, we see the presence of these same themes as Gregory outlines an understanding of the human person as an image of sovereign power and a participant in the perfect goodness of God, an image of divine perfection. And, as I have attempted to stress throughout this section, Gregory's understanding of the image is an inherently dynamic one. It is not simply through their possession of rational faculties or a complementary physical structure, but through their active use of these faculties in a way that reflects the characteristic virtues and activities of God that humanity fulfills its created purpose as to image God. It is through active participation in the beauty of God that humanity becomes what it was created to be: mirrors of divine perfection.[37]

To be clear, I am not claiming that Gregory intentionally constructed his anthropology to directly coincide with the doctrine of God and divine perfection that he articulated in his debate with Eunomius, nor am I arguing that these anthropological

[37] I use the word "mirrors" here intentionally, for, as David Bentley Hart suggests, the motif of a mirror is in fact one of the most pervasive themes throughout Gregory's consideration of human nature (see, e.g., *Hom op* 12.9, *Cant* 3 and 15, *Virg* 11, and *De beat* 6) and it is an instructive motif when it comes to helping us recognize the correspondence between his anthropology and his Nicene, trinitarian theology. When we attend to this metaphor, Hart argues, we begin to recognize the strongly "dynamist" character of Gregory's interpretation of the *imago Dei*. The soul is not simply a mirror, but a "moving" and "infinitely motile" mirror that manifests the nature of God precisely within its own activity. And the theological foundation for this, Hart goes on to observe, can be found in Gregory's Nicene trinitarian theology, for what the movement of the soul reflects is the "eternal act whereby God becomes God" the life-giving goodness that is actualized in the "self-outpouring love" of the Son's generation and the "self-knowing wisdom" of the Father's contemplation of and delight in the Son. Hart, "The Mirror of the Infinite: Gregory of Nyssa on the *Vestigia Trinitatis*," *Modern Theology* 18:4 (October 2002). For a similar argument that draws together the dynamism of the mirror motif with the soul's active reflection of God, see Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Presence and Thought: Essay on the Religious Philosophy of Gregory of Nyssa*, trans. Mark Sebanc (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 111-119.

treatises were intended to bolster his defense of Nicaea.[38] More modestly, I am suggesting that Gregory's anti-Eunomian and pro-Nicene theology, with its strong emphasis on the unity of divine power and being and its attention to divine action as the revelatory basis for positive knowledge of the perfection of God as life-giving goodness, provides an important background for his interpretation of the nature of humanity as the image of God. Whether Gregory is aware of the continuity between these two elements of his theology or not, a faithful reading of these texts confirms that he understands the human creature to be not simply an image of God, but more explicitly to be an image of the God of Nicaea. To provide even more evidence for this claim, I will now turn from these two primary anthropological treatises to another text in which Gregory discusses human creation and the nature of the *imago Dei* and couches this discussion within a defense of Nicene theology.

The Image of God and Nicene Theology in the Catechetical Oration

As with the texts already discussed, in the *Catechetical Oration* Gregory describes human nature as an image of divine goodness and power. In explaining the reason for human creation, for instance, Gregory claims that the first human was made in order that he might be a "partaker of the divine goods" (μέτοχος τῶν θεῖων ἀγαθῶν).[39] Expanding on this further, he writes, "For what was needed was that [God's] light should not remain unseen, nor his glory without witness, nor his goodness with no one to enjoy

[38] Although these texts are not wholly free of Nicene polemics either. While Gregory does not explicitly mention the debate in *On the Resurrection*, he does mention it in *On the Making of Humanity*. Cf. *Hom. op.* 6.

[39] *Cat or.* 5 (GNO III, IV.17.9). My references to paragraph numbers follow the textual divisions found in *The Catechetical Oration of St. Gregory of Nyssa*, trans. J.G. Srawley (London: SPCK, 1917).

it, and that all the other qualities which are observed in the divine nature (πάντα ὅσα περὶ τὴν θείαν καθορᾶται) should not remain inoperative, with no one to participate in them or enjoy them."[40] The purpose of humanity, therefore, is to serve both as a participant in the qualities of divine goodness, but also as a visible reflection of these qualities within the created order. In what follows, Gregory specifies some of the "divine goods" he has in mind, attributes such as life, reason, and wisdom. This list is not meant to be comprehensive, however, but illustrative as discreet elements of the goodness in which humanity participates, and to make it clear that they are merely illustrative, Gregory makes reference to all other goods that are "befitting of God" (πᾶσι τοῖς θεοπρεπέσιν ἀγαθοῖς).[41] And all of these attributes of perfection, he goes on to note, are comprehended by Genesis when it refers to the human beings as being made in the "image and likeness" of God. To be the image of God, then, is to be a visible image of divine goodness by way of participation in all aspects of the perfect goodness of God.

A few pages further, Gregory returns to the creation of humanity as the image of God. This time, however, instead of characterizing the human creature as a "partaker" of the attributes of divine perfection, Gregory describes humanity as an image of the active power of God. After discussing the creation of the "angelic powers", he notes the creation of the first human as a "representation of the supreme power" (τῆς ἄνω δυνάμεως ἀπεικόνισμα). "This living creature," he continues, "was the human. In him there was the godlike beauty of the intelligible nature, mixed with a certain ineffable power (ἀρρήτῳ τινὶ δυνάμει)."[42] The reference to "godlike beauty" here refers to human

[40] *Cat or.* 5 (GNO III, IV.17.4-7), trans. Srawley, 35.
[41] *Cat or.* 5 (GNO III, IV.17.23-24)
[42] *Cat or.* 6 (GNO III, IV.23.3-5)

participation in the attributes of divine goodness as noted above, but now the likeness between human and divine nature is further expanded by drawing attention to the ineffable power present in the human. This power, Gregory goes on to note, also gave the human being an elevated status and a specific task within the created world: the human was appointed "to rule (βασιλεύειν) over the earth and everything upon it."[43] As with the texts already surveyed, then, Gregory understands humanity to be an image of the transcendent power of God which rules the universe, and he thinks that they reflect divine power by sharing in the God's characteristic activity of sovereign rule.

But why highlight this account of human creation? Does it offer any further insight into the relationship between Gregory's anthropology and his Nicene theology to the analysis of *On the Making of Humanity* and *On the Soul and the Resurrection* above? I would argue that it does, but not because its description of humanity as an image of divine power or divine goodness offers any substantial additions to what I have already discussed. What the *Catechetical Oration* adds to the analysis above can be found not in the particular account of humanity's creation that occurs in the text, but the broader context in which it takes place. Most scholars have regarded the *Oration* as one of Gregory's later works, likely written sometime after the Council of Constantinople in 381 and after Gregory had already finished his anti-Eunomian treatises.[44] It makes sense,

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[43] *Cat or. 6* (GNO III, IV.25.13-14)

[44] E.g., Jean Daniélou, "La chronologie des sermons de Grégoire de Nysse," *RevSR* 29 (1955), 346-372; and Gerhard May, "Die Chronologie des Lebens und der Werke des Gregor von Nyssa," in *Écriture et culture philosophique dans la pensée de Grégoire de Nysse*, ed. Marguerite Harl (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1971), 51-67. This dating of the treatise has been defended at greater length by Reinhard Kees in his *Die Lehre von der* Oikonomia *Gottes in der* Oratio Catechetica *Gregors von Nyssa* SVC 30 (Leiden: E.J Brill, 1995). Kees offers an extensive analysis of the *Oration* as a synthetic expression of his mature theology, arguing along the way that Gregory integrates the insights and positions that he had already developed in his controversies with Eunomius and Apollinarius, as well as his earlier ethical and ascetical writings. In contrast, Raymond Winling presents a number of intra-textual reasons to reconsider this dating and suggests an earlier date. Winling, "Introduction", *Grégoire de Nysse: Discours catéchetique* SC 453 (Paris:

therefore, to read the *Oration* as reflective of Gregory's mature trinitarian theology, and indeed the more recent interpretations of Nicaea have privileged the *Oration* as a particularly clear presentation of Nicene theology.[45] To anyone who has read the *Oration*, this may seem like a rather strange characterization of its contents. After all, Gregory's explicit discussion of the Trinity occupies no more than the first four of the treatise's forty total chapters.[46] The rest focuses on the creation, fall, and restoration of humanity and on the sacramental and moral foundations of the Christian life. Yet, as Khaled Anatolios has argued in his analysis of the *Oration*, if we understand Gregory's Nicene theology to extend beyond the particular concerns of how to reconcile the unity and plurality of God to include the christologically defined understanding of divine goodness that stands at the center of what Gregory considers to be the "distinctly Christian conception of God," then the *Catechetical Oration* is plainly a catechetical exposition of Nicene trinitarian theology.[47]

The concern for defining and defending divine goodness is clear from the very beginning of the text. In the opening prologue, wherein he outlines a fitting apologetic that may be given to an atheistic or polytheistic interlocutor, Gregory bases his argument

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Les Éditions du Cerf, 2000), 126-130. Yet, even if Winling's thesis is correct and Gregory did write the *Oration* prior to writing his responses to Eunomius, this does not undermine the significant theological continuity between the two texts, particularly in their shared focus on the unity of divine power and the expression of that power as life-giving goodness within the economy of divine action.

[45] For explicit commendations of the *Catechetical Oration* as a clear presentation of Gregory's mature Nicene theology, see Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy*, 360, 435 and Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, 194ff.

[46] The division of the text into forty chapters is, as Reinhard Kees points out, a legacy of modern editions of the text, such as that of J.P. Migne in the *Patrologia graeca*, which has been frequently followed in popular translations, but does not reflect earlier ways of dividing the text. Kees, *Die Lehre von der* Oikonomia *Gottes in der* Oratio Catechetica *Gregors von Nyssa*, 39-40. This division is also not maintained in the most recent critical edition of the text, that of Ekkehard Mühlenberg in the *Gregorii Nysseni Opera* series, which provides no chapter division whatsoever. In what follows, I will rely on Mühlenberg for the Greek text, and yet, for the sake of ease, I will continue to make reference to the chapter divisions as they are found in J.H. Srawley's translation of the text.

[47] Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, 194-204. The interpretation of the *Oration* which I pursue here is deeply indebted to Anatolios's analysis.

on two key premises: (1) the skillful and wise ordering of the world confirms the existence of a "certain power" (τινα δύναμιν) that is revealed in and that transcends the universe; and (2) this transcendent power is not deficient (ἐλλιπὲς) in any way, but is rather perfect (τέλειον) by nature.[48] Both of these premises, he notes, should be accepted as self-evident and uncontroversial by the hypothetical interlocutor, and on their basis it is possible to make a positive argument not only for the existence but also for the singularity of God. For if one grants that the transcendent power which created the cosmos is indeed perfect in every regard, and that any variation in nature would necessarily be a diminishment of that perfection, then any other so-called god cannot possibly claim absolute perfection.

After this brief retort to potential atheistic or polytheistic Greeks, Gregory goes on to suggest an argument that may be put forward to convince a Jewish interlocutor of the necessity for believing in a plurality of *hypostases* within God. The details of this argument do not seem to be very important to the broader purpose of the text, nor are they likely to prove convincing to modern readers.[49] What is interesting about this

[48] "When then a discussion arises with one who is attached to Greek ways of thinking, it will be well to begin the argument as follows. Does he presuppose the existence of God, or does he agree with the doctrine of the atheists? If he denies the existence of God, then by the signs of skill and wisdom shown in the ordering of the universe he will be led to acknowledge therein the existence of some power (τινα δύναμιν) manifest in created things and transcending the universe. But if, while not denying the existence of God, he is led astray by his notions to believe in a plurality of gods, let us have recourse, in dealing with him, to some such argument as this. Does he consider the deity to be perfect or imperfect (τέλειον ἢ ἐλλιπὲς)? If, as he probably will do, he testifies to the perfection of the divine nature, let us require him to grant that this perfection extends through everything that is observed in the deity, in order that the divine being may not be considered to be a mixture of contrary elements, imperfection and perfection. But whether it be in respect of power, or the conception of goodness, or wisdom, incorruption, eternity and any other thought worth of God that may happen to be connected with the subject of our inquiry, he will agree, as the logical outcome of this course of reasoning, that perfection is in every case the idea contemplated in the divine nature." *Cat or.* 1 (GNO III, IV.6.14-7.6), trans. Srawley, 24.

[49] It is perhaps worth noting, in the light of tendencies in twentieth-century scholarship to distinguish Gregory and Augustine on the basis of their chosen analogies for describing the Trinity, that the analogue Gregory chooses here is that of the human soul and its possession of mind and speech, quite similar to Augustine's so-called psychological analogy and different from the "social" analogy to which Gregory appeals for different purposes in his *Ad Ablabium*.

argument is that, once again, Gregory appeals to the active power and perfection of God as fundamental premises. That there is a Word within God which is distinct from the Father from whom this Word originates can be concluded by reasoning from the fact that the human soul itself possesses a "certain power and life and wisdom" that finds an analogical correspondence in God. But because this Word shares the perfection of the Father, it does not share the same weaknesses and limitations of the human mind. Because it is perfect, this Word possesses life eternally and essentially; its power is fully effectual; and its wisdom is perfectly aligned with the good. Furthermore, Gregory goes on to note, we can recognize the unity of this Word with the Father precisely because in his activity "he manifests in himself the attributes which are observed in God," be they power or goodness or wisdom or eternity.[50] And in his argument for the Spirit's hypostatic existence, Gregory once again invokes the perfection of the divine nature and the manifestation of that nature in the activity of divine power. Like the Word, the Spirit is an active power whose nature can be apprehended by attention to the Spirit's activity, which is characterized by the same characteristics of perfection true to the nature of God. To fully convince the Jewish skeptic, Gregory concludes, one need only point to the testimony of Psalm 33:6: "By the word of the Lord were the heavens established and all their power by the spirit of his mouth."[51]

To reiterate, these arguments in support of trinitarian monotheism are brief and occupy a relatively small portion of the *Oration.* Because of this, it is questionable whether Gregory intends the apologetic reasoning he provides to persuade an actual Jewish or Greek critic of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, or whether perhaps he

[50] *Cat or.* 1 (GNO III, IV.11.18-24)
[51] *Cat or.* 2 (GNO III, IV.14.22-24)

simply wishes to reaffirm his Christian audience of the general rationality of their faith. Either way, on the basis of the amount of attention he devotes to this apologetic, it is clear that it is neither the affirmation of monotheism nor the attribution of plurality in God that Gregory regards as the most pressing aspect of the Christian understanding of God which needs to be addressed. Instead, what Gregory devotes the majority of his attention to is in addressing the challenge of identifying the perfect being of God with the person and activity of the incarnate Jesus Christ. For "it may happen that the Greek, with his general ideas, and the Jew, with his scriptures, do not dispute the existence of a Word of God and a Spirit. But the economy (οἰκονομίαν) of God the Word exhibited in his becoming man will be equally rejected by both of them as being incredible and unfit (ἀπίθανόν τε καὶ ἀπρεπῆ) to be attributed to God."[52] It is this topic, the economy of God in becoming human, that Gregory assumes will elicit the greatest criticism of Christian claims about God. And the opinion that Gregory here identifies with hypothetical Jewish and Greek interlocutors is the same opinion that he found implicit in Eunomius's rejection of Nicaea, namely, that the gospel narrative of the Son's incarnation and his subsequent death is incompatible with the perfect nature of God.

In what follows, Gregory offers a lengthy response to this criticism, a response that includes a broad survey of the economy of divine action from the creation of humanity and its subsequent fall to the restoration of humanity in the incarnation and death of Christ. In order to appreciate the fundamental unity and coherence of his broader argument, however, it is important that we do not read this lengthy foray into the economy of creation and salvation as an attempt to produce a systematic theology that

[52] *Cat or.* 5 (GNO III, IV.15.16-20), trans. Srawley, 33-34.

addresses various and distinct *loci* of Christian doctrine as discreet subject matters.[53] For, despite the breadth of topics that he addresses in this survey, his broader purpose for discussing the history of God's dealings with humanity is consistent. His intent, as he reminds his readers repeatedly, is to provide a cogent answer to those who perceive the incarnation and death of Christ to be irreconcilable with a "fitting" conception of God.[54] Yet, if this is his purpose, why offer a theological commentary on the broad scope of creation and the economy of salvation? How exactly does his treatment of the economy contribute to his broader goal? The answer to this question, I would suggest, is that Gregory is actually reframing his readers' understanding of the nature of divine perfection by describing the character of God as it is manifested in the narrative of creation and salvation. In other words, he is drawing upon the premise that he already appealed to in the opening prologue of his work—that the existence and perfection of God are revealed in the activity of divine power—in order to provide a proper framework by which to evaluate what may or may not be "fitting" for God. For only after one has an accurate understanding of God and of the nature of God as it has been revealed in divine activity, is it possible to answer the question of whether or not the humble descent of Christ is or is not appropriately attributed to the perfect nature of God.[55]

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[53] For an example of an analysis of the *Oration*'s structure that tends in this direction, see Raymond Winling, "Introduction," 26-32.

[54] Gregory reminds his readers of this purpose on multiple occasions, in *Cat or.* 5, 9, 15, 19, and 20.

[55] And his method in pursuing this aim is to offer a truly "Christian" account of divine attributes through attention to the scripturally narrated economy of divine action. In chapter 24, he summarizes the argument of his method this way: "Let us then resume, by way of brief summary, the course of the argument for the [gospel] mystery, and so complete our defense of it against those who criticize the divine economy (τοὺς κατηγοροῦντας τῆς θείας οἰκονομίας) because the deity effects the salvation of humanity through himself. For the divine being must exhibit throughout the attributes that are befitting to him, and we may not form a lofty conception of one attribute, while another attribute of the proper dignity of God is excluded; but every lofty and devout thought (πᾶν ὑψηλόν τε καὶ εὐσεβὲς νόημα) must without reserve be included in our belief with regard to God, and the one must be connected with the other in due sequence. We have shown, then, that goodness, wisdom, justice, power, incapacity for corruption, are all exhibited in the doctrine of God's economy with regard to us. Goodness is apprehended in choosing to save him who was lost. Wisdom and

This is the context in which his description of the creation of humanity finds its place, within a broader consideration of the economy of divine action and its revelation of the perfect goodness of God as philanthropic love.[56] For this reason, while the range of subjects that Gregory includes within his survey of the divine economy is quite broad—the creation of the world and humanity, the intrusion of evil and God's response, the restoration of humanity through the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ, and the sacramental and moral experience of the Christian community—his rhetorical purpose remains quite consistent: to defend the validity of Nicene theology by aligning our understanding of God's perfection with the active goodness of divine power.[57] Because once the nature of God is understood in this manner, then the humble economy of the Son's incarnation can be appreciated for what it is, not a potentially scandalous abdication of divine perfection, but the most perfect actualization of its true character. As Gregory puts it in chapter 15 of the *Oration*, "If, then, love for humanity is a characteristic mark of the divine nature (Εἰ οὖν ἴδιον γνώρισμα τῆς θείας φύσεως

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justice were shown in his manner of saving us; power in the fact that he came in the likeness and fashion of man in the lowly condition of our nature…" *Cat or.* 24 (GNO III, IV.62.15-63.5), trans. Srawley, 78 (modified).

[56] Gregory repeatedly draws his reader's attention back to this theme throughout his commentary on the various aspects of the divine economy. In discussing creation, for instance, he writes, "So then, this being, who is God the Word, Wisdom, Power has been shown in the course of our argument to be the creator of human nature, not as being impelled by some necessity to make man, but devising the production of such a creature out of superabundant love (ἀλλ' ἀγάπης περιουσὶᾳ)." *Cat or.* 5 (GNO III, IV.16.22-17.3), trans. Srawley, 35. His discussion of evil and sin is, likewise, primarily focused on defending the perfect goodness of God, which explains why Gregory interprets the "tunics of skin" given to Adam and Eve not as punitive, but as a hidden blessing that enables humanity to look beyond the pleasures of mortal life, and is in fact therefore a demonstration of "the exceeding greatness of divine beneficence" (τὴν ὑπερβολὴν τῆς θείας εὐεργεσίας)." *Cat. or* 8 (GNO III, IV.29.5-6). For a fuller analysis of this theme throughout the *Oration*, see Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, 199-202.

[57] Anatolios describes the primary task of the *Catechetical Oration* thus: "what needs to be centrally communicated in the exposition of Christian theology is not an account of unity-within-distinction but an account of how our notion of who God is becomes determined by the christological narrative." He goes on to add that the central demonstration toward which Gregory is aiming in this treatise is "that the christological narrative represents a superior presentation of divine perfection and goodness." Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, 198.

ἡ φιλανθρωπία), you have the explanation for which you asked; you have the reason for the presence of God among men."[58] Once the nature of God is characterized in terms of its combination of wisdom, justice, power, and, most especially, its life-giving goodness that manifests itself as φιλανθρωπία, then the gospel narrative of the Son's incarnation and death becomes not merely *a* but *the* most perfect expression of the nature of divine power, for it is in the Son's descent, Gregory argues, that "power conjoined to love for humanity" (συγκεκραμένη τῇ φιλανθρωπίᾳ ἡ δύναμις) is most clearly and visible displayed.[59]

How does all of this relate to the nature of Gregory's anthropology in the *Oration* and its relation to his Nicene theology? I have already observed the similarities between Gregory's primary description of humanity in the *Oration* and his more extended discussion of this topic in *On the Making of Humanity* and *On the Soul and the Resurrection*. As with the latter two texts, Gregory's commentary on human nature in the *Oration* focuses on how humanity was created to serve as a living image of divine power and to be a participant in all of the "goods" of the divine nature. Unlike the other treatises, however, this description of the human creature in the *Oration* comes in the context of an extended defense of Nicene theology that focuses explicitly on the economy of divine power in human history and the revealed character of divine perfection that arises from that economy. When Gregory describes humanity as a "partaker of the divine goods" and a "representation of supreme power," we should take this broader context into account, for the primary subject of the entire treatise is precisely how the character of those goods relate to the activity of God's supreme power toward humanity, which

[58] *Cat or.* 15 (GNO III, IV.43.15-18), trans. Srawley, 59 (modified).
[59] *Cat or.* 24 (GNO III, IV.61.3-4)

reaches its climax in the Son's incarnation and death, in which the commingling of divine power and love are most clearly visible. For this reason, the *Oration* offers us an ideal vantage point from which to view the relationship between Gregory's anthropology and his Nicene theology. To be the image of God for Gregory is, as I have said, to be an active reflection of divine perfection. Now, in light of the *Oration*, we may go further and say that to be the image of God is to be a living mirror of the dynamic goodness and love of God made known in the face of Jesus Christ.

Unlike God: The Mutability and Corruption of the Image

Thus far, I have argued that Gregory's anthropology rests principally upon his identification of the nature and purpose of humanity as the "image and likeness of God" and that his interpretation of this anthropology reflects key elements of his Nicene theology. To be an image of God is to be an image of divine power and to actively reflect the perfect goodness of God. In this way, the human creature corresponds in its constitution and life to some of the most significant positive elements of Gregory's Nicene doctrine of God. It is important, however, to reconcile this anthropology with another central aspect of Nicene theology: the distinction between Creator and creation.[60] This theme is central to Athanasius's defense of Nicaea in his *Orations Against the Arians*, in which he repeatedly highlights the biblical denunciation of idolatry as evidence

[60] Indeed, Anatolios argues that the "emerging clarity on the radical distinction between God and the world" constitutes one of the most significant catalysts for the fourth-century trinitarian debates. For this reason, "the question of the relation between Father and Son was closely bound to questions about the nature of transcendence and the relation between God and creation." Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, 39. Lewis Ayres similarly comments on the contestation over the God-world relation as intrinsic to the Nicene debates: "Suggestions that the issue was one of placing Christ (and eventually the Spirit) on either side of a well-established dividing line between created and uncreated are particularly unhelpful. At issue until the last decades of the controversy was the flexibility with which the term 'God' could be deployed." Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy*, 14.

for a clear and absolute distinction between the Creator and what is created.[61] In light of this condemnation of idolatry and the separation of God and the world which it implies, Athanasius argues, Christians must conclude one of two things regarding their worshipful devotion to the person of the Son. On the one hand, they may reason that the Son is ingredient to the very being of God and perfectly shares the divine nature with the Father, and because of this their doxological practices do not violate the biblical command to worship God alone. On the other hand, they may accept the arguments of Arius and other critics of Nicaea and distinguish the Son as in some way distinct in nature or derivative of the Father, in which case, according to Athanasius, they must likewise accept that their worship of Jesus Christ amounts to idolatry.

Gregory similarly makes the distinction between Creator and creation central to his defense of Nicene theology in *Against Eunomius*. And like Athanasius, he also frames the question of the God-world relation within the biblical proscription of idolatry: "The divine word has decreed that none of those things which have come into being by creation (τῶν διὰ κτίσεως γεγονότων) is to be worshipped by men, as one must learn from every part of the divinely inspired scriptures."[62] On the basis of this proscription, he goes on, all existing things fall into one of two categories: either that of creation (κτίσις) or that of the uncreated nature (ἄκτιστος φύσις). Those who refuse to abide by this strict binary of creation/uncreated nature will inevitably fall into the error of pagan idolatry, attributing divinity to and ultimately worshipping that which is a part of the created order. Christians must avoid this error, of course, and in order to keep them from it, they are taught to regard everything created as "outside of the divine nature" (ἔξω τῆς θείας

[61] Cf. *Contra Arianos* 1.17; 2.23-24
[62] *CE* 3.3.2 (GNO II.107.10-12)

φύσεως) and to restrict their worship and adoration to the "divine and uncreated nature," the distinguishing mark of which is the infinity of its existence, that it has neither beginning nor end.[63] For this reason, Gregory rejects Eunomius's attempt to differentiate the Son's nature from that of the Father while simultaneously revering the Son as divine. In the light of the unbridgeable chasm that separates God from his creation, only two options are possible: either the Son is God and must be worshipped as such, or the Son is a creature and worship of him must be denounced as idolatry.

As Hans Urs von Balthasar has noted, this "irreducible opposition between God and creature" resides at the heart of Gregory's metaphysics.[64] And because of this, in order to understand Gregory's anthropology, it is necessary to identify not only the similarities between the created image and its uncreated archetype, but also their differences. From the brief survey of his anthropology above, it is clear that Gregory does not locate this difference in a distinction of which perfections are characteristic of each nature, as if the created image possessed only certain aspects of divine goodness and not others. To the contrary, he interprets the identification of the human creature as *imago Dei* to mean that human beings are created with the intent that they would embody and reflect all of the perfect "goods" of the divine nature. Instead, he distinguishes the created image from its uncreated archetype by arguing that the perfection which the uncreated nature possesses eternally and immutably by nature, the created image possesses only in a derivative and mutable fashion. Here is how Gregory explains this distinction in book 1 of *Against Eunomius*:

[63] *CE* 3.3.8
[64] Balthasar, *Presence and Thought*, 27.

> Since the intelligible nature on the created side stands at the border between good things and their opposite, so as to be capable of receiving either by inclining to those which it prefers, as we learn from scripture, there is room to speak of more and less (τὸ πλέον καὶ τὸ ἔλαττον) in the one who excels in virtue in proportion to his rejection of the worse and approximation to the better. The uncreated nature is far away from such a distinction, inasmuch as it does not have good as something acquired (ἐπίκτητον), nor does it receive excellence (τὸ καλὸν) into itself by participation (κατὰ μετοχὴν) in some higher excellence, but because it is by nature (τῇ φύσει) that which is good, and is perceived as goodness, and is attested even by our opponents to be the fount of goodness, simple, uniform, and uncompounded.[65]

This is an important passage for understanding Gregory's anthropology and how it relates to his Nicene theology. Whereas the passages discussed in the section above clarified the points of similarity between the image and its archetype, here we have a clear delineation of the way in which the created image is dissimilar to its Creator. Chief among these differences is the inherent mutability of the creature. It is possible to speak of "more and less" with regard to the creature's excellence, and thus of growth and diminishment, whereas the uncreated Creator is good "by nature" and therefore cannot possibly become either more or less good. As David Balás has amply demonstrated, this distinction resides at the very heart of Gregory's metaphysics and it explains why he so emphasizes the theme of "participation" (μετουσία) in articulating the relationship between God and humanity.[66] According to Balás, what distinguishes the human

[65] *CE* 1.275-276 (GNO I.106.23-107.10), trans. Hall, 75 (modified).
[66] This is one of the primary theses of Balás's study *ΜΕΤΟΥΣΙΑ ΘΕΟΥ: Man's Participation in God's Perfections According to St Gregory of Nyssa*.

creatures who participate in the divine nature from their perfect Creator is, again, not that they only participate in some of the divine perfections and not others, but precisely that they participate in these perfections derivatively, whereas God "possesses (or rather *is*) every (pure) perfection essentially."[67] As creatures who have been created out of nothing, human beings are inherently mutable and have the capacity to either increase or diminish in their participation in the perfections of the divine nature, but God is infinite and immutable and it is therefore impossible to speak of "more and less" in reference to God's own perfection. And it is this, according to Balás, that constitutes the "ontological difference" between God and humanity.[68]

One result of this interpretation of the image in Gregory's thought is that he does not treat the image of God in human nature as a given fact.[69] As I have already noted above, Gregory diverges from an interpretive tradition that preceded him and that is followed by Origen and Basil which identifies the "image" with the natural intellectual faculties of the human soul and differentiates this from the "likeness" as the moral perfection attained through the right use of those faculties. According to this interpretation, whereas the creature's moral likeness to God may wax or wane, the presence of the image is indelible because it is identified with the given fact of humanity's intellectual nature and inherent capacity for free choice. In contrast to this, Gregory treats these terms in a more synonymous manner and, for this reason, he also suggests that the soul only truly *images* the nature of God "as long as it partakes in its

[67] Balás, 162.
[68] *Ibid*, 121-140.
[69] As Balás notes, "it is very questionable to affirm that man is, according to Gregory, 'by nature' image of God…" Balás, 146. Here, Balás is calling into question the remarks of Jean Daniélou: "L'homme 'à l'image', c'est pour Grégoire ce que l'homme est par nature (φύσιν)." *Platonisme et théologie mystique*, 49-50.

likeness to the archetype" (ἕως ἂν μετέχῃ τῆς πρὸς τὸ ἀρχέτυπον ὁμοιότητος).[70] "For an image is only properly (κυρίως) thus called," he writes, "if it maintains its likeness to the prototype, but if the imitation (ἡ μίμησις) is turned aside from what has been set before it, it [becomes] something else, and is no longer an image of that thing."[71] In other words, if the soul ceases to reflect the characteristic activities and perfections of divine power in its own life, then it ceases to function as the image and the image of God is no longer a visible reality in the soul. Should this happen, properly speaking, the human will have ceased to function as the image God.[72]

Gregory often uses the metaphor of a mirror when speaking of the nature of the soul and its relation to God, and part of the reason that he gravitates toward this metaphor is that it helps to illustrate this inherent mutability of the *imago Dei*.[73] In *On Virginity*, for instance, he says that human participation in God involves a participation in the beauty and purity of God and, to illustrate this, he likens the soul to a mirror that reflects back the light which shines upon its surface. As long as the mirror faces the light and as long as its surface stays clean, this dynamic of reflection continues. Should the surface become dirty or corroded, however, the mirror will cease to reflect the light.[74] This is

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[70] *Hom op* 12.9 (PG 44.161C)
[71] *Hom op* 16.3 (PG 44.180B)
[72] Most scholars hesitate to say that Gregory thinks that the image of God can be lost entirely in the human soul, preferring instead to speak of the image's corruption or its functional cessation. In his study of the *imago Dei* in Gregory's thought, for instance, Roger Leys raises the question of whether the presence of evil, or the loss of goodness, in the soul in fact "destroys" the image. Leys argues that Gregory does not think that the presence of sin or the absence of virtue destroys the image altogether, but he struggles to express precisely how it remains, suggesting that the image of God in such a soul is "oblitéré mais toujours present." *L'image*, 111-112. Warren Smith offers a similarly qualified judgment, observing that, on the one hand, Gregory does not think that the image is "lost" in a person if they perfectly fail to reflect the goodness of God since human finitude makes it impossible that any person could attain such a lofty goal, but on the other hand, that those who fail to actively participate in the virtues of God also "fail to reflect the nature of the divine archetype and so cease to be in the image of God." Smith, *Passion and Paradise*, 26.
[73] I have already drawn attention to this metaphor in note 30 above.
[74] *Virg* 11

precisely what happens when the soul falls away from its participation in God and becomes mired in sin. Its surface is covered over and it ceases to reflect the perfection of divine glory. When this occurs, Gregory goes on to suggest, the image of God is itself covered over and is no longer visible in the soul and thus, functionally, the soul ceases to serve its purpose of being an image.[75] And in several of his writings, Gregory acknowledges that this is no mere hypothetical possibility; it is in fact the reality in which humanity finds itself. In *On Virginity* he writes, "the godlike beauty of the soul made in imitation of the prototype was darkened like some iron by the rust of evil." Like a person who slips and falls into the mud, the human creature has fallen "into the mire of sin" and "no longer is the image of the incorruptible God."[76]

Significantly, this is no mere hypothetical for Gregory; it is an empirically verifiable description of a current reality. For when one observes humanity, one does not find a created reflection of the active power and goodness of God, but creatures who are prone to vice and whose lives are subject to suffering and death.[77] As he puts it in the *Catechetical Oration*, "For where is the soul's godlikeness (τὸ θεοειδές)? And where is the body's freedom from passion? Where is everlasting life? Human life is fleeting, overcome by passion, subject to death, and inclined to every form of suffering in both body and soul."[78] This, of course, seems to contradict Gregory's earlier depiction of humanity as an image of divine perfection, and he himself alerts the reader to that apparent tension. In the context immediately prior to the quotation above from the *Catechetical Oration*, he says, "But perhaps he who looks to the present condition of

[75] *Virg* 12.
[76] *Virg* 12
[77] E.g., *Hom op* 16.6, *Cat or* 5
[78] *Cat or* 5, trans. Srawley, 36 (modified)

things objects to our statements and thinks that he can prove our description to be false, because man is not now seen to possess those blessings, but is in an entirely contrary state."[79] And in response to this potential objection, Gregory once again draws his readers' attention to an element of dissimilarity in the image, but this time it is not the ontological dissimilarity between Creator and creature to which he appeals, but rather the dissimilarity between the created intent for the human creature and the current state of humanity. "The fact that human life is at present in an abnormal condition is no adequate proof that man never was in possession of what is good."[80] It may be true that the *imago Dei* is not visible in human experience, but that is no proof that this was never the case. For Gregory, it merely affirms his account of the image as a mutable reality, one that requires active participation in the perfections of God and, therefore, a reality that cannot be presumed as an inalienable fact of human nature.

It is possible, then, to speak of humanity's *unlikeness* to God in two ways. On the one hand, humanity differs from its archetype by sharing in the perfections of God in a derivative and mutable way, whereas to God these perfections are all infinitely and immutably present by nature. This is the "irreducible opposition" between God and creation that Hans Urs von Balthasar identified as being at the core of Gregory's thought and, as David Balás argued, it is the foundational premise informing Gregory's ontology of participation. In its current state of subjection to passion, suffering and death, however, humanity is unlike God not simply as creatures but as sinners. Sin is the opposite of the goodness of God and therefore the opposite of divine perfection, and by falling into a state of sin humans have necessarily ceased to manifest the active goodness

[79] *Cat or* 5, trans. Srawley, 36.
[80] *Cat or* 5, trans. Srawley, 37.

of God in their souls. The consequence of this, as Gregory makes clear, is that the mirror of the soul has been darkened and has ceased to reflect the light of divine power and beauty. Humanity has ceased to manifest the glory of God, and therefore ceased to fulfill its role as an active reflection of divine perfection.

Conclusion

When Gregory thought about the creation of humanity, and its nature and purpose and history in the created order, he thought primarily in terms of the biblical characterization of human beings as the "image of God." Gregory's anthropology, then, is a truly *theological* one in the fullest sense; to think about human nature is to think indirectly about the character and perfection of God, for humanity was created and fashioned for no other purpose than to serve as a living mirror of divine perfection. For this reason, it is entirely justifiable to pose the question which has animated this chapter: How does Gregory's account of human nature compare with the account of divine nature and divine perfection that he develops in his Nicene writings? After all, as I argued in the previous chapter, one of the central points of conflict between Gregory and Eunomius which informed their opposite responses to the claims of Nicaea revolved around their particular accounts of divine transcendence and the nature of divine perfection. Eunomius identified the perfection of God with the one quality that uniquely and categorically distinguished him from everything else: unbegottenness, absolute distinction from the world of created natures. The logic which led Eunomius to this particular understanding of divine perfection involved a particular understanding of divine simplicity as well as a firm commitment to the distinction of divine being (or

nature) from divine act. The activity of God may reveal much about the character of divine will, but it tells us nothing about the divine nature, for the perfection of God's nature is prior to and distinct from any will or activity.

As I argued in the previous chapter, drawing on the recent work of Khaled Anatolios and Michel Barnes, it was in response to this account of the divine nature that Gregory most fully articulated his own account of divine perfection as "self-communicating trinitarian goodness."[81] This notion of divine perfection was central to the defense of Nicaea, for whereas Eunomius's notion of ἀγεννησία excluded the Son from the Father's peculiar glory, Gregory's characterization of God in terms of active power and life-giving goodness enabled the humble narrative of the Son's economy to be appreciated as the most supreme expression of the divine nature, for it was in the life, death, and resurrection of the Son on behalf of wayward creatures that the φιλανθρωπία of God was most perfectly revealed. Furthermore, just as Eunomius's understanding of divine perfection depended upon a strict distinction between the being and activity of God, so Gregory's Nicene theology depended upon their unity. To describe not simply the will, but the very nature of God as "self-communicative goodness" was possible for Gregory only because he conceived of the nature and the active power of God as so closely united that he treated them as practically synonymous. The nature of God is that of an active, productive power, and the basis for our knowledge of the characteristics of that nature is its activity.

In this chapter, I have sought to trace the connections between Gregory's anthropology and his Nicene theology precisely by using these elements of Gregory's

[81] Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, 194.

account of divine perfection as a sort of lens to interpret his account of the *imago Dei*. For that reason, I have drawn attention to his characterization of human beings not simply as an image of God, but, more specifically, an image of divine power and goodness. Human beings were created to reflect the transcendent power of God in the created order and they were particularly designed with this purpose in mind by being given a rational soul, an "intellectual power" as Macrina calls it, which manifests its existence and nature through its governing and "life-giving activity" in the body. In order to function as the image of God, however, it is not sufficient that humanity should possess this intellectual power or its attendant capacities for rational thought and free choice; human beings must employ those capacities in ways that mirror the activity of God. This is why Gregory does not follow in the footsteps of Clement or Origen in distinguishing between the image and likeness of God as referring, respectively, to the soul's intellectual nature on the one hand and the virtuous employment of that intellect on the other. Instead, he treats these terms as largely synonymous and interprets the *imago Dei* motif as an inherently dynamic reality. Numerous previous scholars have observed this fact, but few have related it to Gregory's Nicene theology. And yet, the parallels between the two are quite clear. The God of Nicaea is a transcendent power that is eternally and inherently active; "the divine nature, insofar as it is the divine nature, is productive."[82] Likewise, the created image of God only truly reflects its creator and archetype when, as a causal power, it participates in the same productive activities that characterize the divine nature.

Just as the human creature reflects divine power by sharing in the characteristic activities of God, so it images divine goodness by participating in all of the various goods

[82] Barnes, *The Power of God*, 223-224.

that can be observed in that activity, and therefore Gregory frequently speaks of humanity as being a created participant in divine goodness. In and of itself, this establishes some parallels between Gregory's Nicene theology and his anthropology. But in this chapter, I have gestured toward a more significant connection by arguing that Gregory's reference to participation in the goodness of God in his discussion of the image of God reflects what Anatolios refers to as Gregory's Nicene, "christologically determined" conception of goodness. This conception of goodness is present in *On the Making of Humanity* when Gregory equates the goodness in which humanity participates as the mind, reason, and love that are manifested in Christ, and again also in chapter 16 when he describes that goodness with reference to the philanthropic love on display in humanity's creation. Yet it is perhaps even clearer when we consider his characterization of humanity as an image of divine power and goodness in the *Catechetical Oration* and place these remarks within the broader context of the work itself. The primary purpose of the *Oration*, I argued, is to provide a pro-Nicene defense of the economy of Christ's incarnation and death as a "fitting" display of the divine nature. And he does this by narrating the economy of divine action as a revelation of the essential goodness of divine power. This context is important to keep in mind when we read Gregory's discussion human creation in chapters five and six, wherein, once again, he defines humanity as an image of divine power and goodness. For within the context of the *Oration*, the character of divine power is described at length as the being of God in act, just as the goodness of God is that quality which is witnessed in the loving creation and even more loving restoration of humanity in the incarnation and death of Jesus Christ.

To be the image of God, for Gregory, is to be a living and dynamic reflection of the perfect, life-giving goodness of God, which is to say that humanity is not simply *imago Dei*, but is, more precisely, *imago Dei Nicaeni*. And yet, the image is not the archetype. The human creature is unlike its creator in the fact that its participation in the goodness of God is a contingent reality, dependent upon whether or not the soul's movements reflect the movements of the life of God. In other words, because Gregory understands the *imago Dei* in such dynamic categories and because he regards creaturely participation in divine perfection as a mutable reality, he also allows for the possibility that humanity's reflection of God may diminish and that the image may, in a sense, be lost. And as I noted in the final section of this chapter, this is no mere possibility for Gregory. To the contrary, following humanity's turn away from God toward sin, it has become a readily apparent fact that the perfection of divine life is no longer reflected in, and indeed stands in stark contrast to, the life of human creatures. As he puts it in the *Oration*, the human race now appears to be in a condition "entirely contrary to" its original design. Because of sin, the *imago Dei Nicaeni* has ceased to reflect the goodness and power of its perfect creator. It should come as no surprise, then, that Gregory thinks of salvation as the restoration of that image, and it is to that topic which I will turn in the next chapter.

Chapter 3
The Imitation of Christ as the Imitation of the Divine Nature
Nicene Theology and the Ascetical Life

The previous chapter explored the connections between Gregory of Nyssa's pro-Nicene doctrine of God and his theological anthropology. Through an analysis of several of his most important anthropological treatises, especially *On the Making of Humanity* and *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, I observed that Gregory interprets the biblical description of humanity as the image of God to mean that the human soul was created to be a dynamic reflection of the active power and life-giving goodness of God. It is in this way that humanity serves as a created mirror of divine perfection, by actively participating in the perfect goodness of God. This dynamic interpretation of the *imago Dei* motif is a direct reflection of some of the key elements of Gregory's doctrine of God that he develops in his debate with Eunomius of Cyzicus, discussed in chapter one. Yet, as I noted, the dynamism of this anthropology and Gregory's related emphasis on the mutability of human participation in God also entail that, insofar as humanity fails to actively participate in the goodness of God, it ceases to fulfill its created purpose and thereby ceases to fulfill its function as the image of God. And indeed, this is precisely what Gregory says has taken place through the advent of sin into human history, whereby humanity has turned away from the dynamic goodness of God and ceased to reflect the goodness of the divine nature in its own life.

That is where I ended the previous chapter, with the tragic diminishment of the image of God through the corrosive influence of sin. In the current chapter, I turn my attention from Gregory's anthropology to his soteriology, from the creation and corruption of the *imago Dei* to its restoration through the process of salvation. As with

my study of Gregory's anthropology, however, so here my intention is not to offer a systematic treatment of his understanding of salvation. My more focused interest here lies in the relationship between Gregory's account of the restoration of the image of God and his Nicene account of divine perfection. And the primary thesis which I will advance in both this chapter and in the following is that the pro-Nicene account of perfection that Gregory developed in his debate with Eunomius does indeed play a significant role in his account of human perfection as it emerges in his writings on salvation and the virtuous life. This influence can be observed in at least two ways. First, Gregory thinks of human salvation as a progressive and active participation in the perfections of God. The soul is restored and perfected by contemplating and participating in divine virtue and the goal of the virtuous life, therefore, is to become like God. This approach to the doctrine of salvation closely parallels Gregory's interpretation of human nature as *imago Dei* and, as I noted in my discussion of that theme in the previous chapter, also coheres with his positive pro-Nicene description of divine perfection as the active goodness and virtue of God.

Yet, the resonances between Gregory's soteriology and his Nicene doctrine of God extend further than this. For as I argued in the first chapter, what is perhaps most remarkable about Gregory's Nicene theology is not simply his equation of divine perfection with divine goodness, nor merely his epistemological argument that the character of the divine nature can be observed in the active manifestation of divine power, but in what these arguments enable him to unequivocally affirm: that the character of divine perfection is revealed in the person of Jesus Christ and in the gospel narrative of his humble descent. It is this, what Khaled Anatolios refers to as Gregory's "maximal

christological transformation" of the notion of divine transcendence and perfection, and the consequent emphasis on life-giving goodness and philanthropic love, that resides at the heart of Gregory's contribution to Nicene doctrine.[1] And it is this same insight that lies at the heart of Gregory's account of human salvation. Gregory's description of the transformed and perfected soul mirrors his christologically focused account of divine perfection. For the height of the soul's perfection consists, for Gregory, in its participation in the philanthropic and life-giving activity of God. And the pathway which leads toward this goal lies in the contemplation and imitation of Jesus Christ.

I will develop this thesis over the course of the next two chapters through an analysis of some of Gregory's most well-known ascetical and spiritual writings. In the present chapter, I will focus my attention on two texts that are frequently studied in tandem with one another: *On the Christian's Profession* and *On Perfection*.[2] These two texts present an optimal starting place for our discussion because, of all of Gregory's writings, they most directly address the two topics which I wish to pursue in this part of the study, namely, the nature of Christian perfection and the imitation of Christ. In these

[1] Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 187

[2] The dating of these two texts, like the dating of most of Gregory's works, is a matter of dispute. Both Jean Daniélou and Werner Jaeger argue for a late dating for both of these texts, with *De perfectione* following after and expanding upon Gregory's argument in *De professione Christiana*, and therefore see them as an expression of Gregory's most mature theology. Gerhard May, on the other hand, suggests a date of 370-378 for *De perfectione*. So, Daniélou, "La Chronologie des oeurvres de Grégoire de Nysse," *SP* 7 (1966), 168; Jaeger, *Two Rediscovered Works of Ancient Christian Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 1954), 27-30; and May, "Die Chronologie des Lebens und der Werke des Gregor von Nyssa," in Harl, ed., *Écriture et culture philosophique dans la pensée de Grégoire de Nysse* (Leiden: Brill, 1971), 56. Examples of studies which analyze these two texts together include Sr. Mary Keenan, "*De Professione Christiana* and *De Perfectione*: A Study of the Ascetical Doctrine of Saint Gregory of Nyssa," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 5 (1950), 169-207; Lucas F. Mateo-Seco, "Imitación y Seguimiento de Cristo en Gregorio de Nisa," *Scripta Theologica* 33:3 (2001), 601-622; and Rowan Greer, "The Promises and Baptism" in *One Path for All: Gregory of Nyssa on the Christian Life and Human Destiny* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015), 135-153. In what follows, I will be utilizing the recent translation of these two texts provided by Rowan Greer in *One Path for All*. References to the Greek text are taken from the editions found in *Gregorii Nysseni Opera* (GNO) vol. VIII, I (Leiden: Brill, 1952).

writings, Gregory's understanding of the goal of the ascetical life is clearly articulated: to become like God by actively participating in the perfections of the divine nature. Similarly, both of these texts make it equally clear that the means for attaining this goal consists in nothing other than in the contemplation and imitation of the perfections of Jesus Christ. These twin elements of Gregory's spiritual doctrine—participation in divine perfection and the contemplation and imitation of Christ—are also foundational to the texts that I will discuss in the following chapter, but I begin with *On Perfection* and *On the Christian's Profession* because their expression of these principles is so clear and because they pressure us to ask the questions that most need to be asked if we are to understand the importance of Nicene theology for Gregory's spiritual theology. What sorts of perfections ought a Christian to participate in to become like God? Which is simply another way of asking the question: What is the character of divine perfection? And, on what basis does the imitation of the *man* Jesus Christ amount to an imitation of the perfection of *God*? To answer these questions is to understand the theological logic that underlies Gregory's discussion of the ascetical life, and this logic is none other than the same elements of Gregory's theology that I highlighted in the first chapter, which is what makes the discussion of Christian perfection in these two texts an extension and expression of Nicene trinitarian theology.

Divine Perfection and Christlikeness in *On the Christian's Profession*

On the Christian's Profession is a letter written by Gregory to a certain Harmonius, who, we learn in the prologue, is a friend and former student of the Cappadocian bishop. Gregory begins the letter by apologizing for having neglected to

write for some time and therefore having failed to pay Harmonius the debt he owes, "since for Christians," he writes, "a promise (ἐπαγγελία) is a debt."[3] Although Gregory never specifies precisely what the content of his promise to Harmonius is, we can gather from the letter that it refers to Gregory's role as a teacher in the life of his former student. When they were together, Gregory reminds Harmonius, they engaged in frequent dialogues wherein Gregory would instruct his pupil and Harmonius would dutifully listen and probe his master with questions to test the truth of what Gregory said. The subject of these dialogues was always the same: virtue (ἀρετή) and training for godliness (γυμνάσιον πρὸς θεοσέβειαν). With this letter, Gregory tells Harmonius that he now purposes to fulfill the obligation he owes to his former pupil and continue the teaching that he can no longer do in person. And just as before, the subject matter of this lesson will be that of the virtuous life and its relation to the goal of godliness. In order to better organize this epistolary lesson, however, Gregory proposes to refine the scope of his subject by focusing his attention on a single question: "What is the Christian's profession?"

The word choice that Gregory uses in posing this question is itself significant for understanding the underlying theology of the treatise. The significance of the name "Christian" is a theme that Gregory will return to again and again, both in this treatise as well as in the lengthier one which I will turn to later in this chapter. To call oneself a "Christian" is not simply to identify with a particular religious group, but it is instead to bear the identity of Christ himself. For this reason, the name by which those who follow Christ are called contains within itself an implicit pledge to which they are bound. In the

[3] *Prof* (GNO VIII,I.129.6-7)

same way that Gregory's identity as a teacher in the life of Harmonius brought with it a promise (ἐπαγγελία) that obligated Gregory to fulfill a certain role, all those who bear the name Christian are obliged to a certain "profession" (ἐπάγγελμα). This vocabulary choice implies, as Rowan Greer notes, that "[w]hen people call themselves Christians, they are making both a profession of their faith and a promise."[4] And by framing the question this way, Gregory has already anticipated the two main themes of the treatise: what promise, or goal, defines the essence of what it means to be a Christian, and how this goal revolves around the particularity of the name and person of Christ.

So just what is the promise or goal that is essentially included in the identity of being a Christian? About midway through the letter, Gregory offers a definition of what he regards to be the essence of Christianity: "Christianity is the imitation of the divine nature" (χριστιανισμός ἐστι τῆς θείας φύσεως μίμησις).[5] Perhaps this definition will seem

[4] Greer, "The Promises and Baptism," 142. This emphasis on the moral and spiritual outworking of a Christian's given identity is one of the primary reasons that Greer makes an argument for reading both *On the Christian's Profession* and *On Perfection* within the context of baptismal liturgy and exhortation. Whether or not these two texts were in fact intended to serve as spiritual exhortations to the newly baptized—a fact that Greer himself readily admits cannot be known for certain—it is undeniably true that the appeal Gregory makes in this text to the Christian's call to live out her identity by imitating the one whose name she bears is a direct parallel to the argument that he makes regarding baptism in both *Catechetical Oration* and *On the Day of Lights*. In the former text, Gregory explains that baptism is a participation in the death and resurrection of Christ which must be followed by an imitation of Christ, the "Pioneer of our salvation" (ἀρχηγός τῆς σωτηρίας ἡμῶν) and that those who have become children of God through baptism must demonstrate the truth of this new identity by mirroring the characteristics of their Father in their own life through acts of charity and mercy that parallel the merciful acts of God. *Cat or.* 35, 40 (GNO III, IV.86-87, 104-105). Similarly, in the latter text, which is a homily on the baptism of Christ, Gregory argues that those who have been baptized have inherited a new identity and condition as the children of God which they must live out through a life conformed to the pattern of the goodness of God. Commenting on Matthew 5:44-45, for instance, he writes, "For he says that they have become sons [of God] whenever they conform their own thoughts to a likeness of the fatherly goodness (τῆς πατρικῆς ἀγαθότητος τὴν ὁμοίωσιν) by a philanthropic love (φιλανθρωπίᾳ) for their kindred." *In diem lum* (GNO IX.239). As I will demonstrate throughout the rest of this chapter, this argument—that the outworking of Christian identity consists in a mimetic participation in the virtuous perfections of God, specifically understood through an imitation of the philanthropic goodness of God expressed in the christological narrative—is at the heart of Gregory's understanding of Christian perfection and the ascetical life. And while its appearance in Gregory's explicit discussions of baptismal theology does not prove a baptismal context for *On the Christian's Profession* and *On Perfection*, it does demonstrate that the theology which they articulate is consistent with Gregory's thought elsewhere.

[5] *Prof* (GNO VIII,I.136.7-8).

strange to some, he tells Harmonius, as if it is too noble a goal or too lofty an ideal for human beings.[6] But if anyone should be tempted to reject the definition because they think it exceeds human nature, then, says Gregory, let them simply be reminded of what the scriptures say about the creation of humanity: "For the initial formation of humanity was according to the 'image and likeness of God.' This is how Moses gives a philosophical account of humanity, when he says: 'God made humanity, according to the image of God he made him.' And the profession of Christianity (ἡ τοῦ χριστιανισμοῦ ἐπαγγελία) is that humanity be brought back to its original good inheritance."[7]

That Gregory would justify his definition of Christianity with a reference to the creation of humanity should come as no surprise. In the previous chapter, I explored the development of this theme in some of Gregory's anthropological treatise and there emphasized the foundational importance of the Genesis designation of humanity as the *imago Dei*. And in my analysis of this anthropology, I noted how Gregory interpreted this designation to mean that human beings were created to be mirrors of divine

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[6] While Gregory suggests that some people may find his definition of Christianity oddly presumptuous, his equation of the life of virtue with an imitation of God was in fact not at all unique within the philosophical currents of his day. For as Werner Jaeger points out, this definition of Christianity parallels Plato's definition of virtue in the *Theaetetus* as "ὁμοίωσις θεῷ κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν" (*Theaetetus* 176b, cf. *Republic* 613a-b and *Phaedrus* 253a-b). Jaeger, *Early Christianity and Greek Paideia* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1961), 88-93. What is more, this understanding of virtue as imitation of or "likeness to" God was highly influential in the writings of later Platonist philosophers, such as Eudorus, Plutarch, Alcinous, and Plotinus. Nor was it limited to the Platonist school of philosophy. For as some scholars have recently demonstrated, this principle also played a significant role in the moral philosophy of Stoic and Epicurean thinkers as well. On the importance and influence of this theme in ancient philosophy, see Julia Annas, *Platonic Ethics, Old and New* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 52-71; John Dillon, "An Ethic for the Late Antique Sage," in *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 315-335); Michael Erler, "Epicurus as Deus Mortalis: *Homoiosis Theoi* and Epicurean Self-Cultivation," in *Traditions of Theology: Studies in Hellenistic Theology, Its Background and Aftermath*, eds. Dorothea Frede and André Laks (Boston: Brill, 2002), 159-182; David Sedley, "The Ideal of Godlikeness," in *Plato 2: Ethics, Politics, Religion, and the Soul*, ed. Gail Fine (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 309-328; George H. Van Kooten, *Paul's Anthropology in Context: The Image of God, Assimilation to God, and Tripartite Man in Ancient Judaism, Ancient Philosophy, and Early Christianity* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 124-169; and Christoph Jedan, "Metaphors of Closeness: Reflections on *Homoiôsis Theôi* in Ancient Philosophy and Beyond," *Numen* 60 (2013), 54-60.

[7] *Prof* (GNO VIII,I.136.13-19).

perfection, living and dynamic reflections of the characteristic perfections of divine life. I also observed how, in treatises such as *On the Making of Humanity* and *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, Gregory conceives of this reflection occurring by way of human participation in the perfect goodness and the active power of God, in the soul's imitation of divine activity. So, when he tells Harmonius that his definition of Christianity as the "imitation of the divine nature" has biblical warrant in Moses' depiction of human creation, we should anticipate him to mean, more specifically, active imitation of the perfections of God. And indeed, upon reading a little further, this is precisely what we find him to be saying. In a key passage of the letter, he writes,

> For when [Jesus] called the true Father the father of those who believed, he wanted also those born through him to be like the perfection of goods contemplated in him (ἐν ἐκείνῳ θεωρουμένην τῶν ἀγαθῶν τελειότητα). You will say to me, then, 'and how can it be that human lowliness should strain forward (ἐπεκτείνεσθαι) to the blessedness beheld in God, since immediately with the command its impossibility appears? For how may it be possible for the earthly to be made like the One in the heavens, since the very difference in nature demonstrates the imitation is unattainable? For it is just as impossible to make ourselves equal in appearance to heaven's greatness with the beautiful things in it as to liken humanity from earth to God in heaven.' But the explanation of this problem is clear, because the Gospel does not command the comparison of one nature to another (οὐ τῇ φύσει τὴν φύσιν), I mean the human with the divine. Instead, it commands the imitation in our way of life of the good activities (τὰς ἀγαθὰς ἐνεργείας), as far as that may be possible. What, then, are the activities on our part that are like God's activities? Our being made strangers to every wickedness as far as may be possible, to be pure from its

> defilements in deed and word and thought—this is truly the imitation of divine perfection (μίμησίς...τῆς θείας...τελειότητος) and of what has to do with God in heaven.[8]

This passage is, in many ways, the heart of Gregory's answer to the question that he posed at the beginning of the letter: What is the Christians profession? Whereas before he summarized the goal with his pithy definition of Christianity as the "imitation of the divine nature," he now expands upon the meaning of this definition by tying it in with Jesus' exhortation in Matthew 5 to "be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect." To imitate the divine nature, to fulfill the Christian's profession, then, means that a person comes to share in the "perfection of goods" that are contemplated in God. Or, as he phrases it at the end of this passage, to speak of imitating the divine nature is to speak of an "imitation of divine perfection." He specifies this even further when he clarifies that, by referring to an imitation of the divine nature, he is not attempting to collapse the distinction between the finite nature of the creature and the infinite nature of the Creator. Instead, the exhortation to share in the perfection of divine goods is an exhortation for the Christian to imitate the "good activities" of God in her life, which entails a complete alienation from all that is wicked and impure.[9] To be like God by sharing in the perfect

[8] *Prof* (GNO VIII,I.138.2-23), trans. Greer, 21 (modified).

[9] The reader might note that, in my commentary, I am shifting between the language of "sharing" in the perfections of God and that of "imitating" divine perfection. I do this intentionally. For, as Torstein Tollefsen rightly observes, the "ontological structure" of the imitation of God in Gregory's writings is indistinguishable from Gregory's theology of participation, so that when Gregory speaks of the imitation of God, he does not intend by this to imply merely an imitation of an external model, but a genuine participation in divine activity. And this is consistent throughout Gregory's work. As Tollefsen notes, "Gregory's works abound in the terminology of imitation. When he speaks of likeness and archetype, the likeness is an imitation or reflection of the archetype…I think this is just another way to express the central idea of participation. To imitate God is to participate in God. In principle, the logic is the same." Tollefsen, *Activity and Participation in Late Antique and Early Christian Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 163.

goods of the divine nature through the soul's activity—this, Gregory tells Harmonius, is what it means to be a Christian.

This description of the goal of the Christian life as becoming like God is certainly not unique to *On the Christian's Profession*. To the contrary, Gregory regularly describes Christian perfection as a process of becoming like God through the contemplation and active imitation of divine perfection. Indeed, this theme is so ubiquitous in Gregory's writings that it led Jules Gross to claim that "divinization as the goal of Christian salvation has thus become for Gregory of Nyssa the crux of all his theology."[10] Some scholars have questioned Gross's description of this motif in Gregory's work as "divinization", noting in response that Gregory rarely utilizes the technical terminology associated with the doctrine of deification, but few have questioned his identification of it as a crucial theme that pervades the whole of Gregory's writings on virtue and the spiritual life.[11] What is noteworthy about Gregory's definition of

[10] Gross, *The Divinization of the Christian According to the Greek Fathers*, trans. Paul Onica (Anaheim, CA: A&C Press, 2002), 188.

[11] Ekkhard Mühlenberg has made the most extended argument against labeling Gregory's soteriology as "deification", judging the doctrine to be at fundamental odds with Gregory's concern to distinguish between a finite creation and the infinite Creator. Cf. Mühlenberg, *Die Unendlichkeit Gottes bei Gregor von Nyssa* (Göttingen, 1966). The rarity of technical deification terminology in Gregory's writings is a fact that has been widely commented upon. See, e.g., Irénée Dalmais, "Divinisation," in *Dictionnaire de spiritualité, ascétique et mystique*, vol. 3 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1954), 1382-1383, David Balás, *ΜΕΤΟΥΣΙΑ ΘΕΟΥ*, 159, and *idem*, "Deification," *The Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa*, 210-213. For a lexical study of Gregory's preferred language on this topic, see Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 226-229. And yet, despite this relative lack of deification terminology, many scholars have followed the lead of Gross and have continued to use the label of "deification" in discussing Gregory's soteriology. See, e.g., Jaroslav Pelikan, *Christianity and Classical Culture: The Metamorphosis of Natural Theology in the Christian Encounter with Hellenism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 295, 317-318; Anthony Meredith, *The Cappadocians* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1995), 82-83; Lewis Ayres, "Deification and the Dynamics of Nicene Theology: The Contribution of Gregory of Nyssa," *SVTQ* 49:4 (2005), 375-394; J. Warren Smith, *Passion and Paradise*, 104, 123, 151; John Anthony McGuckin, "The Strategic Adaptation of Deification in the Cappadocians," in *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Tradition*, eds. Michael Christensen and Jeffrey Wittung (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 95-114; and Elena Ene D-Vasilescu, "'Love Never Fails': Gregory of Nyssa on Theôsis," in *Visions of God and Ideas on Deification in Patristic Thought*, eds. Mark Edwards and Elena Ene D-Vasilescu (London: Routledge, 2017), 59-77.

Christianity in this text, however, is the clear Nicene logic upon which it is based. In the above passage, Gregory equates the imitation of the divine nature with (a) an imitation of the "perfection of goods" that are contemplated in God and (b) an imitation of the "good activities" of divine life. Eunomius would have objected to equating the "perfection of goods" in God and the "good activities" of God with the divine nature itself, yet Gregory shows no hesitation in making this equivalence, nor does he feel the need to make any qualifications about doing so. To be sure, Gregory's purpose in this text is not to address his controversy with Eunomius, nor does he intend this passage to serve in any way as a concise theological commentary on the relationship between the activity, goods, and perfection of the divine nature. My reason for drawing attention to the equivalence with which Gregory treats those terms here is not to propose that we should read *On the Christian's Profession* as an exposition of Gregory's Nicene theology. What I do propose, however, is that the logic of Gregory's argument in this text draws upon some of the key aspects of the theology of divine perfection that he develops in response to Eunomius. We should take Gregory here at his word when he treats the goods and activities of God as synonymous with the perfection of the divine nature, and we should do so because it perfectly coheres with the Nicene theology that he articulates elsewhere.

To fully appreciate the relationship between Gregory's treatment of the virtuous life in this text and his Nicene theology, however, it is necessary to pay attention to a second aspect of the argument that Gregory uses to arrive at his definition of Christianity: the significance of the person and name of Jesus Christ. As I noted above, Gregory begins his letter to Harmonius by drawing a connection between the name "Christian" and the professed calling (ἐπάγγελμα) that such a name implies. The goal of the life of

virtue is to live into that identity, to become in truth and not only in appearance what the name "Christian" indicates. To illustrate the principle that he has in mind, Gregory appeals to a well-known story which the satirist Lucian recounts in two of his works.[12] The story tells of a monkey who was dressed up in a costume and mask resembling a human person and then incentivized to perform a dance routine for audiences. Because of this disguise, and because of its movements, the monkey could have been mistaken for an actual human being. One day, however, a man threw some almonds onto the stage in front of the monkey, whose true animal nature was immediately revealed when he abandoned his dance and tore off the mask in order to consume the nuts. What this story illustrates, Gregory tells Harmonius, is that those who call themselves Christians and yet fail to "truly" conform their lives to the calling that their name implies "will be easily exposed" as frauds, who, like a costumed monkey, "only act the part of Christianity by a show of imitation (διὰ μιμήσεως ἐσχηματισμένης)."[13] To truly be a Christian, one must "become what the name means" by becoming like Christ.

