Embodiment and Virtue in Gregory of Nyssa

An Anagogical Approach

HANS BOERSMA

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Contents

List of Abbreviations xiii

Introduction 1
Anagogy, Embodiment, and Virtue 1
Chapter Outline 12

1. Measured Body 19
Measuring the Creature Only: *Contra Eunomium* 24
Virtuous Progression in Time: *In Ecclesiasten homiliae* 27
Christological Realignment of Time: *De tridui spatio* 33
The Eighth Day as Upward Future: *In sextum Psalmum* 38
Heavenly Paradise: Diastemic Space and Time? 44
Conclusion 50

2. Textual Body 53
Faith as Anagogical Guide 54
The "Turn" of Proverbs 8 in *Contra Eunomium* III.i 59
The Defense of Anagogy in the Preface to *In Canticum canticorum* 66
Joining the Angelic Choir: *In inscriptiones Psalmorum* 70
Interpretation and Anagogy in *In Canticum canticorum* 77

3. Gendered Body 85
Tunics of Christ in *In Canticum canticorum* 87
Bodily and Spiritual Senses in *In Canticum canticorum* 93
Sex in the Garden? *De hominis opificio* 100
Neither Male nor Female: Macrina's Angelic Overcoming of Gender 109

4. Dead Body 117
The Paradoxes of Virginity in *De virginitate* 117
Virginity as the End of Death in *De virginitate* 123
Death and Mourning in *De mortuis oratio* 128
Death and Mourning in Pastoral Context 137
Conclusion 144

5. Oppressed Body 146
Manumission in Annisa 147
Slavery and the Image of God 152
Slavery and the Resurrection 157
Preaching on Homeless Bodies 163

Preaching on Homeless Souls 170
Conclusion 175

6. Ecclesial Body 178
Ascension into the Church: *In ascensionem Christi oratio* 179
Baptism and the Body: *In diem luminum* 182
Eucharistic Transpositions: *Oratio catechetica magna* 186
Submission of the Body of Christ: *Tunc et ipse* 188
Into the Inner Bridal Chamber: *In Canticum canticorum* 197
Conclusion 209

7. Virtuous Body 211
Alleged Moralism in Nyssen's Theology 215
Virtue as Participation in Christ: *De professione Christiana* and *De perfectione* 221
Assistance of the Spirit: *De instituto Christiano* 228
De vita Moysis: Modeling Virtue 231
De vita Moysis: Anagogical Participation in Christ 240
Conclusion 245

Epilogue 247

Bibliography 251
General Index 273
Scripture Index 280

Introduction

ANAGOGY, EMBODIMENT, AND VIRTUE

Nothing was more important to Gregory of Nyssa (*c*.334–*c*.395) than to make progress in the spiritual life in order to participate more deeply in the being of God. In his homilies on the Song of Songs, Nyssen refers to this participation as *ἡ δὲ κατὰ ἀναγωγὴν θεωρία*, an expression we may translate as "anagogical insight" or "lofty contemplation."[1] Those familiar with the term "anagogy" (*ἀναγωγή*) mostly know it as a technical term that denotes the last of four levels of meaning in medieval exegesis. Recall the final line of a famous medieval distich, which refers to the anagogical or eschatological meaning of the biblical text:

Littera gesta docet,
quid credas allegoria,
moralis quid agas,
quo tendas anagogia.[2]

In English, one could render the rhyme somewhat freely as follows:

The letter shows us what God and our fathers did;
The allegory shows us where our faith is hid;
The moral meaning gives us the rule of daily life;
The anagogy shows us where we end our strife.[3]

Throughout much of the Middle Ages, the term "anagogy" referred to the eschatological sense, the last of four distinct levels of meaning. Thus, the doctrine of the four senses restricts the anagogical meaning of a biblical text to its eschatological interpretation.

[1] *Cant* 5.144.17–18.

[2] Cf. Henri de Lubac, "On an Old Distich: The Doctrine of the 'Fourfold Sense' in Scripture," in *Theological Fragments*, trans. Rebecca Howell Balinski (San Francisco, Calif.: Ignatius, 1989), 109–27.

[3] Robert M. Grant with David Tracy, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible*, 2nd edn. (Philadelphia, Penn.: Fortress, 1984), 85.

Gregory, however, belongs to an earlier tradition, in which the four levels of meaning were not yet clearly delineated. He usually distinguishes only two levels of meaning, to which we may refer as "historical" and "spiritual."[4] As a result, his use of the term "anagogy" is much broader than its use later in the Middle Ages. Nyssen makes clear that when he employs the term in connection with biblical exegesis, it encompasses each of the three deeper levels of meaning referred to in the distich—the allegorical, the moral (or tropological), and the eschatological (or anagogical). Explaining his relative indifference with regard to the terms one uses to discuss spiritual levels of meaning, Nyssen comments: "One may wish to refer to the anagogical interpretation (τὴν διὰ τῆς ἀναγωγῆς θεωρίαν) of such sayings as 'tropology' or 'allegory' or by some other name. We shall not quarrel about the name as long as a firm grasp is kept on thoughts that edify."[5] For Gregory, "anagogical" exegesis refers not just to the end of history; rather, it speaks about the spiritual level of meaning in general. His lack of distinction between allegorical, moral, and anagogical thus points to the fact that for him the term ἀναγωγή has a breadth of meaning that was lost to later medieval thought.[6]

Gregory's broad use of the term "anagogy" (ἀναγωγή) implies that Holy Scripture allows us to participate already *today* in the eschatological realities of the future. That is to say, for Gregory anagogy has to do with Scripture giving insight into *higher* realities (that are spiritual in character), not just *future* realities. We could also say that through anagogical reading (or through "allegory" and "tropology"—different terms, as we saw, for the same thing), one is "led upward" into the eschatological realities of the future. Anagogy thus has not only a horizontal meaning (as referring to a historically future eschaton), but it also has a vertical sense (implying a move from historical to spiritual realities). In fact, etymologically, the term "anagogy" is restricted to this vertical aspect; the origin of the term does not carry the horizontal or forward-looking meaning that the word came to have in later medieval thought. The root meaning of the term "anagogy" thus draws our attention to the fact that the meaning of the Scriptures is not restricted to historical events but also has to do with the higher (or heavenly) realities of the eschaton.

Gregory believes that we reach both these higher and these future realities through the life of virtue. As a result, anagogy can be identified not just with allegory and eschatology but also with tropology. The moral meaning of the text is really no different from the allegorical or the eschatological meaning. The reason is that for Gregory, growth in virtue is simply the avenue through

[4] In this regard, Gregory stands within the Origenist tradition. Cf. Henri de Lubac, *History and Spirit: The Understanding of Scripture according to Origen*, trans. Anne Englund Nash (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2007).

[5] *Cant* Prologue.5.6–9.

[6] Cf. Charles Kannengiesser et al., *Handbook of Patristic Exegesis*, The Bible in Ancient Christianity, 1 (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 257.

which one embarks on the simultaneously vertical and horizontal movement of spiritual progress. Gregory identifies Jesus Christ, or God himself, with virtue, and so it makes little difference to him whether the text refers to Christ or to the life of virtue. To Gregory, they are one and the same: to participate in Christ is to participate in virtue.[7] Both the Christological and the moral meanings of the text give us access to heavenly realities (to use the vertical metaphor) or to the eschatological future (to stick with the horizontal metaphor). Thus, also in connection with the moral aspect of the meaning of Scripture, we can say that, for Gregory, heavenly or eschatological realities impinge on the here and now. Allegorical, moral, or anagogical interpretation of Scripture are all one and the same for Nyssen; at most, they are different angles from which to understand biblical exegesis, as it moves from the surface-level (*πρόχειρον*) of history (*ἱστορία*) to the higher (*ὑψηλότερον*) level of insight or contemplation (*θεωρία*). The term "anagogy," then, has a broad scope of meaning, which includes each of the spiritual levels of meaning that later medieval thought distinguished much more sharply.

The word *ἀναγωγή* has such a broad semantic range in Nyssen's thought that it reaches even beyond the realm of exegesis. It is the argument of this book that Gregory's overall theology should be characterized as "anagogical." That is to say, for Gregory the purpose of life itself is anagogical in character. We are meant to go "upward" and "forward," both at the same time, so as to participate ever more thoroughly in the life of God. Anagogy, then, is not just an exegetical practice or hermeneutical approach for St. Gregory. Rather, anagogy is our own increasing participation in divine virtue and thus our own ascent into the life of God. Also here, the word "anagogy" has both a vertical and a horizontal connotation. We ourselves enter into the simultaneously heavenly and eschatological reality of the life of God through the way in which we live our lives here on earth. Thus, in his commentary on the inscriptions of the psalms, Nyssen comments that the psalms not only "lead (*ἀναγαγεῖν*) the understanding up to that which is truly blessed"[8] but also are presented in a harmonious order so that they "form our souls in accordance with God through virtue."[9] The purpose of the interpretation of Scripture—and, by extension, the purpose of theology and of all of life—is that the believer's virtues be shaped in accordance with eternal realities. Ascent (*ἀνάβασις*) or anagogy (*ἀναγωγή*) is the purpose not only of exegesis, but of all of life, since it is through ascent or anagogy that one increasingly participates in the heavenly or eschatological reality of the divine life.

[7] Cf. Chap. 7, sect.: Virtue as Participation in Christ: *De professione Christiana* and *De perfectione.*

[8] *Inscr* 69.14 (Heine 124).

[9] *Inscr* 117.4 (Heine 164).

Virtue (ἀρετή) and embodiment both play key roles in this anagogical progression in the divine life. For St. Gregory, "virtue" denotes the moral skills required for progressive participation (μετουσία) in the heavenly or eschatological reality of God's life. By speaking of "skill," I do not mean to suggest an objective, technical dexterity that anyone can acquire, quite apart from one's relationship to Christ or to God. As I make clear in Chapter 7 ("Virtuous Body"), nothing could be further from the truth. For Gregory, every step in virtue is an advance in one's participation in Christ, since "virtue" is a synonym for "Christ." In the strict sense, therefore, no human being can be called virtuous, because no one can ever truly attain the perfection that characterizes divine virtue. Human beings, for Gregory, can only be called virtuous in a derived and indirect sense.

Despite its elusiveness as a goal, nothing is as important to St. Gregory as participating in this divine virtue. The theme of virtue runs throughout this book (even though only the last chapter presents a more or less systematic exposition of Nyssen's approach to virtue). The reason is that the theme is pervasive throughout Gregory's writings. Especially in his biblical expositions, but also in many of his other works, virtue is the central theme. The scroll that St. Gregory holds in his hand in the icon on the book jacket reads, "It is necessary for the one longing to be the bride of Christ to be like Christ." These words succinctly express Gregory's focus on virtue. Modern readers tend to be startled by this ubiquity of virtue in his writings, and they are likely to wonder whether perhaps he is arbitrarily imposing this theme on the various texts of Scripture. We should keep in mind, however, that for Gregory, virtue is something rather different from what it is for most of our own contemporaries. For Nyssen, virtue is not just a human moral accomplishment, quite apart from theological considerations that may or may not come into play. As already mentioned, virtue is for Gregory a participation in the divine life; virtue, for Nyssen, *is* the anagogical progress itself. As such, anagogical advance in virtue is nothing but a description of the Christian life. To speak of the Christian life without focusing on increase in virtue would, for Gregory, be oxymoronic. It can only be done by removing the very essence of the Christian life: participation in God through Jesus Christ. For Gregory, to say that a biblical text refers to virtue is no different from suggesting that it speaks of the Christian life.

St. Gregory recognizes that we live out the Christ-like life of virtue in concrete, particular realities of time and space. The heavenly or eschatological realities for which we aim are not hermetically sealed from the natural realities of this world: it is through virtuous lives lived in time and space that it becomes increasingly possible to transcend time and space and to participate in the life of God. For the sacramental universe of pre modern Christianity, largely shaped as it was through the fruitful symbiosis of Christian and Platonic categories of thought, it was unthinkable to separate heaven and

earth, nature and the supernatural.[10] Gregory is no exception in this regard. As a Platonist Christian, he appreciates the importance of the category of "participation" and regards the pursuit of anagogy by means of virtue as central to the Christian faith.[11] At the same time, his works deal with the question of what this means in terms of the embodied realities that one encounters both in church and in everyday life. At the most basic level, then, Nyssen assesses the ontological status of the categories of time and space: are these just parenthetical divine accommodations that will one day give way to a fuller time-less and space-less participation in the infinite life of God? And what about the materiality of embodiment, as such? Will it continue in the eschaton, or will it yield to a spiritual mode of existence in the "heavenly tabernacle"? Thus, this book deals with questions of embodiment, understood in the broad sense of the term, as referring to material or sensible forms of life, created in time and space, which includes (but is not restricted to) the human body.[12]

The basic metaphysical questions surrounding embodiment that I just mentioned are linked to a variety of other significant theological concerns, many of them with practical implications. Thus, St. Gregory realizes that the question of how to interpret Scripture is closely linked to the significance that one attaches to the temporal, historical realities depicted in Scripture. Other questions immediately follow: how significant is gender, from a Christian perspective? Is it part of God's initial design or is it, in some sense, problematic? And if the latter is the case, how can one still affirm the goodness of the body? How can one still confess the resurrection of the body? Similar tensions arise, for Gregory, in connection with the emotional life, and in particular with the complicated moral question of how one ought to comfort people who mourn the death of loved ones. In some places, at least, Scripture evaluates emotions such as zeal, anger, and even grief rather positively, seemingly implying a close integration of the rational and emotional faculties. But is mourning appropriate, considering the hope of resurrection? Does moral acceptance of grief do justice to the subordinate role of the emotions in relationship to the rational faculty? Gregory's writings spell out in careful detail how one should and should not approach the moral issues surrounding the loss of bereavement. Furthermore, the question of the significance of

[10] Cf. Hans Boersma, *Heavenly Participation: The Weaving of a Sacramental Tapestry* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2011).

[11] Most contemporary scholarship rightly perceives the centrality of Gregory's Christian convictions and has abandoned the monochromatic depiction of Nyssen as a Platonist, which once was common and found its classical expression in Harold Fredrik Cherniss, *The Platonism of Gregory of Nyssa*, University of California Publications in Classical Philology, 11/1 (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1930).

[12] With this description I do not mean to tie material, embodied reality inextricably to time and space. As will become clear in the course of this study, Gregory believes that in the eschaton, materiality (including the human body) will perdure, while time and space will disappear.

embodiment causes St. Gregory to reflect on the basic social and economic realities around him. Slavery and homelessness—the latter often linked to poverty and/or leprosy—were daily realities in Gregory's context, demanding a theological response. His attitude toward them tells us a great deal about how he looks at the relationship between earthly and heavenly realities and at the relative value he assigns to each. And perhaps it is especially the realities of church life that make Nyssen reflect on the importance of material, embodied existence in the overall theological scheme of things. Gregory's theology of Baptism and Eucharist inevitably puts on display how he evaluates the created, embodied realities of time and space.

Scholarship since the mid-twentieth century has tended to emphasize Gregory's positive appraisal of time and space as well as of embodied existence. Scholars such as Hans Urs von Balthasar, Jean Daniélou, and Endre von Ivánka have drawn attention to the distinctly Christian character of Gregory's thought, which can be seen in the fact that for Gregory, the difference between creator and creature—rather than between spirit and matter (as in the Platonic tradition)—is the most basic ontological distinction.[13] Most contemporary scholarship recognizes that the clear ontological distinction between creator and creature introduces a distinctly Christian (non-Platonic) element in Nyssen's thought and that it is this Christian element that allows him to do justice to the basic realities of time and space as well as to the embodied character of created existence. It seems to me that this is essentially a correct assessment. As Chapter 1 makes clear, I too believe that for St. Gregory the most basic ontological distinction is that between creator and creature and that this is a Christian metaphysical "novelty." The presence of Platonic and Stoic elements in his thinking notwithstanding, Gregory is first and foremost a Christian thinker.

These Christian proclivities of Gregory's theology are both pervasive and obvious, and they make clear that Nyssen does recognize the importance of time and space (in this life) as well as of the body (both in this life and, in some fashion, in the hereafter). We can see this positive valuation of embodied existence in time and space in at least three ways. First, Gregory is convinced that anagogy (which is always his ultimate concern) is only possible because of and through the concrete realities of material existence. For example, his homilies on the Song of Songs make clear that one can reach the impassible life of God only by paying attention to the descriptions of bodily passion that the biblical text provides. Solomon "so deals with the soul that she looks upon

[13] Jean Daniélou, *Platonisme et théologie mystique: Doctrine spirituelle de Saint Grégoire de Nysse*, rev. edn., Théologie, 2 (Paris: Aubier, 1944), 8–9; Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Presence and Thought: An Essay on the Religious Philosophy of Gregory of Nyssa*, trans. Mark Sebanc (San Francisco, Calif.: Communio—Ignatius, 1995), 15–23; Endre von Ivánka, *Plato christianus: Übernahme und Umgestaltung des Platonismus durch die Väter* (Einsiedeln: Johannes, 1964), 149–85.

purity by means of instruments that seem inconsistent with it and uses the language of passion to render thought that is undefiled."[14] Gregory wants us to look upon created beauty as a material support or framework (ὑπόβαθρα) that enables us to contemplate the intelligible beauty itself.[15] Similarly, he argues that through the life of renunciation we discipline the "tunics of hide" (the post-lapsarian body) in order to grow in virtue and so to deepen our participation in the divine life. Even if one might want to object that this approach uses embodiment simply as a "springboard" for higher things, it is nonetheless true that for Nyssen embodiment is indispensable for the anagogical pursuit.

Second, St. Gregory repeatedly cautions against disregarding embodied existence as of no value or as perhaps even inhibiting the Christian life. The created order itself cannot be identified as futile.[16] The body itself is also not problematic: "[S]ince everyone mindful of virtue has been in the flesh yet not in evil, it is clear that the body is not the cause (αἰτία) of the misfortunes but that free will (προαίρεσις) is the maker of the passions."[17] Likewise, marriage as such is not the essence of the human predicament: "Let no one think that, for these reasons, we are disregarding the institution of marriage."[18] To be sure, I do think that the spirit–matter distinction introduces a tension in Gregory's thought at this point. But this tension has to do with the fact that *in our current, post-lapsarian* (and pre-eschatological) situation, the body and marriage inevitably go accompanied by temptations of the passions. Nyssen does not reject either the body or marriage as inherently evil.

Third, Gregory lavishes praise on the physical construction and the functioning of the human body, even in its post-lapsarian make-up as "tunics of skin." Gregory learned a great deal about the human bodily physique from Basil of Ancyra, a trained physician.[19] Particularly the way in which the body functions so as to produce speech elicits from Nyssen detailed physical descriptions, full of admiration.[20]

Fourth, although Gregory usually limits the language of participation (μετουσία) to the soul—which through its intellectual faculty participates in heavenly realities—he occasionally acknowledges that also material realities

[14] *Cant* 1.29.9–12.

[15] *Virg* 11.292.13–14 (Woods Callahan 39).

[16] *Eccl* 1.283.18–284.11 (Hall 36–7).

[17] *Mort* 58.5–8. Cf. *Mort* 59.19–22: "Therefore, the body is not the origin of evils but free will (προαίρεσις) turns the needs into the goal, misdirecting desire (ἐπιθυμίαν) toward foul things." Throughout, I provide my own translations of this treatise.

[18] *Virg* 7.282.3–4 (Woods Callahan 31).

[19] *Gregory of Nyssa: The Letters*, ed. and trans. Anna M. Silvas, Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae, 83 (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 153, n. 202.

[20] *Eun* II.283.11–284.14 (Hall 102); *Op hom* XXIX–XXX (*PG* 44.233D–256C); *Inscr* 32.16–33.6 (Heine 90–1).

participate in the life of God.[21] Thus, Nyssen maintains, "By a participation (*μετουσίαν*) in this [intellectual] beauty, the other beautiful things come into being and are identified."[22] God's wisdom has arranged for "a mixture (*μίχις*) and blending (*ἀνάκρισις*) of the sensible and the intelligible, in order that everything may equally participate (*μετέχοι*) in the good (*καλοῦ*), and none of the things which exist may be excluded from a share in the nature of that which is superior."[23] To be sure, this participation of material beauty in intellectual beauty is only indirect. Whereas the mind "partakes as far as possible in its likeness to the archetype," the body, governed by the mind, "is adorned by the beauty that the mind gives, being, so to say, a mirror of the mirror."[24] While we certainly should not overplay these few quotations, they do make clear that Gregory does have somewhat of an eye for a real or sacramental participation of embodied beauty in eternal realities.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, it seems to me impossible to read Gregory's concern for social justice (in particular his compassion for leprous and homeless people) and his focus on the embodiment of the sacramental practices of Baptism and Eucharist without recognizing that at least in certain important areas of moral and doctrinal theology, Gregory does appreciate the great significance of embodied reality. Chapters 5 and 6 of this book, which deal with these topics, thus give the most poignant witness to a sacramental current in Nyssen's thought.

Several caveats, however, do need to be made. First, though as a Christian Gregory acknowledges the creator–creature distinction as the most foundational one, he is not convinced that it in any way invalidates the Greek spirit–matter distinction. He repeatedly highlights this distinction, and he invariably ranks spiritual concerns above material ones. In fact, as we will see, material and bodily concerns often turn out to be a hindrance for the anagogical pursuit of the Christian life. Second, Gregory believes that upon death (and through a fire of purgation) we enter into the paradisal reality of the eschaton, in which we come to share in the infinite, immeasurable life of God. This is not to say that the creator–creature distinction will evaporate. (Gregory is quite convinced that God will forever infinitely transcend his creatures.) But it does mean that categories such as time and space (as well as movement, measurement, and extension) will disappear. The arrival of the eschaton will involve an anagogical transposition that is beyond anything we can describe or imagine with our current, this-worldly categories. The body will also be affected in important ways by this eschatological transposition. To be sure, as a Christian

[21] Cf. David L. Balás, *Μετουσια Θεου*: *Man's Participation in God's Perfections according to Saint Gregory of Nyssa*, Studia Anselmiana, 55 (Rome: Herder, 1966), 65–6, 72–5.

[22] *Virg* 11.292.14–15 (Woods Callahan 39).

[23] *Or cat* 21.23–22.3 (Srawley 39).

[24] *Op hom* XII.9 (*PG* 44.161C).

theologian Gregory does not give up on the resurrection of the body. A good part of *De anima et resurrectione* is devoted to an argument for the plausibility of a bodily resurrection.[25] Nonetheless, as I make clear in the first chapter, St. Gregory is quite insistent that the perfection of virtue in the resurrection is accompanied by a body whose constitution will no longer use the passions to drag us down to earthly realities.

In fact, the overall argument of this book is meant as a word of caution: we should not so highlight Gregory's positive appreciation of embodiment as to lose sight of the profoundly otherworldly cast of his overall theology. I will highlight the fact that Gregory consistently aims for anagogical progression in the divine life and that this almost always implies a turn away from the material toward the spiritual. Thus, while he does give positive nods in the direction of the physical body and the institution of marriage, bodily virginity is of great significance to Nyssen, and he is deeply cognizant of the problems associated both with the "tunics of skin" and with sexuality and marriage. Participation is for St. Gregory almost consistently a spiritual rather than a material reality, and even as he acknowledges that material beauty participates in intellectual beauty, in the same breath he adds that the soul is supposed to "forget the matter in which the beauty is encased."[26] Furthermore, while Gregory genuinely opposes slavery and exhorts his hearers to care for the sick and the poor, these concerns are part and parcel of his interest in practices of renunciation and aim at eternal, heavenly salvation. In Nyssen's thought, while Baptism and Eucharist obviously do serve as significant embodied practices, their purpose is to assist in the believers' anagogical transposition into eternal life.

It is important to underscore that for Gregory embodiment and virtue stand in the service of the anagogical pursuit of otherworldly realities, since recent trends in contemporary scholarship go too far in highlighting Gregory's appreciation of the goodness of the created order, and in so doing they remove the tension that typically characterizes his thought.[27] Mark Hart, for instance, has argued that much of *De virginitate*—in particular the sections where Gregory waxes most eloquent about bodily renunciation—must be read as irony. He maintains that Nyssen's praise of celibacy is not a straightforward encouragement to join celibate communities but is meant only for the "public," while at the same time he informs the "few" (those who see beyond mere appearances) that the truly wholesome life is that of marriage. The deeper, real message of *De virginitate*, according to Hart, is that a

[25] Cf. Catharine P. Roth, "Platonic and Pauline Elements in the Ascent of the Soul in Gregory of Nyssa's Dialogue on the Soul and the Resurrection," *VC* 46 (1992), 20–30.

[26] *Virg* 11.292.12–13 (Woods Callahan 39).

[27] For an excellent overview of postmodern readings of Gregory, see Morwenna Ludlow, *Gregory of Nyssa: Ancient and (Post)modern* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

contemplative life can, in fact, be combined with marriage.[28] John Behr, building on Hart, presents a reading of *De hominis opificio* that highlights human beings' "kinship" with animals, in that God originally intended gendered existence, including marriage and sexuality, to be part and parcel of paradisal life. Nyssen, according to Behr, regards the human person as a "psychosomatic whole" and, as such, created in the image of God. Behr thus holds that Nyssen views embodied existence—including sexuality—as well as the nutritive and sensitive aspects of the human soul as integral to what it means to be a human person.[29]

Rowan Williams has a similar approach, though he focuses on *De anima et resurrectione* and discusses the role that the emotions—grief, in particular—play in Gregory's theology. Williams insists that Gregory undermines the Platonic dualism between the rational faculty and the emotions, and he asks us to appreciate the full instinctive weight that grief holds for Nyssen. Gregory, argues Williams, includes the lower (vegetative and sensible) elements within the rational soul, and at the same time Nyssen believes that the body shows the nature of the higher soul. This means that human nature properly includes the emotions and that there is no absolute gulf between animals and human beings. Accordingly, Williams argues that Gregory regards the emotion of grief in the face of death as something positive to be embraced for the sake of better self-knowledge. Ordinary human grief, which is both understandable and permissible, functions for Gregory as a paradigm of proper desire. Nyssen, so Williams argues, takes temporality, animality, and contingency much more seriously than has often been recognized.[30]

Elizabeth Clark, looking at Gregory's treatment of his sister Macrina in *De anima et resurrectione* and in *Vita s. Macrinae*, argues that we must take into account the literary and rhetorical character of Nyssen's treatment of Macrina much more than has often been done. Thus, Gregory's depiction of his sister as "manly" does not give us the "real" Macrina, and we should be suspicious of his description of his sister as his "teacher." Just as in Plato's *Symposium* Diotima enters the text to represent the necessary female absence

[28] Mark Dorsey Hart, "Marriage, Celibacy, and the Life of Virtue: An Interpretation of Gregory of Nyssa's *De Virginitate*" (Ph.D. diss., Boston College, 1987); id., "Reconciliation of Body and Soul: Gregory of Nyssa's Deeper Theology of Marriage," *TS* 51 (1990), 450–67; id., "Gregory of Nyssa's Ironic Praise of the Celibate Life," *HeyJ* 33 (1992), 1–19.

[29] John Behr, "The Rational Animal: A Rereading of Gregory of Nyssa's *De hominis opificio*," *JECS* 7 (1999), 219–47. For a similar reappraisal, see Eric Daryl Meyer, "Gregory of Nyssa on Language, Naming God's Creatures, and the Desire of the Discursive Animal," in Nathan MacDonald, Mark Elliot, and Grant Macaskill (eds.), *Genesis and Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2012), 103–16.

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

since she serves as a trope for Socrates, so Macrina—in the voice of Gregory in *De anima et resurrectione*—also actually suppresses the female voice, seeing she merely serves as a trope for Gregory himself. Macrina is for Gregory an instantiation of the "image of God," in which sexual differentiation is overcome. Thus, like Hart and Behr, Clark wants us to deconstruct traditional readings of the text. Unlike Hart and Behr, however, Clark insists that Gregory suppresses rather than celebrates sexual difference. But she believes that despite Gregory's attempt at suppressing the "real" Macrina, he cannot avoid leaving "traces" of her in the text. Her identity as a "holy woman" shines through in the text despite Gregory's attempts at covering it up.[31]

Virginia Burrus presents a somewhat similar reading of Gregory. She, too, compares *De anima et resurrectione* to Plato's *Symposium*, and she comes to the conclusion that Gregory's text doesn't quite succeed in its presentation of Macrina as an instance of male-centered production of a feminized "object." Despite Gregory's best attempts at reinforcing the universalizing discourse of homosocial communities, there is always the intrusive presence of women in male environments. It is true, explains Burrus, that, by presenting Macrina in the role of Diotima, the text turns Gregory into Socrates. But when the dialogue repeatedly depicts Gregory as a weeping virgin, this makes Macrina inevitably switch positions so as to take on the role of Socrates. Thus, Burrus sees Gregory's work—contrary to his own intentions—as transgressing the homosocial worlds of gender that elsewhere (in Plato and Methodius of Olympus) are kept intact.[32]

I will not evaluate these proposals in detail here. Chapters 3 ("Gendered Body") and 4 ("Dead Body") present my own appraisals of Gregory's views on the body, gender, sexuality, and virginity, and these chapters will make clear, I believe, that recent reappraisals of Gregory's theology of embodiment do not do justice to his overall thought. In one significant way, the readings of Hart, Behr, and Williams are quite different from those of Clark and Burrus. The former, since they draw attention to Gregory's acknowledgment of the goodness of embodied, created existence, see Nyssen as positively appreciating gender difference (along with marriage and sexuality). The latter see Gregory as (unsuccessfully) trying to suppress sexual differentiation. Both perspectives, however, downplay the fact that Gregory is a radically anagogical theologian, for whom embodied existence (and gender in particular) simply does not have the importance that it carries for our contemporaries. The arguments of

[31] Elizabeth A. Clark, "Holy Women, Holy Words: Early Christian Women, Social History, and the 'Linguistic Turn'," *JECS* 6 (1998): 424–6; ead., "The Lady Vanishes: Dilemmas of a Feminist Historian after the 'Linguistic Turn'," *ChH* 67 (1998), 25–30.

[32] Virginia Burrus, *"Begotten, Not Made": Conceiving Manhood in Late Antiquity* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000), 116–22; ead., "Is Macrina a Woman? Gregory of Nyssa's *Dialogue on the Soul and Resurrection*," in Graham Ward (ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 249–64.

Hart, Behr, and Williams—that Gregory deeply appreciates materiality, that he holds marriage in higher regard than virginity, that he regards human beings as closely akin to animals, and that he wants to integrate emotions such as grief in a proper understanding of the human person—are ultimately unsuccessful because they fail to recognize the anagogical bent of Nyssen's theology; Gregory, so I will argue in this book, wants to move from the material to the spiritual, from this-worldly, earthly existence to otherworldly, heavenly existence. Similarly, readings such as those of Clark and Burrus, which focus on female absence and/or on gender reversals, are unsuccessful because they force Gregory through a contemporary grid that does not do justice to the fourth-century social context of Gregory and Macrina. Nyssen is simply not interested in questions of immanent gender reversals. Instead, he views Macrina's transcending of gender as the result of her entry into a genderless angelic state. Again, it is the anagogical bent of his theology that contemporary scholarship fails to appreciate.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

In no way do I mean to deny the importance that embodiment plays in Nyssen's thought. Gregory is keenly interested in this theme. He is also aware that embodied existence implies being tethered to time and space, and he reflects deeply on the link between embodiment and what he calls the "extension" or "interval" (διάστημα) of created life, something we can measure in terms of time and space. Chapter 1 ("Measured Body") acknowledges the significance of this notion of "extension" in Gregory's theology—something first noted by Hans Urs von Balthasar and a common feature of Gregory scholarship since that time.[33] Gregory's emphasis on the diastemic, measurable character of created existence implies that God created the world distinct from himself. As a result, it is today a common scholarly assumption that for Nyssen "extension" (διάστημα) is *the* defining characteristic of all created life, as distinct from the adiastemic life of the creator. This would imply that according to Gregory angelic life, too, is diastemic and that the diastemic nature of human life continues in the eschaton. I challenge in particular the latter view. Nothing is more important for Gregory than for human beings to enter into the divine life. He maintains that although we can (and should) make use of diastemic existence in time and space, the purpose is precisely to overcome time and space. Thus, I will argue, for St. Gregory time and space (along with the διάστημα that they imply) do *not* characterize the final human destiny.

[33] Balthasar, *Presence and Thought*, 27–35.

To be sure, the common assumption that for Gregory διάστημα will continue in the hereafter is based on several correct insights: (1) Gregory, especially in debate with Eunomius, firmly and consistently upholds the creator–creature distinction as the most basic ontological distinction; and (2) Gregory believes that in the hereafter human progress in the infinite divine life will be continuous and will never be satiated; this dynamic view of progress in the eschaton would seem to imply the measurability of extension. I begin, therefore, by acknowledging the truth elements that this common reading of Gregory contains.[34] Nonetheless, I argue that Gregory does not view diastemic existence as uniformly positive. This is clear from the fact that he believes that neither human life before the Fall nor our post-resurrection existence is diastemic in character.

Nyssen's homilies on Ecclesiastes, *In Ecclesiasten homiliae*, make clear that there is a great deal of futility in our diastemic life under the sun. Although the διάστημα of measured bodies can potentially serve the journey of virtuous ascent, the often terrible conditions of embodied, temporal existence lead Gregory to encourage his hearers to undertake the anagogical (upward) journey away from the limits of this-worldly existence. That time (χρόνος)—characterized by extension and measurability—will not perdure in the hereafter becomes clear when in his Easter homily *De tridui spatio* Gregory explains that the newness of the resurrection of Christ implies the in-breaking of the eschaton in the world of time and thus a realignment of time. The eschatological "eighth day," Gregory makes clear in his sermon *In sextum Psalmum*, will mean the disappearance of time (χρόνος). With unmistakable lucidity, he insists here that it is only in this-worldly existence that we measure "the whole extension of time (χρόνου διάστημα) by the cycle of weeks," and he explains that this movement (κίνησις) will come to an end in the eschaton.[35] To be sure, Nyssen's explicit disavowal of διάστημα in the hereafter does not make him deny the resurrection of the body: the materiality of the body consists merely of intelligible properties, which can be reconfigured so as to suit the non-diastemic life of the resurrection. Still, our present, post-lapsarian bodies (the "tunics of hide") do need to get rid of their diastemic configuration to be able to enter the heavenly Paradise. Thus, the anagogical drive of Gregory's theology renders him impatient with the diastemic structures of time and space.

The negative conditions of diastemic life, as well as the inherently flawed nature of our embodied existence (between Fall and final resurrection), result in Gregory placing limits on his affirmations of the goodness of embodiment. His aim, in dealing with embodiment, is to overcome the diastemic limits that accompany it (in its current condition). The anagogical thrust of Nyssen's

[34] Especially (though not only) Nyssen's books *Contra Eunomium* are unambiguous about the fact that it is only the creature that is characterized by διάστημα.

[35] *Sext ps* 189.3–6 (Daley 213).

theology is directly linked to his impatience with diastemic limits and to his conviction that the body often trips us up. The remaining chapters all seek to demonstrate that St. Gregory's restrained attitude with regard to embodiment serves the purpose of anagogy. In Chapter 2, I focus on the "Textual Body" of Scripture as one instance of a measurable, diastemic body. The anagogical pursuit means not only that we ultimately leave behind the diastemic character of our fallen material and temporal condition, but it also means that we dare not linger with the fleshly and historical interpretation of Scripture. Gregory's allegorical reading of Abraham's journey in *Contra Eunomium* II makes clear that our diastemic limitations render it impossible for human discourse to grasp the adiastemic life of God. Thus, it is faith rather than "verbal description" or "ratiocination" that allows us to reach the goal of our anagogical pursuit. Abraham's journey from sensible knowledge via intellectual knowledge to faith finds its counterpart in the reader of Scripture, who is supposed to "turn" from the historical or surface meaning of the text to its spiritual level. Thus, exegetical ascent mirrors the soteriological ascent from this-worldly diastemic time and space into the heavenly Paradise of the "eighth day." St. Gregory's commentary on the inscriptions of the psalms, *In inscriptiones Psalmorum*, depicts this heavenly future both as the ultimate aim of the Psalter and as the purpose of human life; each section of the book of psalms represents a further stage in the ascent (*ἀνάβασις*) to eternal blessedness. What matters is not the historical reality behind the psalms. