

Beauty's Transformation of the Ugly in Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Moses*

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Introduction

In this paper, I will build on the efforts of those who have shown that Gregory of Nyssa (335 – 395 AD) critically engaged the Platonic inheritance as represented by Origen and Plotinus, among others.¹ I will explore Gregory's *Life of Moses* as a corrective to Origen within the Church, and as an evangelist of sorts to educated Neoplatonists outside the Church. I will do this by comparing Plotinus' chapter on Beauty in the *Enneads* with Gregory's treatment of pagan philosophy and the three theophanies in *Life of Moses*.

The Problem of Ugliness According to Plato and Plotinus

One of the difficulties for Plato and Plotinus was the problem of "ugliness." Both Plato and Plotinus started from human experience. They observe that we find pleasing certain sights, sounds, movements, and proportions, so we call them beautiful. Plato remarked that we find human bodies – or at least some of them – beautiful.² Why? Plotinus asks and answers the question thus: "On what principle does the architect, when he finds the house standing before him correspondent with his inner ideal of a house, pronounce it beautiful? Is it not that the house before him, the stones apart, is the inner idea stamped upon the mass of exterior matter, the indivisible exhibited in diversity?"³ For both philosophers, Beauty and Ugliness are equivalents to Good and Evil transposed into an aesthetic key.⁴ They reflect metaphysical and moral categories.

For us to recognize beauty, we must already be participating in the Absolute Beauty, the One. Plotinus reasons, "The truths of philosophy must be implanted in him to lead him to faith in that which, unknowing it, *he possesses within himself*. What these truths are we will show later."⁵ One's appreciation of beauty is meant to deepen in insight and quality: from one body to all bodies, from bodies to souls, from souls to virtues, from virtues to the source of beauty: "to contemplate the beautiful as appearing in our observances on our laws, and to behold it all bound together in kinship and so estimate the body's beauty as a slight affair."⁶ This "dialectic" was a therapeutic process for the human soul, meant to cleanse the soul of its pathologies. As the soul acquires more virtue, it becomes more beautiful. One is to eventually inquire about the source of all the beauty, which Plato calls, simply, Absolute Beauty. Plato's goal is "to look upon essential beauty entire [αὐτὸ τὸ θεῖον καλόν], pure and unalloyed; not infected with the flesh and colour of humanity, and ever so much more of mortal trash."⁷

In the Platonic tradition, we are to progress in discernment and virtue via a series of stepping stones, so that by relative comparison, bodies would no longer appear as beautiful, or perhaps only triflingly so. But Plotinus' appropriation of Plato exacerbates Plato's cultivated distrust of, and relative distaste for, the body, because Plotinus is willing to render the body part of the Absolute Ugliness.⁸

¹ Michael Azkoul, *St. Gregory of Nyssa and the Tradition of the Fathers* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1995) describes Gregory's reception and critique of Plotinus in ch.3, Philo in ch.4, and Origen in ch.5. Ann Conway-Jones, *Gregory of Nyssa's Tabernacle Imagery in Its Jewish and Christian Contexts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) explores Gregory's explanation of tabernacle imagery in comparison with various sources: Biblical, Alexandrian, and Jewish heavenly ascent texts.

² Plato, *Symposium* 210A – B

³ Plotinus, *Enneads* 1.6.3

⁴ Plotinus, *Enneads* 1.6.6 says, "We may even say that Beauty is the Authentic-Existence and Ugliness is the Principle contrary to Existence: and the Ugly is also the primal evil; therefore its contrary is at once good and beautiful, or is Good and Beauty: and hence the one method will discover to us the Beauty-Good and the Ugliness-Evil. And Beauty, this Beauty which is also The Good, must be posed as The First... For the [Universal] Soul, a divine thing, a fragment as it were of the Primal Beauty, makes beautiful to the fulness of their capacity all things whatsoever that it grasps and moulds."

⁵ Ibid, 1.3.1 (emphasis mine)

⁶ Plato, *Symposium* 210C

⁷ Ibid, 211E

⁸ Plotinus, *Enneads* 1.6.2 says, "All shapelessness whose kind admits of pattern and form, as long as it remains outside of Reason and Idea, is ugly by that very isolation from the Divine-Thought. And this is the Absolute Ugly: an ugly thing is something that

Ugliness enters into Plotinus' system as both a practical and metaphysical problem.

"Let us take the contrary, the ugliness of the Soul, and set that against its beauty: to understand, at once, what this ugliness is and how it comes to appear in the Soul will certainly open our way before us. Let us then suppose an ugly Soul, dissolute, unrighteous: teeming with all the lusts; torn by internal discord; beset by the fears of its cowardice and the envies of its pettiness; thinking, in the little thought it has, only of the perishable and the base; perverse in all its the friend of unclean pleasures; living the life of abandonment to bodily sensation and delighting in its deformity."⁹

When people indulge in vice, they sometimes develop what we today would call "addictive behaviors." Plotinus seems well aware of this. These behaviors produce "ugliness" in the soul. Ugliness, then, raises the practical question: Why do some people fail to consistently contemplate the Beauty in the beauty, to become beautiful of soul themselves? The ugliness also raises a metaphysical problem for Plotinus. Plotinus takes the step of asserting that the "soul becomes ugly – by something foisted upon it, by sinking itself into the alien, by a fall, a descent into body, into Matter."¹⁰

On the one hand, this is an appealing theory because Plotinus postulates that the essential part of who we are as human beings is still intact and beautiful. In *Enneads* 1.6.5, he considers that we are "deeply infected with the taint of body, occupied always in Matter, and absorbing Matter into itself," and "immersed in filth or daubed in mud," having an "alien matter that has encrusted him," like "gold... degraded... with earthy particles." We must be "emancipated from all the passions, purged of all that embodiment has thrust upon it." No easy task, to be sure. To which the question can be raised: "Why is it so difficult for the ugly to become beautiful again?" But we can take heart that all that is ugly is alien to us. All that is beautiful is who we still are, and truly are, underneath the encrustation.

On the other hand, the One is still the ultimate origin of the material world, despite matter being the lowest ontological tier in the great chain of being. If there is one which is First, there must also be another which is Last. This material level, Plotinus calls "evil." It is close to "non-Being." In fact, "Matter has not even existence whereby to have some part in Good: Being is attributed to it by an accident of words: the truth would be that it has Non-Being."¹¹ Plotinus acknowledges that, in his cosmology, "Evil is a necessity."¹² Since matter itself, and material, bodily existence, is itself evil, "poverty and sickness are helpful to the very sufferers."¹³ But if Evil is a necessity as Good is a necessity, both being emanations from the One,¹⁴ which is both transcendent over all but sustaining all via invisible connections, then the One cannot properly be Good. In fact, the ontological and metaphysical and moral distinction between Good and Evil breaks down and they collapse into each other. The distinction between Beauty and Ugliness breaks down into an aesthetic and moral relativism where all value judgments are mere opinion. Can Beauty be rescued from Ugliness?

One indication that Gregory of Nyssa engages intentionally with the category of Beauty is his insertions of the word in places it does not appear in the biblical text itself. In Part One of *Life of Moses*, where he ostensibly summarizes the biblical account of Moses' life, Gregory adds the word "beauty" at strategic moments. The infant Moses is "already appearing beautiful" (1.16), which is faithful to Exodus 2:2. But the seventy date palms in Exodus 15:27 are not described thus; Gregory nevertheless inserts the notion that they "made a great impression... because of their

has not been entirely mastered by pattern, that is by Reason, the Matter not yielding at all points and in all respects to Ideal-Form."

⁹ Ibid, 1.6.5

¹⁰ Ibid, 1.6.5

¹¹ Ibid, 1.8.5

¹² Ibid, 1.8.7

¹³ Ibid, 3.2.5

¹⁴ Michael Azkoul, p.90 surveys Plotinus' cosmological and metaphysical statements against the options available, and concludes, "Although the branches and roots of a tree have different shapes and perform different functions than the trunk, all share the same nature; so it is with the One, the Nous, the Soul and the cosmos. Whatever and however they exist, nothing is which is not a manifestation of the One. Arguing to the contrary must lead us to the conclusion that something exists which does not originate in and through the One and is independent of it, something Plotinus never conceded. The fact of evil or non-being did not deter him."

exceptional beauty and height” (1.34). No doubt Gregory does this because in 2.133 – 134, he later interprets the seventy trees as the full cast of the seventy missionary apostles. Gregory calls the heavenly tabernacle and its furnishings “beautiful” seven times in 1.49 – 54, even though the word appears only twice in Exodus 26 – 31 and only with reference to Aaron’s priestly garments (Ex.28:2, 40) and not at all in Exodus 35 – 40. Gregory again describes Moses as “beautiful” at the end of his life (1.76) because of his virtue, which was “an unchangeable beauty” (1.77), even though the biblical text does not describe Moses that way (Dt.34).

I point this out because scholars of Gregory’s *Life of Moses* generally hold to the view that Part One is Gregory’s recounting of the biblical story, whereas Part Two is his anagogical interpretation of it. However, in Part One, Gregory is already interpreting the biblical story in a certain way. Specifically, Gregory is clearly weaving Platonic “beauty” language into the story, in order to develop it further in Part Two.

Gregory and the Legacies of Origen and Plotinus

Two classical scholars of renown – greatly celebrated even in their lifetimes – inaugurated divergent paths which would continue to influence and engage each other for over a century. Origen of Alexandria (c.184 – c.253 AD) and Plotinus (c.204 – 270 AD) both studied Middle Platonism under Ammonias Saccas in Alexandria, Egypt, missing each other by about a year. Both had a profound impact on pagan intellectual circles and in the Christian community, though for very different reasons. Origen was the prodigious Christian biblical scholar and theologian who produced well-regarded commentaries on Scripture, and incorporated Middle Platonist philosophy and reading practices into the Church. Plotinus, along with his chief disciple Porphyry of Tyre (c.234 – c.305 AD), who compiled Plotinus’ teachings into the literary corpus called the *Enneads*, contributed to a renewal of Platonic thought which generated new readings of older Hellenistic literature and philosophy in what we now call Neoplatonism, the dominant philosophy of late antiquity.¹⁵

Modern patristics scholar Anna M. Silvas makes the helpful biographical observation that Gregory of Nyssa “read deeply and retentively in Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, Plotinus and other platonizing philosophers, Philo of Alexandria and Christian authors, above all Origen.”¹⁶ Her statement highlights Gregory’s inheritance in classical pagan education, and also his family’s Christian inheritance in Origen’s teaching. Gregory’s grandparents became Christians under the ministry of Gregory Thaumaturgus, who had previously been a student of Origen for seven years at Caesarea Maritima in Palestine; this older Gregory was the first bishop of Pontus in a very effective ministry of teaching and, apparently, miracles. Gregory of Nyssa credited his elder sister Macrina the Younger for first teaching him the Christian faith and Origen’s theological approach; he credited their grandmother Macrina the Elder, disciple of Gregory Thaumaturgus, for teaching his sister. Later, Gregory undertook a classical education, at Caesarea and/or Athens, although scholars view the latter as less likely. However, Gregory said that, in regards to theology, he learned from his older brother Basil, Paul, John, the apostles, and the prophets.¹⁷ Mention of Basil is significant because Basil and his friend Gregory of Nazianzus attempted to correct Origen’s theological system of its overly platonized elements.¹⁸ Here we see their younger friend and colleague Gregory of Nyssa sharing in that task. In all likelihood, he was writing to those very near to him – parishioners, friends, and even family in the Cappadocian region – his assessment of the prospects of a synthesis between Platonism and Christian faith. He had already criticized the heretic Eunomius for “having fallen in with Plato’s *Cratylus*.”¹⁹ In *Life of Moses*, Gregory

¹⁵ Peter T. Struck, “Allegory and Ascent in Neoplatonism,” edited by Rita Copeland and Peter T. Struck, *The Cambridge Companion to Allegory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p.57

¹⁶ Anna M. Silvas, *Gregory of Nyssa: The Letters: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary* (Brill, 2006), p.8

¹⁷ Morwenna Ludlow, *Universal Salvation: Eschatology in the Thought of Gregory of Nyssa and Karl Rahner* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p.21. In *De Virg.*, Gregory expresses gratitude “to our most godly bishop and father (Basil) as the only one having educated us on such things who by God’s grace has been raised up as a protector of the life of virtue” (*De Virg.* PG 46 320A – B).

¹⁸ Anthony Meredith, *The Cappadocians* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1995), p.21 – 22 notes that the two compiled Origen’s *Philocalia*, a collection of Origen’s texts, probably during their monastic period in the late 350’s to early 360’s. Gregory Nazianzen, *Letter 115*, says to Theodore, “I have sent you a little book, the *Philocalia* of Origen, as a remembrance of me and of the holy Basil.” Basil admired Origen’s spiritual – or anagogical – interpretation of Scripture, but in *Hexameron* 9.1, he complains about those who “do not admit the common sense of the Scriptures, for whom water is not water, but some other nature...”

¹⁹ Gregory of Nyssa, *Against Eunomius* especially 2.6, 9.3, 12.5 and *Answer to Eunomius’ Second Book*, “Having perchance fallen in with Plato’s *Cratylus*, or hearing from some one who had met with it, by reason, I suppose, of his own poverty of ideas, he attached that nonsense patchwise to his own, acting like those who get their bread by begging. For just as they, receiving some

cautiously appreciates pagan learning. As Plotinus, Porphyry, and Iamblichus had done in the Platonic tradition, Gregory reads literature in an anagogical mode. In this case, he reads Scripture anagogically while firmly expressing the limitations of human language. He limits anagogical interpretation and Origen's textual mysticism, especially in light of the Trinitarian language formalized in the Council of Nicea 325 and Constantinople 381. He also curbs the tendency of Origenist monks towards individual mysticism and instead directs his Christian readers towards the life of virtue in Christian community.

Christian debates with Plotinus and Porphyry also stand in the background of Gregory's *Life of Moses*. Between 232 – 235, Porphyry traveled to Caesarea Maritima to hear Origen teach. While impressed by his learning, Porphyry accused him of impropriety: betraying the teaching of Plato and the classical philosophical tradition to the Christian Scriptures.²⁰ Porphyry also tells us that Origen met Plotinus at either Rome or Antioch between 238 – 244.²¹ Porphyry became an able antagonist of Christians, perhaps because he had once been one himself. During his retirement in Sicily, he wrote a fifteen book attack on Christian faith called *Against the Christians*, which focused mainly on undermining the Scriptures. Methodius of Olympus (died 311) replied in writing. Constantine banned Porphyry's books.²² Augustine (354 – 430 AD) and Jerome (347 – 420 AD) also felt the need to write replies. Theodosius II ordered copies of Porphyry's work burned, first in 435 and again in 448. In all, over a century and a half, some thirty Christian apologists responded to Porphyry, and two Christian emperors banned his work.²³ Such was the impact and force of Porphyry's criticism. Therefore, we can say with high confidence that Gregory of Nyssa knew the work of Porphyry and his collection of Plotinus' teachings in the *Enneads*.

Moses' Early Life: The Value of Pagan Learning (2.1 – 18)

In 2.1 – 18, Gregory takes the early years of Moses' life as an opportunity to explore how one can approach pagan learning and education, like the Platonic cultural inheritance. The infant Moses is saved from the tumultuous river of "passion" which threatens to drown people (2.6) by the ark made of "various boards" which represent "education in the different disciplines" (2.7). Worldly education has value, in Gregory's mind, insofar as it teaches "virtue" (2.9).

However, Gregory refers to "God" only once in this section, and negatively so, calling "profane education" ultimately "barren" with regards to leading someone to "the light of the knowledge of God" (2.11). He uses the figure of Pharaoh's daughter – who was "childless and barren" – as representative of "profane education," or "philosophy." Those who are educated in this manner are like her – barren – because they were "hidden in the womb of barren wisdom" (2.11). Therefore, Gregory urges, we should stay connected to the "nourishment of the Church's milk" (2.12), which is represented by Moses' ongoing relationship with his biological birth mother.

But, Gregory counsels, Christians will inevitably find that the "profane doctrines" and "the doctrines of the fathers" are "two antagonists" (2.13). He provides a few examples later in his text,²⁴ but otherwise does not elaborate. He uses the incidents of conflict that Moses faced in Egypt as opportunities to counsel his readers to take courage in this intellectual fight (2.13 – 16). If the intellectual conflict has social ramifications, we are to "reprove the teachers of evil" (2.17) and opt for the "solitary life," by which he means "we shall live among those of like disposition and mind who are fed by us while all the movements of our soul are shepherd, like sheep, by the will of guiding reason" (2.18).

Later, when Gregory interprets the Israelites plundering the Egyptians as they left Egypt (2.112 – 116), he returns to the topic of pagan education. He takes "the treasures of the foreigners" (2.112) to refer to the stores of intellectual

trifle from each who bestows it on them, collect their bread from many and various sources, so the discourse of Eunomius, by reason of his scanty store of the true bread, assiduously collects scraps of phrases and notions from all quarters. And thus, being struck by the beauty of the Platonic style, he thinks it not unseemly to make Plato's theory a doctrine of the Church."

²⁰ John Anthony McGuckin, *The Westminster Handbook to Origen* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), p.18

²¹ Ibid, p.20 – 21

²² Socrates Scholasticus, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 1.9.30 – 31 and Gelasius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 2.36 include a *Letter of Constantine Proscribing the Works of Porphyry and Arius, to the Bishops and People*

²³ LeRoy Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of our Fathers* (Review and Herald, 1950)

²⁴ Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses* 2.40 – 41 credits pagan philosophy for saying that the soul is immortal. But he criticizes the view that souls pass from bodies to bodies, or change their nature. These are components of Origen's cosmology, which he drew in from Plato's notion of reincarnation. Gregory also criticizes the notion that God is material, or needed matter for creation, or submits to the necessity of fate. In 2.287ff., Gregory accepts Aristotle's definition of virtue as the mean.

and philosophical knowledge found outside the Church. Gregory includes the subjects of “moral and natural philosophy, geometry, astronomy, dialectic, and whatever else is sought by those outside the Church, since these things will be useful when in time the divine sanctuary of mystery must be beautified with the riches of reason” (2.115). He praises his brother, “the great Basil” (2.116), who brought his “profane learning” with him and “dedicated this wealth to God for the adornment of the Church, the true tabernacle” (2.116). Pagan learning is useful and should be honored cautiously and appropriately. When one must choose between the teaching of Church and Academy, however, Gregory’s priority is clear.

The First Theophany: The Burning Bush (2.19 – 41)

The burning bush story – the first theophany of God to Moses in the Exodus narrative – provides Gregory with helpful material by which to say that contact with God in Jesus Christ provokes an intellectual crisis of sorts. He says, with poetic cadence:

“It is upon us who continue in this quiet and peaceful course of life that
the truth will shine,
illuminating the eyes of our soul with its own rays.
This truth, which was then manifested
by the ineffable and mysterious illumination
which came to Moses, is God.” (2.19)

Gregory treats the burning bush story and its significance as an experience of *Christians and for Christians*. The “us” to whom Gregory refers are those who follow the path of virtue in the context of the Church. The fiery light which shone out from the bush is nothing less than “the truth.” “This truth... is God.” Gregory expects God to illuminate the soul.

Gregory delights in the physicality and particularity of the burning bush. In it he sees the physicality and particularity of the Incarnation of Jesus. He refers to the bush as “a thorny bush” (2.20), and draws the parallel between bush and Jesus by referring to Jesus’ flesh as “thorny flesh” (2.26) at the end of this section. Gregory goes so far as to say that “God made Himself visible to us in the flesh” of Jesus (2.20). Gregory finds the bush important because it is earthly, and reflects the descent of God to earth to make Himself known to us. He notes the stars which shine from heaven, but do not personally descend to us (2.20). Gregory includes the Virgin Mary in the typology of the bush because the divinity of Christ shone through her as well, albeit through her womb, and preserved her virginity even as she gave birth (2.21).

Gregory finds very practical significance in Moses removing his sandals before the burning bush. He says, “The dead and earthly covering of skins, which was placed around our nature at the beginning when we were found naked because of disobedience to the divine will, must be removed from the feet of the soul” (2.22). The *New Catholic Encyclopedia* explains:

“In the Platonic tradition, however, [Gregory] spoke of two creations of man, an ideal and an historical creation. With regard to the ideal creation, he held the peculiar position that human beings did not have by nature the sexual mode of reproduction. Humans were historically created male and female only because the creator foresaw the fall of the human race.”²⁵

This comment both demonstrates Gregory’s proximity to the Platonic tradition as a whole, and shows that he was, in my opinion, unduly influenced by it on this point. Nevertheless, there is much to appreciate. Through this semantic link and association to the “skins” of Moses’ discarded sandals, Gregory accomplishes something powerful and subtle. He invokes the idea of “new creation” in Christ because in him the “skins” from the fall can be removed from the soul. He also refers to the Jewish prophets’ insistence on “circumcision of the heart” because the unclean “skins” of our hearts must be removed. And, he also deploys the “truth” of the light in the burning bush as God’s purification of us: God purifies our understanding of creation’s utter contingency and dependence on God as Creator and sustainer (2.22 – 25).

²⁵ New Catholic Encyclopedia, “Gregory of Nyssa, St.” *Encyclopedia.com*, 2003, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/religion/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/gregory-nyssa-st>

Plotinus believes similarly about the person who has engaged in vice. That person *is* (not merely *has*) a soul that is like gold mixed with other earthy and worthless particles. That soul must purify itself. But for Plotinus, the soul must purify itself from its attachment to matter and its affection for bodily pleasures, which includes bodily well-being and a concern for social conditions like poverty and sickness. He explains his soul-body dualism:

“So, we may justly say, a Soul becomes ugly – by something foisted upon it, by sinking itself into the alien, by a fall, a descent into body, into Matter. The dishonour of the Soul is in its ceasing to be clean and apart. Gold is degraded when it is mixed with earthy particles; if these be worked out, the gold is left and is beautiful, isolated from all that is foreign, gold with gold alone. And so the Soul; let it be but cleared of the desires that come by its too intimate converse with the body, emancipated from all the passions, purged of all that embodiment has thrust upon it, withdrawn, a solitary, to itself again in that moment the ugliness that came only from the alien is stripped away.”²⁶

Plotinus might use similar words as Gregory – as Gregory uses the terms “being” and “nonbeing” (2.22 – 25) as well – but their orientation and content are different. In Christian theology, the incarnation of Jesus into a human body means salvation for the body and the material world, along with eternal personal distinctions, via union with God. Gregory maintains this posture when he refers again to “the light shining from the bramble bush, that is, to the Radiance which shines upon us through this thorny flesh and which is (as the Gospel says) the true light and the truth itself” (2.26). When he discusses the Church in 2.184 – 188, he discusses the particular people one finds in the Christian community, historically and presently.

A stunning difference emerges when Gregory expands on the ministry of the incarnate Jesus on behalf of human beings in 2.27 – 34. Gregory deploys the miracle stories of Moses’ hand and rod as anagogical signifiers of Jesus’ incarnation and atonement.

“When he was manifested to us from the bosom of the Father, he was changed to be like us. After he wiped away our infirmities, he again returned to his own bosom the hand which had been among us [ἐν ἡμῖν]²⁷ and had received our complexion... What is impassible by nature did not change into what is passible, but what is mutable and subject to passions was transformed into impassibility through its participation in the immutable.” (2.30)

Gregory weaves Johannine language into his statement. “The bosom of the Father” comes from John 1:18. The phrase “among us” comes from John 1:14. To assure Moses of His presence, God performed miracles with him. “When the hand of the lawgiver was extended from his bosom it was changed to an unnatural complexion, and when placed again in his bosom, it returned to its own natural *beauty*” (2.29; emphasis mine). This is Gregory’s first use of the term “beauty” in Part Two of *Life of Moses*. Gregory says this signifies “the change of the right hand of the Most High” (2.28 – 30) that is, the Son’s journey into human nature, and his return to the Father.

The parallel miracle of Moses’ rod signifies Christ again to Gregory, this time involving a victory over the corruption of sin within human nature, and hostile spiritual powers without:

“For if the father of sin is called a serpent by Holy Scripture and what is born of the serpent is certainly a serpent, it follows that sin is synonymous with the one who begot it. But the apostolic word testifies that the Lord was made into sin for our sake by being invested with our sinful nature. This figure therefore is rightly applied to the Lord. For if sin is a serpent and the Lord became sin, the logical conclusion should be evident to all: By becoming sin he became also a serpent, which is nothing other than sin. For our sake he became a serpent that he might devour and consume the Egyptian serpents produced by the sorcerers. This done, the serpent was changed back into a rod by which sinners are brought to their senses, and those slackening on the upward and toilsome course of virtue are given rest, the rod of faith supporting them through their high hopes. Only faith can guarantee the blessings that we hope for.” (2.32 – 34)

Gregory, like Plotinus, believes that we must undergo a healing and cleansing. He shares with the Neoplatonist philosopher the conviction that the human being is still fundamentally good. However, Gregory also maintains that

²⁶ Plotinus, *Enneads* 1.6.5

²⁷ For discussion about the translation “among us” vs. “in us,” see *Appendix A*, below

sin is not simply an encrustation that can be wiped off, like a soul leaving behind a body, but a disorder and disease within our humanity, defined as both body and soul. So the healing, cleansing, and repristination of human nature could not take place through the soul taking its leave of the body through death, where death is abstracted from the quality of life one led. Nor could it be the work of a divine being who can promote human substance upwards on the chain of being in an effortless way. Jesus had to cleanse his own human nature through a hard-won lifetime of hard-fought faithfulness and human obedience to his Father, and open a way for us to participate in his victory on our behalf.

By saying this, Gregory answers a lingering question in Plotinus: Why do some people resent the Beautiful? Why do some prefer the Ugly? Plotinus says:

“But let the soul fall in with the Ugly and at once it shrinks within itself, denies the thing [i.e. the Principle that bestows beauty on material things through an organized, beautiful pattern], turns away from it, not accordant, resenting it.”²⁸

Today, one can imagine an addict of some sort. Being ensnared by something Ugly, he comes to think of it as Beauty, but falsely so. Therefore, he turns away from that which is truly Beautiful, resenting it, because he has come to experience it as Ugly. In his twelve volume work *Against Eunomius*, in another very important passage about Jesus’ atonement where he engages with critical biblical passages, Gregory explains that without Jesus, our life would not “of itself return to the high and heavenly place.”²⁹ Here in *Life of Moses*, Gregory refers to forces both internal (our sinful nature) and external to us (our enemy the serpent, his sorcerers) which hold us the bondage of sin and vice. In a later passage, Gregory uses the motif of the broken tablets of the law to say that we have a “broken nature”; Jesus is “the one who healed our brokenness” and “restored the broken table of our nature to its original *beauty*” by being “the stonecutter of his own flesh;” he reinscribed the law of God upon his human nature through the Holy Spirit (2.216 – 217, emphasis mine). Very importantly, Gregory says later, “He came to fulfill His own law” (2.251). Gregory’s experience of Jesus is not, it would appear, strictly cognitive, involving truth-claims. His presentation rests on the assumption that an experience of Jesus involves empowerment.

As Gregory understands, Jesus became Ugly. That is, by sharing in our fallen humanity, he became the bearer of our infirmity, which signifies our vulnerability to becoming more ugly. But he undoes the Ugliness from within, turning it back into Beauty and returning to the bosom of the Father. His descent and return ascent ought to jar us, and break the power of Ugliness over us and in us. Later in *Life of Moses*, Gregory will use Paul’s terminology in Romans 8:3 to describe what Jesus accomplished in his human lifetime: the mortification of “sinful flesh” (2.187) because Jesus came “in the likeness of sinful flesh” (2.275 – 277) and defeated the sinfulness within it. Jesus makes possible our participation in his humanity, by his Spirit, that we might also be victorious in the inner battles with sin we face. Gregory envisions his readers drawing on Jesus for support, who is now “the rod of faith supporting them through their high hopes” to walk “upward” with the Son, towards fuller fellowship with God.

Correspondingly, Jesus returned human nature to its “natural beauty” (2.29). Perhaps this description of Moses’ hand – which is a platonic term inserted into the biblical story – is not accidental in its timing. Operating on the level of the textual story of Moses, Gregory’s comment would be relatively inconsequential. But, operating on the level of the layer of Jesus’ recovery of human nature as God intended it, both soul *and body*, the phrase takes on additional signification. The human body qua body is beautiful, and Jesus returned it to its “natural beauty” and “original beauty,” ontologically.

By saying that the Christian God created humans with “natural beauty” and “original beauty,” Gregory vindicates the Christian God of the charge of being the source of Ugliness. Instead, he places the problem of Ugliness firmly in the realm of human decision, subsequent to the creation. We abused (and continue to abuse) our free will, as we

²⁸ Plotinus, *Enneads* 1.6.2

²⁹ Gregory of Nyssa, *Against Eunomius* 12.1 says, “Since then it was impossible that our life, which had been estranged from God, should of itself return to the high and heavenly place, for this cause, as says the Apostle, “He who knew no sin is made sin for us” [2 Corinthians 5:21], and frees us from the curse by taking on Him our curse as His own [Galatians 3:13], and having taken up, and, in the language of the Apostle, “slain in himself the enmity” [Ephesians 2:15] which by means of sin had come between us and God – in fact sin was “the enmity” – and having become what we were, He through Himself again united humanity to God.”

sickened and diseased ourselves with sin.³⁰ In fact, as Gregory discusses the plagues on Egypt in 2.63 – 72, he says that our own human decisions to believe truth or falsehood affect our experience and perception of events and even ourselves. In Gregory’s analysis, drawing from the stream of faith in Christ means that we are the Hebrews drinking the wholesome water of the Nile, while the Egyptians drink from the very same source and taste corrupted blood (2.66 – 67). Human choices are to blame for our experience of Ugliness: “Being a man by nature and becoming a beast by passion...” (2.70). But since the Christian God can be properly understood as having no Ugliness or Evil within Himself, He is morally qualified to restore the Beauty of the human, which He has done in Christ through his faithful, good, and Beautiful life. It is uncertain whether a God who is passive in the face of human evil and ugliness is morally qualified to judge it in the end. It is even less certain that a God who is responsible for the origin of human evil and ugliness can do so. In the Christian account, Ugliness is not absolute, but only a defect stemming from humanity’s abuse of free will, and Beauty transforms the Ugliness from within through an embrace of healing union, found in the Incarnation of Jesus.

The Second Theophany: Darkness and the Tabernacle (2.162 – 188)

Darkness on the mountain follows light from the bush. While Gregory does not always insist that the biblical sequence of events in Moses’ story reflects a set sequence of spiritual growth and ascent, it does appear that his sequence of the three theophanies reflects a sequence which he regards as normative.³¹ This is because the process of purification must involve the shedding of “skins,” and an encounter with Christ, prior to the entrance into the divine darkness.³²

Gregory’s account of the darkness in 2.162 – 169 involves Moses’ encounter with the “tabernacle not made with hands” which is elaborated upon in 2.170 – 183 and represented by the earthly tabernacle in 2.184 – 188. Gregory calls God both “invisible” and “incomprehensible” (twice in 2.163), using the term “incomprehensible” again in 2.188 (and also 1.46). Nevertheless, God can be apprehended. Gregory uses the term λαμπρῷ γνόφῳ, which is translated “luminous darkness” (2.163) by Malherbe and Ferguson, or “radiant darkness” by Conway-Jones,³³ or “bright darkness.” Gregory resorts to paradoxical language: “There [the intelligence] sees God... This is the seeing that consists in not seeing” (2.163). What does he mean here?

Gregory takes great interest in the biblical presentation of God’s descent upon Sinai as “a thick cloud” (Ex.19:9, 19), perhaps the result of the “smoke [which] ascended like the smoke of a furnace” (Ex.19:18). LXX Exodus and Deuteronomy use the terms σκότος γνόφος (Ex.20:21; Dt.4:11), which Gregory also deploys in his account. After Moses and the elders went half-way up the mountain and “saw the God of Israel” (Ex.24:9 – 11), an incident Gregory leaves unmentioned, Moses ascended by himself to the top: “Moses went up to the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain” (Ex.24:15), for “the glory of the Lord was like a consuming fire on the mountain top” and “Moses entered the midst of the cloud as he went up the mountain” (Ex.24:17 – 18).

³⁰ Gregory places great weight on human free will. In *Life of Moses* 2.44, he says that God’s “assistance was already there at our birth, but it is manifested and made known whenever we apply ourselves to diligent training in the higher life and strip ourselves for the more vigorous contests.” We are in some manner our own parents, “giving birth to ourselves by our own free choice in accordance with whatever we wish” (2.3). From the fall onwards, God places every person between an angel to help him and a demon who contrives to corrupt his nature (2.45 – 46). “We men have in ourselves, in our own nature and by our own choice, the causes of light or of darkness, since we place ourselves in whichever sphere we wish to be” (2.80). “Since then in the same place evil comes to one but not to the other, the difference of free choices distinguishing each from the other, it is evident that nothing evil can come into existence apart from our free choice” (2.88). Hans Boersma, *Embodiment and Virtue in Gregory of Nyssa: An Anagogical Approach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p.240 – 241, comments on this passage, “The fact that divine grace is present in people’s lives from the time of their birth means that free choice does not reflect a purely natural or strictly autonomous human power. Instead, God already actively assists the human person long before he chooses to perform a virtuous act. Of course, for Gregory divine assistance does increase or decrease depending on how we interact with it. It is not the kind of assistance that eliminates free choice.”

³¹ In 2.158, Gregory implies a sequence of preparatory activity when he writes “The knowledge of God is a mountain steep indeed and difficult to climb—the majority of people scarcely reach its base.”

³² In 2.22, Gregory writes, “That light [of the burning bush] teaches us what we must do to stand within the rays of the true light: Sandaled feet cannot ascend that height where the light of truth is seen, but the dead and earthly covering of skins, which was placed around our nature at the beginning when we were found naked because of disobedience to the divine will, must be removed from the feet of the soul. When we do this, the knowledge of the truth will result and manifest itself.”

³³ Ann Conway-Jones, p.244

The biblical text tells us that Moses saw God in the cloud. Gregory asks, therefore, two questions of the Scripture: First, “what does it mean that Moses entered the darkness and then saw God in it?” How can one see God in darkness? How can one see anything in the darkness? Second, why does this second theophany take place in darkness, while the first one took place in light? (2.162) Gregory answers both questions by distinguishing between experiencing God’s presence and comprehending God’s nature. He interprets the divine darkness as the inevitable result of attempting to specifically contemplate *the divine nature*:

‘Religious knowledge at first appears as light to those in whom it springs up. Therefore the opposite of piety is thought to be obscurity; and the escape from obscurity comes with participation in the light. But as the mind advances, and through an ever greater and more perfect attentiveness comes to envisage an understanding of all existence, the nearer it draws to contemplation, the more it sees that *the divine nature* [φύσις] is not to be contemplated.’ (2.162)

Gregory singles out the term φύσις. In the next paragraph, he says the same of the word ουσία: “Knowledge of the divine *essence* [ουσία] is unattainable not only by men but also by every intelligent creature” (2.163). In contemplating what φύσις and ουσία mean for God, we can go no further, he says. This concurs with Gregory’s other statements about the divine φύσις and ουσία:

“For if it were possible that the Divine *nature* [φύσις] should be contemplated in its absolute *essence* [ουσία], and that we should find by appearances what is and what is not proper to it, we should surely have no need of other arguments or evidence for the comprehension of the question. But since it is exalted above the understanding of the questioners, and we have to argue from some particular evidence about those things which evade our knowledge, it is absolutely necessary for us to be guided to the investigation of the Divine *nature* [φύσις] by its operations.”³⁴

“Hence it is clear that by any of the terms we use the Divine *nature* [φύσις] itself is not signified, but some one of its surroundings is made known. For we say, it may be, that the Deity is incorruptible, or powerful, or whatever else we are accustomed to say of Him. But in each of these terms we find a peculiar sense, fit to be understood or asserted of the Divine *nature* [φύσις], yet not expressing that which that *nature* [φύσις] is in its *essence* [ουσία].”³⁵

Given Gregory’s well-known role in defining the use of the terms ουσία and ὑποστάσις together with his brother Basil of Caesarea³⁶ and their friend Gregory of Nazianzus,³⁷ resulting in the Constantinopolitan modification of 381 to the Nicene Creed of 325, I suggest that Gregory is being very specific. He is not saying that we can suddenly dispense with Scripture, the *homoousion*, or the three divine names – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – by which we identify the divine *hypostaseis*. Gregory’s earlier insistence on encountering “the truth of God” (2.19) through the incarnate Son, Christ Jesus, born through the Virgin Mary, as well as his exploration of Jesus’ redemption of “sinful flesh” (2.27 – 34) demonstrates the bishop’s interest in the historical self-revelation of God through Jesus, which anchors one end of the Father-Son relation in our history, and makes that relationship known to us. Nevertheless, Gregory maintains, God’s ουσία is unknowable by all created beings.

³⁴ Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Holy Trinity* (emphasis mine)

³⁵ Gregory of Nyssa, *To Ablabius, On Not Three Gods* (emphasis mine)

³⁶ Basil of Caesarea, *Letter 38* to his brother Gregory, explains the Cappadocian use of ουσία and ὑποστάσις which prevailed at the Council of Constantinople 381.

³⁷ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Second Theological Oration* (Oration 28), ch.3, curiously writes *himself* into the story of Moses’ ascent, anticipating Nyssa’s later work. Nazianzen says: “What is this that has happened to me, O friends, and initiates, and fellow-lovers of the truth? I was running to lay hold on God, and thus I went up into the Mount, and drew aside the curtain of the Cloud, and entered away from matter and material things, and as far as I could I withdrew within myself. And then when I looked up, I scarce saw the back parts of God; [Exodus 33:23] although I was sheltered by the Rock, the Word that was made flesh for us. And when I looked a little closer, I saw, *not the First and unmingled Nature* [φύσις], *known to Itself — to the Trinity, I mean*; not That which abides within the first veil, and is hidden by the Cherubim; but only that Nature, which at last even reaches to us... For though a thing be all heavenly, or above heaven, and far higher in nature and nearer to God than we, yet it is farther distant from God, and from the complete comprehension of His Nature [φύσις], than it is lifted above our complex and lowly and earthward sinking composition.” (emphasis mine). In ch.17, Nazianzen writes concisely, “What God is in nature [φύσις] and essence [ουσία], *no man ever yet has discovered or can discover.*” (emphasis mine); he goes on to say that in eternity, perhaps we will be able to know and speak of these things.

Ann Conway-Jones points out that Gregory's account of the divine darkness differs from that of Philo and Origen because of their theological proposals. Philo, because he believed the Logos served as the intermediary between the unknowable God and the created world, said that Moses' ascent resulted in an encounter with that Logos.³⁸ Conway-Jones suggests that Philo used "seeing" as a metaphor for noetic apprehension, not just sense perception, and urges us to interpret Philo as saying that one can "see" God through the *nous*.³⁹ Origen, understanding Christ as the Logos who is fully divine, has Christ *dispelling* the darkness around the Father. Gregory, by comparison, maintains the darkness as a motif for a specific purpose. Rowan Williams notes helpfully, "Plato, Philo, and Plotinus would all agree that the soul cannot express God in image or concept; it is Gregory who grounds this incapacity in a *metaphysical* gulf between God and the created self."⁴⁰ Anthony Meredith concurs: "Whereas for Philo the text points to the superiority of God to sense, Gregory uses the same passage to assert the superiority of God to intellect as well. For Philo God is above all sensory shape, for Gregory he is above all form."⁴¹

Darkness is the appropriate figure to use, therefore, because in trying to define *φύσις* and *οὐσία*, we find ourselves unable to do so. Darkness does not just refer to the end of human sense perception, in Gregory's treatment, although of course he includes that in his meaning. Rather, darkness at this point in *Life of Moses* signifies the limit of both human conceptuality and language in this specific effort. This is the appropriate place to stop. Anthony Meredith points to this section in *Life of Moses* as a decisive moment for Christian apophatic theology: "Gregory has often been credited with the discovery of mystical theology, or rather with the perception that darkness is an appropriate symbol under which God can be discussed. There is much truth in this....Gregory seems to have been the first Christian writer to have made this important point..."⁴²

Moses did in fact see something of God in the darkness – but what? Not God's nature, but an aspect of God's relationship to other beings. In Exodus 25:9 and 40, God showed him a pattern or blueprint of what he was to build. "After this," Gregory writes, Moses "comes to the tabernacle not made with hands." This is "the limit that someone reaches who is elevated through such ascents" (2.167). The phrase "not made with hands" is used twice in 2.167, once in 2.168, once in 2.169, twice in 2.170, once in 2.173, and once more in 2.174. Gregory uses the phrase retrospectively in 2.229 and 2.245. It refers to something divine or made by God. Ann Conway-Jones believes that Gregory was picking up a thread in New Testament phraseology.⁴³ She cites several texts. In Mark 14:58, Jesus is accused of saying, "I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands." In 2 Corinthians 5:1, Paul speaks of the future resurrection body as "a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens." In Hebrews 9:11, Jesus entered the presence of God through the "greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this creation." And in Hebrews 9:24, "Christ did not enter a holy place made with hands, a mere copy of the true one, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us." The New Testament usage of the phrase "not made with hands" indicates God's handiwork – either in the resurrection, or in the heavens. Conway-Jones also points out that the LXX uses the phrase "made with hands" pejoratively, often translating the Hebrew for "idol" (e.g. Lev.26:1; Isa.2:18; 16:12; 46:6).

Curiously, Gregory describes the "darkness" as a "room," a "secret place" (1.46, 2.172, 2.229). The word *αὐτόν* used here denotes "the innermost room of a temple or shrine."⁴⁴ Given Gregory's concern to say that God cannot be circumscribed or surrounded by something else larger than Him, because God would then be bounded and enclosed (2.236 – 237), this seems contradictory at first glance. How can the darkness, which signifies a limit to the knowing of God's nature or essence, be described as a "room"? Moreover, Moses is inside the "room." There, Moses saw the God "who made darkness His hiding place" (2.164, quoting Psalm 18:11). But: "When he arrives there [in the darkness], he sees that tabernacle not made with hands, which he shows to those below by means of a material likeness" (2.169).

³⁸ Philo of Alexandria, *On the Confusion of Tongues* 95 – 96

³⁹ Ann Conway-Jones, p.68

⁴⁰ Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to St. John of the Cross* (London: DLT, 1979), p.60 (emphasis his)

⁴¹ Anthony Meredith, *The Cappadocians* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1995), p.74

⁴² Anthony Meredith, *Gregory of Nyssa* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1999), p.100

⁴³ Ann Conway-Jones, p.82 – 83

⁴⁴ Ibid, p.65

Then, Gregory associates the “tabernacle not made with hands” with Christ himself.

“This tabernacle would be Christ who is the power and the wisdom of God [1 Corinthians 1:24], who in his own nature was not made with hands, yet capable of being made when it became necessary for this tabernacle to be erected among us [ἐν ἡμῖν].⁴⁵ Thus, the same tabernacle is in a way both unfashioned and fashioned, uncreated in preexistence but created in having received this material composition.” (2.174)

Gregory seems to answer the apparent contradiction of the “room” by saying that Moses was, in reality, perceiving *Christ*. He is human “on the outside.” But “on the inside,” as it were, he is divine, the very “power and wisdom of God,” “not made with hands,” “unfashioned,” “uncreated in preexistence.” Christ is like one of the mysterious tents which is more spacious and roomy on the inside than on the outside. And within him and his divine nature – as one might attempt to contemplate that – one is met with “luminous darkness” (2.163). This is how Gregory resolves the question of Jesus being circumscribed by the world in his humanity but uncircumscribed in his divinity. It is also how Gregory can say how Jesus was a finite man walking about the created world and within it, “being made” a “tabernacle... erected among us,” “fashioned,” and “created in having received this material composition.” Gregory reiterates his point: “This one is the Only Begotten God, who encompasses everything in himself but who also pitched his own tabernacle among us” (2.175). Gregory “contains” his apophaticism, or “constrains” it, within Christ. Conway-Jones concludes, “This is not an abandonment of apophaticism: within the *αὐτόν* of the darkness is the tabernacle (*αὐτὰ*), within which is the *αὐτόν* of the holy of holies.”⁴⁶ For Gregory, the divine nature can only be properly indicated – and not defined further – out of consideration firstly of Christ.

Gregory then explores the ramifications of naming God a “tabernacle” (2.176 – 183). He enlists various Scriptures as support for why he does this: Colossians 1:17, which says “in him lives the fulness of divinity” (2.177); 2 Corinthians 12:1 – 6 in which Paul has a vision of paradise and arguably sees or inhabits a tabernacle (2.178); Colossians 1:16, which says that “in him” are spiritual thrones or dominions (2.179). Gregory envisions the heavenly tabernacle as containing the angels and their heavenly liturgy, the heavenly correlate to the church’s liturgy on earth which for now remain separate; they will be reunited in the eschaton. Likewise, the pillars, the ark, the cherubim, the mercy seat (2.179 – 2.182) all represent the spiritual realities which inhabit the world. And the skin dyed red and woven hair materials represent the flesh of Christ in his saving passion (2.183).

The earthly representation of the heavenly tabernacle is none other than the Church. If the reader is fascinated by the description of the heavenly tabernacle, then he or she must examine the apostles, prophets, and teachers, who are called “pillars” (Gal.2:9). Timothy was “a pillar and foundation of the truth” (1 Tim.3:15). The Corinthians were to be “steadfast and immovable” like pillars (1 Cor.15:58). One searching for the light need only look at John the Baptist, the “burning lamp” (Jn.5:35), those who “shine like stars” (Phil.2:15). And so on (2.185 – 186). The outer tent made of hair and rams’ skins dyed red signify the flesh of Jesus in his death. As such, they become “the mortification of sinful flesh” (2.187). In and through Jesus, one enters the Church, the earthly tabernacle.

In the earthly tabernacle of the church, we find a multiplicity of people in the form of apostles, prophets, teachers, evangelists, etc. That multiplicity stands in contrast to the “strictures” of multiplicity that Plotinus sought to avoid. Also, with Gregory, we find the primacy of love over the primacy of contemplation (*theoria*) as we do in Origen and Plotinus. We have a stress on ethical union and not a stress on intellectual or noetic union. Gregory is actually describing the church in worship. “So let faith sound forth pure and loud in the preaching of the holy Trinity” (2.192), in the ascetic life which is like the pomegranate – outwardly unpleasant but inwardly sweet (2.193) – and in the beautiful garments of good deeds and spiritual honor (2.194 – 202). In all, there is a balance between “contemplation... and works” (2.200). When Gregory interprets the meaning of the priestly garments (2.189 – 201), it is clear he connects spiritual contemplation with active service to the Church and in the Church. Gregory advocates for “the ascetic way of life. By these the tabernacle of the church is especially beautified” (2.187).

Plotinus’ writings suggest that he would have expected Moses to ascend the mountain, into the darkness, and encounter the Alone One, a God who is utterly alone. He would not have expected God to contain this panoply of beings. For Plotinus, “dialectic,” the refinement of one’s focus and desire away from the sensible and towards the

⁴⁵ For discussion about the translation “among us” vs. “in us,” see *Appendix A*, below

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, p.232

intelligible, or from the concrete towards the abstract, is “the flight of the alone to the Alone [φύγη μόνου πρὸς μόνον].”⁴⁷

“The Supreme, as the Absolute Good and not merely a good being or things, can contain nothing, since there is nothing that could be its good. Anything it could contain must be either good to it or not good; but in the supremely and primally Good there can be nothing not good; nor can the Absolute Good be contained by any good: containing, then, neither the good nor the not good, it contains nothing and, containing nothing, it is alone: it is void of all but itself.”⁴⁸

Gregory, however, does not worship the One of Plotinus. Nor is Gregory interested in a Christian individual retreat into a privatized heavenly space, or even a withdrawal into a life of private contemplation pursuing esoteric meanings in Scripture, as Origen did. He advocates for a meaningful and beautiful life of concrete service in a church community. He makes this especially clear in the third and final theophany.

The Third Theophany: Eternal Progress (2.219 – 255)

In the biblical text, there is a paradoxical reference to Moses seeing God “face to face, just as a man speaks to a friend” in the tent of meeting when God’s cloud descended upon it (Ex.33:11). But Moses, apparently wanting to penetrate the cloud, asks God to show him His glory, to which God says, “You cannot see My face, for no man can see Me and live!” (Ex.33:20) God says that He will cause His goodness and glory to pass by Moses while Moses is in the cleft of a rock. God says, “Then I will take My hand away and you shall see My back, but My face shall not be seen” (Ex.33:23). This happens at the top of Mount Sinai (Ex.34:1 – 9).

Gregory sees that this passage is ripe for “deeper meaning in contemplating” it (2.219). He observes that we cannot take this passage “literally” lest we attribute “shape” and “a bodily nature” to God, because God does not have “front and back” (2.221 – 222). “All this would more fittingly be contemplated in its spiritual sense,” he says (2.223). Gregory makes an observation about the motion of bodies moving downward (whether he is speaking morally or physically or both is uncertain), and says “the soul moves in the opposite direction” (2.224). Plotinus would appreciate this statement from Gregory:

“Once it is released from its earthly attachment, it becomes light and swift for its movement upward, soaring from below up to the heights. If nothing comes from above to hinder its upward thrust (for the nature of the Good attracts to itself those who look to it), the soul rises ever higher and will always make its flight yet higher—by its desire of the heavenly things straining ahead for what is still to come, as the Apostle says. Made to desire and not to abandon the transcendent height by the things already attained, it makes its way upward without ceasing, ever through its prior accomplishments renewing its intensity for the flight. Activity directed toward virtue causes its capacity to grow through exertion; this kind of activity alone does not slacken its intensity by the effort, but increases it. For this reason we also say that the great Moses, as he was becoming ever greater, at no time stopped in his ascent, nor did he set a limit for himself in his upward course. Once having set foot on the ladder which God set up (as Jacob says), he continually climbed to the step above and never ceased to rise higher, because he always found a step higher than the one he had attained.” (2.224 – 227)

The beauty of Gregory’s prose suits the beauty of the journey he wishes to describe. The journey up the mountain is unlike any other climb. The journey is not exhausting on account of its steepness. The mountain’s height makes one stronger and faster, on account of the soul’s proximity to the heavens, and to God. The soul draws strength from its desire for God, who is now closer, and gives the soul even more desire to pursue Him. The activity of climbing and pursuing God increases the virtue in the soul, which strengthens instead of wearies it. C.S. Lewis’ seems to draw from this image in his climactic scene in *The Last Battle*: “Come further up, come further in!”

Gregory recounts the many victories and virtues of Moses to that point (2.228 – 230). Throughout, Gregory says, Moses’ soul was making this ascent in his desire for God: “light and swift... soaring from below up to the heights... by its desire of the heavenly things straining ahead for what is still to come.” He quotes Philippians 3:13, where Paul used the term *ἐπέκτασις*, “straining ahead,” or literally, “standing outside himself.” This term becomes the

⁴⁷ Plotinus, *Enneads* 1.3.5 – 6; 1.4.6; 6.9.9

⁴⁸ Ibid, 5.5.13

hallmark for the spiritual ascent of the soul, through virtue, towards God. Gregory placed the term in his preface as a structural key to the *Life of Moses* as a whole.⁴⁹

Gregory's explanation for why Moses asks to see God's face as if he had never seen God before rests in the meaning of ἐπέκτασις. Moses is straining ahead, leaving behind what he had experienced, even what he had experienced of God. "He still thirsts for that with which he constantly filled himself to capacity, and he asks to attain as if he had never partaken, beseeching God to appear to him, not according to his capacity to partake, but according to God's true being" (2.230). Gregory deploys Plato's language from the *Symposium*, of beauty and our longing for it:

"Such an experience seems to me to belong to the soul which loves what is beautiful. Hope always draws the soul from the beauty which is seen to what is beyond, always kindles the desire for the hidden through what is constantly perceived. Therefore, the ardent lover of beauty, although receiving what is always visible as an image of what he desires, yet longs to be filled with the very stamp of the archetype. And the bold request which goes up the mountains of desire asks this: to enjoy the Beauty not in mirrors and reflections, but face to face. The divine voice granted what was requested in what was denied, showing in a few words an immeasurable depth of thought. The munificence of God assented to the fulfillment of his desire, but did not promise any cessation or satiety of the desire." (2.231 – 232)

Gregory uses participationist categories here. We as humans are "the ardent lover(s) of beauty." Why? Because the God who is Beauty has made us in His image; He has scattered beauty in all creation; so we already participate in Beauty to a certain, small degree – in the way the finite participates in the infinite, or the way a drop of water participates in the ocean. We are moved by desire because "hope always draws the soul from the beauty which is seen to what is beyond... the hidden." We are filled by the desire "to be filled with the very stamp of the archetype." By enlisting Platonic language in service of biblical content,⁵⁰ Gregory reaches a surprising conclusion: "Thus, what Moses yearned for is satisfied by the very things which leave his desire unsatisfied" (2.235). But it can only be so, for the Divine Beauty "is by its very nature infinite, enclosed by no boundary" (2.236). While considering these things, Gregory specifically declares that evil does not enclose God's goodness (2.237 – 238). Or, in aesthetic terms, Ugliness does not enclose God's Beauty. This is not a spatial statement, but a conceptual one rendered in spatial language. The changeable – even corruptible or vulnerable – nature of the material world does not pose a conceptual problem, serve as a conceptual limit, or become a conceptual "drag," as a counterweight, on God's claim to be pure Beauty and Goodness. Ugliness does not taint Beauty, nullify it, or dilute it into a union which erases the distinction. Plotinus never managed to free his Deity from this problem.

In 2.240 – 255, Gregory completes his explanation of the third theophany. Moses can only see God "in the rock," and "the rock is Christ, who is absolute virtue" (2.244). Christ is the stability by which the dynamic of everlasting progress unfolds and flourishes. Gregory associates Christ with Paul's language for the resurrection body in 2 Corinthians 5, the "heavenly house not made with hands which is laid up by hope for those who have dissolved their earthly tabernacle" (2.245). Gregory lists biblical terms for eschatological reward (2.246 – 247), for in Christ are all good things (2.248).

The reason, moreover, why Moses can be "in Christ" and yet observe the Lord pass by is because Jesus calls his disciples to *follow* him. Gregory offers this explanation for why Moses cannot see the face of God: "He who follows sees the back" (2.251). "To follow God wherever He might lead is to behold God" (2.252). And if a fellow traveler is going to trust and accompany his guide, Gregory reasons, he must keep the *back* of his guide in view. God's response to Moses, "My face is not to be seen," came with a warning but not a functional explanation;

⁴⁹ Gregory announces his theme of eternal progress in 1.1 when he opens his preface with the metaphor of the race: "While you are competing admirably in the divine race along the course of virtue, lightfootedly leaping and straining constantly for the prize of the heavenly calling, I exhort, urge and encourage you vigorously to increase your speed." He continues the race metaphor in 1.5 – 10 when he says that perfection is unlimited but directional: "The perfection of human nature consists perhaps in its very growth in goodness" (1.10). Gregory uses the same language for the infinity of God as with virtue: "How then would one arrive at the sought-for boundary when he can find no boundary?" (2.236)

⁵⁰ Plotinus, *Enneads* 1.6.4, writes a very similar thought: "This is the spirit that Beauty must ever induce, wonderment and a delicious trouble, longing and love and a trembling that is all delight. For the unseen all this may be felt as for the seen; and this the Souls feel for it, every soul in some degree, but those the more deeply that are the more truly apt to this higher love- just as all take delight in the beauty of the body but all are not stung as sharply, and those only that feel the keener wound are known as Lovers."

Gregory supplies it: “Do not face your guide” (2.253). Because of the principle of directionality latent in Jesus’ command to follow him, we must not face in any other direction: “what looks virtue in the face is evil... Therefore, Moses does not look God in the face, but looks at his back; for whoever looks at him face to face shall not live, as the divine voice testifies, man cannot see the face of the Lord and live” (2.254). One’s ever-ascending experience of God, then, consists in following Jesus wherever he leads, which is to say, to *whomever and wherever he leads one to serve*. In Christ, there is both stability of relationship and also motion, rootedness and also directionality.

Here Gregory answers multiple questions and problems raised by Origen. Origen postulated that humans and angels, having freedom of *contrary choice* in the Age to Come, might fall from God again and again. Origen postulated that any intelligent being can turn from divine contemplation; the fire of their love would “cool” and, as they turn away from God, their bodies would “thicken.” Origen essentially took up Plato’s theory of reincarnation, which Plotinus also adopted in his theory of the cosmos’ emanation and return to the One in cyclical repetition. Gregory answers Origen by appealing to desire and directionality. These twin foci are the human responses and correlates to God’s infinity and God’s outward-going love for others. “Thus, no limit would interrupt growth in the ascent to God, since no limit to the good can be found nor is the increasing of desire for the good brought to an end because it is satisfied” (2.239). Moses’ journey illustrates the truth that each encounter with God prepared him for new types of service. “Activity directed toward virtue causes its capacity to grow through exertion” (2.226). Spiritual willpower grows through exercise because one’s desire for God increases the more we know Him. The flesh might be temporarily sated by sin (2.59), but the soul that loves God cannot be satisfied (2.230). Gregory replaces Origen’s vision of a still, resting God⁵¹ with a moving, dynamic God. Correspondingly, Gregory replaces Origen’s vision of human rest and contemplation leading, troublingly, to instability with God, with human desire and motion leading, satisfyingly, to stability with God.

Patrick F. O’Connell aptly notes that Moses’ vertical journey prepares him to lead the Israelites in their horizontal journey.⁵² O’Connell’s observation is important, because Gregory intertwines the two journeys. Moses’ growth in virtue and encounter with Jesus (first theophany) prepared him to lead others in the same journey. His ascent into the limitations of human language and conceptuality (second theophany) was another important milestone when he glimpsed Christ as tabernacle, enabling him to emerge with a conviction to participate in the Church’s earthly worship. His ἐπέκτασις (third theophany) affirms Jesus’ lordship and Moses’ followership. Curiously, in Gregory’s anagogical interpretation, Moses does not actually come down the mountain, strictly speaking (2.255 – 256; cf. “He then went down” in 1.56)! As Gregory interprets the events of Numbers, Moses does battle (with the passions), etc. Moreover, Gregory omits the account of Moses disobeying God by striking the rock. Moses simply dies with honor, as “servant of Yahweh” and “friend” of God. “For he who has truly come to be in the image of God and who has in no way turned aside from the divine character bears in himself its distinguishing marks and shows in all things his conformity to the archetype; he beautifies his own soul with what is incorruptible, unchangeable, and shares in no evil at all” (2.318). O’Connell detects in *Life of Moses* Gregory’s message to Origenist monks who believed they could coax further secrets from words in theological discourse like φύσις and οὐσία, or who conceived of the path of virtue in individualistic terms: Christ directs us at every turn to ethical union with others, liturgical participation in the Church, and evangelistic mission in the world. “It is not only Moses’ elevation above the Israelites but his responsibility for them which is the point of the double journey. Contemplation is no privatized, individualistic accomplishment, but the God-given insight and ability to teach, heal and lead others.”⁵³

Finally, Gregory maintains that the beauty of the image indicates the Beauty of the archetype, which was ultimately revealed in the person of Jesus. If Moses has come to “share in no evil at all,” it is because God “shares in no evil at all,” as well. This God, Gregory says, revealed Himself as “shar[ing] in no evil at all” in and through Jesus, for the deformations of beauty in the world resulting in ugliness are due to human self-corruption. Jesus undoes that self-corruption in his own humanity, in the power of the Spirit, so he could share his Spirit with us and help us undo the corruption within us. He shared in our ugliness, that we might share in his beauty. If, by contrast, God were simply

⁵¹ Like Origen, Plotinus, *Enneads* 1.6.7, in a beautiful passage, nevertheless demonstrates the stillness of the One: ‘Beholding this Being – the Choragos of all Existence, the Self-Intent that ever gives forth and never takes – resting, rapt, in the vision and possession of so lofty a loveliness, growing to Its likeness, what Beauty can the soul yet lack? For This, the Beauty supreme, the absolute, and the primal, fashions Its lovers to Beauty and makes them also worthy of love.’

⁵² Patrick F. O’Connell, “The Double Journey in Saint Gregory of Nyssa: *The Life of Moses*,” *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 28, 4 (1983), p.319

⁵³ Ibid, p.323

the Absolute Cause of all, then He would be *both* Beauty *and* Ugliness. Under the metaphysical weight of that crushing realization, we would have to be both beautiful and ugly at the same time, and we would certainly have permission to be thus, and the foundation for virtue would evaporate. But if there is an Absolute Beauty who creates beauty, calls beautiful humans to grow in beauty infinitely, sustains fragments of human beauty despite our ugliness, and transforms our ugliness in a beautiful way, then what else could we do but – in our own finite and limited way – follow him?

Appendix A: ἐν ἡμῖν as “In Us” or “Among Us” in John’s Gospel and Gregory’s *Life of Moses*

The phrase ἐν ἡμῖν can be rendered “in us,” as the most straightforward translation of the Greek preposition ἐν is the English “in.” Why, then, do most translators of John 1:14, translate the phrase “among us?”

“And the Word became flesh and pitched his tent among us” [ἐν ἡμῖν]

Correspondingly, how do we translate Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses* 2.30 and 2.174?

“he again returned to his own bosom the hand which had been among us [ἐν ἡμῖν]” (2.30)

“capable of being made when it became necessary for this tabernacle to be erected among us [ἐν ἡμῖν]” (2.174)

What is at stake in this translation? Here I suggest that the issue is one of *contextual meaning*, not simply translation. If the *meaning* of “the Word became flesh and pitched his tent ἐν ἡμῖν” is that the Word never really became – or needed to become – a particular, embodied, personal instance of humanity with a feet, hands, stomach, heart, mouth, two eyes, a brain, and so on, who lived among the Israelites in Palestine in the first century, developing as human beings do from the biological womb of his mother – Mary of Nazareth, in his case – through infancy, childhood, and adulthood, then I would argue that something has been misunderstood about the literary and historical context of how the apostle John, and Gregory of Nyssa, were deploying the phrase. The human history of Jesus of Nazareth and his social context in Israel, in the time period known as Second Temple Judaism, is vital and irreducible. If instead the Word took up residence “in us” directly, like an invisible, impalpable cosmic force descending upon us (or even constituting us) without our knowing and without our willing, and irrespective of belief in the virtuous life and death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, it might be possible to argue for a straightforward but ironclad universalism (God “saves” everyone), if not outright pantheism (God is in everything).

Larger issues are therefore at play in this one interpretive decision, as they usually are. If God is in everything, then He is in human evil as well as in human goodness, which renders the distinction between evil and good meaningless, which then makes human ethical life not only impossible but irrelevant. If God simply “saves” everyone, then from what? From free will, which turns out to be an illusion? From history, in which Jewish covenantal suffering becomes the most pathetic of all self-delusions? From evil, when the distinction between evil and good is removed? And even from distinct personhood eternally, which would make God a totalitarian narcissist as much as a generic omni-consciousness, because even that distinction would collapse?

I personally favor the phrase ἐν ἡμῖν being translated “in us.” Consider the only other instance of ἐν ἡμῖν in John’s Gospel:

²⁰ I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in me [ἐν ἐμοὶ] through their word;

²¹ that they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in me [ἐν ἐμοὶ] and I in You [ἐν σοὶ], that they also may be in Us [ἐν ἡμῖν], so that the world may believe that You sent me.” (John 17:20 – 21)

I am not aware of any explanation for how English translators justify rendering ἐν ἡμῖν as “among us” in John 1:14 while rendering the very same phrase as “in Us” in John 17:21. However, as I said before, translation alone does not always determine the meaning of words and phrases. Context does. So what does this phrase *mean in context of “the Word became flesh and tabernacled...”*? I will consider John’s Gospel and then Gregory of Nyssa’s *Life of Moses*.

My short response (longer exegesis, below in *Appendix B*) to the question can be summarized with a quote from Irenaeus of Lyons (c.130 – 202 AD), who was discipled by Polycarp of Smyrna (69 – 156 AD), who was a disciple of the apostle John. Irenaeus is significant for the following reasons. First, Irenaeus was a very capable student of another very capable student, from the apostle John himself. Polycarp wins high praise for his sensitive and thorough grasp of all the apostolic writings from which he quotes.⁵⁴ Irenaeus is also impressive for his faithfulness,

⁵⁴ J.B. Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers, Vol 1, Section 1: St. Ignatius and St. Polycarp* (1885), p.595 – 97 compares Polycarp’s epistle to the Philippians to Ignatius of Antioch’s epistles and finds: “The divergence between the two writers as regards Scriptural quotations is equally remarkable. Though the seven Ignatian letters are many times longer than Polycarp’s Epistle, the

intelligence, and sensitivity to texts.⁵⁵ So the historical-relational link from John the Irenaeus is weighty. Second, Irenaeus writes to the same category of theological opponents that John did: gnostics, who believed in various ways that the divine Son did not really make contact with human nature, i.e. “flesh” (e.g. 1 Jn.4:2; 2 Jn.1:7). Thus, Irenaeus emphasizes both the divinity and humanity of Jesus. Specifically, he emphasizes Jesus’ humanity as the unique, particular, embodied humanity which became the first instantiation of a human nature that is purified, healed from sin, and united by the Spirit to God. From Jesus, Irenaeus says, we receive the Spirit to share in his purified, healed human nature. Third, Irenaeus is very mindful of God’ prior work with Israel, uniquely among all the peoples of the world, to prepare us for Jesus. Irenaeus says this of Jesus:

Therefore, as I have already said, He caused man (human nature) to cleave to and to become, one with God. For unless man had overcome the enemy of man, the enemy would not have been legitimately vanquished... But the law coming, which was given by Moses, and testifying of sin that it is a sinner, did truly take away his (death’s) kingdom, showing that he was no king, but a robber; and it revealed him as a murderer. It laid, however, a weighty burden upon *man, who had sin in himself*, showing that he was liable to death. For as the law was spiritual, it merely made sin to stand out in relief, but did not destroy it. For sin had no dominion over the spirit, but over man. For it behooved *Him who was to destroy sin*, and redeem man under the power of death, that *He should Himself be made that very same thing which he was, that is, man*; who had been drawn by sin into bondage, but was held by death, so that *sin should be destroyed by man*, and man should go forth from death. For as by the disobedience of the one man who was originally moulded from virgin soil, the many were made sinners, and forfeited life; so was it necessary that, by the obedience of one man, who was originally born from a virgin, many should be justified and receive salvation. Thus, then, was the Word of God made man, as also Moses says: ‘God, true are His works.’ But if, not having been made flesh, He did appear as if flesh, His work was not a true one. But what He did appear, that He also was: God recapitulated *in Himself* the ancient formation of man, that *He might kill sin*, deprive death of its power, and vivify man; and therefore His works are true.⁵⁶

quotations in the latter are incomparably more numerous, as well as more precise, than in the former. The obligations to the New Testament are wholly different in character in the two cases. The Ignatian letters do, indeed, show a considerable knowledge of the writings included in our Canon of the New Testament; but this knowledge betrays itself in casual words and phrases, stray metaphors, epigrammatic adaptations, and isolated coincidences of thought ... On the other hand in Polycarp’s Epistle sentence after sentence is frequently made up of passages from the Evangelical and Apostolic writings ... But this divergence forms only part of a broader and still more decisive contrast, affecting the whole style and character of the two writings. The profuseness of quotations in Polycarp’s Epistle arises from a want of originality ... On the other hand the letters of Ignatius have a marked individuality. Of all early Christian writings they are pre-eminent in this respect.”

⁵⁵ In the judgment of patristics scholar Johannes Quasten, *Patrology Volume I: The Beginnings of Patristic Literature: From the Apostles Creed to Irenaeus* (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics Inc., 6th printing 1992), p.291, Irenaeus’ second century contemporaries Hippolytus of Rome and Tertullian of Carthage seem to quote liberally from Irenaeus’ writings. We have a complete Armenian version of books 4 and 5, twenty-three fragments of a Syrian version, and almost all of the complete book in Greek through copious quotations by Hippolytus of Rome (170 – 235), Eusebius of Caesarea (~260 – 339), and Epiphanius of Salamis (~320 – 403), the fourth century bishop in Cyprus, and additional fragments. See Richard A. Norris, Jr, ‘Irenaeus of Lyons’, in Frances Young, Lewis Ayres, and Andrew Louth, editors, *The Cambridge History of Early Christian Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, third printing 2010), p.47; Schaff, p.511; Quasten p.291. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 5.28.5, cited by Thomas F. Torrance, *Divine Meaning: Studies in Patristic Hermeneutics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), p.75, says, “Eusebius of Caesarea [early 4th century] named Melito alongside Irenaeus as the two writers who had impeccable Christology: ‘Who does not know the books of Irenaeus and Melito which proclaim Christ as God and Man?’” Athanasius of Alexandria repeats Irenaeus’ pithy phrase, “God made Himself man, that man might become god.” See Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation* 54; *De Decretis* 14; *Apology Against Arians* 1:39, 2:70; 3:19, 3:33, 3:53; *Epistle to Serapion* 1:24; *De Synodis* 51; *Epistle to Adelphi* 4 quoting Irenaeus’ preface to *Against Heresies* 5. Khaled Anatolios, ‘The Influence of Irenaeus on Athanasius,’ *Studia Patristica* 36 (2001), p.463–76 considers the question of Athanasius’ reliance on Irenaeus. The Alexandrians Clement, Origen, and Athanasius either echo Irenaeus’ language or quote him directly, and the Cappadocian theologians Gregory Nazianzen, Basil of Caesarea, and Gregory of Nyssa do as well. See J.A. McGuckin, ‘The Strategic Adaptation of Deification,’ edited by Michael J. Christensen and Jeffery A. Wittung, *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Traditions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007), p.96 – 97. Augustine quoted from Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.2.7 and 5.19.1 in his writings against Pelagius and Julian of Eclanum (*Contra Julian* 1.3.5), and mentions Irenaeus by name (1.7.32). He might also have quoted *Against Heresies* 4.30.1 in his *Christian Doctrine* 2.40.60.

⁵⁶ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies*, 3.18.7, emphasis mine; see also 2.12.4; 3.18.1; 5.1.3

This is a very significant passage in Irenaeus.⁵⁷ In it, he insists that Jesus came to resolve a problem within human nature itself, within himself, and offer back to us his renewed humanity. Using categories, concerns, and even terminology also used by the apostles John and Paul, Irenaeus says this in four ways. First, God worked uniquely with Israel, helping them to correctly diagnose the human condition through “the law... given by Moses” (cf. Jn.1:17). This is important because historically, Judaism and the Jewish people, were so religiously and sociologically unusual that they cannot be explained by mere anthropology and sociology. For instance, historians Paul Johnson, *A History of the Jews*,⁵⁸ and Thomas Cahill, *The Gifts of the Jews*,⁵⁹ provide ample evidence for the historical anomaly called biblical Israel which requires explanation. To explain Jesus, Irenaeus maintains close contact with Jewish faith and categories throughout his work.

Second, Irenaeus says here and elsewhere that Jesus took his humanity not from some other substance, like the virgin soil from which Adam was first taken, but from the virgin womb of Mary.⁶⁰ The Word of God did this to

⁵⁷ Irenaeus repeats much of this in his catechetical instruction, called *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*. In *Demonstration* 32 he says, “Because death reigned over the flesh, it was right that through the flesh it should lose its force and let man go free from its oppression. So the Word was made flesh, that, through that very flesh which sin had ruled and dominated, it should lose its force and be no longer in us. And therefore our Lord took that same original formation as (His) entry into flesh, so that He might draw near and contend on behalf of the fathers, and conquer by Adam that which by Adam had stricken us down.” In 34, he says, “And the trespass which came by the tree was undone by the tree of obedience, when, hearkening unto God, the Son of man was nailed to the tree; thereby putting away the knowledge of evil and bringing in and establishing the knowledge of good: now evil it is to disobey God, even as hearkening unto God is good... So then by the obedience wherewith He obeyed even unto death, hanging on the tree, He put away the old disobedience which was wrought in the tree.” In 37 – 38, he says, “Thus then He gloriously achieved our redemption, and fulfilled the promise of the fathers, and abolished the old disobedience. The Son of God became Son of David and Son of Abraham; perfecting and summing up this in Himself, that He might make us to possess life. The Word of God was made flesh by the dispensation of the Virgin, to abolish death and make man live. For we were imprisoned by sin, being born in sinfulness and living under death. But God the Father was very merciful: He sent His creative Word, who in coming to deliver us came to the very place and spot in which we had lost life, and brake the bonds of our fetters. And His light appeared and made the darkness of the prison disappear, and hallowed our birth and destroyed death, loosing those same fetters in which we were enchained. And He manifested the resurrection, Himself becoming the first begotten of the dead, and in Himself raising up man that was fallen, lifting him up far above the heaven to the right hand of the glory of the Father: even as God promised by the prophet, saying: And I will raise up the tabernacle of David that is fallen; that is, the flesh that was from David. And his our Lord Jesus Christ truly fulfilled, when He gloriously achieved our redemption, that He might truly raise us up, setting us free unto the Father.” The “fallen tabernacle of David,” Jesus has raised up “in himself”: i.e. the sinful “flesh” of David which he inherited from Adam and passed down to everyone in his royal line, including Jesus. Jesus, at his death and resurrection, finally set human nature free from “the bonds of our fetters” by “in himself raising up man that was fallen.” Entering into death as a judgment upon his own fallen humanity, says Irenaeus, Jesus brought the exile sequence in Genesis full circle to its reversal. The disobedience by the tree by which Adam and Eve corrupted human nature, Jesus reversed on another tree by his final step of obedience, which consisted of “putting away the knowledge of evil,” where “evil” Irenaeus defines as “to disobey God.” Jesus did away with the last possibility for his human nature to do evil, by dying, and then raising it anew. Redemption, Irenaeus therefore defines, is the setting free of our human nature from our imprisonment to “sinfulness,” the sinfulness into which we were born.

⁵⁸ Paul Johnson, *A History of the Jews* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1988), p.585 says, “All the great conceptual discoveries of the intellect seem obvious and inescapable once they have been revealed, but it requires a special genius to formulate them for the first time. The Jews had this gift. To them we owe the idea of equality before the law, both divine and human; of the sanctity of life and the dignity of the human person; of the individual conscience and so of social responsibility; of peace as an abstract ideal and love as the foundation of justice, and many other items which constitute the basic moral furniture of the human mind. Without the Jews it might have been a much emptier place.”

⁵⁹ Thomas Cahill, *The Gifts of the Jews: How a Tribe of Desert Nomads Changed the Way Everyone Thinks and Feels* (Thorndike, ME: G.K. Hall & Co., 1998), p.157 – 158 writes, “All evidence points to there having been, in the earliest religious thought, a vision of the cosmos that was profoundly cyclical. The assumptions that early man made about the world were, in all their essentials, little different from the assumptions that later and more sophisticated societies, like Greece and India, would make in a more elaborate manner. As Henri-Charles Puech says of Greek thought in his seminal *Man and Time*: ‘No event is unique, nothing is enacted but once...; every event has been enacted, is enacted, and will be enacted perpetually; the same individuals have appeared, appear, and will appear at every turn of the circle.’ The Jews were the first people to break out of this circle, to find a new way of thinking and experiencing, a new way of understanding and feeling the world, so much that it may be said with some justice that theirs is the only new idea that human beings have ever had.

⁶⁰ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.21.10; cf. 3.22.1 – 2 says, “Why, then, did not God again take dust, but wrought so that the formation should be made of Mary? It was that there might not be another formation called into being, nor any other which should [require to] be saved, but that the very same formation should be summed up [in Christ as had existed in Adam], the analogy having been preserved.”

partake of the same human nature that we all share, to renew it and save it. He did not start a different type of human being, because that would have been of no help to us! This is why Irenaeus constantly referred to Jesus' person and work as the 'recapitulation' – or the summing up, or literally, the re-heading up – of all humanity. Taking this concept from Paul (Eph.1:10), Irenaeus says that Jesus is the 'second Adam' (Rom.5:12 – 21; 1 Cor.15:21 – 22; 45 – 49) the one from whom a new life passes into all other human beings. For Irenaeus, Jesus even sanctified each stage of human life for us, because he passed through the different chronological stages of human life himself.⁶¹ He pressed the Spirit into his humanity at every stage.⁶²

Third, by his faithful life, death, and resurrection, Christ was victorious over the internal enemy we face: sin indwelling us. Whereas other facets of salvation can emphasize the devil, or death, or some enemy external to us, Irenaeus' understanding of atonement highlights the internal contradiction within our ontological and relational being: we are corrupted (ontology) and alienated and hostile (relational) to God. Those who mischaracterize the patristic atonement theology as merely Jesus paying a "ransom" to the devil are grossly misunderstanding the mind of the early church, and misunderstanding the mechanism by which "the flesh" (as Paul and John used that term in a technical sense to refer to the corruption in our nature) served as the point of influence by which the devil had access to us. The patristic and Nicene theologians were working in ontological and relational categories, and their atonement theory was therefore medical. Already in Irenaeus we see a fine exposition of it, and this emphasis continued for centuries.

To the extent that Irenaeus is faithfully communicating the teaching of the apostle John and his Gospel narrative, which I will examine below in *Appendix B*, I think the question about how to translate ἐν ἡμῖν in John 1:14 has less to do with the actual translation itself ("in us" vs. "among us"), and more to do with how this verse relates to the rest of the narrative, specifically the nature of the atonement, and the application of Jesus' atonement to us by the Holy Spirit. If one chooses to translate ἐν ἡμῖν as "among us," one has to resist the tendency to see Jesus' humanity as a mere staging ground for him to become one "among" us who supposedly took the Father's divine retributive wrath at the cross – punitive wrath which was supposedly aimed at human beings, infinitely. Irenaeus says that Jesus did not save us by passively receiving a punishment for us, but by actively obeying the Father and killing sin in his humanity for us. On the other hand, if one chooses to translate ἐν ἡμῖν as "in us," one has to resist the tendency to bypass Jesus' unique human journey, and imagine a direct descent of the divine Word into every single human being, unmediated by Jesus' uniquely successful human struggle unto death and into resurrection, as well as our belief in him or not.

Positively, how should we understand the translation of ἐν ἡμῖν in John 1:14? If we choose to translate ἐν ἡμῖν as "among us," then we must understand that Jesus eventually came to be "in us" by the Spirit as well. Through his faithful life, death, and resurrection, Jesus the Word incarnate prepared a purified, healed, cleansed, and Spirit-saturated new humanity for us. So the incarnation attributed to the Word is not identical with the indwelling attributed to the Spirit. On the other hand, if one chooses to translate ἐν ἡμῖν as "in us," then we must understand that the Word became flesh and tabernacle "in our human nature." "Flesh" is the term for human nature in its fallen mode of existence. Of course, Jesus did not remain that way. He did not become assimilated to our fallen humanity, or assimilate divine goodness to our human evil in a pantheistic blurring of good and evil. Jesus of Nazareth retained and retains normative status as a human being, because he perfected a normative human nature.

⁶¹ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 2.22.4, cf. 4.38.2 says, "Being a Master, therefore, He also possessed the age of a Master [i.e. thirty years at least], not despising or evading any condition of humanity, nor setting aside in Himself that law which He had appointed for the human race, but sanctifying every age, by that period corresponding to it which belonged to Himself. For He came to save all through means of Himself – all, I say, who through Him are born again to God – infants, and children, and boys, and youths, and old men. He therefore passed through every age, becoming an infant for infants, thus sanctifying infants; a child for children, thus sanctifying those who are of this age, being at the same time made to them an example of piety, righteousness, and submission; a youth for youths, becoming an example to youths, and thus sanctifying them for the Lord. So likewise He was an old man for old men, that He might be a perfect Master for all, not merely as respects the setting forth of the truth, but also as regards age, sanctifying at the same time the aged also, and becoming an example to them likewise. Then, at last, He came on to death itself, that He might be 'the first-born from the dead, that in all things He might have the pre-eminence [Colossians 1:18],' the Prince of life [Acts 3:15], existing before all, and going before all."

⁶² Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 3.17.1 says, "Wherefore He [the Spirit] did also descend upon the Son of God, made the Son of man, becoming accustomed in fellowship with Him to dwell in the human race, to rest with human beings, and to dwell in the workmanship of God, working the will of the Father in them, and renewing them from their old habits into the newness of Christ."

Correspondingly, how do we translate Gregory of Nyssa's use of *ἐν ἡμῖν* in *Life of Moses*? I will show below that in his larger conceptual framework – especially on the atonement – Gregory agrees with Irenaeus. This means, once again, that the precise translation is not the issue so much as the precise understanding of its context in Jesus' life and ministry. Malherbe and Ferguson translate *ἐν ἡμῖν* as "among us" four times: 2.30, 2.95, 2.174, and 2.175.

In the first instance, the context is the incarnation of the Word into sinful human flesh. It is significant to my analysis that Gregory quotes heavily from John's Gospel in this section:

27. These seem to me to signify in a figure the mystery of the Lord's incarnation, a manifestation of deity to men which effects the death of the tyrant and sets free those under his power.

28. What leads me to this understanding is the testimony of the Prophets and the Gospel. The Prophet declares: This is the change of the right hand of the most High [Psalm 77:10], indicating that, although the divine nature is contemplated in its immutability, by condescension to the weakness of human nature it was changed to our shape and form.

29. When the hand of the lawgiver was extended from his bosom it was changed to an unnatural complexion, and when placed again in his bosom, it returned to its own natural beauty. Again, the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father [John 1:18] is he who is the right hand of the most High.

30. When he was manifested to us from the bosom of the Father, he was changed to be like us. After he wiped away our infirmities [LXX Isaiah 53:4; Matthew 8:17], he again returned to his own bosom the hand which had been *ἐν ἡμῖν* [John 1:14] and had received our complexion. (The Father is the bosom of the right hand.) What is impassible by nature did not change into what is passible, but what is mutable and subject to passions was transformed into impassibility through its participation in the immutable.

31. The change from a rod into a snake should not trouble the lovers of Christ—as if we were adapting the doctrine of the incarnation to an unsuitable animal. For the Truth himself through the voice of the Gospel does not refuse a comparison like this in saying: And the Son of Man must be lifted up as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert [John 3:14].

32. The teaching is clear. For if the father of sin is called a serpent by Holy Scripture [Genesis 3:1] and what is born of the serpent is certainly a serpent, it follows that sin is synonymous with the one who begot it. But the apostolic word testifies that the Lord was made into sin for our sake [2 Corinthians 5:21] by being invested with our sinful nature.

33. This figure therefore is rightly applied to the Lord. For if sin is a serpent and the Lord became sin, the logical conclusion should be evident to all: By becoming sin he became also a serpent, which is nothing other than sin. For our sake he became a serpent that he might devour and consume the Egyptian serpents produced by the sorcerers.

34. This done, the serpent was changed back into a rod by which sinners are brought to their senses, and those slackening on the upward and toilsome course of virtue are given rest, the rod of faith supporting them through their high hopes. Only faith can guarantee the blessings that we hope for.

Gregory here is referring to "the Lord's incarnation" (2.27). Although the Son's divine nature remained "immutable," he "by condescension to the weakness of human nature... was changed to our shape and form" (2.28). Gregory then uses the idiom of Moses extending his hand from his bosom, outward. He uses an elision between the text of Exodus 4:1 – 7 with the "bosom" text of John 1:18 and the "hand" text of Psalm 77:10. Gregory makes these semantic associations in order to say that when the Father extended the Son into our common fallen human nature in the incarnation, it was like Moses extending his hand from his bosom. This hand "was leprous as snow" (Exodus 4:6) and, in Gregory's words, thus "was changed to an unnatural complexion" (2.29). Jesus then returned to "his bosom," which is the Father (2.29), with "natural beauty," which refers to the healed character of Jesus' human nature after his life, death, and resurrection.

In 2.30, Gregory uses the phrase in question. Gregory says, “When he was manifested to us from the bosom of the Father, he was changed to be like us. After he wiped away our infirmities [LXX Isaiah 53:4; Matthew 8:17], he again returned to his own bosom the hand which had been ἐν ἡμῖν [John 1:14] and had received our complexion.” This narrative sequence refers to the particular, embodied, personal instance of human being taken up by the Son in his incarnate life. The phrase “wiped away our infirmities” (2.30) is in the past tense, and the phrase “had received our complexion” (2.30) is in the past perfect; both phrases indicate that the goal of the incarnation was completed in Jesus’ resurrection and ascension, in accordance with the story of Moses’ hand which returned, healed, to his bosom. Jesus’ new humanity is available to us by the Spirit and by participation, but Jesus’ impact on human nature is not instantaneous, and not irrespective of the Spirit and our will and our own struggle for the virtuous life found in Jesus. If the Word had descended into human nature in some instantaneous and universal way, then all our infirmities – our sin-sickness – would be wiped away universally already, and Gregory’s entire purpose in writing *Life of Moses* would be in vain and redundant.

Moreover, Gregory agreed with his brother Basil that human “nature” is categorically the same across different human “persons” but separated by time and space within those “persons.”⁶³ With regards to God, however, divine “nature” is not only in common but shared simultaneously and continuously by the three “persons” of the Trinity because the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not separated by time and space. We can appreciate Gregory’s Trinitarian logic “in reverse” to comment on his theological anthropology. When Jesus took up a human nature, then, he did so in a non-overlapping way with other human persons, because that is simply the way human nature is instantiated. The divinity of the Son does not – and cannot – function in such a way so as to blur or erase the distinctions between human persons so that human nature can suddenly be aggregated and treated as an impersonal, generic substance. Even the ministry of the Spirit does not erase personal distinctiveness, whether in the Triune God, or among human beings. There is no doubt, then, that Gregory understands the incarnate, earthly life of Jesus as sharing the same human nature as us, but in a non-overlapping way with other human persons.

Therefore, ἐν ἡμῖν in this instance can mean “in us, that is, in our human nature” – as in, sharing that nature in common with us. Simultaneously, however, the translation “among us” is *adequate and accurate* because of Gregory’s understanding of the distinction of human persons, the separation of human nature into respective human persons, the atonement as healing of human nature accomplished by Jesus and in Jesus, and the ministry of the Holy Spirit.⁶⁴ The instance of ἐν ἡμῖν in 2.30 has direct bearing on the translation, and, more importantly, the understanding of the same prepositional phrase in 2.174 and 175.

The second instance of Gregory’s use of ἐν ἡμῖν occurs in 2.95:

94. Since the producer of evil gives birth to lust before adultery and anger before murder, in destroying the firstborn he certainly kills along with it the offspring which follows. Take for an example a snake: When one crushes his head he kills the rest of the body at the same time...

95. In the one the first impulse to evil is destroyed, and in the other the first entrance of evil into us is turned away by the true Lamb. For when the destroyer has come inside, we do not drive him out by our own devices, but by the Law we throw up a defense to keep him from gaining a foothold ἐν ἡμῖν.

It is almost certain that ἐν ἡμῖν in this instance should be translated “in us.” Although Malherbe and Ferguson translate ἐν ἡμῖν as “among us,” this is not as precise as Gregory’s teaching would dictate. Gregory is here talking about “the first entrance of evil *into us*.” He refers to the time “when the destroyer has come inside,” with reference to us as individuals, not as a community. Gregory refers to evils and vices internal to individual persons in 2.94, such as lust and anger. Later in 2.96, he refers to “the nature of the soul.”

In his next mention of ἐν ἡμῖν in 2.174 – 175, Gregory returns to the topic of the incarnation of Christ, but switches literary-anagorical motifs from “hand” to “tabernacle.”

⁶³ Basil of Caesarea, *Letter 38* to his brother Gregory of Nyssa

⁶⁴ Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses* 2.110 – 111 connects the Holy Spirit to the biblical theme of fire, that is, the purifying fire which purifies gold from dross.

174. Taking a hint from what has been said by Paul, who partially uncovered the mystery of these things, we say that Moses was earlier instructed by a type in the mystery of the tabernacle which encompasses the universe. This tabernacle would be Christ who is the power and the wisdom of God [1 Corinthians 1:24], who in his own nature was not made with hands, yet capable of being made when it became necessary for this tabernacle to be erected ἐν ἡμῖν [John 1:14]. Thus, the same tabernacle is in a way both unfashioned and fashioned, uncreated in preexistence [Micah 5:2; John 1:1 – 3] but created [Proverbs 8:22 – 23] in having received this material composition.

175. What we say is of course not obscure to those who have accurately received the mystery of our faith. For there is one thing out of all others which both existed before the ages and came into being at the end of the ages. It did not need a temporal beginning (for how could what was before all times and ages be in need of a temporal origin?), but for our sakes, who had lost our existence through our thoughtlessness, it consented to be born like us so that it might bring that which had left reality back again to reality. This one is the Only Begotten God [John 1:18], who encompasses everything in himself [Colossians 1:17] but who also pitched his own tabernacle ἐν ἡμῖν [John 1:14].

176. But if we name such a God “tabernacle,” the person who loves Christ should not be disturbed at all on the grounds that the suggestion involved in the phrase diminishes the magnificence of the nature of God. For neither is any other name worthy of the nature thus signified, but all names have equally fallen short of accurate description, both those recognized as insignificant as well as those by which some great insight is indicated.

Much can be said about this section and Gregory’s use of the tabernacle concept as a whole in 2.162 – 188. But I will restrict my comments to answer the following question: Does Gregory give any indication that his understanding of Christ’s incarnation as a tabernacle pitched ἐν ἡμῖν is different than Christ’s incarnation as the leprous hand extended ἐν ἡμῖν? I suggest that they emphasize different relational aspects Christ has and maintains, but are fundamentally the same. The “extended hand” highlights Christ’s relationship specifically with the sin residing within the particular instance of human nature he took on. The “tabernacle” highlights Christ’s relationship with other heavenly and earthly beings as Creator, and his becoming one of his creation.

Gregory uses the paradoxical language of “change” with reference to the divine nature and divine person of the Son undergoing the incarnation into human nature. Later Christian leaders after Chalcedon would be uncomfortable with his use of terms.⁶⁵ But his overall theological structure and intention seem reasonably clear. I will use a tabular format to draw out the comparison and connections:

174. This tabernacle would be Christ who is the power and the wisdom of God [1 Corinthians 1:24],	
who in his own nature was <i>not made with hands</i>	yet capable of <i>being made</i> when it became necessary for this tabernacle to be erected ἐν ἡμῖν [John 1:14]
Thus, the same tabernacle is in a way both <i>unfashioned</i>	and <i>fashioned</i> ,
<i>uncreated</i> in preexistence [Micah 5:2; John 1:1 – 3]	but <i>created</i> [Proverbs 8:22 – 23] in having received this material composition.
175. What we say is of course not obscure to those who have accurately received the mystery of our faith.	
For there is one thing out of all others which both existed before the ages	and came into being at the end of the ages.

⁶⁵ Ann Conway-Jones, p.109 says, “By later Chalcedonian standards, Gregory’s Christology is untenable because it manages to be ‘Nestorian’ and ‘Monophysite’ at the same time.” I think she overstates her case, because the larger structure of his thought tempers his admittedly aggressive use of the terms “nature” or “essence.” Nevertheless, Conway-Jones is correct about Gregory’s intentionally paradoxical use of terms.

It did not need a temporal beginning (for how could what was before all times and ages be in need of a temporal origin?),	but for our sakes, who had lost our existence through our thoughtlessness, it consented to be born like us so that it might bring that which had left reality back again to reality.
This one is the Only Begotten God [John 1:18], who encompasses everything in himself [Colossians 1:17]	but who also pitched his own tabernacle ἐν ἡμῖν [John 1:14].

Once again, incarnation and atonement are in Gregory's mind. Gregory uses ἐν ἡμῖν twice quoting the fragment of John 1:14 which contains it. Poetically, there would be more resonance if we were to translate ἐν ἡμῖν as "in us" in both instances here. Especially in the last sentence of 2.175, Gregory seems to be paralleling the phrase "in himself" and "in us." "The Only Begotten God, who encompasses everything *in himself*... also pitched his own tabernacle *in us*." Significantly, Gregory's double quotation of John 1:18 and 1:14, with the thought of Colossians 1:17 ("in him all things hold together") also enlisted on the "side" of John 1:18, bring attention to the nature of Christ as both Creator *and* created.

But *translation* alone is not equivalent to *meaning*. Gregory has in mind not the tabernacling of a divine force within all humanity generically, but the particular historical incarnation of the Word, who then tabernacles in believers by the Spirit. He speaks of the Son who "consented to be born like us." This brief reference is decisive and determinative. Gregory thinks of the particular, unique Jewish man known as Jesus of Nazareth, born of Mary of Nazareth. By taking on human nature in the womb of Mary, in the context of Israel, he "received this material composition... and came into being at the end of the ages." Matter, space, time, Israel, Mary, labor pains, and childbirth are in Gregory's mind as he thinks of Jesus, who "erected" or "pitched his own tabernacle" in our human nature, in a sequence. He pitched his own tabernacle in the womb of Mary. The symmetry of Gregory's statements connects eternal begottenness and temporal birth. The phrase "Only Begotten God" indicates the Son's divinity as eternal Son of the Father. Therefore, the phrase "pitched his own tabernacle ἐν ἡμῖν" includes the Son's humanity which began as he indwelt his mother's physical womb. He also indwelt his own human flesh, of course. From there, following his faithful life, death, and resurrection, Jesus is able to indwell those who believe in him, by his Spirit in us as human persons to share with us his new humanity.

This is why Gregory sees the "earthly tabernacle" in the text of Exodus as an opportunity to talk about the church in 2.184 – 188. The church is not identical, in principle, with all human beings. It is built on the "pillars" of the apostles (2.184), which the communities of unbelievers are not founded upon. It shines out "light" as a witness to unbelievers (2.184). It administers baptism (2.185), and certainly not all people have been baptized. Gregory says directly, "The interconnecting courts which surround the tabernacle are fittingly understood as the harmony, love, and peace of *believers*" (2.186; emphasis mine). And most importantly, for the purpose of this argument, the "skin dyed red and the coverings made of hair, which add to the decoration of the tabernacle, would be perceived respectively as the mortification of the sinful flesh (the figure of which is the skin dyed red) and the ascetic way of life" (2.187). Gregory has already interpreted these skins dyed red as the dying and rising of Christ by which Christ put to death the "sinful flesh" (2.183). I think it is fair to detect a gloss Gregory makes to Paul in Romans 8:3, "sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh." Gregory interprets this in way that calls for our human participation. The life shared in common by Christian believers is necessarily rooted in Jesus' human life as an example, but also source of spiritual power. Gregory regards Jesus as the normative human life, not least because he mortified the "sinful flesh" which we all share. But this condition of entry into the church indicates that the community of the church is only a subset of all humanity.

I conclude by repeating my assertion, that ἐν ἡμῖν in Gregory, as in John 1:14, would be better translated "in us." But I repeat that "in us" cannot be interpreted to avoid the "scandal of particularity." The "tabernacle" motif used by Gregory and the apostle John refers to the particularity of Israel. The flesh spoken of refers to the particularity of Jesus of Nazareth, who received his humanity from a particular woman of faith, Mary of Nazareth. The Word's incarnation was "in our human nature" instantiated personally as Jesus, and distinct from other human persons by space and time. In order for a loving God to heal human nature in a human way, Jesus uniquely had to perfect his physical humanity. But the Spirit's ministry makes Jesus available to dwell "in us" individually and particularly, as we believe in Jesus. The Spirit makes us part of Christ's body, the church, a Christ dwells "in us" corporately, a particular people among all the peoples of the earth.