

Becoming Human in the Face of God: Gregory of Nyssa's Unending Search for the Beatific Vision

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Abstract: This article seeks to effect a *ressourcement* of the theology of the beatific vision through reflection on Gregory of Nyssa's engagement with biblical passages that he believes speak of this vision. Through attention to Nyssen's sixth homily on the Beatitudes, commentary on *The Life of Moses* and *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, I argue that, for him, human persons find their telos when in union with Christ they become ever purer, in an ever-increasing growth in the beatific vision. Gregory maintains that the perfection of human personhood consists of the soul always remaining in search of greater fulfilment of its desire to see God in Christ.

Introduction

Patristic and medieval theologians regarded the beatific vision as the undisputed purpose of the Christian life.¹ This notion helped to maintain the unity of spiritual and dogmatic theology through many centuries of Christian thought, for doctrinal reflection on the beatific vision was, by default, deliberation on the spiritual telos of

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- 1 While doctrinal attention to the beatific vision has largely disappeared, the topic has continued to garner attention among historians of doctrine, no doubt as a result of the ubiquity of the doctrine in the history of Christian thought. See, most notably, Kenneth E. Kirk, *The Vision of God: The Christian Doctrine of the Summum Bonum: The Bampton Lectures for 1928* (London: Longmans, Green, 1932); Vladimir Lossky, *The Vision of God*, trans. Asheleigh Moorhouse (Leighton Buzzard: The Faith Press, 1973); Christian Trottman, *La Vision béatifique des disputes scolastiques à sa définition par Benoît XII* (Rome: École française de Rome, 1995); Severin Valentinov Kitanov, *Beatific Enjoyment in Medieval Scholastic Debates* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2014).

human existence.² The marginalization of the beatific vision as a dogmatic (and spiritual) locus may be traced to a variety of factors. The theology of the Reformation played some role,³ as have a self-conscious marginalization of teleological notions in modern science⁴ and a broader modern tendency to emphasize this-worldly goods as the ends of human life. The cumulate force of a series of factors is an unfortunate neglect of the theology of the beatific vision.⁵

There is good reason for a *ressourcement* of this aspect of classical theology. The decline of the beatific vision as a key element of eschatological reflection impoverishes Christian spirituality – in particular the Christian hope and, by implication, Christian identity – in serious ways. Its replacement in extra-theological reflection by the presumption that the pursuit of pleasure and material wellbeing represents the telos of human life renders impossible the proper flourishing of the human soul. This article thus aims at an unapologetic *ressourcement* of the doctrine and spirituality of the beatific vision by means of a discussion of Gregory of Nyssa's understanding of the theme. A genuine and successful retrieval of this telos will prove to be ecclesially and culturally no less significant than its loss in the modern period.

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- 2 Cf. the helpful discussion on the split between spirituality and theology in Hans Urs von Balthasar, 'Theology and Sanctity', in *Explorations in Theology*, vol. 1, *The Word Made Flesh* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), pp. 181–209.
 - 3 See Suzanne McDonald, 'Beholding the Glory of God in the Face of Jesus Christ: John Owen and the "Reforming" of the Beatific Vision', in Kelly M. Kapic and Mark Jones, eds., *The Ashgate Research Companion to John Owen's Theology* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012), pp. 141–58. Franciscus Junius, Amandus Polanus, Antonius Walaeus and Francis Turretin are among the scholastic Reformed theologians who pay attention to the beatific vision. Puritan theologians (such as Lewis Bayly, Isaac Ambrose, Richard Baxter, John Owen, Thomas Watson and later also Jonathan Edwards) picked up on the theme as part of their focus on matters of Christian spirituality and anagogy. The recent book by Anthony C. Thiselton also contains two chapters dealing with the beatific vision (*Life after Death: A New Approach to the Last Things* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), pp. 185–215).
 - 4 M.B. Foster's renowned essay, 'The Christian Doctrine of Creation and the Rise of Modern Natural Science' (*Mind* 43 (1934), pp. 446–68) is revealing in this regard. Failing to recognize either the explicitly anti-Christian roots or the secularist outcomes of seventeenth-century philosophical developments, Foster erroneously attributes them to the Christian doctrine of creation. While he celebrates the occlusion of teleology and the separation between Creator and creature in the modern period, my starting point in this essay is that the materialist and immanentist focus of modernity is something to be lamented. Although I write of the occlusion of teleology, empiricism does have its own presuppositions and aims; it simply hides them and is often unconscious of them. In modernity, the satisfaction of desires through ever-increasing material consumption has replaced the beatific vision as the telos of human existence.
 - 5 This neglect includes to some extent Catholic theology. However, for an insightful contemporary Catholic treatment that draws on Thomas Aquinas, see Matthew Levering, *Jesus and the Demise of Death: Resurrection, Afterlife, and the Fate of the Christian* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012), pp. 109–25.

The long tradition of reflection on the beatific vision is based primarily on the biblical promise that after death believers will see God face to face,⁶ along with descriptions of theophanic experiences of Old as well as New Testament saints⁷ (which occur despite repeated biblical claims that no one can see God⁸), and passages that speak more broadly about life before God in terms of vision and/or light.⁹ In much of the Christian mystical tradition, particularly where the influence of Gregory of Nyssa and of Dionysius has been prominent, reflection on these passages is linked with attention to texts that speak of God's self-revelation in terms of darkness.¹⁰ In this article, I will reflect particularly on Nyssen's engagement with biblical passages that to his mind speak of the beatific vision itself, and so my focus will be on his homilies on Matthew 5:8, his commentary on Moses' ascent of Mount Sinai, and his sermons on the Song of Songs.

Engagement with the fourth-century Cappadocian mystical theologian Gregory of Nyssa is particularly germane in an attempt to retrieve the spiritual and dogmatic theme of the beatific vision. The theme was of great significance to the Bishop of Nyssa, as he repeatedly reflected on it, often in passing, and on three occasions at some length. His sixth homily on the Beatitudes (probably written in the mid to late 370s), as well as his commentary on *The Life of Moses* and his *Homilies on the Song of Songs* (both of which probably stem from the 390s),¹¹ deal extensively with the beatific vision. Furthermore, Gregory was a theologian for whom Christian doctrine, biblical interpretation, pastoral theology and personal ascetical practices were closely linked together. In each of these areas, Gregory's anagogical (or upward-leading) approach to theology inspired in him a desire to move from this-worldly, earthly realities to otherworldly, heavenly ones. The doctrine of the beatific vision fits neatly with Nyssen's view of biblical interpretation as an upward move from history

6 The most obvious passages we may think of here are Job 19:26–27; Mt. 5:8; Jn 17:24; 1 Cor. 13:12; 2 Cor. 5:6; and 1 Jn 3:2.

7 The most-discussed theophanies are the Lord's appearing to Abraham (Gen. 18), Jacob (Gen. 28 and 32), Moses (Exod. 33–4; Num. 12:7–8; Heb. 11:27), Micaiah (1 Kgs 22:19), Isaiah (Isa. 6:1–5), Ezekiel (Ezek. 1:4–28; 8:1–4), Peter, James and John (Mt. 17:1–8 and pars.), Paul (Acts 9:3–9; 2 Cor. 12:1–4), and John (Rev. 1:12–16; 4–5).

8 Exod. 33:20; Jn 1:18; 1 Tim. 6:16; 1 Jn 4:12.

9 Some of the passages most frequently referenced in the Christian tradition in this regard are Ps. 27; 36:9; 27:20; 80:19; Isa. 26:10; 53:2; 64:4; 66:14; Mt. 18:10; Jn 14:8–9; 1 Cor. 2:9; 2 Cor. 3:18; 4:6; and Rev. 21:23–4.

10 Exod. 20:21; 24:18; Ps. 18:11; Song 2:3; 5:2; 5:5–6. For Gregory's use of the biblical theme of darkness, see Martin Laird, 'Darkness', in Lucas Francisco Mateo-Seco and Giulio Maspero, eds., *The Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), pp. 203–5. Laird, following the lead of Bernard McGinn, emphasizes that Gregory uses the apophatic theme of darkness only in exegetical contexts that demand such attention to it. See Martin Laird, *Gregory of Nyssa and the Grasp of Faith: Union, Knowledge, and Divine Presence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 174–203.

11 On internal grounds, it seems to me that *The Life of Moses* was written before the *Homilies on the Song of Songs*. See Hans Boersma, *Embodiment and Virtue in Gregory of Nyssa: An Anagogical Approach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 231 n. 95.

to spirit, with his desire to prepare his congregation for eternal life, and with his conviction that a life of almsgiving, care for the sick, and bodily renunciation are indispensable in reaching the aim of the Christian life.

For Gregory, therefore, the beatific vision is not a doctrine about which to speculate abstractly. Instead, he regards it as the very aim of the Christian life – and hence also of his own, personal existence. Gregory looked forward concretely to experiencing the beatific vision at the point of death; this vision also constituted the aim for which he strove throughout his life, and as such it determined his overall outlook on life. Gregory, we could say, was someone who made it the purpose of his existence to seek the face of God. The aim of the spiritual journey here on earth was, for Gregory, identical to the telos of seeking God in the hereafter. This concord between the destiny of the heavenly future and the aim of everyday spirituality means that the quest to see God lies at the heart of Gregory's mystical-theological approach. For him, God makes himself visible to saintly believers in their spiritual lives by means of theophanies, in anticipation of the beatific vision in the hereafter. Gregory's reflections on the beatific vision draw, therefore, on the spiritual, theophanic visions that saints such as Moses, Paul, and John (as well as the bride of the Song of Songs) experienced during their earthly lives. Gregory worked on the assumption that we are to pursue the vision of God in this life, and that the resulting theophanies give us insight into the reality of the beatific vision in the hereafter.

In what follows, then, I will highlight some of the characteristics of Gregory's doctrine of the beatific vision, based as it is on his insights in the biblical text.¹² I will argue that, for Gregory, human souls find their telos when in union with Christ they become ever purer, in an ever-increasing growth in the beatific vision. Gregory was a theologian always in search of Christ, and though he was convinced he had indeed found him, Nyssen's desire to see Christ impelled him to seek still further. For Gregory this theological longing was grounded in his understanding of the beatific vision: the eschatological future of perpetual progress (*epektasis*) in the life of Christ meant that already in this life Gregory set his desire on seeking the face of God in

12 To be sure, Gregory does not see biblical exegesis as being at odds with philosophical reflection. I do not have the space here to discuss in detail Gregory's reliance on Platonic philosophy and how this relates to the biblical character of his approach. Suffice it to say that I believe Gregory to be primarily a biblical theologian. Jaroslav Pelikan strikes the right balance when he comments that the Cappadocians 'stood squarely in the tradition of Classical Greek culture, and each was at the same time intensely critical of that tradition' (Jaroslav Pelikan, *Christianity and Classical Culture: The Metamorphosis of Natural Theology in the Christian Encounter with Hellenism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 9). To my mind, then, it is a gross exaggeration to state with Harold Fredrik Cherniss that, 'but for some few orthodox dogmas which he could not circumvent, Gregory has merely applied Christian names to Plato's doctrine and called it Christian theology' (Harold Fredrik Cherniss, *The Platonism of Gregory of Nyssa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1930), p. 62). At the same time, Jean Daniélou may unduly minimize the importance to Gregory of a Platonic metaphysic. See Jean Daniélou, *Platonisme et théologie mystique: Doctrine spirituelle de Saint Grégoire de Nysse* (Paris: Aubier, 1944), pp. 8, 9.

Jesus Christ. For Gregory, then, the soul's true end – depicted under the biblical images of the pure in heart, Moses, and the bride – can be realized in the soul's mystical vision of God in Christ, prior to the eschatological beatific vision. At the same time, Gregory is convinced that human personhood will never be a finished project, since the soul will always remain in search of greater fulfillment of its desire. The reason for this is that seeing God implies at the same time a non-seeing, since the soul can never (not even in the hereafter) attain to the very nature or essence of the infinite God.

Homilies on the Beatitudes: obstacles to purity

Gregory first extensively discusses the beatific vision in his *Homilies on the Beatitudes*.¹³ Anticipating the approach of many others in the later tradition, Gregory begins by posing the obvious paradox that the canonical witness presents: on the one hand, John, Paul, and Moses all rule out the possibility of seeing God (Jn 1:18; 1 Tim. 6:16; Exod. 33:20);¹⁴ on the other hand, none of these three saints 'failed to achieve that sublime blessedness which comes as a result of seeing God'.¹⁵ This paradox is closely linked to two obstacles that may prevent us from seeing God, both of which would appear to justify the belief that human beings cannot possibly do so. The first obstacle has to do with the nature of God. The promise held out by the sixth beatitude – that the pure in heart shall see God – is a promise that 'exceeds the utmost limit (ὄρον) of blessedness'.¹⁶ Gregory maintains that the divine nature 'transcends all conceptual comprehension'.¹⁷ God's nature is beyond human limits, and so the only way to speak of the divine nature is by using apophatic negations: God is inaccessible, unapproachable, incomprehensible and untraceable.¹⁸ The second obstacle concerns the lack of purity on the part of human beings. Gregory is keenly aware of the passions that stand in the way of the purity required to see God. Worrying about the 'intractable difficulty' that the passions pose,¹⁹ Gregory exclaims, 'What sort of Jacob's ladder (Gen. 28:12) is to be found, what sort of fiery chariot like the one which carried up the prophet Elijah to heaven (2 Kings 2:11), by

13 For the Greek text, I follow the critical edition of *De beatitudinibus* (hereafter *Beat.*), in Johannes F. Callahan, ed., *Gregorii Nysseni Opera*, vol. VII/2 (Leiden: Brill, 1992), pp. 75–170. I use the English translation by Stuart George Hall in Hubertus R. Drobner and Albert Viciano, eds., *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on the Beatitudes: An English Version with Supporting Studies* (Leiden: Brill, 2000).

14 *Beat.* 6.137.13–22 (Hall, p. 66).

15 Gregory appeals to 2 Tim. 4:8; Jn 13:25; and Exod. 33:17.

16 *Beat.* 6.138.9–10 (Hall, p. 67).

17 *Beat.* 6.140.16–17 (Hall, p. 68).

18 *Beat.* 6.140.17, 19, 20 (Hall, p. 68).

19 *Beat.* 6.144.16 (Hall, p. 71).

which our heart might be lifted up to the marvels above, and shake off this earthly burden?’²⁰ Gregory makes clear to his readers that the Lord’s promise faces tremendous hurdles.

Both the depth of the dominical saying and the intractable challenge that it poses to the spiritual quest make Gregory’s mind ‘spin’, ‘whirl’ and ‘reel’.²¹ In fact, he begins his homily by speaking of the vertiginous experience of looking down from a mountaintop into a deep sea:

People who look down from some high peak on a vast sea below, probably feel what my mind has felt, looking out from the sublime words of the Lord as from a mountain-top at the inexhaustible depth of their meaning. It is the same as in many seaside places, where you may see a mountain cut in half, sliced sheer on the seaward side from top to bottom, at whose upper end a projecting peak leans out towards the deep. As a person might feel who from such a view-point looked down from the great height on the sea at the bottom, so my mind spins now, sent reeling by this great saying of the Lord.²²

By comparing the impact that the sixth beatitude has on him to an experience of vertigo, Nyssen indicates that the Lord’s saying about the pure in heart is one that involves paradoxes and difficulties of such magnitude that they render us unable to explain the saying.²³ Gregory is alluding to an experience of rapture or ecstasy that takes him beyond the powers of sense and discursive reasoning.²⁴

The paradox and obstacles surrounding the beatific vision do not render Gregory silent or agnostic on the topic. Both the paradox of seeing the invisible God and the obstacles that impede the vision can be subjected to rational analysis. Gregory takes several steps toward a resolution of the difficulties. With regard to the first difficulty, that of divine incomprehensibility, he notes that it is possible – even for the ‘wise of

20 *Beat.* 6.144.22–6 (Hall, p. 71). Within the context of the struggle against the passions, it is hard to imagine that the mention of Elijah’s chariot does not at the same time call to Gregory’s mind Plato’s allegory of the chariot, which he relates in *Phaedrus* 246a–254e.

21 *Beat.* 6.137.10 (Hall, p. 66); 6.137.25 (Hall, p. 66); 6.138.26 (Hall, p. 67). In each case, Gregory uses forms of the verb ἰλιγγιάω or of the noun ἰλιγγος.

22 *Beat.* 6.136.26–137.11 (Hall, p. 66).

23 Gregory uses the imagery of vertigo to describe the move beyond rational knowledge also in his seventh homily on Ecclesiastes. See *In Ecclesiasten homiliae*, in Paulus Alexander, ed., *Gregorii Nysseni Opera*, vol. V (Leiden: Brill, 1986), 7.413.5–414.9. The English translation is ‘Gregory, Bishop of Nyssa: Homilies on Ecclesiastes’, trans. Stuart George Hall and Rachel Moriarty, in Stuart George Hall, ed., *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on Ecclesiastes: An English Version with Supporting Studies* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1993), pp. 125–6.

24 It does not seem to me that Gregory’s rhetorical reference to his experience of vertigo implies that he actually has a mystical experience during the writing or preaching of his sermon. More likely, he playfully suits the rhetoric of the homily’s opening paragraph to the theme of the sermon.

the world' – to move from God's energies or operations to the divine operator.²⁵ In particular, God's operations teach us about his transcendent wisdom, goodness, power, purity and immutability.²⁶ Gregory here distinguishes between God's nature (φύσις) or being (οὐσία) and his energies (ἐνεργεία). This distinction – which through Gregory of Palamas's use during the fourteenth-century Hesychast controversy has taken on particular prominence in Orthodox theology – helps Gregory affirm both that God *cannot* be seen (in his being) and that he *can* be seen (in his operations). 'He who is by nature invisible', affirms Gregory, 'becomes visible in his operations, being seen in certain cases by the properties he possesses.'²⁷ As a result of this distinction, the paradox becomes a little less intolerable: it is apparently possible for us to see God in creation, while he remains invisible inasmuch as he transcends the created order.

Gregory explains that the *visio dei* also becomes a reality when we wash away the accumulated filth of sin 'by scrupulous living'²⁸ or when, as a whetstone strips off rust from iron, our heart recovers its original likeness to its archetype.²⁹ This means that it is possible to see God's beauty in ourselves as in a mirror.³⁰ The result is that,

even though you are too feeble to understand the unapproachable light, yet if you go right back to the grace of the image which was built into you from the first, you possess in yourselves what you seek. Godhead is purity, absence of passion, and separation from every evil. If these are in you, God is certainly in you.³¹

Gregory thus 'resolves' the paradox of seeing the invisible God by limiting in two ways what it is that we see of God: we observe only his operations – not his nature – in creation (with the physical eyes), and we see merely a reflection of God's nature in the mirror of our lives (with the 'eye of the soul').³² Both of these

25 *Beat.* 6.142.2–4 (Hall, p. 69).

26 *Beat.* 6.141.8–142.4 (Hall, p. 69).

27 *Beat.* 6.141.25–7 (Hall, p. 69).

28 *Beat.* 6.143.11–12 (Hall, p. 70).

29 *Beat.* 6.143.13–20 (Hall, p. 70).

30 Cf. the comment of Edwart Baert: 'Ainsi la réapparition de l'image de Dieu qui est un retour à l'état originel est aussi une vision de Dieu dans le miroir de l'âme pure (Edwart Baert, 'Le Thème de la vision de Dieu chez S. Justin, Clément d'Alexandrie et S. Grégoire de Nysse', *Freiburger Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Theologie* 12 (1965), p. 492). For discussion of Gregory's use of the 'mirror' metaphor in his *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, see Boersma, *Embodiment and Virtue*, p. 99. Cf., more extensively, Daniélou, *Platonisme*, pp. 210–22.

31 *Beat.* 6.143.27–144.4 (Hall, p. 70).

32 At the same time, as we will see, for Gregory the 'resolution' does not really remove the paradox, which remains as a result of his doctrine of perpetual progress (*epektasis*).

For discussion on Gregory of Nyssa's approach to the spiritual senses, see Boersma, *Embodiment and Virtue*, pp. 93–100; Sarah Coakley, 'Gregory of Nyssa', in Paul L. Gavriluk and Sarah Coakley, eds., *The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 36–55.

limitations to the *visio dei* imply that something remains inaccessible to human sight: in the first instance we do not see the nature or being of God, and in the second instance we see his light only inasmuch as the soul reflects it. To be sure, we should not conclude that this means that human beings do not really see God: by witnessing the operations of God or the likeness of the archetype, we really do see God himself. After all, by drawing rational conclusions about God's operations we do get to see God in some way: '[E]ach sublime idea brings God into view', comments Gregory.³³ And he encourages his listeners to recover their likeness to the archetype, for, he says to them, the result will be that 'you possess in yourself what you seek . . . God is certainly in you'.³⁴

It should be clear from this that for Gregory everyday spirituality – seeing what God is like by looking at the world around us and observing with the 'eye of the soul' 'the luminous outpoured rays of the divine nature' in our hearts³⁵ – is intrinsically linked to the beatific vision. Seeing God is not just a matter of the *eschaton*. Already today we get to contemplate in some fashion the light of God's being. What is more, for Gregory, earthly anticipations of the beatific vision take the form not just of ecstatic, theophanic experiences – though, as will see, he does discuss them. Much more mundanely, however, we already experience the *visio dei* in a real sense when we see traces of God in the ways in which he works in the world and in the reflection of his purity in our own lives.

Of course, in none of this exposition has Gregory 'solved' the paradox of seeing the invisible God. What he *has* done is to delineate, as it were, certain aspects of God's presence in the world (in his operations and in human purity) that make him visible, while limiting the invisibility of God to those inner aspects of God's being that are beyond ordinary human observation. But while in some significant way Gregory has dealt with the paradox of seeing the invisible God, one of the two obstacles to the vision of God remains more or less intact: the requirement of 'purity of heart' (and so our vision of God in ourselves as in a mirror) still hardly seems feasible. God's character is perfect purity, and a mere mirroring of this purity would hardly seem the kind of purity required for the vision of God. Regardless of Gregory's attempts thus far at securing the human vision of God, therefore, he has

Arguing that the later Gregory turned against his own earlier Platonic body–soul dualism, Coakley wrongly claims that Gregory turns from a 'disjunctive' to a 'conjunctive' approach, according to which sense perception itself can become spiritual perception. This interpretation overlooks that when Gregory wants us to use the senses to arrive at the reality that surpasses them, this 'use' of the senses typically takes the form of a renunciation of the senses. Coakley underestimates the (Platonist Christian) emphasis on ascent and anagogy throughout Gregory's writings, even in his later mystical commentaries (though it is true that these tend to be more thoroughly Christological than some of his earlier works).

33 *Beat.* 6.141.17–18 (Hall, p. 69).

34 *Beat.* 6.144.2–4 (Hall, p. 70).

35 *Beat.* 6.144.8–9; 6.144.12 (Hall, p. 71).

not yet fully addressed the gap separating the creature from the Creator. Nor would it be out of place for his audience still to have questions about their ability to attain to the 'purity of heart' that allows for the vision of God.

As we will see shortly, Gregory is keenly aware of the difficulty of attaining genuine 'purity of heart'. Nevertheless, in this homily on the sixth beatitude he never fully resolves this second obstacle to the vision of God – the lack of human purity vis-à-vis the holiness of God. Nyssen simply insists that the dominical saying is not only a warning but also a promise, which as such is attainable.³⁶ Purity of heart cannot be out of reach, Gregory explains. He references the Lord's sharpening of the Old Testament Law in the remainder of the Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5:17–28), and he insists that we find in this teaching a 'sharp-edged word like a plough digging out the roots of sins from the bottom of our heart', identifying Christ's words as 'instruction which leads us to our goal'.³⁷ Gregory merely reinforces the urgency of Christ's demand as he insists that purity of heart is within our reach. We cannot but wonder how Gregory's audience would have responded to their preacher's optimistic assessment of our ability to achieve the goal of purity. After all, the passage concludes with the demand to 'be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect' (Mt. 5:48). Christ's 'instruction' regarding this perfection may not at all imply that people in fact have the ability to follow up on it. Purity may still be out of reach.

Gregory is quite aware of the exegetical and doctrinal difficulty that he faces at this point: if perfection is unattainable, this means that purity is out of reach. And if purity is wishful thinking, then we will never see the face of God. In this particular sermon, Gregory leaves the issue unresolved. He simply warns his congregation at the end about the choice of either a life of virtue taking on the shape of the Divinity or a life of vice taking on the form of the Adversary.³⁸ He even adds that it is up to us which one to choose, since 'there is offered to us the power to go either way by our own freedom of choice'.³⁹ This ending of the sermon seems rather unsatisfying, as it leaves Nyssen's congregation with a demand for purity that appears for all intents and purposes impossible to fulfill. Quite likely, Gregory leaves the question of the attainability of purity unresolved for homiletical reasons – either so that he can end the sermon with a stern warning or so that he does not have to start up a lengthy new discussion of what it means to attain perfection or purity. Whatever his reason for ending the sermon the way that he does, Gregory clearly leaves the onus of purity resting firmly on the shoulders of his listeners.

36 *Beat.* 6.145.20–146.2 (Hall, p. 72).

37 *Beat.* 6.147.15–16; 6.147.19–20 (Hall, p. 73).

38 *Beat.* 6.148.3–8 (Hall, p. 73).

39 *Beat.* 6.148.15–16 (Hall, pp. 73–4). While it is tempting perhaps to accuse Gregory of Pelagianism at this point, his overall theology (and particularly his christological understanding of participation) should caution us in this regard. See Boersma, *Embodiment and Virtue*, pp. 211–50.

The Life of Moses: vision as perpetual desire

Both in his book *On Perfection* and in his two masterful mystical treatises on Moses and on the Song of Songs, Gregory does develop a carefully considered christological response to this issue.⁴⁰ Toward the end of his life, he resolves the issue of the apparent impossibility of perfection (and, by implication, also of purity) by redefining it in terms of infinite progress towards perfection as it exists in God himself. Thus, he writes in *On Perfection*: ‘For this is truly perfection: never to stop growing towards what is better and never placing any limit on perfection.’⁴¹ Gregory gives a similar definition in *The Life of Moses*, when he comments that ‘the perfection of human nature consists perhaps in its very growth in goodness’.⁴² Gregory here writes of perfection as unending growth or progress in the life of God (*epektasis*), which is an important theme in the mystical works written toward the end of his life. Nyssen takes the concept from Philippians 3:13–14, where Paul states, ‘Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward (ἐπεκτεινόμενος) to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus’ (ESV). For Gregory, ever-increasing growth in purity and perfection is possible, explains Lucas Mateo-Seco, ‘because one already participates in a real manner in this good; an infinite growth is possible because this good is inexhaustible’.⁴³ It is the infinite goodness of God that secures for Gregory the notion of perpetual progress in the life of God.

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- 40 There is some difference of opinion as to the dating of *On Perfection*. Considering the less developed solution to the problem of perfection in this work (as compared to *The Life of Moses* and the *Homilies on the Song of Songs*), I am inclined to go with Gerhard May’s dating of 370–8 for *On Perfection* (rather than accept Daniélou’s suggestion of a later date). Cf. Jean Daniélou, ‘La Chronologie des œuvres de Grégoire de Nysse’, *Studia Patristica* 7 (1966), p. 168; Gerhard May, ‘Die Chronologie des Lebens und der Werke des Gregor von Nyssa’, in Marguerite Harl, ed., *Écriture et culture philosophique dans la pensée de Grégoire de Nysse: Actes du colloque de Chevetogne (22–26 septembre 1969)* (Leiden: Brill, 1971), p. 56.
- 41 *De perfectione* (hereafter *Perf.*), in Wernerus Jaeger, ed., *Gregorii Nysseni Opera*, vol. VIII/1 (Leiden: Brill, 1986), pp. 2144–6; the English translation is *On Perfection*, in *Saint Gregory of Nyssa: Ascetical Works*, trans. Virginia Woods Callahan (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1999), p. 122.
- 42 *De vita Moysis* (hereafter *Vit. Moys.*), in Hubertus Musurillo, ed., *Gregorii Nysseni Opera*, vol. VIII/1 (Leiden: Brill, 1964), 5.2–4; the English translation is *The Life of Moses*, ed. and trans. Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), p. 31. For detailed discussion of Gregory’s unfolding of the notion of perfection, see Boersma, *Embodiment and Virtue*, pp. 225, 227, 230–4, 237–8.
- 43 Lucas Francisco Mateo-Seco, ‘Epektasis – ἐπέκτασις’, in Mateo-Seco and Maspero, eds., *The Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa*, p. 265. For further discussion on the notion of *epektasis* in Gregory, see Daniélou, *Platonisme*, pp. 291–307; Everett Ferguson, ‘God’s Infinity and Man’s Mutability: Perpetual Progress according to Gregory of Nyssa’, *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 18 (1973), pp. 59–78; Ronald

Gregory closely links his notion of *epektasis* to that of participation (μετοχή or μετουσία), which is common in the Platonic tradition. Gregory holds that created beings (especially created intelligibles) participate in the being of God, particularly through the life of virtue. He regards this as participation in the energies of God (as opposed to his nature or essence).⁴⁴ Since God is infinite, human progress must likewise be infinite, believes Gregory. David L. Balás, in his excellent study on participation in Gregory, comments that ‘participation is, according to Gregory’s conception, intimately connected with change, even continuous change’.⁴⁵ Gregory’s notion that participation allows for continuous (eternal) growth is an answer to the problem that a more static view of the beatific vision would seem to entail: if the vision of God fully satisfies human desire, would this satiety (κόρος) not lead to weariness with regard to the experience of God in the hereafter, and hence possibly to another fall, a recurring lapse from this beatific experience? That this was a genuine theological conundrum is clear from Origen’s speculations on the topic of satiety, and it is likely in response to this Origenist problem that Gregory posits the notion of *epektasis*.⁴⁶

Nyssen’s combination of the themes of purity (or perfection), participation, and *epektasis* is of great significance for the way that he articulates the doctrine of the beatific vision, both in *The Life of Moses* and in the *Homilies on the Song of Songs*.⁴⁷ Following Jean Daniélou, scholars have tended to analyze *The Life of Moses* in terms of the three theophanies that Moses experiences: God appears to him in the Burning

E. 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: Philadelphia Patristic Foundation, 1975), pp. 63–114; E. Ferguson, ‘Progress in Perfection: Gregory of Nyssa’s *Vita Moysis*’, *Studia Patristica* 14 (1976), pp. 307–14; and Albert-Kees Geljon, ‘Divine Infinity in Gregory of Nyssa and Philo of Alexandria’, *Vigiliae Christianae* 59 (2005), pp. 152–77.

44 Cf. David L. Balás, *Μετουσία Θεου: Man’s Participation in God’s Perfections according to Saint Gregory of Nyssa* (Rome: Herder, 1966), p. 128; Paulos Mar Gregorios, *Cosmic Man: The Divine Presence: The Theology of St. Gregory of Nyssa (ca 330 to 395 A.D.)* (New York: Paragon, 1988), pp. 110–23; Elie D. Moutsoulas, ‘“Essence” et “énergies” de Dieu selon St. Grégoire de Nysse’, *Studia Patristica* 18 (1989), pp. 517–28; Verna E.F. Harrison, *Grace and Human Freedom according to St. Gregory of Nyssa* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1992), pp. 24–60, 88–131; Giulio Maspero, *Trinity and Man: Gregory of Nyssa’s Ad Ablabium* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), pp. 27–52; Alexis Torrance, ‘Precedents for Palamas’ Essence-Energies Theology in the Cappadocian Fathers’, *Vigiliae Christianae* 63 (2009), pp. 47–70.

45 Balás, *Μετουσία Θεου*, p. 136.

46 Cf. Marguerite Harl, ‘Recherches sur l’originisme d’Origène: La “satiété” (κόρος) de la contemplation comme motif de la chute des âmes’, *Studia Patristica* 8 (1966), pp. 373–405; Heine, *Perfection*, pp. 71–97.

47 Lucas F. Mateo-Seco observes that Gregory refers to 1 Cor. 13:12 (which speaks of the beatific vision) in *The Life of Moses* ‘precisely when he speaks of the infinity of God and, as a consequence, when he affirms the existence of progression towards infinity in the contemplation of God, that is, when he presents his thought on what scholars of Saint Gregory of Nyssa usually call *épektasis*’. Lucas F. Mateo-Seco, ‘1 Cor 13, 12 in Gregory of Nyssa’s Theological Thinking’, *Studia Patristica* 32 (1997), pp. 153–62.

Bush (Exod. 3), in the darkness of Mount Sinai (Exod. 20:21), and by the cleft in the rock (Exod. 33:21–2). The three stages have been characterized as a move from light, via the cloud, into darkness.⁴⁸ In actual fact, however, Nyssen's understanding of Moses' progress does not proceed quite this neatly by way of three distinct stages. Gregory does indeed trace Moses' ascent by following the three theophanies in the book of Exodus. But when we analyze what distinguishes them, it becomes clear that the notion of *epektasis* radically blurs the lines between the second and the third 'stages' of the ascent. There is only one genuine marker in the ascent; it falls, as we will see, between the first and second theophanies. The result is that there are really only two major stages in the ascent of the soul.

At the Burning Bush – in its material form a witness to the incarnation⁴⁹ – Moses comes to recognize that neither sense perception nor understanding gives true access to Being:

It seems to me that at the time the great Moses was instructed in the theophany he came to know that none of those things which are apprehended by sense perception and contemplated by the understanding really subsists, but that the transcendent essence and cause of the universe, on which everything depends, alone subsists.⁵⁰

Nyssen then distinguishes between created realities, which exist by way of participation in Being, and immutable Being itself, which is 'participated in by all but not lessened by their participation – this is truly real Being'.⁵¹

The second theophany leads Moses into the cloud on the mountain (Exod. 20:21). This theophany is a vision of God in darkness, and the reason for this is that Moses comes to see that 'knowledge of the divine essence is unattainable'⁵² and that God is 'beyond all knowledge and comprehension'.⁵³ Here, Moses 'slips into the inner sanctuary (*ἄδυτον*) of divine knowledge' and enters into the 'tabernacle not made with hands' (Heb. 9:11).⁵⁴ Gregory identifies this heavenly tabernacle with Christ, uncreated in his pre-existence,⁵⁵ and he writes of the incarnate Christ (as well as of his church) as the earthly tabernacle.⁵⁶

48 Cf. Daniélou, *Platonisme*, 17–23. I followed this approach in Hans Boersma, *Heavenly Participation: The Weaving of a Sacramental Tapestry* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), pp. 160–1.

49 Nyssen mentions a number of ways in which he believes this passage of Exod. 3 speaks of the incarnation. See Boersma, *Embodiment and Virtue*, p. 241.

50 *Vit. Moys.* 40.13–17 (Malherbe and Ferguson, p. 60).

51 *Vit. Moys.* 40.24–5 (Malherbe and Ferguson, p. 60).

52 *Vit. Moys.* 87.12–13 (Malherbe and Ferguson, p. 95).

53 *Vit. Moys.* 87.16–17 (Malherbe and Ferguson, p. 95).

54 *Vit. Moys.* 88.13 (Malherbe and Ferguson, p. 96).

55 *Vit. Moys.* 91.19 (Malherbe and Ferguson, p. 98).

56 *Vit. Moys.* 91.16–20, 95.11–13 (Malherbe and Ferguson, pp. 98, 101). I have emphasized the christological character of Moses' entry into the tabernacle in Boersma, *Embodiment and Virtue*, pp. 240–5. For a similar analysis, see Nathan Eubank,

Having arrived at the ‘inner sanctuary’ already in the cloud (the second stage), Moses’ further ascent cannot possibly involve advancing to a distinctly different stage. The first theophany taught him that created being exists only by way of participation, and the second theophany made clear that the Being of God is beyond knowledge. At this point, Moses (as well as Gregory himself) faces a dilemma. On the one hand, there can be no knowledge of God that reaches beyond the ‘inner sanctuary’. On the other hand, however, Moses has not yet arrived at the destiny of his ascent: at the very apex of his journey – the inner sanctuary itself – he appears to realize that he will never come to know the Being of God. And so, even though he has already seen God ‘face to face’ (Exod. 33:11), Moses still asks God to show him his glory (Exod. 33:18)⁵⁷ – which then leads to the third theophany, where Moses is allowed to see God’s back from within a cleft of the rock – a divine manifestation that Gregory again explains christologically, with Christ being identified as the rock.⁵⁸ For Gregory, Christ is never left behind: the human person finds his identity always and only in him.

It is at this point that Gregory embarks on a detailed discussion of *epektasis*.⁵⁹ Even though Moses has already come to Christ as the tabernacle and the inner sanctuary in the cloud, further progress still appears possible. But it is progress that takes place after the senses and the understanding have already long been left behind (in the first two theophanies). All that needs to be abandoned has already been let go by the time Moses experiences the third theophany. Already in the second theophany, he has achieved the experience of mystical ecstasy, the sense of vertigo, which comes from leaving behind every this-worldly apprehension of God. The reason why Moses can nonetheless ascend still higher is that his entrance into the ‘inner sanctuary’ does not mean the arrival at a point of static rest. Moses recognizes that even his ‘face-to-face’ encounter with God (Exod. 33:11) beyond sense and understanding does not give him access to God’s ‘true Being’ (ὡς ἐκεῖνός ἐστιν).⁶⁰ Moses still wants to see God ‘not in mirrors and reflections, but face to face’.⁶¹

The reason for Moses’ continued desire to see God face to face is that ‘the Divine is by its very nature infinite, enclosed by no boundary’.⁶² So, even though Moses has, in fact, had the rapturous experience of seeing God in the cloud, this does not satiate his desire: ‘The munificence of God assented to the fulfillment of his desire, but did not promise any cessation or satiety of the desire.’⁶³ Therefore, just as ‘purity of heart’ (human perfection) means ‘never to stop growing towards what is

‘Ineffably Effable: The Pinnacle of Mystical Ascent in Gregory of Nyssa’s *De vita Moysis*’, *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 16 (2014), pp. 25–41.

57 *Vit. Moys.* 110.6–11 (Malherbe and Ferguson, p. 111).

58 *Vit. Moys.* 118.20 (Malherbe and Ferguson, p. 117).

59 *Vit. Moys.* 110.3–122.3 (Malherbe and Ferguson, pp. 111–20).

60 *Vit. Moys.* 115.9 (Malherbe and Ferguson, p. 114).

61 *Vit. Moys.* 114.13–14 (Malherbe and Ferguson, pp. 114–15).

62 *Vit. Moys.* 115.114–16 (Malherbe and Ferguson, p. 115).

63 *Vit. Moys.* 114.17–19 (Malherbe and Ferguson, p. 115).

better and never placing any limit on perfection',⁶⁴ so the beatific vision – which itself is true purity or perfection – always progresses. Nyssen comments, therefore, that 'the true sight of God consists in this, that the one who looks up to God never ceases in that desire'.⁶⁵ And he adds a little later: 'This truly is the vision of God: never to be satisfied in the desire to see him.'⁶⁶ Gregory's definition of the *visio dei* is nearly identical to his definition of purity. The pursuit of both elements of the dominical saying – purity and the vision of God – is driven by never-ending desire.

At this point, Gregory has provided a theological as well as pastoral response to the seemingly intolerable burden that the conclusion of his sixth homily on the Beatitudes imposed on his audience. Recognizing that the promise of the beatific vision seems out of reach as a result of a lack of purity, he ended that sermon simply by impressing on his hearers all the more strictly the demand for purity. In *The Life of Moses*, however, Gregory takes a different approach. He recognizes that our growth in purity – or, we could also say, our participation in Christ – leaves much to be desired. Regardless of how far we may have ascended in terms of purity, the Christian life is never one of absolute achievement; it always remains one of progress. That progress, in fact, is what defines the life of purity for Gregory. And he recognizes that even when Moses reaches the peak of his theophanic experiences, or when we ourselves reach our heavenly future and see God face to face, growth in God – in and through Christ – will still continue. For Gregory, seeing God kindles a desire to see ever more of him, so that the beatific vision implies a perpetual desire to see God – so much so, that Gregory even defines the vision itself as the never-ending desire to see the face of God.

Homilies on the Song of Songs: seeing more and more of Christ

Gregory's *Homilies on the Song of Songs* similarly approach the vision of God by interweaving the themes of purity (often discussed as virtue), participation and *epektasis*. Again, while much of the metaphysical structure is Platonic, Gregory refuses to separate the beatific vision from Christology. Christ is always the object of our vision. When the bride comments, 'Behold, you are beautiful, my kinsman, and glorious, in the shadow by our bed' (Song 1:16),⁶⁷ Gregory takes this to mean that she praises Christ's nobility, compared to which everything else – human approval, glory, celebrity and worldly power – pales:

64 *Perf.* 214.4–6 (Woods Callahan, p. 122).

65 *Vit. Moys.* 114.21–3 (Malherbe and Ferguson, p. 115).

66 *Vit. Moys.* 116.17–19 (Malherbe and Ferguson, p. 116).

67 Throughout, I quote the Song of Songs from the translation of Gregory's own use of the Greek text, as found in Gregory of Nyssa, *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on the Song of Songs* (hereafter *Cant.*), ed. and trans. Richard A. Norris (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012). For the Greek text of the sermons, I use the same volume, which includes a critical edition of the text.

For these things are tinged with a show of nobility for those whose attention is focused on sense perception, but they are not what they are reckoned to be. For how should something be noble when it lacks entire reality? That which is honored in this world, after all, has its being only in the heads of the people who make the judgment, but you are truly beautiful – not only beautiful (καλός), but the very essence of the Beautiful (αὐτῆ τοῦ καλοῦ ἡ οὐσία), existing forever as such, being at every moment what you are, neither blooming when the appropriate time comes, nor putting off your bloom at the right time, but stretching your springtime splendor out to match the everlastingness of your life – you whose name is love of humankind.⁶⁸

For Gregory, Christ is not only ‘beautiful’ (καλός) but also ‘the very essence of the Beautiful’ (αὐτῆ τοῦ καλοῦ ἡ οὐσία). In Nyssen’s Christology, Christ is the very definition of beauty, which means that he always equates the vision of God’s beauty with the vision of the beauty of Christ.

Much as in *The Life of Moses*, so also in these homilies, the incarnation is the central event through which God becomes visible to the human eye. After the bride has already accomplished a number of ascents, Gregory notes that none of this could yet be characterized as ‘contemplation’, properly speaking. Commenting on Song 2:8 – ‘The voice of my kinsman: Behold, he comes leaping over the mountains, bounding over the hills’ – Nyssen remarks that ‘all these ascents are described not in terms of contemplation or clear grasp of the Truth, but by reference to the “voice” of the One who is desired, and the characteristics of a voice are identified by hearing, not known and rejoiced in by understanding’.⁶⁹ In the words ‘Behold, he comes’, Gregory reads a reference to prophetic announcements of God’s manifestation in the flesh, and he quotes from ‘the prophet: “As we have heard, so also we have seen” (Ps 47:9). *The voice of my beloved*: this is what we have heard. *Behold, he is coming*: this is what the eyes see.’⁷⁰ The prophets announce the coming of Christ; the incarnation makes him visible to the eye.

In line with this, when in the next verse the kinsman stands behind the wall, ‘leaning through the windows, peering through the lattices’ (Song 2:9), Gregory sees this as a reference to the Law and the Prophets, which offer only marginal illumination.⁷¹ The ‘anagogical sense of the words’, he maintains, shows us that

the Word follows a certain path and a certain sequence in adapting human nature to God. First of all he shines upon it by means of the prophets and the law’s injunctions. (This is our interpretation: the windows are the prophets, who bring in the light, while the lattices are the network of the law’s injunctions. Through both of them the beam of the true Light steals into the interior.) After that, however, comes the Light’s perfect illumination, when, by its mingling with our

68 *Cant.* 4.106.4–107.11.

69 *Cant.* 5.138.20–3.

70 *Cant.* 5.140.19–20.

71 Cf. Boersma, *Embodiment and Virtue*, p. 83.

nature, the true Light shows itself to those who are in darkness and the shadow of death.⁷²

Although the Law and the Prophets do carry some borrowed light from the true Light, it really is the Light's perfect illumination in the incarnation that enables us to see. So, it is when the bride comes to 'the shelter of the rock' and asks the Groom, 'Show me your face' (Song 2:14), that she recognizes the presence of Christ. Gregory imagines the bride speaking as follows: 'Speak to me no longer by way of the enigmas of the prophets and the law, but show me yourself clearly so that I may see. In that way I can leave the outworks of the law behind and come to be within the rock of the gospel.'⁷³

The encounter with Christ, therefore, fulfills the desire to see God face to face. The Law no longer separates the bride from 'union with the one she desires'.⁷⁴ When the bride comments, 'My kinsman is mine and I am his; he feeds his flock among the lilies, until the day dawns and the shadows depart' (Song 2:16–17), Gregory offers the following paraphrase: '“I have seen,” she says, “the One who is eternally what he is face to face. I have seen him rising up in human form on my account out of the synagogue my sister, and I am resting in him and am becoming a member of his household.”'⁷⁵

Similarly, when much later, in Homily 15, Nyssen reflects at length on the mystery of the incarnation, he refers to the union between the Groom and the bride ('I am for my kinsman, and my kinsman is for me' – Song 6:3). Gregory insists that

through these words we learn that the purified soul is to have nothing within her save God and is to look upon nothing else. Rather must she so cleanse herself of every material concern and thought that she is entirely, in her whole being, transposed into the intelligible and immaterial realm and make of herself a supremely vivid image of the prototypical Beauty.⁷⁶

This transposition of the soul into the intelligible realm implies, Gregory explains, that 'she is conformed to Christ, that she has recovered her very own beauty'.⁷⁷ Just as a mirror shows the exact imprint of the face that it reflects, so the soul, argues Gregory, 'has graven into herself the pure look of the inviolate beauty'.⁷⁸ Accordingly, the mirror of the soul boasts of being shaped by the beauty of Christ: 'Since I focus upon the face of my kinsman with my entire being, the entire beauty of his form is seen in me.'⁷⁹

72 *Cant.* 5.144.24–145.3.

73 *Cant.* 5.163.26–30.

74 *Cant.* 5.168.34–5.

75 *Cant.* 5.168.2–4.

76 *Cant.* 15.439.12–16.

77 *Cant.* 15.439.21–2.

78 *Cant.* 15.440.28–9.

79 *Cant.* 15.440.30–2.

Gregory adds to this christological *visio dei* the notion that it is fueled by a never-ending, epektatic desire. The homilies on the Song of Songs do not develop this theme in the same programmatic way as *The Life of Moses*. My hunch is that the simple reason for this is that the Song lacks the textual scaffolding of the three theophanies of the book of Exodus from which to construct the increasing progression of epektatic growth in the life of God. But that it is more difficult to trace the *epktasis* textually in the Song of Songs does not mean that Gregory fails to develop the theme. As in his first homily he reflects on the Song's opening words ('Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth'), Nyssen refers back to the 'bride Moses' loving the Bridegroom in the same way as does the Song's virgin, and he explains:

through the face-to-face converse accorded him by God (as the Scripture testifies [cf. Num 12:8]), he became more intensely desirous of such kisses after these theophanies, praying to see the Object of his yearning as if he had never glimpsed him. In the same way, none of the others in whom the divine yearning was deeply lodged ever came to a point of rest in their desire. And just as now the soul that is joined to God is not satiated by her enjoyment of him, so too the more abundantly she is filled up with his beauty, the more vehemently her longings abound.⁸⁰

Rather than satisfying his desire for God, Moses' face-to-face contact with God intensifies his longings.

Gregory argues that the Song of Songs reflects this same pattern. The various segments of the Song replicate the soul's ordered ascent into the life of God. Thus, at the beginning of Homily 5, Nyssen explains that the Song evokes both desire (*ἐπιθυμία*) and despair (*ἀπογνώσις*) at the same time:

For how is it possible to be without grief when one considers that the purified soul – even though through love she has been exalted toward participation in the Good by a whole series of ascents – does not yet seem, as the apostle says [Phil. 3:13], to have laid hold on what she seeks?⁸¹

And so, as he reflects on 'the ascents already accomplished', Gregory mentions that he had earlier thought he would be able to 'pronounce the soul blessed on account of her progress toward the heights';⁸² but he then makes the distinction between merely hearing the 'voice' of the beloved and 'contemplating' the Bridegroom himself, which I discussed above.⁸³ Contemplation of the Groom is the point in the epektatic ascent at which one moves beyond just hearing his voice.

80 *Cant.* 1.31.26–32.32. Square brackets in original.

81 *Cant.* 5.137.4–7. Textual reference in square brackets added.

82 *Cant.* 5.137.9–10.

83 *Cant.* 5.138.19–140.12.

In the next sermon the bride journeys toward even 'better things', as she becomes 'more clear-sighted and discerns the glory of the Word'.⁸⁴ She reaches such perfection that she even instructs others about 'eagerness for the same goal'.⁸⁵ But this still does not imply the end of the journey: 'Who, then, would not say that a soul exalted to such a degree had come to the highest peak of perfection? Nevertheless the limit that defines the things that have already been accomplished becomes the starting point of her being led to realities that transcend them.'⁸⁶ Then – and here Gregory refers to the Groom appearing to the bride in the form of a gazelle and of a fawn (Song 2:9) – as an additional step, the bride begins 'to see the One whom she desires when he appears to her in a form other than his own'.⁸⁷ Coming ever closer to perfection, she 'prays to see the very countenance of the One who addresses her, and she receives from him a word that no longer comes by way of intermediaries'.⁸⁸

When in Song 2:16, the bride exclaims, 'My kinsman is mine and I am his', it is clear to Gregory that at this point 'the two actors move into one another. God comes into the soul, and correspondingly the soul is brought into God.'⁸⁹ Again, Gregory uses this new stage of the bride's ascent as an occasion to reflect on the perpetual character of her progress:

[S]he seems to attain the hope of the very highest good. For what is higher than to be in the One who is the object of desire and to receive the object of desire within oneself? But in this situation too she bewails the fact that she is needy for the Good. As one who does not yet have what is present to her desire, she is perplexed and dissatisfied, and she broadcasts this perplexity of her soul in her story, describing in her account how she found the one she sought.⁹⁰

Gregory concludes from the bride's 'perplexity' that the limitless greatness of the divine nature (φύσις) means that 'no measure of knowledge sets bounds to a seeker's looking'.⁹¹ In fact, concludes Nyssen, 'the intelligence that makes its course upward by seeking into what lies beyond it is so constituted that every fulfillment of knowledge that human nature can attain becomes the starting point of desire for things yet more exalted'.⁹²

It is only after the bride has departed from the watchmen making their rounds in the city, having asked them where the Groom might be (Song 3:3), that she finds her lover and brings him into her mother's chamber (Song 3:4). Gregory has the bride explain that, no sooner had I

84 *Cant.* 6.176.11–12.

85 *Cant.* 6.177.26–72.

86 *Cant.* 6.177.29–178.31.

87 *Cant.* 6.178.34–5.

88 *Cant.* 6.178.8–9.

89 *Cant.* 6.179.16–18.

90 *Cant.* 6.179.22–8.

91 *Cant.* 6.180.31. Gregory repeatedly denies that God is subject to 'limit' (πέρας) and boundary (ὄρος), thereby alluding to his strong insistence on the infinity of God.

92 *Cant.* 6.180.33–180.2.

departed from the whole created order and passed by everything in the creation that is intelligible and left behind every conceptual approach, than I found the Beloved by faith, and holding on by faith's grasp to the one I have found, I will not let go until he is within my *chamber*.⁹³

The chamber, explains Gregory, is the heart, where God comes to live so as to return it to its original condition at the time of creation.⁹⁴

Nyssen perceives that the ascent has still not come to a halt when he reads the following words in Song 4:8: 'Come away from frankincense, my bride, come away from frankincense. You shall come and pass through from the beginning of faith, from the peak of Sanir and Hermon, from the lions' dens, from the mountains of the leopards.' The bride's ever-continuing movement makes Gregory think of the fact that Paul reflects on his own *epektasis* to a still higher ascent (Phil. 3:13) *after* he has already been in the 'third heaven' (2 Cor. 12:2).⁹⁵ Our capacity to see God increases continuously, maintains Gregory. Yet, 'the infinity and incomprehensibility of the Godhead remains beyond all direct apprehension'.⁹⁶ Gregory again asserts that 'the outer limit of what has been discovered becomes the starting point of a search after more exalted things',⁹⁷ while 'the desire of the soul that is ascending never rests content with what has been known'.⁹⁸

Nyssen then discusses the particularities of Song 4:8 by explaining that the bride has already accompanied the Bridegroom to the 'mountain of myrrh'⁹⁹ – which is a reference to being buried with Christ by baptism into death (Rom. 6:4) – and that she has come with him also to the 'hill of frankincense'¹⁰⁰ (having risen with him to new life and to communion with the Godhead). Now, maintains Gregory, she is prepared through 'unending growth' for yet greater heights.¹⁰¹

Finally, in Homily 12 Gregory draws attention to the apparent incongruity between Song 5:3 ('I have removed my tunic. How shall I put it on?') and 5:7 ('the watchmen of the walls took my veil away from me'). How is it possible, Gregory asks, that the watchmen take the veil away from the bride when earlier she has already been 'stripped of all covering'?¹⁰² Nyssen sees here yet another reference to *epektasis*: the bride has so increased in purity, he explains, 'that by comparison with the purity that now becomes hers she does not seem to have taken off that clothing

93 *Cant.* 6.183.20–4. For Gregory, faith allows one to move past the limits of the senses and of discursive knowledge to union with God in Christ (and so to the beatific vision). See Laird, *Gregory of Nyssa*, pp. 100–7.

94 *Cant.* 6.183.24–6.

95 *Cant.* 8.245.25–6.

96 *Cant.* 8.246.14–15.

97 *Cant.* 8.247.3–4.

98 *Cant.* 8.247.6–7.

99 *Cant.* 8.249.4.

100 *Cant.* 8.249.4–5.

101 *Cant.* 8.252.26–7.

102 *Cant.* 12.360.2.

but again, even after that former stripping, finds something on her to be taken off'.¹⁰³ To Nyssen, the bride here faces the same situation in which Moses found himself when he asked God to show him his glory (Exod. 33:18) even though he had already seen him face to face (Exod. 33:11).¹⁰⁴ The ascent into the life of God – which both for Moses and for the bride means union with Christ – is never-ending or epektatic growth in the divine life, spurred on by a desire that never comes to a point of rest. Christ, for Nyssen, is a never-ending source of enjoyment; he therefore continuously increases our longing to be found in him.¹⁰⁵

Conclusion: becoming human in the beatific vision

Gregory's search for the vision of God in Christ continues to have a great deal to commend itself. First, Gregory was someone for whom this-worldly realities – accessible to the senses and the intellect – were unable to fulfill his deepest desires. To be sure, his sixth homily on the Beatitudes makes clear that sensible and intellectual apprehension in this world already involves some incipient vision of God. But Gregory regards purity of heart as central to attaining the beatific vision, since it is through growth in purity that we come to participate in the purity of God himself. It is growth in purity, then, that allows us to participate in the energies of God and so in the beauty of Christ himself.

Second, Gregory recognizes that human desire is insatiable, so that a proper Christian spirituality holds out the hope of a vision that does not culminate in a static point but ever continues and increases in relation to the ultimate object of this vision. When, in his two climactic mystical exegetical works, Nyssen reflects on what it is that makes one most genuinely a human person, he turns to Moses and to the bride of the Song of Songs. Through the purity of their lives, they arrive at astounding theophanies. United to Christ, they see God. For Gregory, the epektatic character of this journey into the 'inner sanctuary' means that we should not think that this vision fully resolves the paradox of the dominical saying that the pure in heart shall see God. For Gregory, they both shall and shall not see God. If perfection or purity means 'never to stop growing towards what is better and never placing any limit on perfection',¹⁰⁶ and if 'the true sight of God consists in this, that the one who looks up

103 *Cant.* 12.360.6–8.

104 Cf. Boersma, *Embodiment and Virtue*, pp. 91–2, 237.

105 In the three writings that I have analysed, Gregory does not clarify explicitly how he sees the relationship between participating in the divine energies and participating in Christ. Since, in his other writings, he identifies Christ repeatedly with virtue, with perfection, with virginity, with wisdom and so on, it seems to me that Gregory assumes a close link between Christ and the energies of God. For Gregory, to the degree we are united to Christ, we also participate in the life of God.

106 *Perf.* 214.4–6 (Woods Callahan, p. 122).

to God never ceases in that desire',¹⁰⁷ then this implies that what makes the beatific vision glorious is that the soul revels with increasing intensity and intimacy in the infinite, ever-greater gift-giving of the invisible God who in Christ has made himself visible.

Third, and more than anything else, Gregory makes us aware that human beings cannot find their true identity, and therefore cannot flourish, when they exclude serious reflection on the transcendent purpose of the human person. Human personhood is defined by its telos. As human beings – both as individuals and in our common life together – we attain our identity (and so become fully human) only to the degree that we explicitly aim for the supernatural goal of the beatific vision, which God places before us as our true fulfillment. The reductionism inherent in the modern abandonment of the beatific vision is, therefore, much more serious than may at first appear. It means a turning away from the infinite God who gives all good things in the vision of Christ in favour of a reorientation of the human gaze toward this-worldly goods. The loss of the beatific vision as the purpose of human existence leads to a 'spirituality' in which nothing any longer exceeds the ebb and flow of this-worldly human desires. Gregory knew human nature well enough to recognize that our desires are infinite. When such infinite desire is directed away from its proper telos of the vision of God in Christ, the objects of desire inevitably end up holding their immanent sway over human existence in frightening ways, holding us in a form of bondage that, ironically, we have willed into existence by our own misshapen desires. We are perhaps more than ever in need, therefore, of the witness of Gregory of Nyssa: only when with Gregory we redirect our gaze upon God in Christ can human persons find their true identity and aim.¹⁰⁸

107 *Vit. Moys.* 114.21–3 (Malherbe and Ferguson, p. 115).

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