It is this reasoning that leads Gregory to his definition of Christianity as an "imitation of the divine nature." Yet, the logic of this argument raises a significant theological question. After all, it is one thing to say that a Christian ought to become like Jesus Christ; it is another to equate this with the imitation of the divine nature. By what justification are these two considered equivalent? Perhaps this may not seem like much of a conundrum given what we already know of Gregory's theological commitments, but

[12] Lucian, *Piscator* 36, *Apology* 5. The two versions of this story differ in some of their details and the version that Gregory recounts seems to blend these differences into a single account. Gregory simply refers to it as a story commonly told in pagan circles, however, and there is no evidence that his knowledge of it comes from a familiarity with Lucian's own writing.
[13] *Prof* (GNO VIII, I.133.11-13)

it is in fact a question that has continued to puzzle some of the more astute interpreters of his work. For instance, in a recent study of this text, Rowan Greer comments, "In [this letter] the Christian profession has to do with what the name 'Christ' means, and I have assumed that the allusion is to the baptismal confession of Christ. But Gregory concludes that 'Christianity is the imitation of the divine nature.' It is by no means clear how we are to correlate these two themes."[14] Greer goes on to clarify that his puzzlement over the correlation of these two themes arises from his conviction that, when Gregory discusses the name and imitation of Christ, he must be exhorting his readers to "imitate the human Christ" by modeling themselves upon his example in a way that correlates to their own "human experience." All this emphasis on the humanity of Christ, however, seems at odds with the notion of imitating divinity itself, which leads Greer to wonder whether "the imitation of Christ has replaced that of the divine nature." Ultimately, Greer dismisses this strict dichotomy between imitation of the human Christ and imitation of divinity and thinks that the answer must lie in a notion that the imitation of Christ is "somehow" an imitation of the divine nature, though Greer himself does not explain precisely what logic may be at work in this implication.[15]

A similarly puzzled evaluation can be found in Johannes Zachhuber's analysis of Gregory's soteriology in his book, *Human Nature in Gregory of Nyssa: Philosophical Background and Theological Significance*. As the title suggests, Zachhuber's interest lies principally in the theme of human nature in Gregory's work. More specifically, he focuses on the universality of human nature and how this motif, which is present in Gregory's discussion of the creation of humanity, influences his understanding of

[14] Greer, "The Promises and Baptism," 143-144.
[15] *Ibid*, 144-145.

soteriology and eschatology. In his discussion of Gregory's soteriology, Zachhuber highlights what he thinks are two distinct strands of thought: a "physical" strand wherein universal human nature is itself redeemed through Christ's incarnation and resurrection, and a "humanistic" strand in which the notion of a universal human nature plays no role whatsoever.[16] It is this second, "humanistic" strand which Zachhuber identifies with the motif that Gregory emphasizes in his letter to Harmonius, namely, the imitation of Christ. And like Greer, Zachhuber understands Gregory's references to the imitation of Christ to refer specifically to the humanity of Jesus and questions how this imitation is supposed to relate to the savior's divine nature. "With regard to the underlying Christology it appears that Gregory's soteriology in this and similar passages is primarily based on the assumption of the savior's perfect humanity. His divinity, on the other hand, does not seem to be of crucial importance."[17] Zachhuber does go on to concede that, for Gregory, the imitation of Christ must "eventually" or "ultimately" lead to the imitation of God, yet he then proceeds to argue that this means nothing more than that it is "Christ's (the man's) imitation of God" that Christians are called to imitate. What is more, because of this emphasis on the imitation of the *human* Christ, Zachhuber argues that Gregory's Christology is "divisive" and "a real Incarnation is not achieved."[18]

Both of these scholars interpret Gregory's focus on Jesus Christ as a focus on what Zachhuber refers to as the "perfect humanity" of Christ and on Jesus as a distinctly human model for imitation and both, therefore, regard the equivalence that Gregory draws between this and his definition of Christianity as "imitation of the divine nature" as

[16] Zachhuber, *Human Nature in Gregory of Nyssa* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 187-200.
[17] *Ibid*, 192.
[18] *Ibid*, 192-193.

rather confusing and as something that begs for further clarification. To be sure, neither of them deny that some connection between the imitation of Christ and the imitation of God exists. Greer says that the imitation of the human Christ must "somehow" correlate to an imitation of divinity and Zachhuber, likewise, confesses that Gregory at least presumes that the former "eventually" leads to the latter, but only by way of implication, since what Christians imitate is only the human Jesus' imitation of God. At the same time, both Greer and Zachhuber struggle to justify the seamless transition that Gregory seems to make between speaking of becoming like Christ and imitating the divine nature.[19] And the reason that they give for their puzzlement is similar. Both of them assume that when Gregory lifts up Jesus Christ as the model for the virtuous life, what he has principally in mind is the *humanity* of Jesus as somehow distinct from his *divinity*.[20] In Zachhuber's judgment, in fact, the exhortation to imitate Christ rests on a "divisive" Christology which conceives of Jesus' humanity as absolutely distinct from his divinity.[21]

It is not my intention here to address directly the question of how Gregory understands the human and divine natures in Christ to relate, or whether his Christology

[19] For an alternative account that emphasizes the seamless equivalence between the imitation of Christ and imitation of the divine nature in Nyssa's thought, see Lucas F. Mateo-Seco, "Imitación y Seguimiento de Cristo en Gregorio de Nisa." In a discussion of this theme in *On the Christian's Profession*, Mateo-Seco observes, "Esta insistencia en la union con la divinidad como ideal místico ha podido solapar más de una vez su claro cristocentrismo. De hecho ambas perspectivas—cristocentrismo y teocentrismo—coinciden perfectamente en Gregorio…Gregorio dedica también unos párrafos a mostrar que el cristianismo es la imitación de la naturaleza divina, haciendo patente con esto que, para él, imitar a Cristo e imitar la naturaleza divina son afirmaciones equivalentes." 610-611. Hans Boersma similarly argues against the notion that Gregory understands the imitation of Christ simply to be a matter of following "the example of Jesus' humanity," and notes instead that "For Nyssen, imitation of Christ is imitation of his divine virtues and is thus also imitation of and a participation in the life of God." Boersma, *Embodiment and Virtue*, 224-225.

[20] It should be pointed out, however, that Gregory himself does not appeal to this distinction between Christ's humanity and divinity in *On the Christian's Profession*.

[21] Greer's reading of Gregory's Christology is more nuanced than this, as illustrated by his study of the theme in *Broken Lights and Mended Lives*, 54-60.

is more "unitive" or more "divisive".[22] Instead, I would like to suggest that the puzzlement expressed by both Greer and Zachhuber over Gregory's equation of imitation of Christ with imitation of the divine nature is best resolved by paying attention to how the letter to Harmonius draws upon the logic of his Nicene theology. And so, let me now turn once again to the text of the letter itself. After introducing the subject of the letter and warning Harmonius of the possibility that someone who bears the name "Christian" may in fact deny its reality through vicious behavior, Gregory turns his attention to the particularity of the name itself, and his first observation about the name is a semantic one: the word "Christ" means king, and when Scripture uses the name, it uses it to express the concept of "royal dignity" (τὴν βασιλικὴν ἀξίαν). He continues:

> Nevertheless, since, as scripture says, divinity is ineffable and incomprehensible, transcending every comprehending thought, necessarily the prophets and apostles, inspired by the Holy Spirit, guide us to an understanding of the incorruptible nature (ἐπὶ τὴν σύνεσιν τῆς ἀφθάρτου φύσεως) by many names and concepts (πολλοῖς ὀνόμασι τε

[22] Brian Daley offers a brief overview of the twentieth century debates over Gregory's Christology in "Divine Transcendence and Human Transformation: Gregory of Nyssa's Anti-Apollinarian Christology," *Modern Theology* 18:4 (October, 2002), 497-498. As Daley observes in that article, however, the question of whether Gregory embraces a more unitive or divisive Christology—a question that is nearly always posed according to the later standards of Chalcedon—tends to distort our understanding of Gregory's Christology more than it illumines it. To properly appreciate Gregory's understanding of Christ, according to Daley, we must pay attention to the way in which it informs Gregory's soteriological emphasis on human transformation, particularly within Gregory's spiritual and ascetical writings. For as Daley points out, what is significant in Gregory's account of Jesus Christ is not the fundamental distinction or incompatability between humanity and divinity, but the transformation of the humanity of Christ to take on the characteristics of his divinity. Daley has since repeated this sympathetic reading of Gregory in a later article: "'Heavenly Man' and 'Eternal Christ': Apollinarius and Gregory of Nyssa on the Personal Identity of the Savior," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 10:4 (Winter, 2002), 469-488. Not all have been persuaded by this interpretation, however. For a more negative analysis of Gregory as a theologian whose thought is fundamentally and hopelessly compromised by a concern to distinguish the humanity and divinity of Christ that prevents him from recognizing the savior's unity, see Christopher Beeley, *The Unity of Christ: Continuity and Conflict in Patristic Tradition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), 199-221.

καὶ νοήμασιν). This is because one of them sets us straight with respect to some other one of the concepts befitting God. As a result, authority over all things is hinted at by the name 'kingship' (τῷ τῆς βασιλείας ὀνόματι), while purity and freedom from all passion and all evil are specified by the names of virtue, each one both thought and spoken in a higher sense.[23]

Note the first sentence of this quotation. It is nearly identical to the account of divine naming that Gregory provides in book 2 of *Against Eunomius* when he is describing how, despite the ultimate incomprehensibility of the divine essence, humans come to have a positive understanding of the divine nature. I have already analyzed this aspect of Gregory's pro-Nicene argument in an earlier chapter, and will not rehearse that analysis here. In order to note the similarities between that text and this one, however, I would like to recall one key passage where Gregory describes this phenomenon of how to rightly know and speak of God:

> When God was yet unknown (ἀγνοούμενον) to the human race because of the idolatrous error (τὰ εἴδωλα πλάνην) which then prevailed, those saints made him manifest and known to men, both by the miracles (θαυμάτων) which are revealed in the works done by him, and from the titles (ὀνομάτων) by which the various aspects of divine power are perceived. Thus they are guides towards the understanding of the divine nature (σύνεσιν τῆς θείας φύσεως) by making known to mankind merely the grandeur of their thoughts about God.[24]

[23] *Prof* (GNO VIII,I.134.6-17), trans. Greer, 19.
[24] *CE* 2.102, trans. Hall, 82, modified.

The similarities between this passage and the first sentence of the quotation from *On the Christian's Profession* are numerous. While the former does not mention the context of idolatry, it does refer to the saints who spoke of God (prophets and apostles) and it says that the names which they used to describe God in the light of divine activity bring "understanding" (σύνεσις) of the divine nature. But why should this matter? After all, it is not surprising that Gregory would repeat the same argument regarding human knowledge and description of God. And yet, even though the consistency may not surprise us, the strong similarity in both logic and vocabulary between these two passages is significant for our understanding of how Gregory understands the nature and function of the name "Christ" in his letter to Harmonius. For, once we recognize the similarities between these two, it is clear that Gregory's interpretation of Christ to mean "kingship" suggests that his primary concern is not specifically with the humanity of Christ, but with the function of the title "Christ" as one of the titles used to describe the divine nature itself. To reflect on the name of Christ, then, is the means by which we may gain understanding of the divine nature itself.

This being the case, the puzzlement expressed by Greer and Zachhuber over the equivalence that Gregory appears to make between the imitation of the human Christ and the imitation of divine perfection is unwarranted. When Gregory highlights Christ as the model for human imitation and equates this with the imitation of the divine nature, he is not suggesting that imitation of a perfect human nature corresponds "ultimately" or "somehow" to that of divine perfection, while being in reality distinct from divinity itself. Gregory's thought is bolder than this. He is suggesting that the name "Christ" and all of the other titles associated with that name are not simply descriptions of the perfect

humanity of the incarnate Lord, but are in fact revelatory titles describing various aspects of the perfection of God's own nature. Those who are called to become like God must imitate Christ because Christ himself is the perfect manifestation of divine perfection and, therefore, the names that are given to him are not simply descriptors of his humanity. To the contrary, the titles of Christ are themselves the means by which we come to understand and thereby imitate the divine nature.

This point becomes even clearer if we continue reading what Gregory has to say next, wherein he does not confine his commentary on Christ to that one name in particular, but expands his focus to include a variety of scriptural titles used for Christ: righteousness, wisdom, power, goodness, life, salvation, incorruption, immutability, and changelessness. "All these Christ both is and is called."[25] And it is through the recognition of these multiple titles, he continues, that we can come to a proper understanding of the nature of Christianity and the virtuous life.

> For if we, united to him by faith in him, are named together with him who transcends the names which interpret the incorruptible nature (τῷ ὑπερέχοντι τῶν τῆς ἀφθάρτου φύσεως ἑρμηνευτικῶν ὀνομάτων), it is entirely necessary that as many concepts concerning that incorruptible nature as are contemplated with the name should also, as a consequence, become true of us who share his name. For just as we have obtained the appellation of Christian by participating in Christ, so too it is fitting that in conformity we should be drawn in to sharing all the lofty names (τῶν ὑψηλῶν ὀνομάτων)…For neither can it be that Christ is not righteousness and purity and truth and estrangement from all evil, nor can it be that a Christian, at least one truly a Christian (τόν γε ἀληθῶς Χριστιανόν),

[25] *Prof* (GNO VIII,I.134.22-135.1)

> should fail to display in himself his share (τὴν κοινωνίαν) also in those names. Thus, just as someone has interpreted the meaning of Christianity by giving a definition (ὅρῳ), we shall say this, Christianity is the imitation of the divine nature.[26]

While this paragraph is intended to provide an explanation to Harmonius for why conformity to Christ is at the heart of what it means to be a Christian, it also offers a wonderfully succinct summary of what I have been referring to as Gregory's Nicene theology of divine perfection. Note, for instance, the equivalence that exists between the titles given to Christ and the attributes of the divine nature. Gregory says, on the one hand, that Christ "transcends" these various titles, and yet he also describes them as names which "interpret the incorruptible nature (τῆς ἀφθάρτου φύσεως)." Similarly, he suggests that whenever these names are contemplated, one is simultaneously contemplating "concepts" (νοήματα) about the nature of God. This conflation of christological titles and divine attributes is, as I have already noted, one of the primary strategies that Gregory uses in his reconfiguration of divine perfection around the person and work of Jesus Christ. And it is for this reason that Gregory sees no tension whatsoever in saying that whoever imitates Christ by conforming herself to his various titles—kingship, righteousness, wisdom, power, goodness, life, salvation, etc.—has fulfilled the goal of Christianity and the virtuous life, namely, imitating the perfection of God.

Once again, my intention in drawing attention to the parallels that exist between Gregory's discussion of christological titles in this letter and his similar interpretation of

[26] *Prof* (GNO VIII,I.135.12-136.8), trans. Greer, 19-20 (modified).

titles for divine perfection in *Against Eunomius* is not to suggest that Gregory intends *On the Christian's Profession* to serve as an apologetic treatise on trinitarian theology. The thesis which I wish to advance is simply that this text coheres with and is dependent upon the fundamental principles of Nicene theology that Gregory articulates in his debate with Eunomius. More specifically, I contend that the equivalence that Gregory seems to assume in speaking of the imitation of the divine nature and the imitation of Christ only makes sense if one assumes the basic premise of Nicene doctrine—that the perfection of the Father is shared by and is beheld in the person of the Son.[27] What is more, Gregory's discussion of christological titles as names that "interpret the incorruptible nature" is a mark of clear continuity with the way that he employs these same titles in *Against Eunomius* as a positive biblical witness to the nature of God. And the upshot of Gregory's advice to Harmonius is unmistakable. The virtuous life consists in the imitation of Christ, in conforming oneself to all of the distinct virtues that are attested to in the biblical titles of Christ, and only by doing this can one attain to the goal of Christian virtue, which is to become like God.

The Imitation of Christ in *On Perfection*

The treatise *On Perfection* shares many similarities with *On the Christian's Profession*. For instance, much like *On the Christian's Profession*, this text is focused on the subject of perfection and the virtuous life and it also takes the form of a letter, albeit

[27] I am not the only one who has drawn attention to the fundamentally Nicene convictions that undergird the ascetical theology of *On the Christian's Profession*. Lucas Mateo-Seco has likewise argued that Gregory's conflation of the imitation of Christ and the imitation of God is dependent upon a prior conviction regarding the character of the Son's divinity. "Sólo si Jesús es Dios, se le puede entregar el amor supremo; sólo así se puede afirmar que la perfección cristiana consiste en la imitación de Jesús al mismo tiempo que se señala que la perfección cristiana no es otra cosa que la imitación de Dios." Mateo-Seco, "Imitación y Seguimiento de Cristo en Gregorio de Nisa," 613.

this time addressed to a certain monk named Olympius.[28] Yet, these parallels are not unique similarities between these two texts; they can also be found in several of Gregory's other texts.[29] The more striking similarity between this text and the previous, and the reason that they are so often studied and discussed in tandem with one another, comes in the way that Gregory frames his approach to the topic of the virtuous life in *On Perfection*. Mirroring the approach that he modeled in the letter to Harmonius, Gregory focuses on how his addressee's identity as a "Christian" ought to serve as the foundation for his pursuit of the life of virtue. And, using the same logic that he employed in *On the Christian's Profession*, Gregory tells Olympius that whoever has been "granted a share in the name [of Christ]" (τὴν κοινωνίαν τοῦ ὀνόματος) must live into this new identity by conforming their life to the character of the one whose name they bear so that they might be Christian not in name only, but in truth. For "it is fitting," he writes, "that the confirmation of all the goods discerned in Christ be expressed by the characteristic marks of [the Christian's] way of life. And the characteristic marks of one who is really a Christian (τοῦ ὄντως Χριστιανοῦ) are all those whatsoever that we conceive concerning Christ."[30] And because of this, Gregory reasons, the first step along the path to true virtue is to understand the nature of Christ, for it is only in learning what Christ is like that those

[28] Little is known about this monk, although it is not the only time that he appears as the recipient of one of Gregory's letters (the *Life of Macrina* is also composed as a letter to Olympius, who is most likely the same person. The length has led some to question whether Gregory ever intended for this to be a personal letter, or whether he simply utilized a basic epistolary format to construct a more formal treatise. For a fuller discussion of this question of genre classification, see Andrew Radde-Gallwitz, "The Letter Collection of Gregory of Nyssa," *Late Antique Letter Collections: A Critical Introduction and Reference Guide*, eds. Cristiana Sogno, Bradley Storin, and Edward J. Watts (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017), 102-112.
[29] E.g., *De virginitate* and *De vita Moysis*
[30] *Perf* (GNO VIII, I.178.9-12), trans. Greer, 27.

who are named after Christ can learn what sort of virtue they ought to display in their own life.

As a guide in this task of understanding, Gregory looks to the example of the apostle Paul, and the reasoning that he gives for this choice is that Paul excelled in the two tasks that are involved in the Christian's pursuit of perfection: understanding the nature of Christ, and enacting what is understood in one's own life through imitation. "For [Paul] most of all both accurately understood what Christ is (τί ἐστιν ὁ Χριστὸς κατενόησε) and led the way by what he did (δι' ὧν ἐποίησεν) to the sort of character one named by Christ ought to have."[31] As evidence of this latter claim, Gregory cites the testimony of Paul himself in Galatians 2:20 and 2 Corinthians 13:3, where the apostle refers to Christ "living" and "speaking" in him, and the interpretation Gregory gives to these verses is instructive. He suggests that Paul's identification of Christ as the agent of his speech and life is a result of the apostle's recognition of the "goods" which were realized in his own life when his soul was transformed "through a most accurate imitation" (διὰ τῆς ἀκριβεστάτης μιμήσεως) of Jesus. In other words, when Paul says that Christ was living and speaking in him, he was testifying to the fact that, through imitation, his soul had come to be characterized by the same goodness that he saw in Christ and that this goodness was being manifested through his own life and speech. Yet Paul's value as a guide to the life of virtue lies not only in the faithfulness of his imitation, but in what enabled that imitation: the clarity of his understanding of Christ. After all, in order to conform to the name of Christ, one must first understand what is being signified by that name, or as Gregory puts it, "what Christ is." And what sets Paul

[31] *Perf* (GNO VIII, I.175.2-4), trans. Greer, 25.

apart, what makes him such an ideal guide for the person who wishes to become virtuous, is not only that he understood what Christ is, but that he also made his understanding known to others. As evidence for this latter point, Gregory lists thirty-two different titles which he has culled from Paul's letters, from "power of God" and "wisdom of God" to "peace" and "paschal lamb" and "spiritual food and drink." Each of these different titles, Gregory observes, grant only a partial understanding of the nature of Christ. Taken together, however, they "suggest for us some impression of what the name that accords with Christ means" and enable our imitation of Christ by providing distinct "characteristic marks" that should characterize the life of virtue. And the more that we receive what these names have to tell us about Christ into our souls, he goes on, the more they reveal to us the nature of his "ineffable greatness" (ἀφράστου μεγαλειότητος).[32]

The rest of this treatise is taken up with an exposition of each of these thirty-two titles and what each of them, in its own way, contributes to the two necessary requirements for attaining perfection in the virtuous life: a greater understanding of the nature of Christ and a faithful imitation of him. In what follows, I will focus on some of the particular titles that Gregory treats and what we can learn from his interpretation of them. Before doing so, however, I would like to begin by making a few observations regarding his general approach to these titles and the parallels between this approach and his Nicene theology. To begin with, it is worth noting the relationship between these christological titles and the economic activity of the Son. Recall that, in *Against Eunomius*, Gregory developed a theory of divine names as the product of *a posteriori* reflection on divine activity and in *On the Christian's Profession* he described imitation

[32] *Perf* (GNO VIII, I.175.14-176.17)

of divine perfection as imitation of the "good activities" of God. In the same way, in this text Gregory interprets many of these Pauline titles as descriptive references that arise from particular aspects of the Son's economic activity. In order to explain what Paul means by referring to Christ as "peace," for instance, Gregory refers to Ephesians 2:14-16, where the apostle discusses how Christ brought an end to the division of Jews and Gentiles by breaking down the "dividing wall" of hostility between them. In order to become like Christ, he tells Olympius, one must likewise become a peacemaker, bringing inner peace to the soul's battle between "flesh" and "spirit" and leading others to a state of peace and reconciliation. "Christ has put to death hostility (ἔχθραν ἀπέκτεινε), as the apostle says…let us also kill hostility (τὴν ἔχθραν νεκοποιήσωμεν) among ourselves, so that what we believe to be in him, this we may also achieve in our life."[33] What the title "peace" discloses about Christ, then, is what Gregory has already referred to as one of Christ's "characteristic marks," a distinctive perfection, as it were. And the recognition and description of this perfection is inherently tied to a particular aspect of the Son's economic activity. This same pattern repeats itself in Gregory's treatment of other titles such as power, wisdom, paschal lamb, high priest, atonement, and sanctification. In each case, Gregory interprets the meaning of the title with reference to a specific aspect of the economic activity of the Son and then exhorts Olympius to take on this characteristic through an imitation of the specified activity in his own life.

Perhaps the most interesting example of this exhortation to the imitation of the Son's economic activity comes in Gregory's discussion of the "humility" (ταπεινοφροσύνη) and "long-suffering" (μακροθυμία) of the incarnate Christ. Citing

[33] *Perf* (GNO VIII, I.183.22-184.6), trans. Greer, 30.

Matthew 11:29—"Learn from me that I am meek and humble in heart"—Gregory argues that, just as Christ both praised and embodied the virtue of humility in his earthly life, so too must those who wish to become perfect in the virtuous life adopt this trait of humility in their own life.[34] Likewise, in the time of his suffering Christ willingly endured the violence and mockery of the soldiers without retaliation. "He endures all these things in meekness and forbearance (ἐν πραότητι καὶ μακροθυμίᾳ)" and in so doing "gives the law of forbearance to your life through his own."[35] In so far as humility, meekness, and forbearance indicate distinct attributes of Christ that relate to specific aspects of his incarnate life, there is nothing particularly surprising in Gregory's inclusion of them, except as another example of his strategy of relating Pauline titles to distinct elements of Christ's activity. On the other hand, unlike many other christological titles, such as power, wisdom, and goodness, these virtues are not attributes typically associated with divine perfection. To the contrary, the meekness and humility of the incarnate Christ are precisely the sorts of attributes that anti-Nicene theologians regularly appealed to as evidence of the Son's essential inferiority to the Father.[36] It is striking, therefore, that Gregory includes these examples of the Son's incarnate life within his discussion of the imitable perfections of Christ. And his inclusion of them raises a question: does Gregory regard the humility and meekness and forbearance of Christ as indicative of some aspect

[34] *Perf* (GNO VIII, I.196-197)
[35] *Perf* (GNO VIII, I.197.13-14), trans. Greer, 36.
[36] Alexander of Alexandria observed this argumentative strategy as a common feature even in the early stages of the debate: "Concerning their judgment, let it be referred to your examination. They keep in their memory statements about the Savior's sufferings, humblings, emptying, and so-called poverty, which by addition the Savior accepted on our account. They quote these as evidence for impugning his essential divinity." Alexander, "Letter to Alexander of Thessalonica," in *The Trinitarian Controversy*, trans. William G. Rusch (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 37. For a discussion of the role that these and other instances of Christ's humility and suffering played in the rationale of Arianism, see R.P.C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*, 106-109.

of the perfection of Christ's divinity, or are they instead merely qualities of Christ's humanity?[37]

I have already raised this question above when I noted that both Johannes Zachhuber and Rowan Greer interpret Gregory's exhortation to imitate Christ as an imitation of the humanity of Christ in distinction from and over against his divinity. Within the context of *On the Christian's Profession*, I argued that such a distinction was both foreign to the text itself and, ultimately, a distortion of the Nicene logic it expressed. In the case of *On Perfection*, I would argue much the same. While the distinction between the humanity and divinity of Christ is not a concept unknown to Gregory, and indeed is one that he himself will appeal to on certain occasions, nowhere in this text does he make reference to such a distinction.[38] To the contrary, he treats all of the titles as equally indicative of aspects of Christ's perfection that together provide insight into how one might attain the goal of the virtuous life, which is nothing less than a "participation in [Christ's] divinity" (μετουσία τῆς θεότητος).[39] To suggest that some titles refer to an

[37] Much as in the arguments of Greer and Zachhuber discussed above, this distinction between divine and human natures is one that is regularly made in analyses of *On Perfection*. Sr. Mary Keenan, for instance, suggests that the "greater number" of the titles which Gregory surveys in *On Perfection* refer to Christ's divinity, but she does not identify which titles she has in mind, nor which titles would belong to the smaller number that presumably refer to his humanity. Cf. Keenan, "*De Professione Christiana* and *De Perfetione*," 187. Lucas Mateo-Seco similarly observes that the list of Pauline titles that Gregory cites amount to a synthesis of "todas de las perfecciones de Cristo" and that in this list "se incluyen incluso títulos que se pueden aplicar a su Divinidad." Of course, to say that the list "*even* includes" (incluyen *incluso*) titles which can be applied to Christ's divinity implies that many of the titles cannot be so applied, but Mateo-Seco nowhere explains why he thinks that some titles should be restricted to Christ's humanity or which of the various perfections "may be applied to [Christ's] divinity." Mateo-Seco, "Imitación y Seguimiento de Cristo en Gregorio de Nisena," 607.

[38] For an example of where Gregory does appeal to such a distinction, see *Contra Eunomium* 3.1.52-54. The only distinction that Gregory makes in *On Perfection* is that between those titles which are meant to be *imitated* and those which are meant to be *worshipped* (see GNO VIII, I.178.13-17). He does not elaborate on precisely what this means, but it is quite clear that this distinction is not a reference to two distinct sets of perfections, one belonging to Christ's humanity and one to his divinity, only the former of which invite imitation, since Gregory explicitly identifies the titles "wisdom" and "power" as "concepts befitting God" (τὰς θεοπρεπεῖς ἐννοίας) that he nevertheless exhorts Olympius to imitate.

[39] *Perf* (GNO VIII, I.205.8)

aspect of divine perfection and some to a characteristic of human perfection has no basis within the text of *On Perfection* itself. Gregory's logic is more simple and straightforward. Every title that Paul uses of Christ conveys something about the nature and perfection of Christ that is expressed in a particular aspect of the Son's activity. And the imitation of any one of these characteristics of Christ, from the majestic power and creative goodness displayed in the creation of the world to the lowly humility and patience witnessed in his incarnate life, renders the Christian more like Christ and thus more like God.

This is the logic that guides Gregory's interpretation of these titles, and it is a logic that assumes as a premise what is perhaps the fundamental claim of his Nicene theology, namely, that the fullness of divine perfection is possessed by and made known through the person of the Son. Indeed, Gregory addresses this premise directly in his discussion of two of the christological titles: "reflection of glory" and "image of the invisible God." The first of these two titles refers to the unqualified identity of nature and perfection that the Son and Father share. And in his discussion of it, Gregory articulates the basic elements of the pro-Nicene theological epistemology which I surveyed in chapter one of this study.

> For this reason Paul, in speaking of the things contemplated concerning the divine nature as peace and power and life and righteousness and light and truth and such things, defined the principle (τὸν...λόγον) of that nature itself to be altogether incomprehensible (ἄληπτον παντελῶς), when he said that God neither has ever been seen nor will be seen…Therefore, on the one hand, he left the being (οὐσίαν) that transcends all existing things unnamed; but, on the other hand, when he interprets the united and inseparable

relation of the Son to the Father as well as the fact that, in an unlimited and eternal fashion, Christ is contemplated with (συνθεωρούμενον) the unlimited and eternal Father, he calls him 'the reflection of glory' (ἀπαύγασμα δόξης) and 'the exact imprint' (χαρακτῆρα) [of *hypostasis*]. For neither is any difference conceived (ἐπινοεῖταί) between the ray and the nature that shares its radiance, nor is there any diminishment of the exact imprint with the *hypostasis* bearing it. Moreover, whoever has understood the reflecting nature (τὴν ἀπαυγάζουσαν φύσιν νοήσας) has certainly by this also understood the reflection; and whoever has received in his mind the greatness of the *hypostasis* will certainly also measure the *hypostasis* by the exact imprint that has appeared (τῷ ἐπιφαινομένῳ χαρακτῆρι). It is on this account that Paul also calls the Lord 'the form of God' (μορφὴν θεοῦ), not belittling the Lord by the idea of form, but indicating the greatness of God by the form in which there is discerned the Father's majesty (τοῦ πατρὸς ἡ μεγαλειότης)…This is why the Lord says, 'Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.'[40]

[40] *GNO* VIII, I.188.6-189.15, trans. Greer, 32 (modified). This passage is strikingly similar to another one from Gregory's letter to his brother Peter, on the subject of Nicene trinitarian theology. There Gregory writes, "Therefore, whoever contemplates the beauty of the image comprehends that of the archetype. And whoever apprehends the form (μορφήν), as it were, of the Son receives the figure of the Father's *hypostasis*, seeing the latter through the former, not seeing the unbegottenness of the Father in the representation (for then he would be entirely the same as and not different from him), but observing his unbegotten beauty in the begotten. For just as whoever apprehends the reflection of a form that appears in a flawless mirror has a clear knowledge of the countenance (προσώπου) imaged therein, so too whoever recognizes the Son receives the figure of the Father's *hypostasis*, through the knowledge of the Son, into his heart. For we behold all the [attributes] of the Father in the Son, and all the [attributes] of the Son are of the Father, since the Son remains wholly in the Father and contains the Father wholly in himself. The *hypostasis* of the Son therefore becomes as it were the shape (μορφή) and countenance (πρόσοωπον) of the knowledge of the Father, and the *hypostasis* of the Father is made known in the form (μορφῇ) of the Son." *EpPet* 8, trans. John Behr, *The Nicene Faith: Part Two* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2004), 425. In commenting on this passage, Behr observes that Gregory's primary concern is an epistemological one; it is to insist that the only avenue for knowledge of the Father's attributes and glory lies in contemplation of the Son. Thus Behr writes, "There is only one 'form' or 'figure,' one *prosopon*, in which God is contemplated, that of Jesus Christ, known by the Spirit to be the Son of the Father." This is one of the most fundamental premises of Gregory's Nicene trinitarian theology, and it is an apt summary of the point that he wishes to make in this passage from *On Perfection*.

In its immediate context, this comment is simply intended as an interpretive gloss on the meaning of Hebrews 1:3.[41] Read within the context of Gregory's debate with Eunomius, however, it is a clear reaffirmation of the basic tenets of his pro-Nicene account of theological knowledge. First, Gregory affirms that the divine nature is ultimately incomprehensible and therefore unable to be precisely defined by any one particular term, as Eunomius claimed to do with the word "unbegottenness". Paul recognizes this fact, according to Gregory, and therefore does not attempt to provide a single definition of the divine essence with a single name. At the same time, this does not mean that humans are left without any knowledge of the divine nature. To the contrary, because Christ is the reflection of divine glory, because there is an absolute identity of nature and glory between the Father and the Son, the nature of the eternal God is contemplated in and through the person of the Son. And for further biblical affirmation of this point, Gregory draws in two other important pro-Nicene biblical references: Philippians 2:6 and John 14:9. These two texts both confirm the point Gregory wishes to make about the Son's essential identity with the Father, but more importantly, they also draw direct attention to the epistemological consequences of that fact. The Son is the "form" in which the greatness of God is known, the one through whom the Father's majesty (μεγαλειότης) is beheld, the revelation and measure of divine perfection.

In and of itself, however, this does not provide a clear answer to the question of how we might relate the virtues of the incarnate Christ to the perfections of the divine

[41] It may seem strange for modern readers that Gregory includes a verse from Hebrews in his discussion of Pauline titles, since few would now attribute this New Testament text to the authorship of the apostle Paul, but Gregory's apparent assumption that Paul authored Hebrews was a common one among ancient Christian readers. For a fuller discussion of this subject, see Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 3-33.

nature. It is possible, after all, to affirm that the Son is naturally identical to the Father in his divinity while at the same time arguing that the goods on display in the life of the incarnate Jesus Christ are reflective of virtues that are distinctive to his human nature and therefore do not reveal anything about the character of his divinity. Such a distinction between divine perfection and human virtue is what seems to be assumed when scholars attempt to distinguish which of the goods that Gregory discusses in *On Perfection* belong to the divinity of Christ and which belong to his humanity. Once again, however, we must remember that Gregory himself does not make such a distinction in this text. And the reason that he does not do so is because he does not think of the incarnation as the Son's adoption of a new and distinct range of perfections suitable to human nature. Moreover, such a distinction between human and divine perfection is foreign to the broader framework of Gregory's thought. For, as I noted in my previous chapter, the guiding principle of Gregory's anthropology is the biblical description of humanity as *imago Dei*, which he takes to mean that the goods and perfections that can be observed in the activity of the human soul are none other than the characteristic goods and perfections of the divine nature. The one fundamental distinction between created humanity and uncreated divinity lies not, for Gregory, in a differentiation between divine and human perfections, but in the fact that the uncreated divine nature possesses perfect goodness in an infinite and unchangeable manner, whereas humanity's participation in such goodness is finite and inherently mutable.[42] A more consistent conclusion for Gregory to make,

[42] I explored this topic at length in my previous chapter and Gregory returns to this principle at the end of *On Perfection*, where he argues that the inherent mutability of human nature means that the nature of Christian perfection is that of endless development and growth. "For this is what perfection truly is (ὡς ἀληθῶς τελειότης): to never cease growing toward the better, nor to ever circumscribe perfection with some kind of limit (τινι πέρατι)." (GNO VIII, I.214.4-6). It is true, then, that the unbridgeable chasm separating uncreated and created nature plays a significant role in Gregory's thinking about Christian perfection and the ascetical life. There is a significant difference, however, between an infinite growth in

therefore, would be that any and all qualities of goodness and virtue which are on visible display in the Son's incarnation and human life are nothing other than the "form" and "reflection" in which the greatness of God is beheld. And indeed, this is precisely what we find him affirming as we read his discussion of the christological title found in Colossians 1:15, wherein Christ is referred to as the "image of the invisible God."

Before addressing Gregory's own exegesis of Colossians 1:15, it is helpful to recall the important legacy of this verse in early Christian trinitarian theology. As Jennifer Strawbridge has observed, this passage in Colossians is the second most frequently cited text from the Pauline epistles in early Christian theological literature.[43] Prior to the fourth century, the reference to Christ as the "image of the invisible God" was cited regularly by theologians such as Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen, and Novatian in their discussions of the Trinity.[44] Within the context of the Arian controversy, however, this christological title took on new significance as it was appealed to by anti-Nicene theologians as scriptural evidence of the ontological inferiority of the Son. For if the Father is by nature the "invisible God", so the argument went, then the Son's function as the visible revelation of that God—his "noetic visibility" as it were—constitutes an ontological distinction between the Father and Son and serves as a clear indication of the

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the participation in perfection and a differentiation of christological perfections into categories of "human" and "divine".

[43] Strawbridge, "The Image and Unity of God: The Role of Colossians 1 in Theological Controversy," in *The Bible and Early Trinitarian Theology*, Christopher Beeley and Mark Weedman, eds. (Washington, DC: CUA Press, 2018), 172. For further discussion of the prominence of this Colossians passage in comparison with other Pauline texts in early Christian writings, see *eadem*, *The Pauline Effect: The Use of the Pauline Epistles by Early Christian Writers* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015).

[44] For a discussion of the exegesis of Colossians 1:15 among these ante-Nicene theologians, see Strawbridge, "The Image and Unity of God," 174-186 and Gerald Boersma, *Augustine's Early Theology of Image: A Study in the Development of Pro-Nicene Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 20-31.

Son's natural inferiority.[45] Such an argument would be entirely unacceptable to Gregory of course and, due to the prominence of this argument among critics of Nicaea, we would expect him to offer a distinctly pro-Nicene interpretation of this verse, just as he did in his discussion of Hebrews 1:3. That this is what he does in the context of *On Perfection* is therefore hardly worth mentioning. Precisely how he does so, however, is quite illuminating for us as we seek to understand the relationship between Christ's incarnation and its importance to the Christian's pursuit of godlike perfection. Here is what Gregory writes:

> Then Paul names Christ, who is 'God over all' and 'great God' (τὸν ἐπὶ πάντων θεὸν καὶ μέγαν θεόν), the 'image of the invisible God'…by these expressions he teaches us through what is said that what the One who eternally exists as what he is—and this is what only the One who is knows, and what has always transcended the limit proportioned to human comprehension, even if someone who sets his mind on things above constantly progresses ever nearer to it—this One, therefore, who transcends all knowledge and comprehension (ὁ ὑπερεκείνα πάσης γνώσεώς τε καὶ καταλήψεως), who is ineffable and unutterable and indescribable, in order to make you once more the image of God, because of his love for humanity (ὑπὸ φιλανθρωπίας), also himself became the image of the invisible God (εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ ἀοράτου). As a result, he has been formed in you in the form he assumed and has made his own; and through himself you have again been conformed to the character of archetypal beauty (πρὸς τὸν χαρακτῆρα τοῦ ἀρχετύπου συσχηματισθῆναι κάλλους) so as to become what you were from the beginning.

[45] I borrow the phrase "noetic visibility" from Michel Barnes, who discusses the prominence of this argument for Homoian critics of Nicaea in his article "The Visible Christ and the Invisible Trinity: Mt. 5:8 in Augustine's Trinitarian Theology," *Modern Theology* 19:3 (July 2003), 355.

> Therefore, if we are going to become also ourselves the image of the invisible God, it is fitting that the form of our life be modeled in accordance with the example of life set forth to us.[46]

Just as he did with his discussion of Hebrews 1:3, so in this passage Gregory reiterates the apophatic-cataphatic dialectic that characterizes his pro-Nicene account of knowledge of God. God is invisible and incomprehensible, and this invisibility is not just a characteristic belonging to the Father, but to the Son as well, which is a crucially important point within the context of fourth-century debates. For whereas anti-Nicene theologians argued that the Son's function as the visible image of God indicated a natural capacity for comprehension arising from an ontological difference with the Father, Gregory says that Christ exists eternally and naturally shares the ineffability and incomprehensibility of the Father. As the "God over all," Christ "transcends all knowledge and comprehension" and is "ineffable and unutterable and indescribable." And yet, at the same time, Christ has made himself known; he *became* (ἐγένετο) "the image of the invisible God," thereby making known the nature and character of the invisible God. This language of *becoming* is significant, for it signals that this designation of Christ as "image" is not so much a description of the eternal nature of the Son as a reference to what he accomplished in the event of the incarnation. The one who shared the Father's invisibility became visible in this most discrete of divine actions, thereby giving visible form to the "archetypal beauty" of God, the characteristic perfection of the

[46] *Perf* (GNO VIII, I.194.4-195.8), trans. Greer, 35 (modified).

divine nature.[47] Furthermore, in order to understand this act of becoming, it is necessary to recognize both its purpose and motivation. The purpose of the Son's incarnation was none other than the restoration of the *imago dei* in humanity and its motivation derived from and gave expression to divine love for humanity (φιλανθρωπία).

This interpretation of Paul's words in Colossians is an example of what John Behr has referred to in his analysis of Athanasius's pro-Nicene theology as "partitive exegesis."[48] According to Athanasius, a proper understanding of the scriptural witness concerning the nature of Christ must recognize the "double account" (διπλῆν ἀπαγγελίαν) that the scriptures give of Christ.[49] This double account refers to the two different "modes of existence," as Behr puts it, under which Christ is referred to in scripture—the aspect of his eternal identity and the aspect of the economy of his incarnation. Athanasius used this exegetical principle regularly in dealing with a variety of controverted biblical verses such as Proverbs 8:22, Galatians 3:13, 2 Corinthians 5:21, and John 1:14, which speak of Christ "becoming" or being "made" something, and thereby imply a degree of mutability in the nature of the Son distinct from the immutability of the Father.[50] Properly understood, however, Athanasius argues that these texts do not suggest an element of mutability in the eternal nature of the Son, but are instead references to the change that took place when the Son took on human nature in the economy of the incarnation. And this point is crucial for accurate interpretation, not only because it keeps us from

[47] While Gregory does not mention it in this passage, it is important to remember that he does not regard the Son's incarnation as the *only* noetically available manifestation of divine perfection—his broader argument within the Eunomian controversy is that the character of the divine nature is made known through all instances of the activity of divine power—but rather that the incarnation is the *greatest* and *most complete* manifestation of divine power.
[48] Behr, *The Nicene Faith: Part Two*, 208-215.
[49] Athanasius, *Contra Arianos* 3.29.
[50] See, e.g., Athanasius, *Contra Arianos* 2.44-49.

mistakenly attributing creaturely properties to the being of the Son, but also because it draws our attention to the motivating purpose of the incarnation—the philanthropic love of God that inspired this act to restore humanity—and therefore reveals something foundational about the character of the divine nature.[51]

It is this same interpretive strategy that Gregory uses in his discussion of Colossians 1:15 in the passage above and it is one that he employs again when he comes to address the Pauline references to Christ as "firstborn" (πρωτότοκος). On this occasion, however, there is no need to speculate about what Gregory's polemical concerns might be, for he himself makes them quite clear.

> Whenever we hear that Christ is the "firstborn of creation" and the "firstborn of the dead" and the "firstborn among many brothers," let us first dismiss the assumptions of the heretics, since their base manufacture of doctrine out of the above words has no support…Indeed, those who fight against God (οἱ θεομάχοι) say that the only begotten God, the creator of the universe, the one from whom and through whom and in whom are all things is the work of God and a creature and something made (ἔργον εἶναι τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ κτίσμα καὶ ποίημα). For this reason they give as their definition that he is called the firstborn of all creation because he is akin to creation and is first by the privilege of age alone, just as Reuben was ranked before his own brothers not by nature but by the privilege of age based on time.[52]

[51] "Thus, his being 'created,' 'formed,' and 'appointed' all have the same meaning. They indicate not the beginning of his being, nor that his essence is created, but the renewal that came to be for our sake through his bounty…So when he says 'created,' he immediately adds the reason, which he says is 'the works,' in order to clarify that his being created for the works is his becoming human for their renewal." Athanasius, *Contra Arianos* 2.53, trans. Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 146-147.
[52] *Perf* (GNO VIII, I.200.4-17), trans. Greer, 37-38.

The heretics that Gregory here speaks of are the subordinationist critics of Nicaea who argue that the Son is ontologically inferior to the Father. They interpret these descriptions of Christ as "firstborn" as an indication of his status as a "creature" and "something made," and so they regard the Son as greater only in degree and not in kind from the rest of creation.[53] Yet Gregory argues that this interpretation is problematic, not only because it demeans the nature of the Son, but also because it renders incoherent the scriptural designation of Christ as the "only-begottten God" (τὸν μονογενῆ θεὸν, cf. John 3:16, 18), which indicates a difference not merely of degree but of absolute uniqueness in kind. In response to this misunderstanding, Gregory offers his own interpretation of the references to Christ as "firstborn" in which he makes an explicit appeal to the principle of partitive exegesis, and in which, I suggest, he provides a succinct summary of the relationship between his Nicene theology and his ascetical emphasis on the imitation of Christ. Here is what he writes:

> Therefore it is fitting to assign meanings by the standard of truth (τῷ κριτηρίῳ τῆς ἀληθείας), carefully distinguishing each of these names, so that 'only-begotten' (μονογενῆ) gives an account of pre-existence, while it is the Word made flesh who became the 'firstborn' (πρωτότοκον) of all the creation that came to be after this in Christ. And whatever concept (νόημα) has entered our mind by learning that he is the firstborn of the dead and the firstborn among many brothers, let us understand that also to conform to 'the firstborn of creation.' Therefore, when he became 'the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep,' he became the firstborn of the dead so that he might make a path

[53] On Arius's use of these and similar scriptural passages to build his argument for the Son's creaturely nature, see Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 95-115.

> to the resurrection for all flesh (ἵνα ὁδοποιήση πάσῃ σαφκὶ τὴν ἀνάστασιν). And when he was going to make us, who were previously by nature children of wrath, sons of day and sons of light by the new birth through the water and the Spirit, he led the way to such a birth himself in the stream of Jordan…Therefore, if by the same manner of rebirth and water and the Spirit we have also become brothers of the one who for us became the firstborn among many brothers, it would follow that we display close kinship (τὴν πρὸς αὐτὸν ἀγχιστείαν) to him through various character traits of life (διὰ τῶν τοῦ βίου χαρακτήρων), when the firstborn is formed in our life. What character, then, have we learned from scripture belongs to this form? We have often said of him that 'he committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.' Therefore, if we are going to take the title brothers of the one who led the way to our birth, the sinlessness of our life (τὸ ἀναμάρτητον τῆς ζωῆς) will give proof of our kinship with him…Moreover, the firstborn is righteousness and sanctification (καὶ δικαιοσύνε καὶ ἁγιασμός), as well as love and redemption (ἀγάπη καὶ ἀπολύτρωσις) and such titles. Therefore, if our life is also characterized by such things, we shall present clear tokens of our noble birth, so that the one who looks down upon these things in our life may confirm for us by his testimony kinship to Christ (τὴν πρὸς τὸν Χριστὸν ἀδελφότητα).[54]

This passage is an excellent example of the pro-Nicene exegetical practice that Gregory adapts in his interpretation of certain christological titles. When Scripture refers to Christ as "only-begotten," it is speaking of his pre-existent identity and nature as the eternal Son. When, on the other hand, Paul utilizes the language of "firstborn," he is referring to the Son as the "Word made flesh," the Son within the economy of the incarnation. This is not to say that these two titles are speaking of different subjects,

[54] *Perf* (GNO VIII, I.201.8-204.3), trans. Greer, 38-39 (modified).

since they are both referring to the one Jesus Christ, who is the eternal Son and also the Word-become-flesh, but rather that they are speaking of that one subject and under two distinct "aspects" of his life. And yet, to understand the description of Christ as "firstborn of creation," it is necessary not only to distinguish it from the term "only-begotten; it is also necessary to interpret it with reference to the gospel narrative of the Son's philanthropic descent for the sake of human salvation. For the "concept" (νόημα) that is conveyed with the term "firstborn" cannot be separated from the story of which it is a part, namely the story of how Christ "became the firstborn of the dead so that he might make a path to the resurrection for all flesh." And this is a significant point, for as I noted in my discussion of Gregory's pro-Nicene theology of divine perfection, both in *Against Eunomius* and in the *Catechetical Oration*, it is not simply the person of Christ as such that is determinative for our understanding of the characteristic goodness of God, but the philanthropic narrative of the christological economy. That is what Gregory has in mind when he speaks of the perfection of the "God of the gospel" and that is also what he is calling attention to here with his reference to the incarnation.

Of course, Gregory does not end his treatment of this title with an exposition of its meaning. Instead, he does what he has done throughout this treatise, which is to apply the meaning of the title to the pursuit of Christian perfection. Notably, in this instance, Gregory does not suggest imitation of the title "firstborn" itself, but instead uses the meaning of this title as an impetus to review his theological approach to this topic as a whole. For whenever the Christians thinks of Christ as "firstborn," she is reminded of her own "new birth" and the consequent calling that she has been given to live into the reality of that birth by adopting the characteristics of Christ in her own life and thereby

demonstrating her "kinship" (ἀγχιστείαν/ἀδελφότητα) with him. The familial language used here is determined by the exegetical referent in mind, but the concept is identical to what Gregory has said repeatedly throughout both this treatise and *On the Christian's Profession*, that the essence of the Christian life lies in nothing else than in becoming like God—renewing the image—through a conformation of one's life to the pattern of Jesus Christ. The four titles that Gregory goes on to list as examples of the characteristics that the Christian ought to imitate in her own life—righteousness, sanctification, love, and redemption—are merely meant to serve as illustrative examples, as the reader well knows. At the same time, the selection of these four titles is also notable in that, like the title "firstborn," they are all titles which have arisen from reflection on and give testimony to virtues of Christ that are made manifest in the gospel narrative. For the Christian seeking to advance in the virtuous life, this is the model of perfection to which they must conform themselves: the eternal Son who, because of his love for humanity, became righteousness and sanctification and redemption for the sake of those who had become lost and mired in sin. This is the model of Christian perfection because this is also the form and character of divine perfection.

Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter has been to answer the question: How is Gregory's account of Christian perfection, and its attainment through the ascetical life, influenced by his pro-Nicene theology of divine perfection? And the answer that I have given to that question through my analysis of these two texts is, in some ways, rather simple and straightforward: Gregory believes that Christian perfection consists in nothing less than

becoming like God, imitating the divine nature, and the means to attain that perfection in the ascetical life consists in nothing other than mimetic participation in the perfections of Jesus Christ. In short, to become like God one must become like Christ and in imitating Christ one is imitating the divine nature. Yet, while such a lapidary summary of Gregory's underlying thesis in these two texts is neither inaccurate nor a distortion of his thought, it also does not do justice to the sophistication of the theological structure upon which it is built. For what is most notable about the parallels between Gregory's Nicene thought and his instructions on life of virtue is not simply the ease with which he is able to move back and forth between speaking of the divine nature and the person of Christ, nor is it the occasional instance when he directly addresses the arguments of anti-Nicene theologians, as he does in his discussion of Colossians 1:15 in *On Perfection*. No, what makes Gregory's approach to the ascetical life a peculiarly Nicene one is the logic upon which he develops his account of the imitation of Christ.

Perhaps the clearest expression of this logic can be found in the first text I discussed, *On the Christian's Profession*. It is in that text that we find Gregory's concise and often-quoted definition of Christianity as "the imitation of the divine nature." In his later explanation of this definition, Gregory makes it clear that what he has in mind when he speaks of imitating the divine nature is precisely the same thing that he thinks is intended by the biblical description of humanity as *imago Dei*: mimetic participation in the characteristic virtues and "good activities" of God. But what are these characteristic virtues? What guidance can be given to the person who seeks to develop these divine virtues and participate in these good activities in the life of her own soul? Gregory's response to these questions in both of the texts discussed above is the same. Whoever

wishes to imitate the perfection of the divine nature must do so by imitating the perfection of Jesus Christ. The fact that Gregory can draw such a direct and unqualified equivalence between the perfection of Christ and the perfection of the divine nature is in and of itself an expression of his Nicene theology—since it is certainly not something that Eunomius could have done—but the method that he uses in developing this exhortation to imitate Christ is equally significant. For in both of these texts, but especially and at length in *On Perfection*, Gregory directs the attention of his readers to various scriptural titles that are used for Christ. Some of these titles are those to which Gregory regularly appeals in *Against Eunomius* as the characteristic descriptions of divine perfection—wisdom, power, goodness, life, light, etc.—whereas others are rarely mentioned in such contexts, but in both cases, the underlying logic of Gregory's appeal to these titles remains consistent. What each of these titles convey to the earnest Christian ascetic is a distinct attribute or aspect of the characteristic perfection of Jesus Christ, and to imitate any one of these perfections is to imitate the perfection of the divine nature.

Another notable feature of Gregory's appeal to these christological titles, and one which also has parallels with his anti-Eunomian theology of divine perfection, is the correlation that he draws between the titles and the activity of Christ. As I observed in my discussion of *On Perfection*, Gregory interprets the meaning of Christ's titles with reference to specific elements of Christ's economic activity. This is significant on the one hand because, as I have already noted both in my analysis of his anthropology and in the current chapter, when Gregory speaks of being or becoming like God, what he has in mind is the soul's dynamic and mimetic participation in the characteristic activities of the divine nature. By linking this participation not only to the imitation of the perfections of

Christ, but more specifically, the imitation of the economic activity of Christ, Gregory is therefore drawing upon the same logic which he used in his defense of Nicaea. Which is to say, that the activity of Christ is none other than the activity of divine power and therefore revelatory of the nature of God. On the other hand, this attention to the economic activity of Christ is also significant because it focuses the attention of the Christian ascetic who wishes to pursue godlikeness most especially on the gospel narrative, and this for two reasons. First, because the incarnation of the Son represents the fullest and most complete visible manifestation of the invisible glory and majesty of the divine nature. And second, because once one properly understands the narrative of the Son's descent according to the terms of Nicene theology, not as the natural function of a subordinate or mediatorial deity, but rather as the self-humbling condescension of a God whose natural, life-giving goodness and characteristic love for humanity compels him to rescue his human creation from the corruption of sin, then it becomes clear that the incarnation, death, and resurrection of the Son constitutes nothing less than, as Gregory puts it in the *Catechetical Oration*, the "supreme manifestation of divine power" and so likewise the most perfect model for Christian perfection.[55]

With this being said, the question remains of whether or not the two texts that I have discussed in this chapter, *On Perfection* and *On the Christian's Profession*, are unique outliers in Gregory's writings on the spiritual life or whether in fact the account of Christian perfection that they articulate—becoming like God through an imitation of the acts and attributes of Jesus Christ—is consistent with Gregory's treatment of this issue elsewhere. After all, as I mentioned at the outset of this chapter, the reason that I selected

[55] *Cat or.* 24

these two texts for analysis is because it is in them that we find the most direct discussion of the imitation of Christ. As I will demonstrate in the following and final chapter of this study, however, while these texts may be unique in the directness of their treatment of this theme, their approach to the theme of Christian perfection is entirely consistent with some of Gregory's other most influential writings. Here and elsewhere, Gregory's understanding of the goal of the spiritual life remains the same: to become like God through an active participation in the perfections of the divine nature. Which means that the perfection of the Christian is a reflection of the perfection of God. And this brings us back to the question that was posed at the very beginning of this study. In what does the perfection of God consist? What is the character of divine perfection? In this chapter, I have argued that Gregory's answer to that mirrors the answer that he gave in *Against Eunomius*, that the perfection of God consists in nothing less than the life-giving power and active goodness of God manifested in the person and work of Jesus Christ, and in the following chapter I will argue much the same. For just as in his account of human creation, so in his account of Christian perfection, the perfect God which humans reflect is no generic deity. It is the God of Nicaea, the God of the Gospel.

Chapter 4
Spiritual Ascent and Philanthropic Descent
Nicene Theology and Christian Virtue

In the last chapter, I began to analyze the relationship between Gregory's pro-Nicene theology of divine perfection and his account of Christian virtue and divinization by looking at the theme of the imitation of Christ in two of his most well-known ascetical writings. In this chapter, I will continue that same theme by turning my attention to three more of his most popular spiritual writings: *Homilies on the Beatitudes*, the *Life of Moses*, and *Homilies on the Song of Songs*. These three texts, especially the latter two, have featured prominently in modern studies of Gregory's so-called mystical theology.[1] Two of the prominent themes in much of this literature have been the distinctly apophatic character of Gregory's mystical doctrine and his related emphasis on the relationship between divine infinity and the endlessly progressive nature of spiritual desire and growth, both of which, as some scholars have noted, demonstrate a connection between

[1] For an overview of Gregory's mystical doctrine and a summary of its primary themes and the modern scholarly literature on it, see Lucas Francisco Mateo-Seco, "Mysticism" in *The Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa*, eds. Lucas F. Mateo-Seco and Giulio Maspero (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 519-530. By referring to this aspect of Gregory's thought as "so-called" mystical theology, I am not suggesting that the characterization of Gregory as a mystic is necessarily wrong, only acknowledging that it has been a matter of debate in twentieth century scholarship. Jean Daniélou, for instance, argued forcefully that Gregory was not only a mystical theologian but indeed the "founder of mystical theology." Walther Völker, however, disagreed with this claim, not because he thought that Gregory was not a mystic but because he thought that Daniélou had mischaracterized Nyssen's thought by overstating his originality and by emphasizing the theme of apophatic darkness to the exclusion of the simultaneously prominent theme of mystical illumination. Scholars such as Hilda Graef, Hermann Langerbeck, and Ronald Heine have also pushed back on the interpretation of Gregory as a mystic by arguing that his mystical writings were less analyses of religious experience than they were commentaries on biblical texts and treatises on the theology of the spiritual life. For a discussion of the debate between Daniélou and Völker, see Henri Crouzel, "Grégoire de Nysse est-il le fondateur de la théologie mystique? Une controverse récente," *Revue d'ascétique et de mystique* 33 (1957), 189-202. For the arguments of Graef, Langerbeck, and Heine, see Graef, *The Story of Mysticism* (Peter Davies: London, 1966); Langerbeck, "Zur Interpretation Gregors von Nyssa," *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 82 (January 1957), 82-90; and Heine, *Perfection in the Virtuous Life: A Study in the Relationship Between Edification and Polemical Theology in Gregory of Nyssa's* De Vita Moysis (Cambridge, MA: The Philadelphia Patristic Foundation, 1975).

Gregory's spiritual writings and his anti-Eunomian theology.[2] In this chapter, however, my interest lies elsewhere. For while I do not disagree that the themes of apophatic unknown and spiritual *epektasy* provide a point of continuity between Gregory's spirituality and trinitarian theology, I do not think that this is the only point of connection. To the contrary, I would suggest that one of the clearest lines of continuity between Gregory's defense of Nicene theology in *Against Eunomius* and his treatment of spiritual transformation in these texts can be found in the harmony that exists between his pro-Nicene identification of divine perfection with the philanthropic goodness made known in Jesus Christ and his account of the soul's vision and virtuous reflection of God.

Each of these three texts share several notable similarities that render them conducive to comparative analysis.[3] First, all three of these texts share a basic fact of literary genre: they are all three commentaries on biblical texts (two written in the form of a collection of homilies and one as an extended treatise composed in the form of a letter). Second, all three take as their theme the same basic subject: the soul's progressive transformation into godlikeness through the contemplation of and mimetic participation in divine perfection. Third, in each of these three texts we find a similar guiding symbolic motif, the depiction of the virtuous life as a spiritual "ascent." In the first two of these texts which I shall survey, the *Homilies on the Beatitudes* and the *Life of*

[2] While not the only examples of this argument, the relationship between divine infinity, perpetual progress, apophatic theology, and anti-Eunomian polemics is succinctly made in two complementary articles from the same 1973 edition of *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review*: Everett Ferguson, "God's Infinity and Man's Mutability: Perpetual Progress According to Gregory of Nyssa," *GOTR* 18:1 (1973), 59-78, and Robert Brightman, "Apophatic Theology and Divine Infinity in St. Gregory of Nyssa," *GOTR* 18:1 (1973), 97-114.

[3] Thus, it should come as no surprise that I am not the first to discuss these three texts in tandem. For a similar recent study, see Hans Boersma, "Becoming Human in the Face of God: Gregory of Nyssa's Unending Search for the Beatific Vision," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 17:2 (April 2015), 131-151.

Moses, this motif of ascent provides a clear role in the organizational structure of Gregory's analysis of the spiritual life. In the final text, the *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, the prominence of the symbol of ascent has become subdued due to the fact that, as I will discuss further, the bride who is the subject of those homilies has already arrived at the final stage of ascent. Even there, however, the idea of spiritual progress remains connected to the language of ascent. Fourth and finally, what is remarkable in each of these texts is that, while each of these texts agree in their portrayal of the soul's progress as a continuous ascent, they are likewise all three united in their suggestion that the effect and evidence of this ascent lies in the soul's virtuous, philanthropic descent in active ministry toward others. And the reason for that, as I shall now demonstrate, lies in their shared identification of godlikeness with the philanthropic self-giving manifested in the person and work of Jesus Christ, which, as I have thus far been arguing, is a direct reflection of Gregory's Nicene theology of divine perfection.

Nicene Theology and Christian Virtue in *Homilies on the Beatitudes*

Gregory begins his *Homilies on the Beatitudes* by drawing his audience's attention to the narrative setting that the Gospel of Matthew gives for the occasion of the Sermon on the Mount, namely, Jesus' ascent up a mountain.[4] What is the significance of this ascent? Some readers of Matthew's gospel might assume that Jesus is merely finding a convenient location from which to address a large crowd that has gathered. Alternatively, the more astute reader might discern in this geographical detail a figural reference to the ascent of Moses upon Sinai, signifying Matthew's intention to portray

[4] Matt. 5:1-2

Jesus as another, albeit greater, lawgiver who has come to dispense the wisdom of God from upon the mountaintop. Gregory's focus, however, is elsewhere. For what he calls attention to is not what Jesus' ascent might have to teach us about the Savior's own identity as the new-and-greater Moses, but what the implications of that ascent are for those who wish to follow Jesus. For whoever wishes to be a "disciple of the Word," Gregory notes, must likewise make their own ascent with Christ, an ascent "from the low ground and away from the hollows of lowly thoughts to the spiritual mountain of sublime contemplation."[5] In so doing, they are heeding the call of the prophet Isaiah—"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord"—and thereby achieving the goal of the spiritual life, which is "to share God's house with him (τὸ σύνοικον θεοῦ γενέσθαι)" and to behold "those good things which the Word shows to those who accompany him to the height."[6]

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[5] *Beat* 1.1. Here and in what follows, I will be utilizing both the English translation and the textual paragraph numbering provided by Stuart Hall in in *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on the Beatitudes: An English Version with Commentary and Supporting Studies*, eds. Hubertus R. Drobner and Albert Viciano (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 21-92. All references to the Greek text of the *Homililes* will be to the edited text of Johannes F. Callahan in *Gregorii Nysseni Opera* (GNO), vol.VII, II (Leiden: Brill, 1992). As with most of the texts in Gregory's oeuvre that I have discussed thus far, the dating of Gregory's collection of sermons on the beatitudes is a matter of dispute and cannot be determined with any degree of certainty. Most of those who have suggested dates for this text have tended to place it earlier in Gregory's writing career. Jean Daniélou, for instance, proposes a date prior to 379 and Gerhard May suggests somewhere in the period between 376 and 378. Alden Mosshammer likewise assumes an early date for these homilies. Most of the arguments for this early dating, however, rely upon the logic which Mosshammer makes explicit, which is that it is possible to identify a discernible development in Gregory's theology on the basis of the prevalence of certain themes in some of the texts that are frequently assumed to be written at the latter end of Gregory's career and which are taken to represent his most mature theological outlook, such as the *Homilies on the Song of Songs*. This logic, however, is questionable for two reasons. First, as I will demonstrate in this chapter, while there are undoubtedly differences of emphasis and expression in these homilies on the beatitudes, there is also significant continuity in the fundamental theology which is being expressed. Second, as Martin Laird has observed with reference to his analysis of the *Songs* homilies, we must keep in mind that many of the distinctions between Gregory's works are frequently the result of the exegetical details of the texts upon which he is commenting and do not necessarily reflect a theological shift. Cf. Daniélou, "La chronologie des oeuvres de Grégoire de Nysse," *Studia Patristica* 7 (1966): 159-169; May, "Die Chronologie des Lebens und der Werke des Gregor von Nyssa," in *Écriture et culture philosophique dans la pensee de Gregoire de Nysse*, ed. M. Harl (Leiden: Brill, 1971), 51-66; Mosshammer, "Gregory's Intellectual Development: A Comparison of the *Homilies on the Beatitudes* with the *Homilies on the Song of Songs*," in *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on the Beatitudes: An English Version with Commentary and Supporting Studies*, 359-388; and Laird, "Gregory of Nyssa and the Mysticism of Darkness: A Reconsideration," *The Journal of Religion* 79:4 (October 1999), 592-616.

[6] *Beat* 1.1 (GNO VII, II.78). The quotation from Isaiah comes from Isaiah 2:3.

This discussion of Christ's ascent upon the mountain and the subsequent invitation to follow him is not merely an interesting exegetical detail for Gregory. To the contrary, it serves as the organizing motif around which he structures all eight of his sermons on the beatitudes. And, as we shall soon see, it is also a metaphor which he returns to again in his discussion of the spiritual life in both *Life of Moses* and his *Homilies on the Song of Songs*.[7] That such an image should appeal to Gregory as a symbol of the spiritual life is unsurprising, for as I noted in the previous chapter, his fundamental understanding of salvation revolves around a notion of deification as a dynamic process of the soul's continuous transformation through an ever-deepening participation in the active perfection of divine life, and he regularly frames that process of transformation along the lines of an upward ascent from a "lower" to a "higher" form of life.[8] And upon reading further in his sermon, it becomes clear that what Gregory has in mind when speaking of this upward ascent upon the mountain is nothing other than what he identified as the essence and goal of the Christian life in both *On the Christian's Profession* and *On Perfection*: mimetic participation in the perfect goodness of the divine nature. Indeed, this is clear from his very first comments on the first beatitude, where he discusses the meaning of the word "blessed" (μακάριος) itself.

> Blessedness, as I understand it, is something which includes every concept of goodness (πάντων τῶν κατὰ τὸ ἀγαθὸν νοουμένων), and from which nothing answering to good desire is missing. The meaning of beatitude might also become clearer to us by the

[7] Gregory himself makes the connection between Moses' ascent upon Sinai and the ascent of the beatitudes in *Beat* 7.1.

[8] For a study of just how extensive a role this guiding motif of upward ascent/transformation plays in Gregory's soteriology, see Hans Boersma, *Embodiment and Virtue in Gregory of Nyssa: An Anagogical Approach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

> comparison with its opposite. The opposite of 'blessed' is 'miserable.' Misery is the wretched experience of painful and undesirable things…To the one called blessed belong joy and happiness at his prospects of enjoyment, to the one called wretched, distress and pain at his circumstances. To tell the truth, the blessed is the divine itself (τὸ μὲν οὖν μακαριστὸν ἀληθῶς αὐτὸ τὸ θεῖόν ἐστιν). Whatever we may suppose it to be, blessedness is that unsullied life: the ineffable and inconceivable good, the indescribable beauty, essential grace and wisdom and power, true light, fount of all goodness…The mind does not reach the reality, and if we did manage to think some of the more sublime thoughts about it, no word can express the thought. Since, however, the one who formed man 'made him in the image of God,' in a secondary why what has come to exist with this name by participation in the real blessedness might also be called blessed. For just as in the case of physical comeliness the original beauty is in the living face and being, but second and following comes the beauty displayed by being copied in the portrait, so also human nature, being an image of the transcendent blessedness (εἰκὼν οὖσα τῆς ὑπερκειμένης μακαριότητος), is itself also marked out as possessing the same excellent beauty, when it displays in itself the features proper to the characteristics of blessedness (τὰς τῶν μακαρίων καρακτήρων ἐμφάσεις).[9]

What Jesus refers to when he speaks about those who are "blessed" (μακάριοι), then, is first and foremost a characteristic that is proper to God's own life. For blessedness refers to the possession of all good things and thus to the quality of divine life.[10] Human experience of beatitude is therefore a derivative participation in the life of

[9] *Beat* 1.2 (GNO VII, II.79-81), trans. Hall, 24-25.
[10] Robert Louis Wilken notes the conceptual parallel between Gregory's discussion of those who are "blessed" (μακάριοι) in these homilies and the ancient eudaimonistic tradition of moral philosophy as a pursuit of "happiness" (εὐδαιμονία). See Wilken, "Gregory of Nyssa, *De beatitudinibus*, Oratio VIII: 'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven; (Mt 5,

God, which is only possible because human nature was created as an "image of the transcendent blessedness." I have already discussed Gregory's understanding of human nature as the image of God at greater length in chapter two of this study, and there is no need to review the details of that argument here. Suffice it to say that this brief reference to being an image of divine blessedness is consistent with and should be understood with reference to his broader understanding of the *imago Dei* as humanity's active participation in the characteristic goodness of divine power. To advance in blessedness, then, is equivalent to an increased participation in the perfections of God, with the result that the soul "displays" in its own life and activity "the features proper to the characteristics of blessedness," which is simply another way of saying "the characteristic perfections of God."

Gregory himself makes this link between divine blessedness and divine perfections even more clear in the introductory comments of his fifth homily. On this occasion, he once again finds a scriptural parallel to expound upon the motif of ascent, although this time it is no longer the prophet Isaiah but the patriarch Jacob and the vision which he saw in Genesis 28 to which Gregory turns. What Jacob saw in his dream at Bethel was a ladder ascending from the earth all the way into heaven, and upon that ladder were angels ascending and descending. Much like Matthew's mention of Jesus' ascent upon a mountain to preach, this vision of a ladder is a potent image which has proven to fertile exegetical ground for theologically minded interpreters. Yet, once again, Gregory's interest in the vision is focused upon its significance for the spiritual life and the lesson which he derives from it closely follows his reading of Matthew 5:1.

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10)," in *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on the Beatitudes: An English Version with Commentary and Supporting Studies*, 243-245.

Focusing his attention on the angels who are ascending the ladder, Gregory suggests that Jacob's vision is meant to serve as a typological symbol that is given to instruct the patriarch "that there is no other way to go up to God but by constantly looking upwards (πρὸς τὰ ἄνω βλέποντα) and having an unceasing desire (τὴν...ἐπιθυμίαν ἄληκτον) for sublime things."[11] And this is the purpose of the beatitudes as well, for each of the beatitudes are meant to serve as a rung of the ladder upon which a person may climb and thereby ascend toward the goal of heavenly bliss. What is more, this ascent toward bliss is simultaneously a progressive imitation of and conformity to the various perfections of divine life because the ascent to bliss is necessarily an ascent to God himself. For "just as we approach the Wise through wisdom and through purity the Pure, so we are also assimilated to the Blessed by way of the beatitudes. Blessedness belongs properly to God: that is why Jacob tells of God standing firmly on such a ladder. So therefore, participation in the beatitudes is nothing less than sharing in divinity (ἡ οὖν τῶν μακαρισμῶν μετουσία οὐδὲν ἄλλο εἰ μὴ θεότητός ἐστι κοινωνία)."[12]

This comment demonstrates the significant continuity between the motif of spiritual ascent that Gregory utilizes both here and elsewhere and the pursuit of ascetical perfection which I discussed in the previous chapter. For in the same way that Gregory equated the goal of the ascetical life in *On the Christian's Profession* with an imitation of the divine nature, so here he describes the goal of the spiritual ascent as a "sharing in divinity." In a similar way, just as he identified the means for attaining that goal in his ascetical writings as both a contemplation of and mimetic participation in the various perfections of God, so in the above quote he suggests that the ascent which a person

[11] *Beat* 5.1 (GNO VII, II.124.1-3), trans. Hall, 57.
[12] *Beat* 5.1 (GNO VII, II.124.8-14), trans. Hall, 57 (modified).

makes toward the goal of sharing in divinity, symbolized by Jacob's ladder, consists in a participation in the characteristic "blessedness" of God's own life.

In order to participate in this characteristic blessedness, however, it is necessary to gain a clear understanding of its nature. This is why Gregory speaks about the necessary habit of "looking upwards" and having an "unceasing desire" for things that are sublime. What this upward gaze and longing refer to are the contemplation of and desire for divine goodness. And this is where the beatitudes play an important role. For the purpose of the beatitudes is to serve as a guide to the person making the ascent precisely by identifying and describing concrete and distinctive ways in which someone may begin to share in the perfection of divinity. The beatitudes serve as a "ladder of ethical ascent in which the Christian grows in the divine likeness" and thereby attains the goal of sharing in divine life.[13]

In and of itself, this understanding of the character of spiritual ascent and the necessary activities which it entails—contemplation of and participation in divine perfection—will hardly come as a surprise at this point in this study. But it does raise two questions that relate to my broader thesis. First, how does Gregory's account of the contemplation of divine perfection in these sermons, and the role that the beatitudes play in facilitating that contemplation, compare with the pro-Nicene account of theological knowledge that he developed in *Against Eunomius*? And second, how does the quality of blessedness which is attained through the process of spiritual ascent compare to the christologically grounded account of divine perfection that, I have argued, is such a key component of Gregory's Nicene theology? In what follows, I will argue that there exists

[13] John Gavin, "Ascending the Mountain with Christ: Divine Accommodation in Gregory of Nyssa's *De Beatitudinibus*," *The Downside Review* 130 (April 2012), 27.

significant continuity between Gregory's treatment of these themes in these homilies and his more comprehensive analysis of them in *Against Eunomius*. With regard to the question of human contemplation of the character of divine "blessedness", Gregory once again insists on a dialectic of both divine incomprehensibility and divine revelation mediated through the activity of divine power and human participation in divine goodness. Similarly, while the character of divine perfection is perhaps less explicitly christological in these homilies than it was in the pro-Nicene writings, I will argue nevertheless that there is a remarkable similarity between the character of the spiritually transformed person who has ascended through the beatitudes and the philanthropic goodness that is at the center of Gregory's understanding of the "God of the gospel."

Seeing God in the Homilies on the Beatitudes

The soul's ascent toward the goal of sharing in the blessedness of God is intimately connected to the contemplation of God. Indeed, as Hans Boersma observes, the vision of God serves as both the goal and the means of spiritual ascent in Gregory's treatment of this topic within these homilies.[14] As always, however, the subject of "seeing" God is a complicated one for Gregory, for while he recognizes it as a foundational element in biblical spirituality, he is also firmly committed to defending the ultimate incomprehensibility of the divine essence. Yet, as I noted in my analysis of *Against Eunomius*, this commitment to divine incomprehensibility did not lead Gregory to a simple attitude of epistemological agnosticism or muted silence about the nature of God. What Gregory offered in response to Eunomius's claims to immediate and

[14] Boersma, "Becoming Human in the Face of God," 135-139.

"precise" understanding of the divine nature was more sophisticated than a mere dismissal of the possibility of knowing or seeing God. It was an alternative account of theological knowledge, one which accepted that all human understanding of God is always and inevitably incomplete and partial due to the infinity of the divine nature, and yet nevertheless sought to speak rightly and truthfully about the character of that nature on the basis of the revelation of divine power in act. And while that account of human knowledge of God was closely connected with the broader context of Gregory's debate with Eunomius, it is nevertheless consistent with what Gregory says in these homilies about the possibility and method of seeing God.

Gregory first addresses this subject in his third homily on the beatitudes, in his analysis of Jesus' paradoxical statement that those who sorrow (οἱ πεθοῦντες) shall be blessed. This seems patently absurd, and Gregory readily admits so, noting that critics of Christianity will be quick to mock such a statement as vapid and nonsensical. What sort of sorrow could Jesus possibly have in mind that would lead to a state of blessing and happiness? In order to answer that question, Gregory first defines the meaning of sorrow as "a sad state of the soul resentful at the loss of something the heart was set upon."[15] What brings about sorrow, then, is the soul's awareness that it has lost or is lacking the good which it desires. With reference to the spiritual life, the sorrow-inducing experience of loss that Jesus has in mind is the soul's awareness of its own sin. Yet, Gregory goes on to clarify that this is not simply a positive awareness of the presence of sin within the soul, for while that may produce regret it is not in and of itself a grief over what has been lost. Nor is it the grief in and of itself which leads to blessedness. No,

[15] *Beat* 3.4, trans. Hall, 41-42 (modified).

what is significant in this experience of sorrow that leads to beatitude is not the pain of loss itself, but rather "the knowledge of the Good (τὴν εἴδησιν τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ) which brings with it the emotion of grief because what is sought is not present in this life."[16]

It is this observation that presses Gregory to first address the complicated question of how a person may see or "know" the Good. And this is indeed a conundrum, for it seems to necessitate a knowledge of something beyond human comprehension. Thus Gregory asks: "How shall I name the invisible (τὸ ἀθεάτον)? How describe the immaterial (τὸ ἄϋλον)?" And again: "How is it possible…for such a good to come under our view, that which is contemplated but not seen (τὸ θεώμενον καὶ μὴ βλεπόμενον), which gives being to everything that is, yet itself for ever is and needs no such generation?"[17] These quotes make it clear that Gregory's primary perplexity at this point lies in the fact that the true good which the soul ought to know and therefore desire is the uncreated nature of God, which is immaterial and thus unavailable to sensible perception. And his central concern, as he makes clear in the paragraphs that follow, is the human propensity to set one's desire on lower, visible goods. Such a shift in desire is the result of human error, of the mistaken replacement of the true good with the "present deceitfulness of life" in such a way that the soul seeks to find satisfaction in lesser goods and, in the process, becomes enslaved to all variety of passions. It is this, notes Gregory, which led to the human fall into sin and the loss of happiness that was experienced in humanity's Edenic condition as *imago Dei*. At the same time, it is also this deception that prevents human beings from returning to their original state, for in setting their sights and desires on the pleasures of the material world, they continue to live unaware of the

[16] *Beat* 3.4 (GNO VII, II.104.4-8), trans. Hall, 42-43.
[17] *Beat* 3.5 (GNO VII, II.104.15-25), trans. Hall, 43.

true state of blessedness for which they were created. And that is why Christ identifies sorrow as a beatific step on the path to spiritual ascent, for sorrow arises from an acknowledgment of what is lacking and a desire for the one and only true good.

In the next homily, Gregory takes up this question of desire once again, this time in the context of a discussion of what Jesus means by referring to "hunger and thirst for justice" as a condition which leads to beatitude. This would seem to be a natural progression from what he has just discussed in his third homily. For once again, the subject under discussion is that of desire, and whereas the previous homily highlighted the necessity of knowing and desiring the true good and warned against the perils of mistaking it for deceitful goods of this present life, it gave little specific definition to what the nature of that true good might be. Here, however, Jesus has commended a specific good as the object for right desire, the good of justice (ἡ δικαιοςύνη). The question is, what is justice? Gregory offers several different possible definitions. He first begins with a definition of justice that, as Elias Moutsoulas notes, would have been commonly accepted in the ancient world, the notion of justice as "a disposition which distributes to each person what is fair and appropriate."[18] This definition, however, proves ultimately unsatisfactory to Gregory because it appears to limit the virtue of justice to those who occupy positions of social power that would enable them to participate in the act of fair distribution, which undermines the Christian conviction that the "saving word" of the gospel has been made universally available to all, regardless of social position. For "if being just consists of ruling and apportioning and administrating

[18] Moutsoulas, "Le sens de la justice dans la quatriéme *Homélie sur les Béatitudes* de Grégoire de Nysse," in *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on the Beatitudes: An English Version with Commentary and Supporting Studies*, 389-390.

generally, then surely the one who is without those is excluded from justice."[19] Yet it is clear in the gospels that a man of such low rank as the impoverished Lazarus has attained beatitude, therefore the definition of justice as the act of impartial and fair distribution must be insufficient.[20]

In searching for another definition, Gregory turns his attention to the example of the reports of Jesus' own hunger in the gospels. For if we can identify what it was that Jesus hungered after, he reasons, then we will be able to discern what that hunger is which leads to beatitude. "What then is the food which Jesus is not ashamed to crave?"[21] To answer this question, Gregory draws upon two scriptures: John 4:34 and 1 Timothy 2:4. The first of these comes from Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well, when he tells her that his "food" is to do the will of his Father. The second clarifies what precisely it is that the Father wills: "he wants all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." Drawing the logic of these two verses together, Gregory suggests that the "justice" for which Jesus hungers is the salvation of human souls. Similarly, those whom Jesus refers to as hungering and thirsting for justice are those who refuse to be satisfied with the deceptive pleasures of material food and drink and who instead crave their own beatific transformation.

Yet, Gregory does not end here. Although this definition of justice as salvation is preferable to the commonly accepted notion of justice as fair and impartial distribution, it still leaves us with certain questions. For example, does the statement that those who hunger and thirst for justice shall be satisfied imply that the desire for this particular

[19] *Beat* 4.2, trans. Hall, 49.
[20] Gregory is the one who cites the example of Lazarus from Luke 16.
[21] *Beat* 4.4, trans. Hall, 52.

virtue exceeds the desire for other virtues, such as temperance, prudence, and courage? Gregory raises this possibility only to flatly reject it. For the growth in any virtue, he argues, entails a growth in the other virtues as well, because to grow in virtue is to grow in goodness and the opposite of virtue is not another virtue, but vice.[22] Whoever desires to grow in virtue, be it the virtue of prudence or the virtue of courage or any other virtue, desires virtue itself. For this reason, when Jesus says that those who will be blessed are those who desire justice, "he indicates by this every kind of virtue (πᾶν ἀρετῆς εἶδος), with equal blessedness for the one who hungers for prudence, courage, temperance, and whatever else is comprehended in the same concept of virtue."[23]

Thus far in the homily, Gregory has made it clear that the true good which is to be desired and sought after is none other than the soul's own beatific transformation, and that this is equivalent to a desire for virtue. At this point, however, the reader would be justified in feeling a bit dissatisfied. For in the previous homily, the point was made that humans have a tendency to be deceived in their understanding of what is truly good. And in the beginning of the current homily, Gregory stressed the necessity of obtaining a clear perception of the object of one's desire.[24] But from what has been said thus far, it seems that Gregory has made little advance on the question of how a person may gain a clear understanding of the true good of "justice". Instead, he has simply clarified that the desire for justice is a desire for the soul's salvation and also a desire for virtue. Still to be

[22] Andrew Radde-Gallwitz analyzes Gregory's commitment to the mutual reciprocity of the virtues in his "Gregory of Nyssa on the Reciprocity of the Virtues," *Journal of Theological Studies* 58:2 (October 2007), 537-552. In that article, he observes that this commitment to the reciprocity of human virtues parallels Gregory's understanding of the reciprocity of divine perfections ("goods"), which are conceptually distinct but mutually entail one another due to the simplicity of the divine nature.
[23] *Beat* 4.5 (GNO VII, II.118.18-22), trans. Hall, 53.
[24] "One cannot have a desire for what is not apparent; our nature is somewhat inactive and immobile towards what is unknown, unless by hearing or seeing it gets some idea of what is desired." *Beat* 4.2, trans. Hall, 48.

answered is the question of how the soul might gain a clear understanding of the form of virtue itself. Where shall the soul set its vision in order to behold the true good which is the key to its own beatitude? Although Gregory does not give a direct answer to this question in the current homily—since he himself does not pose the question in quite this way—we can discern the basis for an answer to it in his concluding comments.

> If a more daring account should also be attempted, it seems to me that perhaps, by what he says about virtue and justice, the Lord is offering himself to the appetite of his hearers (ἑαυτὸν προτιθέναι τῇ ὀρεξει τῶν ἀκουόντων ὁ κύριος), who has become for us 'wisdom from God, justice and sanctification and redemption'…This then, according to my explanation, is true virtue, the good unmixed with evil, in which every superior concept is comprehended (περὶ ὃ πᾶν νόημα τῶν πρὸς τὸ κρεῖττον νοουμένων καταλαμβάνεται), God the Word himself…quite rightly those who hunger for this justice of God have been called blessed. In fact, he who has tasted the Lord, as the psalm puts it, which means, he who has received God into himself (ὁ ἐν ἑαυτῷ δεξάμενος τὸν θεόν), becomes full of that for which he has thirsted and hungered, in accordance with the promise of the one who said, 'I and my Father shall come and we shall make our abode with him.'[25]

Here is where we begin to see the fundamental logic of Gregory's Nicene theology at work. The true good which is to be desired and which enables the soul to attain the blessedness of sharing in divinity is undoubtedly nothing other than the perfect goodness of the divine nature, but Gregory shows no hesitation in associating that perfection with the person of Christ himself. For it is Christ who presents himself as the

[25] *Beat* 4.7 (GNO VII, II.122-123), trans. Hall, 55-56.

object of desire and who has manifested himself as the form of every virtue to be beheld. Christ is the "true virtue" and unalloyed good, the one in whom "every superior concept is comprehended." Gregory even goes so far as to say that the one who hungers and thirsts for Christ, the one who has "tasted the Lord," has indeed "received God into himself." Thus, when he finally comes around to giving a definitive answer on the question of where the person who wishes to ascend the ladder of spiritual perfection ought to direct her eyes, where she might behold the form of perfect goodness that will correct her errant desire, the object which Gregory proposes for contemplation is Christ. When placed within the broader context of Gregory's argument thus far—that the ascent toward blessedness is an ascent of mimetic participation in divine perfection—the implication is clear: Christ is the revelation of divine perfection, the object upon which the soul must set its sight and desire, and the ladder upon which it must climb.

So much for the emphasis on Jesus Christ as the locus of revelation for the soul's contemplation of divine perfection. What about the related emphasis that Gregory places on the activity of divine power as the manifestation of God, both in *Against Eunomius* and in his anthropological and ascetical texts? Does he include this element of his pro-Nicene account of theological epistemology within his discussion of contemplating God in the *Homilies on the Beatitudes*? To answer that question, we must turn our attention to the sixth homily, wherein Gregory discusses the promise of Matthew 5:8, that the pure in heart shall see God. This promise raises two immediate problems in Gregory's mind. On the one hand, there is the problem that what Jesus promises here seems to be impossible on both scriptural and ontological grounds. That no one ever has or ever can see God is a

fact which is attested on numerous occasions in the scriptures.[26] Even apart from this witness to the impossibility of seeing God, however, there remains the ontological obstacle that arises from the fact that the infinite nature of God transcends human comprehension. "What the divine nature might be in and of itself transcends all conceptual comprehension (πάσης ὑπέρκειται καταληπτικῆς ἐπινοίας), being inaccessible and unapproachable to speculative thoughts: no power has yet been discovered among human beings to understand the incomprehensible, nor has any method been devised of comprehending the unattainable."[27] And on top of this scriptural and ontological impossibility of seeing and comprehending God, there is also a second barrier that, according to Gregory, appears even more of a challenge than the first. For even if it were possible to overcome the apparent inability of human beings to see God, the condition which Jesus attaches to this promise stands in such stark contrast to the present condition of human existence that it seems to render the beatitude spiritually useless. For "when we are warned that the way we come by this vision is to become pure in heart (διὰ τοῦ καθαρὸν γενέσθαι τῇ καρδίᾳ)," then it seems that once again we are faced with an impossibility. "If this is the basis for the vision of God," Gregory writes, "then it would appear that what is proposed by the Word in the present beatitude is an impossibility. What good is it to us to know how God is seen, if the possibility of it is not also given to our understanding?"[28] Yet, despite these seemingly insurmountable obstacles, the fact remains that Jesus declares that some will indeed see God and the testimony of John and

[26] Gregory specifically cites John 1:18, 1 Timothy 6:16, and Exodus 33:20.
[27] *Beat* 6.3 (GNO VII, II.140.15-20), trans. Hall, 68.
[28] *Beat* 6.2 (GNO VII, II.138.24-139.6), trans. Hall, 67.

Paul and Moses suggests that they in fact have obtained this promise and so it must be the case that the vision of God is in fact possible. The question is, how?

To this twofold dilemma, Gregory proposes a twofold solution. First, he says that while it is indeed impossible for human beings to comprehend the divine nature, they may nevertheless gain some understanding of God through the observation of his activities within creation. For just as someone might come to know the wisdom of an artisan by paying attention to the works which her mind and hands produce, so too we might gain an understanding of the wisdom and power and goodness of God through reflection on his economic acts. "He who is by nature invisible becomes visible in his activities (ταῖς ἐνεργείαις), being seen in certain cases by the properties (ἰδιώμασι) he possesses."[29] Second, while the divine nature remains incomprehensible and unavailable to human sight, it is possible to gain an understanding of its character through its reflection in the purity of the human soul. And this is why, Gregory argues, Christ promises the vision of God to the pure in heart. It is not simply the case that those who are pure will be given the prize of beholding God as a reward for their purity, but rather that those who become pure by removing the corruption of sin from their lives will become once again what they were created to be: dynamic mirrors of divine perfection reflecting the characteristic goods of God. The one who is pure in heart will not then behold God only through the external manifestations of God in the activities of divine power, but also in the internal presence of those same activities within her own soul. In

[29] *Beat* 6.3 (GNO VII, II.141.25-27), trans. Hall, 69 (modified). While Gregory distinguishes here between the observable activities of God and his incomprehensible nature, Hans Boersma is right to argue that "we should not conclude that this means human beings do not really see God: by witnessing the operations of God…we really do see God himself." Boersma, "Becoming Human in the Face of God," 138. For a further discussion of how the observation of divine activity contributes to an understanding (albeit impartial and incomplete) of the divine nature, see my more extensive discussion of the topic in chapter 1 of this study.

becoming pure, then, the soul is able to behold in its own life what remains invisible to those who are still corrupted by sin. "And what might that be?" asks Gregory. "Purity, sanctification, simplicity, all such things are the luminous outpoured rays of the divine nature (τὰ φωτοειδῆ τῆς θείας φύσεως ἀπαυγάσματα) by which God is seen."[30]

When this twofold response is read in tandem with the identification of Christ as the form of justice (as well as all other virtues) in homily four, we can see that Gregory's response to the question of how a person might upwardly fix their contemplative gaze on the perfection of divine blessedness follows a familiar Nicene pattern. For while the infinite nature of God transcends the limits of human comprehension, it is nevertheless possible to behold God through the revelatory manifestation of divine activity, most especially through the revelation of God in the person of Jesus Christ. What is more, the soul's ascent is not simply a matter of the desire and contemplation of the goodness of God, but active participation in that same goodness. To be blessed is to participate in the blessedness of God, to "share in divinity" itself, as Gregory puts it in the fifth homily. And because of this, the ascendant soul itself becomes a medium through which the character of God may be beheld, for as the soul attains purity through its rejection of sin and its active participation in divine virtue, it becomes once again a mirror of divine perfection. That is the conclusion which Gregory comes to in his sixth homily and it leads me to the question to which I will now turn: how does the particular virtue of the ascendant soul compare to the particular characteristics of divine perfection that Gregory identifies in his Nicene theology?

[30] *Beat* 6.4 (GNO VII, II.144.10-13), trans. Hall, 71.

Reflecting God in the Homilies on the Beatitudes

In the first chapter of this study, I argued that Gregory's conflict with Eunomius of Cyzicus revolved not simply around the question of whether and to what extent the Son of God shared the nature of the Father. That a proponent and a critic of Nicaea would differ on this question is to be expected. What animated their disagreement, however, was a more fundamental disagreement on the character of divine perfection. For whereas Eunomius identified the perfection of God with the quality of being uncaused and existing in pure distinction from anything that derives its being from another, Gregory associated the perfection of God with the activity of divine power and, most particularly, with the life-giving and philanthropic goodness that was put on display in the gospel narrative of Christ's incarnation, death, and resurrection. This is a point which I have returned to again and again in this study, for it is only when we recognize the centrality of this account of divine goodness and love in Gregory's pro-Nicene account of God that we can begin to appreciate the influence of his Nicene theology on other aspects of his thought. And in the case of these homilies on the beatitudes, the best way to recognize the influence of Gregory's Nicene theology lies in paying attention to the description he gives of the form that godlikeness takes in the life of the transformed soul.

The connection between beatitude and godlikeness is made readily apparent by Gregory in his first homily. Commenting on the meaning of "Blessed are the poor in spirit," he writes, "We have argued before in a certain way, and now we shall do so again, that the goal of the virtuous life is likeness to the Divine (πρὸς τὸ θεῖον

ὁμοίωσις)."[31] Precisely what Gregory has in mind with his reference to a previous statement of this argument is unclear, though it is undoubtedly similar to his comments in *On the Christian's Profession* about Christianity as an imitation of the divine nature. And as I noted in the previous chapter, this description of the goal of virtue was in no way unique to Gregory, but is in fact a common trope in late ancient Greco-Roman (especially Platonic) philosophy.[32] Gregory's identification of virtue with godlikeness is therefore unexceptional. What is exceptional, however, is the particular form of life to which Gregory applies this maxim. For the virtue which is being commended in this beatitude is the virtue of those who are "poor in spirit" (οἱ πτωχοὶ τῷ πνεύματι). And in explaining how this first of the beatitudes contributes to the goal of the virtuous life, Gregory observes that those who develop a poverty of spirit are in fact imitating God; they are growing in godlikeness by imitating the "poverty of God" (τὴν τοῦ θεοῦ πτωχείαν).[33]

While the identification of virtue with godlikeness was rather common and would have probably struck Gregory's listeners as uncontroversial, this equation of godlikeness with poverty is a different matter altogether and sets Gregory apart from his theological and philosophical predecessors.[34] To explain this reference to the "poverty of God," Gregory first offers a more specific definition of what he thinks Jesus means with the

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[31] *Beat* 1.4 (GNO VII, II.82.23-25), trans. Hall, 26 (modified).
[32] See chapter 3, footnote 6.
[33] *Beat* 1.4 (GNO VII, II.83.6-9).
[34] On the originality of Gregory's equation of humility with godlikeness in this homily, see Anthony Meredith, "Gregory of Nyssa, *De beatitudinibus*, Oratio I: 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven' (Mt 5,3)," in *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on the Beatitudes: An English Version with Commentary and Supporting Studies*, 104-106. For a similar estimation of Gregory's originality on this point in comparison with the Platonic tradition, see Shigeki Tsuchihashi, "The Likeness to God and the Imitation of Christ: The Transformation of the Platonic Tradition in Gregory of Nyssa," in *Christians Shaping Identity from the Roman Empire to Byzantium: Studies Inspired by Pauline Allen*, eds. Geoffrey D. Dunn and Wendy Mayer (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 100-116.

phrase "poverty of spirit," namely, the virtue of "voluntary humility" (τὴν ἑκούσιον ταπεινοφροσύνην). Then, in defense of his claim that this virtue is one which can be found in God himself, Gregory appeals to the gospel narrative of Christ's humble descent for the sake of human salvation, citing in particular 2 Corinthians 8:9: ὃς δι' ἡμᾶς ἐπτώχευσε πλούσιος ὤν, ἵνα ἡμεῖς τῇ ἐκείνου πτωχείᾳ πλουτήσωμεν. He continues:

> Just because this sense of superiority is ingrained in almost every member of the human species, the Lord makes this the starting-point of his beatitudes: he evicts pride from our character as being the prime source of evil, when he counsels us to imitate the one who voluntarily became poor (μιμήσθαι τὸν ἑκουσίως πτωχεύσαντα), and who is truly blessed, in order that, inasmuch as we are able to become as much like him as we can in deliberate poverty, we may also gain for ourselves the share of his blessedness. 'Have this mind in you,' he says, 'which is in Christ Jesus, who though he existed in the form of God reckoned it not a prize to be equal with God, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave.' What is poorer for God than the form of a slave? What humbler for the King of all that is, than willingly to come to share our impoverishment? The King of kings and Lord of lords voluntarily puts on the form of a slave (ἐθελοντὶ τὴν τῆς δουλείας μορφὴν ὑποδύεται)…You see the standard of his willing poverty: Life tastes death, the Judge is brought to trial, the King of all the supernatural host does not fend off the hands of his executioners. 'Let the standard of your humility (τὸ ὑπόδειγμα τὸ τῆς ταπεινοφροσύνης),' he says, 'observe this model.'[35]

[35] *Beat* 1.4 (GNO VII, II.84.1-28), trans. Hall, 27.

Whether or not Gregory's hearers and subsequent readers found this apologetic to be a persuasive case for imagining humility as a virtue of God, the boldness with which he advances his case is striking, as is its fundamentally Nicene character. For it is not just the person of Christ to whom Gregory appeals in arguing for the propriety of ascribing humility to God, but the scriptural narrative of Christ's humble descent. The humility of Christ is seen most especially in the astonishing paradox of his incarnation and death, in the fact that the one who is life itself voluntarily tasted death, in the bewildering willingness of the one who is King of kings and Lord of lords to take on the most humiliating form imaginable, the form of a slave. It is here, in the Nicene presentation of Christ as "the descending, self-humbling God" that Gregory finds the basis for Jesus' admonition to poverty of spirit as a means to sharing in the blessedness of God.[36] And it is significant that, in speaking of the humility of Christ, Gregory does not feel the need to ascribe this humility to the *humanity* of the savior. To be sure, the humility which Christ shows can be seen in his willingness to become human, but it is the "poverty" and "voluntary humility" of the philanthropic God, and not simply the poverty of the man Jesus, that is witnessed in this wondrous act of condescension.[37]

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[36] I borrow this phrase from Khaled Anatolios's summary of the gospel narrative in the thought of Athanasius with the recognition of the continuity between Athanasius and Gregory in their focus on this narrative. Cf. Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, 122.

[37] I argued against the tendency to distinguish between Christ's "human" and "divine" virtues at length in the previous chapter, and I only bring it up again here because it seems to be such a common assumption among Gregory's modern readers. For example, in an otherwise insightful article, Shigeki Tsuchihashi suggests that Gregory's inclusion of the imitation of Christ's humility in this oration means that "from a theological perspective on the image, Gregory, in emphasizing the incarnation, suggests that the image of God cannot anymore be Christ's divine nature; rather it is Christ's humanity that is both the image of God and the likeness of God. In this way, it can be said that, through Gregory's innovative and systematic rewriting of the Platonic tradition, the imitation of Christ took the place of the traditional idea of the imitation of God, making its debut in the thought of the Christian fathers." Tsuchihashi, "The Likeness to God and the Imitation of Christ," 112. While Tsuchihashi is right in recognizing the challenge that Gregory poses to elements of the Platonic tradition in this homily, he is wrong in suggesting that Gregory is somehow replacing "Christ's divine nature" with "Christ's humanity" as the image of God, just as he is wrong to conclude that "the imitation of Christ" has taken the place of "the imitation of God" in Gregory's

Another example of this correlation between human virtue and philanthropic goodness can be found in Gregory's discussion of the beatitude "Blessed are the merciful" in the fifth homily. The homily begins, as I have already mentioned, with a discussion of Jacob's ladder as an analogy for the function of the beatitudes in elevating the soul to the experience of union with God. With this in mind, Gregory suggests that the purpose of the beatitude under question is "to divinize" (θεοποιεῖν) the hearer by instructing him on how he might become like God. How so? Because the quality of mercy, Gregory observes, is a quality that is regularly used in the scriptures to describe God himself.[38] And "if the title 'the Merciful' is one befitting God, what else is the Word doing than summoning you to become a god, inasmuch as you were shaped with the features of divinity (μορφωθέντα τῷ τῆς θεότητος ἰδιώματι)?"[39] To clarify precisely what this virtue entails and how it relates to the "features of divinity," Gregory defines the quality of mercy further by suggesting that it refers to a "loving disposition" toward those who have suffered injury or loss or are living in a state of need and that mercy is, therefore, "the father of good-will, the pledge of love, the bond of every amiable disposition (εὐνοίας πατήρ, ἀγάπης ἐνέχυρον, σύνδεσμος πάσης φιλικῆς διαθέσεως)."[40]

In what follows, Gregory offers several concrete examples of what form this virtue might take when put into practice and the social effects it might produce: relief of poverty, care for those in slavery, protection of the socially inferior, etc. And although he does not dwell at length on any of these particular spheres of social concern, it should be

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thought. And the only reason that I can discern for Tsuchihashi to think that this is in fact what Gregory is doing, since Tsuchihashi himself gives no justification for these claims, is that he simply assumes that Gregory cannot possibly mean what he actually says, which is that the humility of Christ is nothing other than the humility of God and, therefore, an aspect of divine perfection.

[38] He mentions the testimonies of David in the Psalms and Moses in Exodus as specific examples.

[39] *Beat* 5.2 (GNO VII, II.124.24-26), trans. Hall, 58 (modified).

[40] *Beat* 5.4 (GNO VII, II.128.14-16), trans. Hall, 60.

noted that, elsewhere in his writings, Gregory is an ardent and outspoken advocate on these and other issues of social concern. Indeed, Gregory dedicates entire homilies to exhorting those with resources to recognize their obligation to care for those afflicted by poverty and suffering, to warning those who loan money to others to act mercifully toward and not attempt to extract usury from their debtors, and to promoting, not simply the general welfare, but even the manumission of slaves.[41] In other words, this is not merely a passing theme in Gregory's writings, but a matter of central and recurring importance to him. What is notable within the context of this homily, however, is not the particular issues that Gregory mentions or what he has to say about them, since they are simply meant to serve as examples of mercy put into action, but instead how they connect to his larger theological argument. That argument is rather simple: to be merciful leads to blessedness because mercy is a quality of God and therefore to be merciful is to share in God's own perfect divinity. And how do we know that? Because the character of divinity has been manifested in the merciful and philanthropic actions of God toward humanity. Because concern for the poor, as Gregory reminds his hearers at the end of

[41] For Gregory's clearest teaching on these issues, see his treatises *De beneficentia* and *Contra usarios* and homily 4 of *In ecclesiasticum*. I say "even the manumission" because, as has been observed, Gregory's call for manumission is, if not unique, a remarkable exception to the norm in the ancient world. For a more extensive analysis of Gregory's writings on these subjects and his active involvement in promoting such causes, see Brian Daley, "Building a New City: The Cappadocian Fathers and the Rhetoric of Philanthropy," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 7:3 (1999), 431-461; Susan Holman, "Healing the Social Leper in Gregory of Nyssa's and Gregory of Nazianzus's 'περὶ φιλοπτωχίας'," *Harvard Theological Review* 92:3 (July 1999), 283-309; *eadem*, *The Hungry Are Dying: Beggars and Bishops in Roman Cappadocia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); David Bentley Hart, "The 'Whole Humanity': Gregory of Nyssa's Critique of Slavery in Light of His Eschatology," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 54:1 (2001), 51-69; Brian Matz, "Alleviating Economic Injustice in Gregory of Nyssa's *Contra usarios*," *Studia Patristica* 44 (2010), 549-553; Ilaria Ramelli, "Gregory of Nyssa's Position in Late Antique Debates on Slavery and Poverty, and the Role of Asceticism," *Journal of Late Antiquity* 5:1 (Spring 2012), 87-118; and Hans Boersma, *Embodiment and Virtue in Gregory of Nyssa*, 146-177.

this homily, is a reflection of the God who "became poor for [your] sake."[42] Because that is the nature of the Nicene God.

For a final example of this connection between the particularities of Gregory's Nicene theology of divine perfection and the character of Christian virtue within these homilies, I would like to draw attention to the seventh homily, on the saying, "Blessed are the peacemakers." In his introductory remarks to the homily, Gregory once again brings up the theme which has been a guiding motif throughout these sermons, that of ascent. And once again, he highlights a figural analogy with another scriptural example of ascent, that of Moses' ascent upon Sinai. I will give significantly more attention to Gregory's understanding of this particular ascent in my comments on *Life of Moses* below. For now, however, I wish to highlight one particular element of that ascent and the connection Gregory draws with it to the seventh homily. Moses' ascent up Mt. Sinai serves as a perfect example, in Gregory's mind, of the progressive stages of the spiritual life that reflect the progressive character of development in the life of virtue. And the culmination of that ascent consists in Moses' entrance into the vision of the heavenly tabernacle, which is the holy of holies. In a similar way, Gregory envisions the beatitudes to serve as a progressive ascent, each one leading upward toward a greater contemplation of and participation in God. And with this beatitude, Gregory suggests that we have arrived at the height of the ascent, the "unentered sanctuary (τὸ ἄδυτον)…which is also truly a holy of holies," because the peacemakers are described as "sons of God," which is the pinnacle and goal of spiritual ascent. After all, "if seeing God (τὸ ἰδεῖν τὸν θεὸν) has nothing to surpass it in goodness, then surely to become a son of

[42] *Beat* 5.8 (GNO VII, II.136.10-12)

God (τὸ υἱὸν γενέσθαι θεοῦ) is beyond all felicity."[43] Because, in Gregory's understanding, to become a son of God is to become fully transformed into the likeness of God. What this promise suggests is that "Man escapes from his own nature: from mortal he becomes immortal, from decaying undecaying, from transient eternal; from man, in short, he becomes God (τὸ ὅλον θεὸς ἐξ ἀνθρώπου γινόμενος)…and becomes inheritor of all his Father's goods (τῶν πατρικῶν ἀγαθῶν)."[44]

My reason for highlighting this estimation of the beatitude's preeminennt place within the spiritual ascent is to underscore the fact that, for Gregory, the attendant virtue of the one who has become a son of God, that of peacemaking, takes on particular significance as the highest expression of godlikeness in the human soul. But what does Jesus mean by peacemaking? Gregory suggests that this virtue refers to the activity of bringing peace where there is conflict, and that this can take place in at least three contexts of conflict: divisions and hatred among human persons, the division and conflict that takes place within the souls of those who are controlled by vicious passions, particularly that of anger, and the internal conflict of one's own soul. And those who bring peace to any of these agonistic realms, according to Gregory, are reflecting God by doing what God does, by performing "a work of divine power" (θείας δυναμέως ἔργον). He continues:

> The reason why [Jesus] calls the peacemaker a son of God is that he becomes an imitator of the true Son (μιμητὴς γίνεται τοῦ υἱὸν θεοῦ ἀληθινοῦ) who has bestowed these things on human life. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. Who

[43] *Beat* 7.1 (GNO VII, II.149.3-16), trans. Hall, 75.
[44] *Beat* 7.1 (GNO VII, II.151.15-20), trans. Hall, 77.

> are they? – the imitators of divine love for humanity (οἱ μιμηταὶ τῆς θειίας φιλανθρωπίας), those who show in their own lives the characteristic activity of God (τὸ ἴδιον τῆς τοῦ θεοῦ ἐνεργείας). This is the work he decrees for you, to expel hatred, to resolve conflict, to get rid of envy, to banish fighting, to destroy hypocrisy, to quench the grudge within which smolders in the heart, and to replace these with what arises in their stead when their contraries are removed. Just as with the withdrawal of darkness light supervenes, so also in place of each of these evils the fruit of the Spirit comes instead: love, joy, peace, goodness, patience, and all the list of good things which the Apostle compiled. How then can the distributor of the divine benefits not be blessed, the imitator of the gifts of God (ὁ μιμητὴς τῶν τοῦ θεοῦ χαρισμάτων), the one who makes his own good deeds resemble the divine generosity?[45]

This passage serves as an excellent illustration of the influence of Nicene theology in Gregory's thinking on the nature of spiritual perfection. It is no mere coincidence that the height of spiritual perfection consists in the activity of peacemaking, because through that particular activity the soul becomes a mimetic reflection of one of the most characteristic marks of divine perfection, God's love for humanity (φιλανθρωπία). On the one hand, this is a distinctly christological virtue which makes the peacemaker an "imitator of the true Son" because the quality of philanthropic goodness is most especially seen in the economy of the Son's saving work in his incarnation, death, and resurrection, which is the means by which God has brought peace to conflicted human souls. But simply because it is a virtue manifested in the narrative of Christ's economy, this does not make it any less a mark of God's own nature. To the

[45] *Beat* 7.4-5 (GNO VII, II.159.13-160.10), trans. Hall, 82.

contrary, the act of peacemaking is a "characteristic activity of God." This is, as I have repeatedly emphasized, a central element in Gregory's pro-Nicene understanding of divine perfection. Which is why, I suggest, that this equation of the activity of philanthropic goodness with the height of spiritual transformation and the process of divinization is deeply indebted to and reflective of his fundamental Nicene commitments. What is more, as I shall demonstrate, the identification that Gregory makes here of the philanthropic activity of bringing peace to the souls of others as the height of Christian virtue is not isolated to this homily. While there are clear exegetical reasons here for Gregory to equate peacemaking with godlikeness, this is a pattern which will appear again, both in the *Homilies on the Song of Songs* and in *Life of Moses*.

Nicene Theology and Christian Virtue in *Life of Moses*

The introduction to Gregory's *Life of Moses* shares numerous similarities with the two texts which I discussed in the previous chapter.[46] Like those texts, for instance,

[46] The *Life of Moses* has attracted significant attention in twentieth century scholarship and, as with most of Gregory's texts, the question of its dating has been a matter of contention. What is interesting about this debate is its connection with questions of the development of Gregory's theology and the relationship between his "spiritual" and his "theological" writings. Jean Daniélou, for instance, suggested a very late date for the composition of *De vita Moysis*, a date at the very end of Gregory's literary career, somewhere around the year 392. And two of the primary reasons that he gave for this dating was that he regarded the theology of this text to reflect the most mature development of Gregory's thought and, also, that he thought it belonged to a later period of the bishop's life when, after the heated battles of polemical dispute, he was finally able to settle down into a non-dogmatic, "mystical" period of writing. Daniélou's argument has proven highly influential in later scholarship, but it has not gone without serious critique. Ronald Heine, for instance, has argued against each of the reasons proposed by Daniélou for the late date that he gives, focusing his criticism especially against the assumption that the *Life of Moses* shows no sign of polemical struggle. To the contrary, Heine argues for a date somewhere in the "mid 380's" precisely because he discerns within the text multiple evidences of Gregory's ongoing disputes with both Eunomianism and certain aspects of Origenism. Sarah Coakley, similarly, has argued against Daniélou's assumption of a late period of polemical-free "mystical writing," pointing out that such a notion distorts our reading of Gregory by introducing a false distinction between theology and spirituality that would have been entirely foreign to the Cappadocian father. While the reading of the *Life of Moses* which I will advance in this chapter is not dependent on establishing the validity of either of these proposals for the compositional date of the text, my interest in observing the overlapping connections between Gregory's anti-Eunomian, pro-Nicene theology and his analysis of Moses' spiritual development make it clear that I am in much sympathy with the

Gregory begins with a prologue that frames the work as a letter addressed to a younger spiritual protégé, although from the length of the treatise, it is nearly certain that Gregory always intended a much broader audience.[47] And just as he did with *On Perfection* and *On the Christian's Profession*, Gregory dedicates this work to the topic of perfection in the virtuous life.[48] Gregory also makes it clear in his opening remarks that the life of virtue is nothing other than a participation in God's own perfect goodness. "The first and most proper Good, whose nature is goodness (οὗ ἡ φύσις ἀγαθότης ἐστίν), is God himself...[and] whoever pursues true virtue participates in nothing other than God (οὐδὲν ἕτερον ἢ θεοῦ μετέχει), because He is himself absolute virtue."[49] Also, much as he did in

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arguments put forward by Heine and Coakley for reading this "spiritual" writing in concert with Gregory's more explicit theological texts. For summaries of these positions, cf. Daniélou, "Introduction," *La Vie de Moïse*, iv-ix; Heine, *Perfection in the Virtuous Life*, 15-20; and Coakley, "Re-Thinking Gregory of Nyssa: An Introduction—Gender, Trinitarian Analogies, and the Pedagogy of the *Song*," in *Re-Thinking Gregory of Nyssa*, ed. Coakley (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 1-3. In what follows, all references to the Greek text of *De vita Moysis* will be taken from the *Sources Chrétiennes* critical edition: Grégoire de Nysse*, La Vie de Moïse, ou, traité de la perfection en matière de vertu*, ed. and trans. Jean Daniélou, S.J., SC 1 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1955). For English translation, I will utilize (with my own modifications) the translation of Everett Ferguson and Abraham Malherbe in *Gregory of Nyssa: The Life of Moses* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978). All translations with no further reference are my own.

[47] The question of precisely who that audience might have been has generated a variety of scholarly proposals, from the suggestion that Gregory intended the treatise to serve as a training manual for a community of young spiritual ascetics to arguments that the primary intended audience consisted of Christian bishops, for whom Moses was meant to serve as a model. Ellen Muehlberger has recently combined these two suggestions and argued that, instead of young ascetics or Christian bishops, it was in fact more precisely the leaders of ascetical communities for whom Gregory wrote the work. Cf. Muehlberger, "The Ascetic Leader in Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Moses*," in *The Christian Moses*, eds. Philip Rousseau and Janet Timbie (Washington, DC: CUA Press, 2019), 136-153. Susanna Elm provides a helpful review of some of these discussions, as well as a salutary reminder that, whoever Gregory's primary intended audience may have been, it is certainly true that he considered the outline of the spiritual life which he was discussing as something available to all, and not just to some, Christians. On this, see Elm, "Dressing Moses: Reading Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Moses* Literally," in *Exploring Gregory of Nyssa: Philosophical, Theological, and Historical Studies*, eds. Anna Marmodo and Neil McLynn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 52-54. Rowan Greer makes a similar argument for the universal applicability of Gregory's writings on the spiritual life to all Christians in Greer, *One Path for All: Gregory of Nyssa on the Christian Life and Human Destiny*, assisted by J. Warren Smith (Eugen, OR: Cascade Books, 2015).

[48] *Vit Moys* 1.5-10

[49] *Vit Moys* 1.7, trans. Malherbe and Ferguson, 31 (modified). C.W. MacLeod highlights Gregory's bold statement about God being absolute virtue as something which sets him apart from both Platonic and Christian precedents: "[This equation of God with absolute virtue] is, I believe, peculiar to Gregory. It is quite foreign to Platonism, which is careful to put God above mere virtue, as was Aristotle (*E.N.* 7.1, 1145a25-6). Gregory seems closer to the Stoics, for whom the virtue of God and man was one and the

On Perfection, Gregory suggests in his opening remarks that the nature of perfection in the life of virtue is a state of endless progress and growth. "The perfection (τελειότης) of human nature," he writes, "consists in constant growth toward greater goodness."[50] Finally, once again he chooses a biblical example to serve as a guide for the life of virtue, this time settling on the person of Moses as an exemplar of one who embodies well both this pursuit of endless growth in a life of participation in divine goodness.

In what follows, I will discuss what Gregory has to say about the virtuous life in this text, paying particular attention, as I did in my analysis of the *Homilies on the Beatitudes*, to the twin themes of Moses' contemplation of God's own goodness and his subsequent reflection of that goodness in the character and activity of his own life. I will do this in turn, looking first at Moses' own experience of seeing and understanding God in his two experiences of theophany, first at the burning bush and then on Mt Sinai, and then focusing my attention on the particular character of Christian virtue as it is reflected in Moses' actions. My purpose in doing this is to illustrate the continuity between Gregory's approach to these themes within this current text and those which I have already discussed. For, as I will demonstrate, what becomes clear when we read the *Life of Moses* in relationship to these other texts is the notable influence, once again, of the major elements of Gregory's pro-Nicene theology that I highlighted in the first chapter, both in terms of theological method and epistemology and in terms of Gregory's distinctive emphasis on philanthropic goodness as a primary marker of divine perfection.

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same (*SVF* 1.564, 3.245-52). This thought was repugnant to Clement; and in fact Gregory does not share it in its original sense. The disparity of created and uncreated being means that God's goodness and human goodness are sharply distinct. At the same time Gregory's formulations make it clear that if there is to be human goodness and, it must be a participation in God or assimilation to him." MacLeod, "The Preface to Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Moses*," *The Journal of Theological Studies* 33:1 (April 1982), 189l

[50] *Vit Moys* 1.10, trans. Malherbe and Ferguson, 31 (modified).

The God whom Moses beholds and the God whom he reflects is no generic deity, but the particular God who has revealed himself in the life and death of Jesus Christ.

Seeing God in Life of Moses

Contemporary studies on the *Life of Moses* have dedicated significant attention to the identification of progressive stages within the spiritual life, with each of these stages being particularly associated with distinctive modes of Moses' perception of God. Reading this text in concert with some of Gregory's comments in his eleventh homily on the Song of Songs, Jean Daniélou identified three particular stages in Moses' spiritual ascent—purgation, illumination, and unification—each one associated with a particular event in Moses' life, one at the burning bush and two at Mt Sinai, and each marked by its own distinct experience of the vision of God.[51] The first stage, that of purgation, is a stage that consists of both an ethical and mental purification from the corrupting effects of sinful passion, and is associated with the bright light which Moses encounters in the burning bush. In the second stage of illumination, the soul contemplates truths of God that are hidden from those who are still weighed down by passion and is associated by Daniélou with Moses' being surrounded by the cloud upon Sinai. The third stage, which Daniélou identifies with Moses' experience of being enshrouded in darkness, is the stage of unification, when the soul experiences mystical union with God and when the

[51] Daniélou, *Platonisme et théologie mystique: Essai sur la doctrine spirituelle de Saint Grégoire de Nysse, 2nd ed.* (Paris: Aubier, 1944) 10-22. The relationship between these stages of spiritual ascent and the theme of seeing/knowing God is evident in Daniélou's description of them as consisting of "connaisance scientifique," "méthode exégétique," and "contemplation mystique." Later scholars have questioned whether Gregory envisaged these aspects of the spiritual life as distinct "stages" which were to be progressed through, but it should be noted that Daniélou himself never claimed as much, preferring instead to think of them as "moments" within the spiritual life. For a further discussion of this, see Warren Smith, *Passion and Paradise: Human and Divine Emotion in the Thought of Gregory of Nyssa* (New York: Herder & Herder, 2004), 151-154.

experience of contemplating God turns from one of illumined knowing to one of apophatic unknowing.

This basic framework and its particular way of charting the epistemological development of Moses' contemplative life have been very influential among subsequent studies of the *Life of Moses*, but it has also been the subject of criticism in several recent studies. Hans Boersma, for instance, has argued against Daniélou's threefold division of the spiritual life of Moses and, in its place, proposed that we speak of only two distinct stages associated with the two distinct theophanies, one at the bush and the other at Sinai.[52] Nathan Eubank has also challenged Daniélou's reading of the stages of Moses' contemplative progress, arguing that the French scholar misconstrued Gregory's understanding of the final stage by placing an undue emphasis on the apophatic experience of noetic darkness and neglecting the simultaneous emphasis on Moses' ongoing contemplation of positive divine revelation.[53] As will become apparent in what follows, my own reading of the stages Moses' experience of seeing and knowing God are indebted to some of this recent revisionary scholarship and, following Boersma's proposal, I will structure my analysis by simply focusing on the two theophanies which Moses experiences, looking first at the burning bush and second at his time on Mt Sinai.

The first theophany occurs in Moses' encounter with God at the burning bush. Latching onto the image of the light emanating from the bush, Gregory sees in this episode an experience of illumination in Moses' life, through which he comes to know

[52] Boersma, "Becoming Human in the Face of God," 141-142. Ronald Heine argues against identifying any distinct stages of ascent, claiming instead that every event in Moses' life "represents another upward step" and therefore that "*all* of Moses' life is to be viewed as a series of ascending steps" with none being more important than another. Heine, *Perfection in the Virtuous Life*, 102-103.
[53] Eubank, "Ineffably Effable: The Pinnacle of Mystical Ascent in Gregory of Nyssa's *De vita Moysis*," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 16:1 (January 2014), 25-41.

something of the truth.[54] And the truth which Moses comes to understand through his experience of revelation at the bush, Gregory explains, is none other than the truth which is God himself.[55] So, what is it that Moses learns about God through the burning light of the bush, and how does this experience compare to the basic elements of Gregory's pro-Nicene epistemology? One of the primary lessons which Moses learns, according to Gregory, is a negative one. Moses learns what God is not, or you might say, he learns what is not God by coming to distinguish between "true Being" (ἀληθῶς τὸ ὄν), which possesses its being entirely independent of any other reality, and that which is "not being" (τὸ μὴ ὄν) because it exists only insofar as it has its nature "from another" (ἐφ' ἑαυτοῦ).[56] What this means in practice is that Moses learns the difference between created and uncreated nature and is thereby purged of all vestigial influences of idolatrous Egyptian philosophy. This is why Daniélou and others have identified this theophany as belonging to the purgative stage of Moses' spiritual experience. This experience is purgative because, as Warren Smith puts it, "[Moses'] very conception of reality must be purified."[57]

But the revelation that Moses receives at the bush is not merely negative. Along with learning what God is not and with what God should not be compared, Moses also gains a deeper understanding of the true nature of God, and in this Gregory discerns a figural analogy in the burning bush and the events surrounding it to the event of Christ's

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[54] The image of light is a prevalent one in Gregory's discussion of the spiritual experience of revelatory illumination, particularly with reference to the incarnation. For a fuller analysis of the various uses for which Gregory employs this imagery, see Martin Laird, "Gregory of Nyssa and the Mysticism of Darkness: A Reconsideration," 599-610.

[55] Θεὸς δέ ἐστιν ἡ ἀλήθεια ἡ ἐμφαινισθεῖσα τότε διὰ τῆς ἀρρήτου ἐκείνης φωταγωγίας τῷ Μωϋσεῖ. *Vit Moys* 2.19

[56] *Vit Moys* 2.23

[57] Smith, *Passion and Paradise*, 157.

incarnation. First, Gregory suggests that the bush itself, which burns but is not consumed, is intended to symbolize the "mystery of the Virgin" (τὸ κατὰ τὴν Παρθένον μυστήριον), through whose body the "light of divinity" shone into the world without destroying the flower of her virginity.[58] It is Christ, then, whom Gregory discerns as the true light which illumines Moses' understanding through the light of the bush. And moving on from the bush itself, Gregory also finds a symbolic reference to Christ in the subsequent miraculous transformation of Moses' rod into a snake and his hand into being leprous in one moment and then clean again in the next. "These," he writes, "seem to me to signify by way of enigma the mystery of the Lord's incarnation, a manifestation of divinity (τῆς φανείσης θεότητος) to mankind."[59] Based on this connection, Gregory spends the next seven paragraphs using the symbols of the rod and the snake to recount the basic narrative of Christ's incarnation, reminding his readers that, although by nature immutable, Christ "was changed to be like us" (καθ' ἡμᾶς ἠλλοιώθη) by becoming sin (a serpent) on our behalf so that we might devour the sin which threatens us and that he might transform us into partakers of his own perfection and, subsequently, granting us a "rod" of faith to strengthen us in our spiritual journey as we advance in hope on the "toilsome course of virtue."[60] What Moses learned about God through the burning bush and the events surrounding it, then, was not simply the necessity of distinguishing between uncreated and created being, but also the nature of God's own character as it is revealed through the narrative of the Son's incarnation on behalf of sinful humanity.

[58] *Vit Moys* 2.21
[59] *Vit Moys* 2.27, trans. Malherbe and Ferguson, 61 (modified).
[60] *Vit Moys* 2.28-2.33

Whereas Gregory's interpretation of the theophanic events surrounding the burning bush occupy approximately sixteen paragraphs of the second book of the *Life of Moses*, his discussion of the second theophany, Moses' encounter with God at Sinai, extends to more than five times this length, stretching out to include nearly eighty-five paragraphs of the text all told.[61] Following the work of Daniélou, who focused his discussion of both the second and third stages of the spiritual life on this experience at Sinai, this section of the *Life of Moses* has probably received more scholarly attention than any other portion of the text. I have no intention to interact with all of this scholarship or address many of the numerous interpretive theses and debates that have arisen around this passage of the *Life*. My purpose, once again, is simply to outline some of the fundamental elements of continuity with Gregory's interpretation of this theophany and his pro-Nicene response to the question of how human beings come to a positive knowledge of the character of divine perfection. For this reason, I will give relatively little attention to Moses' encounter with God in darkness that Gregory discusses in 2.162-2.164, and which has received so much attention in contemporary scholarship, not because I wish to downplay the apophatic element of Gregory's spirituality, which I readily grant plays an important role in his anti-Eunomian approach to theological epistemology, but simply because my interest lies in the more positive aspects of Moses' apprehension of God on Sinai.[62]

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[61] These are rough estimates which might vary depending upon precisely how many paragraphs of the text one includes in each section. My estimates derive from a judgment that Gregory's discussion of the theophany at the burning bush and its interpretation extends from 2.19 to 2.36 and that his interpretation of the second theophany (including Moses' vision of the tabernacle and priestly vestments as well as his later vision of God upon the rock) includes two sections: 2.152-2.201 and 2.219-2.255.

[62] My emphasis on the positive, christological elements of Moses' apprehension of God at Sinai is also in some ways an attempt to correct what seems to be a common tendency of over-emphasizing the theme of divine darkness. And there is good textual reason for this, for as Ann-Conway Jones recently observed, "Whereas the 'radiant darkness,' the focus of much scholarly attention, takes up three paragraphs of *Life of*

Gregory begins his analysis of Moses' ascent up Sinai—the mountain of "the knowledge of God" (ἡ θεολογία)—with an emphasis on the necessary purification that Moses has undergone prior to arriving at this point, using this observation to make a general point about the inherent connection between growth in virtue and growth in the knowledge of God. "Moses' way to such knowledge was purity…This means that the one person who would approach the contemplation of Being (τῇ τῶν ὄντων θεωρίᾳ) must be pure in all things."[63] Gregory goes on to clarify that this necessary purity involves a purification from both erroneous opinions concerning God and irrational and sinful passions. Following these observations, he then notes that the first stage of Moses' ascent up the mountain comes through the trumpet blasts which descend from the mountain and beckon him up. These trumpet blasts, he argues, refer to the "preaching about the divine nature" (τὸ περὶ τῆς θείας φύσεως κήρυγμα) which was given through the Law and the Prophets, and that the content of that preaching consisted in the scriptural teaching about the "mystery of the divine economy," i.e., the narrative of God's saving work in Christ.[64] But not all who heard the trumpets were ready to understand the message which they proclaimed, just as, Gregory notes, not all of those in the Church are prepared to understand divine teaching; some are prevented by their tendency to be led astray by "heretical opinions."[65]

In the three paragraphs that follow, Gregory focuses on Moses' entrance into darkness. This experience seems to stand in contrast to the earlier experience of divine

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Moses (2.162-64), the tabernacle vision occupies thirty-two (2.170-201)." Conway-Jones, "Moses Ascends to Heaven: Gregory of Nyssa's Tabernacle Imagery in *Life of Moses* 2.170-201," in *The Christian Moses*, 154

[63] *Vit Moys* 2.154, trans. Malherbe and Ferguson, 92. For further discussion of the relationship between virtue and the knowledge of God in this text, see Heine, *Perfection in the Virtuous Life*, 115-127.

[64] *Vit Moys* 2.158-159

[65] *Vit Moys* 2.161

illumination, but in fact it is the natural progression of one who has had their erroneous notions of God removed and has been taught by the scriptures. For true knowledge of God, Gregory notes, consists in the "seeing which consists in not seeing" (τὸ ἰδεῖν ἐν τῷ μὴ ἰδεῖν), in the soul's recognition that the God whom it wishes to behold transcends all possibility of human comprehension.[66] This is what is meant, according to Gregory, by the claim that Moses "saw" God in the darkness. The sight which Moses received was the revelation of the absolute infinity of the divine nature, which can never be reduced to the level of intellectual comprehensibility. And this moment of apophatic "unknowing" is, as Ronald Heine has argued, undoubtedly reflective of a very important aspect of Gregory's debate with Eunomius, insofar as it connects to his rejection of the latter's claims to "precise" knowledge of the divine essence.[67] But, and this is important, Moses' progression in the knowledge and vision of God does not end in this moment of agnostic darkness. There are still two more positive experiences of divine revelation that occur on the summit of Sinai.

The first of these two experiences come in the vision of the heavenly tabernacle which Moses receives upon the mountain. While some scholars, such as Jean Daniélou and Andrew Louth, have located this vision of the tabernacle within the "second" stage of Moses' spiritual ascent, Nathan Eubank argues persuasively that Gregory considers it a "more advanced stage" of the knowledge of God than the moment of darkness.[68] But what is it that Moses beholds in this advanced stage of spiritual ascent, when he sees this heavenly tabernacle? According to Gregory, the tabernacle is none other than Christ

[66] *Vit Moys* 2.163
[67] Heine, *Perfection in the Virtuous Life*, 127-158.
[68] Eubank, "Ineffably Effable: The Pinnacle of Mystical Ascent in Gregory of Nyssa's *De vita Moysis*," 29-32. My interpretation of this section of the *Life* is heavily indebted to Eubank.

himself whom Moses now beholds, although it is now no longer through the medium of Christ's humanity but rather a spiritual apprehension of Christ in his pure divinity.[69] Some might hesitate to accept this interpretation, Gregory acknowledges, being concerned that referring to God as a "tabernacle" would end up "diminishing the magnificence (τὸ μεγαλεῖον)" of the divine nature.[70] To reassure those who might have this concern, Gregory makes a general observation about the way that names are used to describe the nature of God:

> But just as all other names, in keeping with what is being specified, are each used piously to express the divine power (πρὸς ἔνδειξιν τῆς θείας δυνάμεως)—as, for example, physician, shepherd, protector, bread, vine, way door, mansion, water, rock, spring, and whatever other designations are used of him—in the same way he is given the predicate "tabernacle" in accord with signification fitting to God. For the power (ἡ δύναμις) which encompasses the universe, in which lives the fullness of divinity (ἐν ᾗ κατοικεῖ πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα τῆς θεότητος), the common protector of all, who encompasses everything within himself, is rightly called "tabernacle."[71]

Two observations should be made regarding this passage's relationship to the arguments which Gregory advanced in support of Nicene theology in *Against Eunomius*. First, note his appeal to both the importance and the plurality of divine names as a means of describing, albeit in a partial fashion, the character of the divine nature. Second, notice the christological character of these names. The examples that Gregory gives

[69] *Vit Moys* 2.174
[70] *Vit Moys* 2.176
[71] *Vit Moys* 2.177, trans. Malherbe and Ferguson, 99.

(physician, shepherd, bread, wine, etc.) are descriptive titles used of Christ in the New Testament. And in a similar way, Gregory not only identifies Christ as the true meaning of the heavenly tabernacle that is beheld by Moses, he also equates Christ with the active "power" of God at work in creation, whose activity serves as the basis for human naming and description of God.[72] The significance of these observations for our understanding of Gregory's account of the spiritual life is that, even in this most advanced stage of his spiritual progress, Moses has not left behind the understanding of God which comes through positive naming of divine power as it is christologically enacted.[73] Still, at this advanced stage, the nature of God is known positively through the person and titles of Jesus Christ.

One final element of Moses' vision of God still awaits in another event that takes place upon Sinai, when Moses returns once again to the top of the mountain to receive the stone tablets for a second time and, in the process, makes his request to see God. This passage, like the description of Moses' ascent into darkness in 2.162-2.164, has received significant attention in scholarly studies of Gregory's spiritual theology as a preeminent example of his distinctive doctrine of "epectasy," the endless dynamic of perpetual growth and desire that is the hallmark of Gregory's understanding of Christian

[72] That Gregory understands Christ to be the "power which encompasses the universe" is clear from the adjectival phrase that he uses to describe this power, "in which lives the fullness of divinity," which is an almost verbatim citation of Colossians 2:9.

[73] As Nathan Eubank puts it, "The encounter with God's ineffability is surpassed by the encounter with the God-man Christ, who is not only the unknown tabernacle of all in his infinity, but also who is known intimately in his humanity and through the church. The soul who is purified and learns of the divine nature and the incarnation through Scripture and the created order eventually enters the darkness, and, having been purified of idolatrous ideas of God, the soul is drawn into the 'ever-ascending dialectic'—to use [Warren] Smith's phrase—between God in his simplicity and God as known in Jesus of Nazareth." Eubank, "Ineffably Effable: The Pinnacle of Mystical Ascent in Gregory of Nyssa's *De vita Moysis*," 41.

perfection.[74] What I would like to note in the context of this study, however, is less the emphasis on continual development and change that plays such an admittedly central role in this passage, but instead how Gregory's interpretation of Moses' vision in the cleft of the rock relates to the relationship between (a) beholding God in the person and activity of Christ and (b) mimetically participating in that activity through the life of virtue.

Moses' request to see God strikes Gregory as a strange and paradoxical one. After all, this request does not occur in the biblical narrative until Exodus chapter 34, at which point Moses has already beheld God in the vision of the heavenly tabernacle and the readers of Exodus have already been told about Moses' habit of meeting with God "face to face."[75] Gregory puzzles over this and asks, "How does someone who Scripture says saw God clearly (ἐναργῶς ὁρᾶν τὸν θεὸν) …require that God appear to him…as though Moses had not yet attained what Scripture testifies he had attained?"[76] And it is this question which presses Gregory to make his observations about the continuous, never-ending nature of contemplation and desire within the spiritual life and the exemplification of this principle within Moses' own experience. "For this reason," he writes, "we say that the great Moses, as he was becoming ever greater (ἀεὶ μείζω), at no time stopped in his ascent, nor did he set a limit (ὅρον) for himself in his upward course."[77] Such is Gregory's answer to the question of *why* Moses makes his puzzling request to see God. But another question follows. What is it that Moses sees when God answers this request? In other words, in what does this further vision consist?

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[74] For a summary of Gregory's doctrine of epectasy, see Lucas Mateo-Seco, "*Epektasis*," in *The Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa*, eds. Lucas Francisco Mateo-Seco and Giulio Maspero (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 263-268.
[75] Exodus 33:11
[76] *Vit Moys* 2.219, trans. Malherbe and Ferguson, 111-112.
[77] *Vit Moys* 2.227, trans. Malherbe and Ferguson, 113.

In attempting to explain Moses' continual progression and the way that it is symbolically interpreted in this episode upon Sinai, Gregory once again returns to the definition of God as perfect goodness, and from this principle he derives several important conclusions. First, the fact that God is goodness itself helps to explain Moses' apparently insatiable desire to see more and more of God, despite the scriptural testimony to his previous experiences of seeing God. For the desire to behold goodness is identical with progress in virtue, and "activity directed toward virtue" (ἡ κατ' ἀρετὴν ἐνέργεια), Gregory notes, is the one kind of activity which "does not slacken its intensity by the effort, but increases it."[78] It is for this reason that Moses, though already well advanced in the life of virtue and the contemplation of God, continues to ask for an even greater gift of divine revelation. Second, this principle helps us to understand what it is that Moses sees in this new and greater vision of God. It is an increased vision of divine goodness that Moses beholds, and the reason that this is possible is because goodness is infinite; it is not limited by anything other than its opposite, which is evil, and in God there is no evil. Therefore, Gregory argues, the goodness of God transcends all limits and the spiritual apprehension of it knows no end.[79] Third, Gregory suggests that the rock upon which Moses stands as he experiences this vision, and, paradoxically, in which he beholds the goodness of God, is none other than Christ. "Since Christ is understood by Paul as the rock, all hope of good things is believed to be in Christ, in whom we have

[78] *Vit Moys* 2.226, trans. Malherbe and Ferguson, 113.
[79] Warren Smith summarizes this connection between the infinity of divine goodness and the insatiability of human contemplation of, desire for, and participation in it: "Nyssen assumes the soul will grow in its knowledge of God's goodness as it grows in virtue and so becomes more like God. Simultaneously, the more it knows of God the more it wants to be pure so that it can receive an even greater share of God's goodness. Since, however, God's goodness is perfect and therefore limitless, the soul even in the eschaton will never reach a point where it fully embodies all of God's perfection and enjoys all the blessings of God's goodness." Smith, *Passion and Paradise*, 182.

learned all the treasures of good things to be. He who finds any good finds it in Christ who contains all good (τῷ περιεκτικῷ πάντος ἀγαθοῦ)."[80]

Moses' request for a further vision of God, then, is explained by the fact that what he is seeing is the infinite and eternally active goodness of God, which is beheld in the person of Christ. But why does Exodus say that Moses sees the "back" of God? Gregory raises this question in the beginning of his commentary on this passage and notes the potential for heretical understandings of God should one interpret such corporeal language literally, but he does not provide his own interpretation of what it means until almost thirty paragraphs later, when he finally returns to the subject.[81] In 2.249, immediately following the above quotation about Christ as the one upon whom and in whom all goodness is beheld, Gregory suggests that when the scriptural narrative refers to Moses seeing the back of God, it is in fact speaking of Moses' virtuous pursuit of the goodness of God. For to see God's back, according to Gregory, means to follow God by doing what God does, since whoever sees the back of a person is travelling in their same direction. "So Moses, who eagerly seeks to behold God, is now taught how he can behold Him: to follow God wherever he might lead is to behold God (τὸ ἀκολουθεῖν τῷ θεῷ, καθ' ὅπερ ἂν καθηγῆται, τοῦτο βλέπειν ἐστὶ τὸν θεόν)."[82]

In conclusion, I would like to highlight several parallels between Moses' experience of seeing God and Gregory's pro-Nicene approach to the question of the knowledge of God. First, it is notable that, although there are strongly apophatic elements in Moses' experience of the vision of God, particularly in the mental

[80] *Vit Moys* 2.249, trans. Malherbe and Ferguson, 118.
[81] The question of the meaning of God's "back" and warnings of its liability to misinterpretation by literal readers occurs in 2.221-222 and Gregory's own response to the question can be found in 2.249-254.
[82] *Vit Moys* 2.252, trans. Malherbe and Ferguson, 119.

purification which he undergoes at the burning bush and his later experience of God in darkness, Gregory makes it clear that Moses' apprehension of God contains a significant positive element as well. Moses advances in his understanding of the nature of God by continuously growing in his apprehension of the active goodness of God. Second, the particular form in which Moses beholds this goodness is, in every case, the person of Christ—in the figural revelation of the economy of Christ through the bush's flames, in the vision of the heavenly tabernacle that occurs after Moses' ascent into darkness, and in this final vision of God upon Sinai, wherein Christ is both the rock upon which Moses stands and the vision which he beholds. Third and finally, one of the consistent themes that recurs again and again in this text is the intimate relationship between the vision of divine goodness and growth in Christian virtue. Gregory begins the treatise by framing his interpretation as a discussion of the quest for perfection in the virtuous life, and it is in this opening prologue that he identifies virtue as participation in the virtue of God. In his comments on both the theophany at the bush and the later theophany upon Sinai, Gregory reminds his readers that Moses' growth in virtue is a necessary prerequisite for his experience of seeing God. And in his discussion of Moses' vision in Exodus 34, Gregory argues that to see God is to follow after God by doing what God does. The logical conclusion to all of this is that Moses, through his spiritual ascent, becomes what God intended all human beings to be: a living reflection of the active goodness and perfection of God. The question to which I now turn is, how does the character of virtue manifested in Moses' own life reflect the character of the God who has become known in the person and work of Jesus Christ?

Reflecting God in Life of Moses

Why search for particular exemplars who may act as guides to the life of virtue? This is a question that Gregory raises in the opening prologue to *Life of Moses*, and in response, he quotes the words of the prophet Isaiah: "Look to Abraham your father and Sarah, the one who gave you birth."[83] These words of Isaiah, Gregory suggests, are given for those who "wander outside virtue," and their intent is to draw attention to the holy patriarch and his wife as "models" (ὑποδείγματα) of virtue. Indeed, it is for this very reason, he continues, that the details of their lives and actions have been recorded in the scriptures, "so that by imitating those who lived rightly before us (διὰ τῆς τῶν προκατορθωκότων μιμήσεως) those who follow them may conduct their lives to the good."[84] Of course, it is also clear from what Gregory has said earlier in the prologue about the relationship between human and divine virtue and from his broader exposition of these subjects elsewhere that these biblical models of virtuous living are not only serving as models of right living, but simultaneously mirrors of divine perfection. But this comment about the lives of Abraham and Sarah is instructive for our purposes because it specifically draws attention to the scriptural record of their lived actions. Abraham and Sarah are useful guides for the virtuous life not simply or even primarily for the teaching that they have to offer concerning the divine nature, but rather for the concrete patterns of virtue that are manifested in the narrated actions of their lives. In similar fashion, it is also in the scriptural record of Moses' actions, and in Gregory's summary and interpretation of that record, that we can best discern the distinctively pro-Nicene pattern of divine goodness as life-giving and philanthropic activity.

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[83] *Vit Moys* 1.10

[84] *Vit Moys* 1.13, trans. Malherbe and Ferguson, 32 (modified).

Gregory's discussion of the virtue of Moses' own life can be classified into two basic categories: purification from sin and philanthropic activity toward others. The first of these two categories, that of moral purification—which includes purification from both erroneous opinions and thoughts as well as purification from corrupting passions—is a theme to which Gregory turns again and again throughout his analysis of Moses' life. Moses' early fight with the Egyptian whom he kills is interpreted by Gregory as a symbol of purification from pagan idolatry and vicious passion, and at the burning bush, his mind is purified of distorted opinions of God through the revelation of the distinction between created and uncreated being. This process of purification was essential in Moses' spiritual transformation, for it was on through purity that Moses was enabled to approach the mountain of Sinai and ascend to a greater knowledge of God. "[Moses'] way to such knowledge," Gregory writes, "is purity (ἡ καθαρότης)…This means that the one person who would approach the contemplation of Being must be pure in all things so as to be pure in soul and body (καὶ ψυχῇ καὶ σώματι κάθαρον), washed stainless of every spot in both parts."[85] Again, "whoever would approach the knowledge of things sublime must first purify his manner of life from all sensual (αἰσθητικῆς) and irrational (ἀλόγου) emotion."[86]

Nevertheless, while Gregory does repeatedly mention this theme of purification from error and sin, it is not Moses' own purification that receives the lion's share of attention in the *Life*, but rather the purification of the people of Israel and the influential role that Moses plays in leading them toward this purification. Part of the reason for this emphasis on Moses' role as a spiritual leader among the people of Israel is, no doubt, an

[85] *Vit Moys* 2.154, trans. Malherbe and Ferguson, 92.
[86] *Vit Moys* 2.157, trans. Malherbe and Ferguson, 93.

exegetical one. Gregory is offering a commentary on the story of Moses as it unfolds in the latter four books of the Pentateuch and the vast majority of this story focuses on the final third of Moses' life, during which time he leads the people of Israel. Another reason for this focus on Moses' role as a spiritual leader could be, as some scholars have suggested, that Gregory intended the *Life of Moses* to serve not primarily as a guide for individual ascetics seeking to pursue a life of virtue, but rather more specifically to serve as a training manual of sorts for Christian bishops and leaders of ascetical communities.[87] Both of these may certainly have contributed to Gregory's focus on Moses' role in aiding the liberation and purification of the Israelite people, but there is also a theological significance to this focus. For in giving attention to Moses' active guidance of the people of Israel as a model of virtue, Gregory is implicitly suggesting what he explicitly stated in his seventh homily on the beatitudes, namely, that the highest expression of Christian virtue is mimetic participation in the philanthropic activity of bringing peace to the souls of others.

Perhaps the clearest articulation that Gregory gives of this principle comes in his discussion of the first theophany at the burning bush. There, after describing the revelatory Moses' revelatory encounter with God in the light of the bush, Gregory describes the transformative effects that an encounter like this has on one's relation to others. "A person like this becomes able to help others to for salvation, to purify (καθελεῖν) [them] from the tyranny which holds power wickedly, and to deliver to freedom (ἐξελέσθαι πρὸς ἐλευθερίαν) everyone held in evil servitude."[88] Gregory then calls attention to the rod and snake that are given to Moses and which, as I mentioned

[87] See my discussion in footnote 44.
[88] *Vit Moys* 2.26, trans. Malherbe and Ferguson, 61 (modified).

above, he interprets as a figural reference to the incarnation. In this context, however, it is important to note that the rod and snake are given to Moses not simply for his own enlightenment, but for him to use in the context of his ministry among the people of Israel. And notice how Gregory characterizes the precise way in which the use of these tools symbolize the narrative of Christ's economy: "These seem to me to signify by way of enigma the mystery of the Lord's incarnation, a manifestation of divinity to mankind, through which comes both purification from tyranny (τυράννου καθαίρεσις) and freedom (ἡ ἐλευθερία) for all of those who are held in bondage by it."[89] The analogy that Gregory discerns between the incarnation of Christ and Moses' use of the rod and snake lie in their function: both accomplish the same purpose of helping to being salvation by purifying others from the tyranny of sin and liberating them from its binding grips.

Precisely how Moses does this becomes clearer in Gregory's commentary on the exodus from Egypt. The first of Moses' action among the people which receives Gregory's attention is his arrival in Egypt and subsequent declaration of the "words of freedom" (τοὺς ὑπὲρ τῆς ἐλευθερίας λόγους) regarding their forthcoming deliverance, by which "offered his hearers freedom" and "strengthened their desire for it."[90] The next of Moses' virtuous deeds is found in the plagues that he brings upon the Egyptians, which were miraculous wonders that he performed, not for the purpose of "terrifying those who happen to be present," but in order to free the people from the deception of pagan vice and magic. Gregory discerns a particularly potent christological symbol in Moses' act of stretching forth his hands to bring an end to the plague of frogs. "You understand, surely, what the figure says to you, and perceive in the lawgiver the true Lawgiver (τὸν ἀληθινὸν

[89] *Vit Moys* 2.27
[90] *Vit Moys* 2.54, 56, trans. Malherbe and Ferguson, 66-67.

νομοθέτην) and in his outstretched hands him who stretched forth his hands upon the cross."[91] Again, in Moses' action of leading the people out of Egypt after the plagues have come to an end, Gregory once again finds an example of the godlike activity of liberating others from the tyranny of sin. "Thus Moses led the people out of Egypt, and everyone who follows in the steps of Moses in this way sets free from the Egyptian tyrant (τῆς Αἰγυπτίας τυραννίδος ἐλευθεροῖ) all those guided by his word."[92] And then, when at the edge of the Red Sea, the people were overcome with fear of the oncoming Egyptian army and rose up in opposition to their deliverer, we are then told "the most marvelous thing (τὸ παραδοξότατον) about Moses," which is that Moses did not respond to the Israelites with anger or contempt, but instead strengthened their hope through exhortation and inwardly interceded on their behalf in prayer to God.[93]

These actions of purification and deliverance continue to characterize Moses' life after the exodus as well. Moses purifies the people of by bringing them through the waters of the Red Sea, a figure of baptism, wherein their sins are drowned like the advancing Egyptian horde.[94] Moses leads the Israelites to drink from the rock and feed on the manna from heaven, both of which symbolize Christ.[95] And, significantly, even after Moses ascends Mt Sinai to see and commune with God, he does not remain there. To the contrary, Gregory notes,

> After [Moses] was instructed in these and other such things by the ineffable teaching of God while he was surrounded by that invisible darkness, and having surpassed himself by

[91] *Vit Moys* 2.78, trans. Malherbe and Ferguson, 72.
[92] *Vit Moys*, 2.112, trans. Malherbe and Ferguson, 80.
[93] *Vit Moys*, 1.29, trans. Malherbe and Ferguson, 37.
[94] *Vit Moys* 2.122-129
[95] *Vit Moys* 2.130-146

> the aid of the mystical doctrines, he emerged again out of the darkness. He then came down (κάτεισι) to his people, sharing (κοινωνήσων) with them the marvels which had been shown to him in the theophany, to deliver the laws, and to institute for them the sanctuary and priesthood according to the pattern shown to him on the mountain.[96]

Although Gregory does not say as much explicitly at this point, the christological analogy with this downward descent from the mountain is unmistakable.[97] And the sheer fact that Moses does in fact descend to lead the people of Israel toward greater purification, and that Gregory's study of Moses' progress in virtue continues on after this descent, is something which deserves to be emphasized. After all, as several scholars have noted, the "orderly sequence" (ἀκολουθία) of the biblical text is a matter of great importance in Gregory's theological interpretation of it.[98] For this reason, it is not a mere exegetical detail but a matter of great significance that causes Gregory to continue his interpretation of Moses' life for another sixty-six paragraphs after the events of his

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[96] *Vit Moys* 1.56, trans. Malherbe and Ferguson, 46 (modified).

[97] This fact has been given relatively little attention in studies of *De vita Moysis*. One of the few scholars who notes its importance is Elias Moutsoulas, who, in an article on Gregory's portrayal of holiness through a variety of his biographical works, makes the following important observation, "Jusqu'à maintenant nous n'avons pas mentioné un point qui nous paraît pourtant important: Le saint, tel qu'il nous apparaît dans la figure de Moïse surtout, mais aussi dans celle des autres personnages que nous avons examines, n'est pas coupé de son entourage, on dirait même que plus il avance dans les étapes de la vertu, plus il se rapproche du people de Dieu. Il est médiateur et sur ce point il est imitateur du Saint des Saints, du Christ…Par consequent la figure du Saint que nous présente Grégoire, n'est pas celle ascète qui se trouve coupé du mounde, mais c'est la figure du combatant qui vit et souffre avec son people et qui transmet aux autres la grâce qu'il reçoit." Moutsoulas, "La 'Sainteté' dans les oeuvres biographiques de Grégoire de Nysse," in *The Biographical Works of Gregory of Nyssa: Proceedings of the Fifth International Colloquium on Gregory of Nyssa*, ed. Andreas Spira (Cambridge, MA: The Philadelphia Patristic Foundation, 1984), 236.

[98] See, e.g., Morwenna Ludlow, "Theology and Allegory: Origen and Gregory of Nyssa on the Unity and Diversity of Scripture," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 4:1 (2002), 65; Richard Norris, "Introduction," in *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on the Song of Songs* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), xxxviii-xliv; and Susanna Elm, "Dressing Moses," 55-58.

encounter with God on Mt Sinai.[99] And in order to appreciate that significance, it is necessary to pay attention to the inherent relationship between the virtue made manifest in the life of Moses and the goodness made manifest in the economy of Christ. For Moses' life was, Gregory tells us, a model of continuous progression in the knowledge and imitation of God. Moses saw God in the revelation of the incarnation at the burning bush and he continued to behold God in the endless manifestation of divine goodness through his contemplation of Christ's divinity in the heavenly tabernacle. And through his desire for and vision of God, Moses became conformed to God, manifesting the same goodness which he had beheld through his life of priestly ministry and prophetic leadership of the people of Israel. Moses did not stay on the mountain, but came down. And the reason that he came down was because the God whom he encountered upon that mountain, the God whom he learned to follow, was the God whose philanthropic love impelled him to likewise come down and be among his people, to set them free from their bondage and purify them from their sin.

Nicene Theology and Christian Virtue in *Homilies on the Song of Songs*

In this final section of the chapter, I will focus my attention on a text which almost undoubtedly comes from the final stages of Gregory's literary career and which is regarded by a number of scholars as the most mature expression of his spiritual theology, namely, his *Homilies on the Song of Songs*.[100] These homilies share much in common

[99] Judging from the common tendency in much contemporary scholarship on the *Life of Moses* to focus primarily, if not exclusively, on Moses' journey to and subsequent ascent up Sinai, one might assume that Moses passed the rest of his life in that summit of darkness.

[100] On the date and context of the homilies, see J.B. Cahill, "The Date and Setting of Gregory of Nyssa's Commentary on the Song of Songs," *Journal of Theological Studies* 32:2 (1981), 447-460 and Richard Norris, "Introduction," in *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on the Song of Songs*, xx-xxiii. This latter volume, which includes a full English translation of the Greek text and was published seven years after Richard

with the two texts which I have already discussed. They too combine the themes of spiritual ascent, the vision of and desire for God, and the soul's transformation into greater godlikeness through a participation in divine virtue.[101] On the other hand, whereas Gregory approached both the beatitudes and the life of Moses as a description of and guide to the whole process of spiritual ascent, he suggests that the Song of Songs have a narrower focus, describing only the spiritual progression that takes place within the final stage of the soul's ascent.[102] The Song of Songs, he says, are the "holy of holies" which Moses entered upon the mountaintop.[103] They describe the bride's experience after she has already passed through the stages of purgation and illumination and has, like Moses, entered into the darkness.[104] For this reason, the purpose of the Song of Songs is not to instruct those who are beginners in the spiritual life, but rather to educate those who have already withdrawn from the corrupting influences of sin and have had their minds cleared of misleading and idolatrous notions about God. And the specific way that the Song of Songs educates the reader, with its depiction of erotic love, is through the intensification and education of the soul's desire for God, "so that by this we may learn that it is necessary for the soul, fixing itself steadily on the inaccessible beauty of the divine nature

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Norris's death, has been an invaluable aid to my study of the text. All quotations in English translation, unless otherwise noted, will be borrowed from this text. I will also make use of the critical edition of the Greek text which is included in this volume (the text is that of Hermann Langerbeck from the *Gregorii Nysseni Opera* series). Citations will include the number of the homily as well as the page number of the Greek text.

[101] On the integral importance of the theme of virtue in this text, see Martin Laird, *Gregory of Nyssa and the Grasp of Faith: Union, Knowledge, and Divine Presence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 192-197; and Martin Wenzel, "Pursuing God: The Role of Virtue in Gregory of Nyssa's *Homilies on the Song of Songs*," in *Gregory of Nyssa:* In Canticum Canticorum, 539-549.

[102] Following the lead of Origen, Gregory identifies the Song of Songs as the third in a trilogy of intentionally progressive Solomonic texts (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs, in that order), each of which is meant to advance the reader further along the spiritual life. Cf. *Cant* 1.17-25. For further discussion of this point, see Richard Norris, "The Soul Takes Flight: Gregory of Nyssa and the Song of Songs," *Anglican Theological Review* 80:4 (Fall 1998), 522-525.

[103] *Cant* 1.26

[104] *Cant* 11.322-324.

(τὸ ἀπρόσιτον τῆς θείας φύσεως κάλλος), to love that beauty as much as the body has a bent for what is akin to it…so that our mind within us may boil with love."[105]

Martin Laird has argued that the particular pedagogical strategy which Gregory discerns in the Song of Songs, and which he himself employs in his commentary on it, is that of an apophatic training of desire through a profusion of images and metaphors that purify the mind and lead it to a "union with God beyond all image and concept."[106] In order to aid the soul in its upward ascent of increasing love for the "beauty of the divine nature," the Song beckons its readers beyond all thought into a union which it describes with "stock Gregorian apophatic markers such as darkness and various oxymoronic expressions."[107] But, as we have already seen with Gregory's treatment of the theme of darkness in *Life of Moses*, the theme of apophatic darkness need not exclude the presence of positive revelation through the person and work of Christ. After all, even in the darkness, Moses never ceased to behold the glory of God in the person of Jesus Christ. And indeed, as other scholars have already noted, while the apophatic themes of noetic darkness and supra-noetic desire do undoubtedly feature prominently in these homilies, so too does an emphasis on the revelation of God in Christ. John Behr, for instance, agrees with Laird on the important role that apophatic darkness plays in the *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, but simultaneously suggests that these homilies train the soul to

[105] *Cant* 1.27.20-24
[106] Laird, "Under Solomon's Tutelage: The Education of Desire in the *Homilies on the Song of Songs*," *Modern Theology* 18:4 (October 2002), 507-525. Similarly, cf. Sarah Coakley, "Gregory of Nyssa on Spiritual Ascent and Trinitarian Orthodoxy: A Reconsideration of the Relationship Between Doctrine and Askesis," in *Gregory of Nyssa: In Canticum Canticorum*, 363-366. To be fair, while Laird places strong emphasis on the role of apophasis and noetic darkness in the pedagogical strategy of the Song, this does not mean that he discounts the positive metaphors of light/illumination and descriptive speech (what Laird refers to as "logophasis"). On this, see Laird, *Gregory of Nyssa and the Grasp of Faith*, 154-204.
[107] *Ibid*, 518.

behold the "countenance of the invisible God" in the person of Jesus Christ.[108] Hans Boersma similarly argues that these homilies enable a genuine vision of God by focusing the soul's attention on the beauty of Christ and, most especially, on the mystery of the incarnation.[109] In what follows, I will build upon these arguments by Behr and Boersma by focusing specifically on the influence of the philanthropic narrative of the christological economy, both in the bride's apprehension of the beauty of the divine nature, and in her reflection of that beauty through her own virtuous transformation.

Beholding Beauty in Homilies on the Song of Songs

The purpose of the Song of Songs, according to Gregory, is, as already mentioned, the education and intensification of the soul's desire for the "inaccessible beauty of the divine nature" and its virtuous transformation through participation in that beauty. Yet, this poses something of a problem, for the beauty which the soul seeks is "inaccessible" (ἀπρόσιτος), beyond the reach of human comprehension. And how can the soul desire a beauty which it cannot comprehend? Gregory is aware of this paradoxical dilemma and, already in his first homily, begins to present something of a solution to it through his interpretation of the opening words of the Song: "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth, for your breasts are better than wine, and the fragrance of your perfumed ointments is better than all spices; your name is perfumed ointment emptied out." The boldness of erotic language in these opening lines is rather startling,

[108] John Behr, *The Nicene Faith: Part 2* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2004), 462-473.
[109] Boersma, "Becoming Human in the Face of God,"144-150. Other scholars have similarly drawn attention to the heavy christological focus of the *Homilies on the Song of Songs*. See, e.g., Lucas Mateo-Seco, "La cristología del *In Canticum Canticorum*," in *Studien zur Gregor von Nyssa und der Christlichen Spätantike*, eds. H.R. Drobner and Ch. Klock (Leiden: Brill, 1990), 173-190; and Miguel Brugarolas, "The Incarnate Logos: Gregory of Nyssa's *In Canticum Canticorum* Christological Core," in *Gregory of Nyssa: In Canticum Canticorum*, 200-232.

and Gregory takes full advantage of it by noting the indication of insatiable desire in the bride's request. But what is it that she is asking for with this request for kisses? Drawing on the metaphor of face-to-face encounter, Gregory connects this request to Moses' encounters with God and suggests that this petition for "kisses of the mouth" indicates the bride's desire to behold the Bridegroom, just as Moses "became more intensely desirous of such kisses after these theophanies, praying to see (ἰδεῖν) the Object of his yearning as if he had never glimpsed (ὡς μήπω τεθεαμένος) him."[110]

But again, we might ask, if this request for kisses is a petition for theophanic encounters with and perceptions of the inaccessible beauty of God, how can the soul's request possibly be granted? One clue to understanding how Gregory might respond to such a question, I suggest, can be found in his interpretation of the remaining phrases of the opening lines, specifically his interpretation of the Bridegroom's breasts and perfumed name.[111] For Gregory interprets both of these images as references to the manifestation of God that takes place through the economic activity of divine power. The reference to the "breasts" of the Bridegroom, for instance, is taken as a reference to the "beneficent activities (τὰς ἀγαθὰς...ἐνεργείας) of divine power on our behalf" which nourish and restore the soul, while the mention of the Bridegroom's perfumed name offers Gregory an occasion to discuss the function of the plurality of divine names that are used to describe the many virtues of God at work in divine activity.[112] On the one

[110] *Cant.* 1.31.24-32.29. Gregory consistently interprets the figure of the Bridegroom as God/Christ, and throughout my analysis I consistently capitalize "Bridegroom" to reflect that fact.
[111] This strange reference to the "breasts" of the bridegroom, which is a textual phenomenon in the Greek of the LXX—μαστοί σου—that is absent in the Hebrew of the MT—*dodêkā*—has not escaped the notice of scholars studying Gregory's approach to gender. For further discussion, see Verna E.F. Harrison, "A Gender Reversal in Gregory of Nyssa's First Homily on the Song of Songs," *Studia Patristica* 27 (1993), 34-38.
[112] *Cant.* 1.33-37

hand, of course, this does not resolve the paradoxical dilemma of the soul's desire for a beauty which it cannot comprehend, because these reference to the traces of divine activity are not meant to serve in and of themselves as a definition of that beauty. What it does do, however, is guide the soul longing to "see" God by directing and focusing its attention on the manifestation of divine power in act. Thus, it is through the contemplation of this activity that the bride is filled with wonder and that her love and desire for the beauty of God is increased.

In this focus on the "beneficent activities" of God as the manifestation of divine beauty and the object of the soul's contemplation we can discern a clear connection with Gregory's pro-Nicene emphasis on the economic activity as the self-presentation of divine perfection. But the presence of Gregory's trinitarian theology goes further than this. For as I have repeatedly noted, the most distinctively Nicene element of Gregory's account of divine perfection is not merely its dependence on the self-revelation of God through the activity of divine power, but its particular emphasis on a specific element of that activity, namely, the philanthropic narrative of the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ on behalf and for the sake of human restoration. And within the context of the *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, it is this narrative, this element of the divine economy, more than any other which occupies the bride's attention and incites her growing desire for divine beauty.[113] Take, for instance, Gregory's interpretation of the bride's declaration of love—"Speak to me, you whom my soul loves"—in the second

[113] I am not the first to draw attention to the central place that the narrative of the incarnation and its communication of divine φιλανθρωπία occupies in these homilies. Miguel Brugarolas has recently made a similar argument in his analysis of the "christological core" of the homilies, arguing in particular that the narrative of the incarnation function as both the preeminent manifestation of God in this text and, also, that this narrative is always understood in terms of divine philanthropy. Cf. Brugarolas, "The Incarnate Logos: Gregory of Nyssa's *In Canticum Canticorum* Christological Core," 208-218.

homily. This characterization of the Bridegroom comes at the end of the bride's reminiscences of her own darkness of complexion and failure to "guard [her] vineyard," which Gregory interprets as a reference to the memory of humanity's fall into sin and the subsequent work of Christ, who has like a "good shepherd" taken the whole human race onto his own shoulders in order to redeem it. It is in this context, in the bride's memory of her own sin and Christ's loving work of salvation, that Gregory then turns to the bride's "name" of the Bridegroom as the one whom she loves. And what this name reveals about the Bridegroom, according to Gregory, is precisely the beauty of his own self-giving love. "Therefore your name which declares your goodness (τῆς σῆς ἀγαθότητος), is my soul's attitude toward you. 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 shepherd? It is not possible to conceive a love greater than this (μείζονα ταύτης ἀγάπην): to give up the well-being of your life in exchange for mine."[114]

This same pattern of apprehending divine beauty through a contemplation of the christological narrative occurs again in a metaphor to which Gregory appeals in his fourth homily to help him interpret the bride's confession of being "wounded" by love, that of love as an arrow lodging itself in the heart of the bride.[115] To understand Gregory's use and interpretation of this metaphor, the broader context is once again crucial. For, while

[114] *Cant.* 2.61.6-12

[115] Sarah Coakley has drawn attention to this metaphor in two separate articles, describing it as one of the most "alluring" and potent of all trinitarian images that Gregory develops within the context of these homilies and a crucial passage for understanding the relationship between Gregory's trinitarian theology and his account of the spiritual life. On both occasions, she identifies the Son as the arrow which the Father shoots, which is certainly true, but on neither occasion does she give much attention to Gregory's specific interpretation of the arrow as the manifestation of divine love within the specific context of the gospel narrative. Cf. Coakley, "Re-Thinking Gregory of Nyssa," 438-441; *eadem*, "Gregory of Nyssa on Spiritual Ascent and Trinitarian Orthodoxy," 365-366. My argument, however, is that the preeminence of this narrative to Gregory's account of divine perfection/beauty is a crucial element of the relationship between his "trinitarian" theology and his description of spiritual ascent.

Gregory's interpretation of the image of the arrow is clear—the arrow which is shot is the Son and the archer who shoots the arrow, God the Father, "is love" (ἡ ἀγάπη ἐστίν)—the reasoning which informs this interpretation is developed in the passage which directly precedes his discussion of the metaphor, for it is there that we learn the particular context which inspires this identification of the Father as love and the Son as the agent of that love. In that passage, Gregory is discussing the meaning of the first clause of the sentence which gives rise to the image of the archer and the arrow: "Encompass me with apples, for I have been wounded by love." Why does the bride ask the Bridegroom to encompass her with apples? To what does this refer? According to Gregory, it is a reference to the philanthropic narrative of Christ's incarnation—"He who for love of humanity (ὑπὸ φιλανθρωπίας) grew up in the woods of our nature became an apple by sharing flesh and blood"—and to the effect of that incarnation, which was the visible manifestation of "the patterns of all good forms of conduct (τῶν ἀγαθῶν πολιτευμάτων)."[116] These are the apples to which the bride refers: the virtues manifested in the narrative of the Son's humble descent for the sake of and out of "love for humanity." And it is precisely those virtues put on display in this narrative, he notes, which are the object for the soul's desirous contemplation and imitation.

> That is why the bride says, "Encompass me with apples, so that, looking on high, I may gaze steadfastly upon the pattern of the good things (τὰ τῶν ἀγαθῶν ὑποδείγματα) that are made known in the Bridegroom." That is where gentleness is; that is where anger is absent; that is where we find forgiveness of enemies and love for those who do harm (τὸ

[116] *Cant.* 4.125.15-126.25

πρὸς τοὺς λυποῦντας φιλάνθρωπον); there is self-control, purity, long-suffering; there is that which has no part in any vanity or deceit of this world.[117]

These examples come from some of the early homilies in this work. But, lest the reader think that the bride's apprehension of divine beauty through her contemplation of the narrative of Christ's descent is a phenomenon which occurs merely at the beginning of the bride's spiritual ascent, I would like to draw attention to one further example, which can be found in the eleventh homily, in Gregory's discussion of the erotically charged sentence in Song 5:4, "My kinsman has put his hand through the opening, and my belly has cried out for him." Gregory begins by observing that, at this point in the bride's spiritual development, she has already been purified and now seeks with an ever more ardent desire to behold the beauty of her Lord (symbolized in the reference to her belly crying out for his presence). Yet even now, at this point in her ascent, Gregory notes, her attention is still directed to the manifestation of God in divine activity:

> 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, she never stops searching and seeking after the Principle of the things that are, after the Wellspring of their beauty, after the Source of the power that fills them, after whatever it is that pours forth the wisdom displayed in them. Stirring all her thought processes and all the explanatory power of her concepts, and striving earnestly to comprehend what she is seeking, she attains, as the limit of her apprehension of God, nothing more than that divine activity (τοῦ θεοῦ τὴν ἐνεργείαν) that comes down and

[117] *Cant.* 4.126.34-127.40

> reaches to us…[she] is filled with wonder and worships the One who is known to exist only through the things that his activity brings about.[118]

This is what the bride is referring to when she describes the Bridegroom putting his hand through her opening. The hand is the activity of divine power which slips into the purified and receptive opening of the bride's soul, and through which she encounters and beholds the One whom she seeks. Gregory does not end his interpretation here, however, for he suggests that a further significance may be found in the bride's reference to the entering hand, a more precise specification given to the divine activity through which she beholds God. What is this fuller meaning to the "hand"? Nothing other than the incarnation of Christ, which is "God manifested in the flesh" (ὁ θεὸς ἐν σαρκὶ φανεροῦται).[119] Expounding on this interpretation, he writes,

> It makes sense, then, for the bride, speaking as a prophet, to refer to the grace of the gospel (τὴν τοῦ εὐαγγελίου χάριν) under the figure of the hand. For when the Lord was revealed on earth and had converse with human beings, we through the hand that is God in action (διὰ τῆς τῶν ἐνεργειῶν χειρὸς), became aware of the pure and immaterial beauty of the Bridegroom, of the deity of the Word, and of the incandescence of the true light.[120]

What conclusions may we draw from these passages regarding Gregory's account of the soul's perception of the beauty and perfection of God within these homilies? First,

[118] *Cant.* 11.333.11-334.29
[119] *Cant.* 11.338.11
[120] *Cant* 11.338.15-20

it is notable that, while there is an undeniably strong apophatic element to much of Gregory's discussion of the bride's perception of God within the homilies, this should not be emphasized to the neglect of the importance of the soul's ongoing contemplation of divine perfection (here understood in terms of divine beauty). Second, even in this highest level of the soul's ascent, when it has already passed through stages of both moral and mental purification, the medium through which it contemplates the nature of God does not change. For it is still in the perception of divine activity that the soul is able to progress in its understanding of the beauty and goodness of God. Finally, much as he did in *Against Eunomius*, so here Gregory argues that there is one aspect of economic activity that stands out as the preeminent manifestation of God and therefore the primary focus of the soul's attention: the incarnation of Christ as the manifestation of God in the flesh. For it is in this act, understood properly in its Nicene context as the "grace of the gospel," that the philanthropic love of God is most clearly encountered. And it is through contemplating this act, Gregory observes, that the bride becomes most fully aware of "the pure and immaterial beauty of the Bridegroom, the deity of the Word, and the incandescence of the true light."

Reflecting Beauty in Homilies on the Song of Songs

In my analysis of the previous two texts, I argued that the pro-Nicene identification of divine perfection with the philanthropic narrative of the incarnation of Christ finds its fitting parallel in the philanthropic activity of the virtuous and divinized soul. This can be seen in the *Homilies on the Beatitudes* in Gregory's equation of the imitation of the humility and mercy of Christ with godlikeness and in his identification of

the activity of peacemaking as the soul's mimetic participation in God's own love for humanity. Similarly, as I noted in my discussion of the *Life of Moses*, Gregory's description of Moses' spiritual progress devotes significant attention not only to Moses' own purification from sin and spiritual ascent, but to the effects which followed from that ascent, namely, Moses' virtuous reflection of the divine nature through his philanthropic activity of liberating and purifying the people of Israel. Here, in the *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, we find a similar pattern in Gregory's interpretation of the bride's own progressive transformation into a living image of the beauty whom the soul desires. For the more that the bride seeks after and contemplates and desires the beauty of the Bridegroom, the more she herself becomes a source of life-giving beauty to the "daughters of Jerusalem" through the activity of what Martin Laird has referred to as "logophatic" speech.[121] To illustrate what I mean, I will now look briefly at two aspects of the bride's speech as its relates to the philanthropic character of God: (1) the central role that the christological narrative of divine love plays in the bride's description of divine beauty and (2) how the very activity of speechmaking is itself a reflection of that same love.

[121] Laird, *Gregory of Nyssa and the Grasp of Faith*, 154-173. Laird's analysis of this important but frequently neglected element in the *Homilies on the Song of Songs* has been very helpful to my own reading of this text. At the same time, I question whether he is correct in suggesting that his own preferred term for the positive speech of figures like Paul and the bride—*logophasis*—is in fact as genuinely distinct from the more traditional term for positive theological speech—*kataphasis*—as Laird himself suggests. The primary distinction between logophatic and kataphatic speech, according to Laird, is that the former arises from "an experience of apophatic union" mediated by faith, whereas the latter attempts to describe the character of God on the basis of his own self-manifestation through divine activity. "*Kataphasis* is grounded in knowledge of God in his ἐνεργείαι," whereas *logophasis* is "a manifestation of the Word in deeds and discourse that follows directly upon an apophatic experience of union with or indwelling of the Word." *Ibid*, 172. Yet, as I note in my analysis below, while the bride's speech is undoubtedly an effect of her own divinization through the contemplation and desire of divine beauty, the content of her speech is still most frequently a positive description of the activity of God in Christ. This may be personal (i.e., her own personal experience of the philanthropic love of God), but it is still a description of God on the basis of divine activity and should not therefore be so sharply distinguished from *kataphasis*.

The bride begins her discourse in Song of Songs 1:1 with an address to the Bridegroom—"Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth"—but only four verses later, she turns from addressing the Bridegroom and begins speaking to her spiritual companions, whom she refers to as the "daughters of Jerusalem."[122] In doing so, the bride shows that her own progress in the spiritual life has resulted not only in increased desire for and union with the Bridegroom, but that it has also made her a teacher (ἡ διδάσκαλος) to the souls of others. And what does she tell her fellow maidens? What is the lesson she wishes to impart? She begins with a confession of her own spiritual transformation from being a soul who was made "dark" by sin to a soul that has become beautiful by sharing in the virtuous beauty of Christ. But this confession of the bride's past is not simply intended, Gregory notes, to draw attention to the bride's own present beauty, but is instead given for the purpose of drawing the maidens' attention to the marvelous beauty of the philanthropic love of Christ. The reason that the bride speaks of her own transformation from the ugliness of sin to the beauty of virtue is "so that we may the better learn the Bridegroom's measureless love of humanity (τὴν ἀμέτρητον τοῦ νυμφίου φιλανθρωπίαν)—the Bridegroom who in his love clothes his beloved with beauty."[123] By narrating her own past transformation, the bride is in effect saying:

> 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 (διὰ τῆς ἀγάπης) made me beautiful, exchanging his own beauty for my ugliness. For having transferred to

[122] Gregory identifies these "daughters of Jerusalem" with the "maidens" (νεάνιδες) that are referred to in verse 3. In his commentary on that verse, Gregory clarifies that these young maidens are those who, like the bride, have progressed in their spiritual ascent, been morally purified, and now experience a deep and increasing desire for union with the beauty of God. Cf. *Cant.* 1.38.10-39.30.
[123] *Cant* 2.46.7-8

> 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 in this way and acted lovingly (καὶ οὕτως ἠγάπησεν).[124]

Gregory goes on to note the striking resemblance between the bride's personal testimony here and similar statements made by the apostle Paul in several of his letters. In Romans, for instance, Paul demonstrates "the love of God for us" (τὴν περὶ ἡμᾶς ἀγάπην) by explaining how "when we were sinners and dark, God made us full of light and lovely by shining upon us with his grace."[125] And in his letter to his young protégé Timothy, Paul echoes the bride's testimony by referring to himself as a blasphemer and persecutor and "dark one" (μέλας) who was nevertheless rendered beautiful by the work of Christ, who "came into the world to make dark ones bright."[126] As a teacher, therefore, the bride follows the example of Paul by relating her own testimony of transformation and, in so doing, encouraging the maidens around her to not give up hope in their own pursuit of virtuous beauty. But in speaking of her own transformation, the bride is also, like Paul, not merely offering a word of encouragement to those seeking to rid themselves of the pollution of sin and be made "bright" with the beauty of God; she is also inciting desire within her hearers by "manifesting the goodness (τὴν ἀγαθότητα) of the Bridegroom" through a narration of the wondrous display of love in the narrative of Christ's economy. Thus, by giving witness to the effects of divine grace in her own soul, the bride is also positively declaring the character of divine beauty made manifest in the

[124] *Cant.* 2.46.9-14
[125] *Cant.* 2.48.6-9 (Cf. Romans 5:6-8)
[126] *Cant.* 2.48.17-49.18

philanthropic narrative of the gospel. It is the gracious love of the one who transformed her from darkness to light that elicits the bride's own response of desire and love for the Bridegroom, and it is through the act of recounting this love and its expression in the narrative of Christ's salvific act of self-giving that the bride seeks to educate and increase the desire of her listeners. "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 shepherd? It is not possible to conceive a love greater than this: to give up the well-being of your life in exchange for mine."[127]

This focus on the manifestation of divine goodness through the philanthropic narrative of Christ's economy becomes once again the focus when, in homily 13, the bride begins to describe the beauty of the Bridegroom to the daughters of Jerusalem. The context for this description comes with the question that the bride's companions put to her in Song of Songs 5:9: "What is your kinsman, O fair among women?" Gregory interprets this question as a solicitation for a description of the nature of the Bridegroom. What the maidens are saying, in other words, is, "Make known (γνώρισον) to us the One we seek. Teach us (δίδαξον) by what tokens the invisible One is detected."[128] Yet, as Gregory acknowledges, this is no simple task that the maidens are asking of the bride, for it raises the question of what positive description may be given for a beauty and perfection that lies beyond human comprehension. And so he asks, "How does [the bride] describe (ὑπογράφει) for them the One she seeks? How does she portray in speech that which marks out (τὸν χαρακτῆρα) the One she desires? How does she bring the

[127] *Cant.* 2.61.9-12
[128] *Cant.* 13.380.8-10

unknown One within the sight (ὑπ᾽ ὄψιν) of her virgins?"[129] Nevertheless, the bride does not attempt to evade the task, nor does she merely respond to the virginal souls with an apophatic reminder of the incomprehensibility of the divine nature. On the contrary, she goes on to give a positive description of the beauty of the Bridegroom by drawing the attention of the maidens to the appearance of God in the incarnation, the "theophany that came to us through the medium of the flesh," and to the ongoing reflection of the beauty of Christ through the virtuous activity of the church.

> Hence when the virgin souls request the soul that is ascending to perfection to make the One they desire known to them, she describes for the virgins the marks of the One they seek (τὰ τοῦ ζητουμένου γνορίσματα) by appealing to the things that have been revealed to us for the sake of our salvation. She treats of the church as the one body of the Bridegroom, and by referring to each individual member, she indicates, in her account of this beauty, some of his attributes, and in this way, starting from the particular characteristics she has examined, sums up the beauty of the body as a whole.[130]

I will return to this theme of the church's reflection of the beauty of Christ momentarily, but for now I would like to focus on what Gregory means when he speaks of the things made known (τὰ γνορίσματα) to us about God through the economy of salvation. To understand what Gregory is referring to, we must continue on to the next homily, which is the penultimate homily of the entire collection. In homily 14, Gregory continues to comment on the bride's description of the various aspects of the

[129] *Cant.* 13.380.15-17
[130] *Cant.* 13.386.21-28

Bridegroom's beauty and how these various aspects are reflected in the life of the church. What is interesting for our purposes, however, is that at the end of that homily, Gregory turns from enumerating distinct attributes of Christ as reflected in the church and focuses on how the bride draws the attention of her maidens to the identity and action of Christ as the personal and narrated form of divine beauty.[131] To elucidate further how the Son manifests the character of this beauty, Gregory once again summarizes the christological economy, this time by way of an allegorical reading of Jesus' parable of the good Samaritan. This parable, according to Gregory, is a scriptural summary of the "entire economy of God's love for humanity (πᾶσαν τὴν φιλάνθρωπον οἰκονομίαν)," for in it Jesus tells of the "downward journey" (τὴν ἄνωθεν κάθοδον) of the human race into sin and its subsequent corruption, the law's inability to restore fallen humanity (symbolized by the unwillingness of the priest and Levite to help the injured man), and, finally, the arrival of the Son in the form of the good Samaritan.[132] It is through a reference to this narrative that the bride brings her description of the beauty of God to a close, because it is in this story of divine descent on the behalf of a corrupted and sinful humanity, that the maidens will discover the most perfect expression of the love of the Bridegroom and, consequently, be inspired to love him in return. And so in conclusion, Gregory writes,

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[131] Gregory is particularly interested in the shift from descriptive to indicative language that takes place in 5:16b, when the bride moves from describing the physical appearance of the Bridegroom to simply indicating his identity. "*This*, says she, *is my kinsman, and this is my close one, O daughters of Jerusalem*, for when by the language of her description she has brought to their attention all the distinctive qualities by which it is possible for the One they seek to be manifest, she then makes use of ostensive language (τότε τῷ δεικτικῷ κέχρηται λόγῳ): 'This (οὗτος),' she says, 'is the one you are looking for. This is he who to become our brother rose up out of Judah, who became a neighbor to the man who fell among thieves…'" *Cant.* 14.426.5-427.10. Whether or not Gregory's interest in this rhetorical shift in the language of the Song is motivated by his own theological instincts or not, it is fitting that the bride's attention to the Bridegroom's *identity*, to which she draws attention with her "ostensive" language (i.e., *this* one), is reflective of Gregory's own emphasis on the identity of the Son and the particularity of the Son's action as the distinctive form in which we contemplate divine perfection.

[132] *Cant.* 14.427.14-429.6

> So he who out of such love for humanity (διὰ τῆς τοιαύτης φιλανθρωπίας) has become our neighbor, who has become our kinsman because he rises up for us out of Judah, this is the One (οὗτός ἐστιν) whom the bride's words declare to the young maidens. This is the One (οὗτός ἐστιν) who is revealed to the daughters of Jerusalem by the immaculate bride, who for their sake (δι' ὧν) says: *This is my kinsman, and this is my close one, O daughters of Jerusalem*. And may we too both discover him by the marks shown us (διὰ τῶν δηλωθέντων γνορισμάτων) and receive him to the salvation of our souls.[133]

Martin Laird refers to this as the "logophatic" speech of the bride, and the content of that speech, as we have seen, is a description of divine beauty by way of a testimony to and a narration of divine action, both in the bride's own personal experience of spiritual transformation through the grace of God, and in her parabolic recounting of the whole economy of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ on behalf of sinful humanity. And in both cases, as I have noted, the bride's account of the beauty of the Bridegroom focuses on the wondrous deeds and effects of divine love. Thus, it is not merely any notion of beauty to which the bride appeals when she seeks to incite and educate the desire of her spiritual companions, but rather the particular form of beauty made manifest in the person and work of Christ. Yet, it is not simply in the content of her speech that the bride reflects the distinctively christological beauty of God. To the contrary, this beauty is also reflected in the very activity of the bride's speechmaking—just as it was in the actions of Moses—and in the activity of all those in the church who, like the bride, engage in the activity of teaching divine truth "for [others'] sake."

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[133] *Cant.* 14.429.6-12

In Song of Songs 4:1, the subject transitions from the bride's testimony of her desire for the Bridegroom to the latter's praise of the beauty of his bride. "Behold, you are beautiful, my close one, behold you are beautiful." This textual transition provides Gregory a convenient opportunity to address the subject of the bride's own participation in and reflection of the beauty that she desires. But how, we might ask, is this beauty made visible in the bride? What form does the beauty of the bride take, and how does it compare to the beauty of Christ? Gregory, for his part, finds the answer to this question in the bride's active reflection of God's love for humanity, which she demonstrates in her activity of inviting others to join her in her spiritual ascent and teaching them about the character of God. This first becomes apparent in the seventh homily, when Gregory is commenting on the bride's invitation to the "daughters of Jerusalem" in Song of Songs 3:11. Observing that, by this call to those outside herself, the bride displays a marked concern for the souls of those around her, Gregory writes:

> For as the great Paul judges it a loss if he does not share (εἰ μὴ...ἐκοινώνησεν) his own good things with all (which is why he said to his hearers: 'Become as I am, for I was once as you are'; and then, 'Become imitators of me as I am of Christ'), so too the bride herself, a lover of humanity (ἡ φιλάνθρωπος) who has been made worthy of the divine mysteries of the Bridegroom (τῶν θείων τοῦ νυμφίου μυστηρίων), when she has seen the couch and has become the litter of the King, calls to the young women…[134]

Thus, it is the bride's generous sharing of the good things which have been given to her, specifically the divine mysteries that have been made known to her, which renders

[134] *Cant.* 7.211.33-212.39

her a "lover of humanity." And it is this active display of philanthropic love, according to Gregory, which is what the Bridegroom identifies as the reflected likeness of divine beauty in the bride.

> When the Word, then, has taken account of the bride's love for humanity (φιλανθρωπίαν)—a love of such a kind that after the pattern of the Lord (κατὰ μίμησιν τοῦ δεσπότου) she too 'wants everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth'—he assigns her the more prestige by assuming the role of a herald and portraitist of her beauty…This is what he says: *Behold, you are beautiful, my close one; behold, you are beautiful*. For she who imitates the loving will (τὸ φιλάνθρωπον βούλημα) of the Master…she truly becomes *close* to the goodness of her Lord because she has drawn near to God by love of neighbor (διὰ τῆς πρὸς τὸν πλησίον ἀγάπης).[135]

This helps to explain why, when Gregory goes on to comment on a variety of the specific elements of the bride's beauty—her teeth, her lips, her neck, and her breasts—he interprets them as symbolic references to the philanthropic activity of members within the church who endeavor, like the bride, to teach and guide others to a participation in the beauty of Christ. Thus, the bride's teeth refer to those in the church who, having attained a level of spiritual maturity, "grind the divine mysteries up small by interpreting them more lucidly (διὰ σαφεστέρας ἐξηγήσεως), so that this spiritual nourishment can the more easily be taken in by the church's body."[136] The lips of the bride, which the Song compares to a "scarlet thread," are interpreted as a reference to the "word of faith" (τὸ

[135] *Cant.* 7.215.1-14
[136] *Cant.* 7.225.17-19

ρῆμα τῆς πίστεως) which is preached in the church for the purpose of leading others to salvation.[137] Similarly, the beauty of the bride's neck is interpreted as a reference to the "nourishing activity" (τὴν θρεπτικὴν ἐνέργειαν) of those who serve as teachers within the context of the church and thus provide spiritual sustenance to those in need.[138] And, finally, Gregory suggests that the beauty of the bride's breasts are a reference to the person who, "after the fashion of the great Paul, becomes a breast for the little ones and feeds the church's newborn with milk."[139] Each of these distinct aspects of the bride's beauty are taken to refer to particular elements of the church's life, most especially the church's philanthropic activity of leading others to the life-giving beauty of Christ.[140]

The identification of divine beauty with the philanthropic love of God made known in the economy of Christ's incarnation and humble self-offering is, therefore, no minor theme in the *Homilies on the Song of Songs*. To the contrary, as I have noted, it features prominently both in the bride's perception of and desire for divine beauty and in her own description and active reflection of that beauty. Perhaps the clearest indication of the influence of this understanding of divine beauty can be found in the fifteenth and

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[137] *Cant.* 7.229.3-13. Gregory interprets the "scarlet" as a reference to the faith that is preached and the "thread" as an indication of the love with which it is preached, so that, together, this description of the bride's lips constitutes an allusion to that speech which is an effect of "faith actively working by love" (πίστις δι' ἀγάπης ἐνεργουμένη).

[138] *Cant.* 7.235.1-8

[139] *Cant.* 7.242.4-5. The description of the bride's breasts as being "made beautiful from wine" in Song of Songs 4:10 provides Gregory another occasion to ruminate on the beauty that is seen in the nursing activity of the bride. On this occasion, he makes it clear that he understands "breasts" to signify "the wellsprings of good teachings (τῶν ἀγαθῶν διδαγμάτων)" and in the "gospel teaching" of those who, like the apostle Paul, relay their understanding of Christ to others. Cf. *Cant.* 9.263-267

[140] Another example of this theme can be found in Gregory's interpretation of the depiction of the bride as a "sealed fountain" sending off an aroma of spices in 4:12-15. In the image of the fountain, Gregory finds a potent symbol for the self-giving character of virtue, for just as a fountain spouts water out of itself, so the church goes outside itself in order to "become water that the thirsty can drink." The various aromas which the fountain appears to be giving off are also interpreted by Gregory to represent the apostles, who have been sent out of the church "to proclaim the truth." And, finally, the description of the fountain as a "well of living water" prompts Gregory to observe how the bride's corporate activity of bringing life to the souls of others functions as a living representation "of the life-giving nature" (τῆς ζωοποιοῦ φύσεως) of God. Cf. *Cant.* 9.280-282, 292-293.

final homily, at the height of the bride's spiritual ascent and union with God, when Gregory turns his attention to the words of Song of Songs 6:3-4: "I am for my kinsman, and my kinsman is for me; he grazes his flock among the lilies. You are beautiful, my close one, like goodwill, lovely, like Jerusalem." For with the words "I am for my kinsman and my kinsman is for me," the bride has confessed her union with and conformity to Christ and, in so doing, identified "the norm and definition of perfection in virtue (κανὼν καὶ ὅρος τῆς κατ' ἀρετήν τελειότητος)," which is that the bride should become a "supremely vivid image (ἐναργεστάτην εἰκόνα) of the prototypical Beauty."[141] To unpack what he means by a "supremely vivid image," Gregory appeals once again to the metaphor which featured so prominently in his anthropological writings, that of the mirror. For in just the same way that a mirror displays "in its clear surface the exact imprint of the face which it reflects," so the bride can say, "Since I focus upon the face of my kinsman with my entire being, the entire beauty of his form (ὅλον τῆς ἐκείνου μορφῆς τὸ κάλλος) is seen in me."[142]

These statements illustrate the significant amount of conceptual similarity between Gregory's anthropology and his account of virtuous perfection. For as we noted in chapter two of this study, Gregory interprets the motif of *imago Dei* to mean that humans were created to serve as living and active reflections—mirrors—of the perfection of divine goodness. In this homily, he returns to those same themes, but this time in the context of describing the "norm and definition of perfection in virtue." What is particularly noteworthy for our purposes, however, is not simply that the end is like the beginning for Gregory, but rather in how he goes on to define the particular character of

[141] *Cant.* 15.439.10-16
[142] *Cant.* 15.440.30-32

the bride's godlike beauty. For, once again, the form which this beauty takes can be found in the philanthropic activity of the bride toward others, in her imitation of the "goodwill" of God made manifest in the narrative of Christ's incarnational descent:

> For it is obvious that where she is concerned the Word is pointing to this: that the soul, through the upward journey she has completed, has been exalted to the point where she is straining forward toward the wonders of the Lord and Master. For if God "in the highest," the One who is "in the bosom of the Father," has been mingled with flesh and blood because of his "goodwill (εὐδοκίας) toward his human creatures," so that "Peace" has come to be "on earth," then plainly the soul that has brought her own beauty into line with this "goodwill" is imitating Christ (τὸν Χριστὸν μιμεῖται) by her own righteous deeds; she is becoming toward others what Christ became for the human race (γινομένη τοῖς ἄλλοις ὅπερ ὁ Χριστὸς τῇ φύσει τῶν ἀνθρώπων ἐγένετο), just as Paul too, that imitator of Christ, did by renouncing his life so as to exchange his own suffering for the salvation of Israel when he said, "I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsman by race." It is surely fitting to say to him what was said to the bride: "The beauty of your soul is of the same order as was the goodwill exercised toward us by the Lord and Master (ἡ τοῦ δεσπότου γέγονεν ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν εὐδοκία), who 'emptied himself, taking the form of a slave,' and gave himself in exchange for the life of the cosmos, and 'though he was rich, became poor for our sakes,' in order that in his death we should live, and in his poverty grow rich, and in the form of the slavery that was his we should reign."[143]

[143] *Cant.* 15.443.1-444.17

This passage, with its brilliant collage of scriptural citations and its intermixture of the gospel narrative and Christian virtue, serves as a fitting conclusion to the argument which I have been advancing in my reading of the *Homilies on the Song of Songs*. For here we can see the deep connection in Gregory's understanding between the character of divine perfection as it appears in the philanthropic narrative of the economy of Jesus Christ and the characteristic shape of Christian virtue as it reflects that perfection. At the height of the bride's ascent, she manifests the beauty of her "Lord and Master" in her reflection of his "goodwill" because, like the God whom she seeks, the bride has "become toward others what Christ became for the human race." Like the apostle Paul and like the person of Moses before her, she has imitated the perfect goodness of Christ to such a degree that she has come to participate in the characteristic mark of divine perfection, the philanthropic activity of self-giving for the sake of another. And let us make no mistake. This form of philanthropic virtue which has become manifested in the bride's own life is not merely a christological virtue; it is one of the characteristic marks, as Gregory goes on to say, by which "divine beauty (τὸ θεῖον κάλλος) is recognized."[144] The virtuous activity of the bride is a reflection of the "character of divinity," the natural perfection of God's own life.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have looked at three of Gregory's most well-known writings on the spiritual life: the *Homilies on the Beatitudes*, the *Life of Moses*, and the *Homilies on the Song of Songs*. And in each of these three texts I have identified several common

[144] *Cant.* 15.445.29

patterns that, I argue, evince the influential presence of Gregory's Nicene theology. First, all three of these texts are united in their depiction of the spiritual life as a continuous process of transformation which takes place through a contemplation of and mimetic participation in the goodness and beauty of God, with the result that the soul becomes what it was created to be: a living and active mirror of divine perfection. Second, when it comes to the subject of contemplating divine perfection, I have demonstrated that, while the theme of apophatic unknowing is present in each of these texts as a correlate to the infinity of the divine nature, all three also provide an account of the positive apprehension of God. What is more, this account of the soul's positive vision of God is consistently interpreted with reference to the manifestation of divine goodness through God's economic activity and, most especially, through the gospel narrative of self-giving love made known in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Third, I have argued that this contemplative focus on the narrative of Christ finds its fitting parallel in the character of virtue as it takes shape within the lives of those who have made their spiritual ascent, be it the person who has ascended through the beatitudes, the person of Moses, or the person of the bride in the Song of Songs. In each and every case, those souls who have made their ascent into the heights of union with God become themselves living reflections of divine perfection through their philanthropic activity toward those in need. As Gregory puts it in his fifteenth homily on the Song of Songs, those souls who have reached the summit of the spiritual life manifest their union with God by "becoming toward others what Christ became for the human race."

These common patterns in Gregory's spiritual writings, so I have argued, demonstrate a clear connection with some of the primary tenets of his Nicene theology.

For as I noted in the first chapter, the debate between Gregory and Eunomius was not merely a disagreement over how to account for unity and plurality within God or how to properly relate the persons of the Father and the Son. On the contrary, at the heart of their arguments over these issues was a more fundamental disagreement on the nature and character of divine perfection. Both Gregory and Eunomius agreed that God was perfect. The question was, in what does that perfection consist and how is that perfection either present or absent in the person of Jesus Christ? The genius of Gregory's response to Eunomius was that he did not allow the bishop of Cyzicus's identification of perfection with the quality of "unbegottenness" to set the parameters for the debate. Gregory instead put forward his own account of divine perfection, one which presumed that the nature of God was faithfully reflected in the activity of divine power and that the gospel narrative of Christ's incarnation, death, and resurrection was the fullest manifestation of that power. The account of perfection yielded by this approach was a description of God not primarily as perfect aseity, but as perfect and life-giving goodness, present in God's own life and manifested in human history in the form of philanthropic love. And, as I have shown in this chapter, it is precisely this account of perfection that Gregory finds reflected in Jesus' teaching in the beatitudes and in Moses' leadership of the people of Israel and in the bride's self-giving activity of logophatic speech. These scriptural texts do indeed provide an account of virtue, according to Gregory, but not a virtue of any generic kind. This is a distinctly Christian account of virtue insofar as it reflects a distinctly Christian understanding of God, the God made known in Jesus Christ, the God of Nicaea, the God of the gospel.

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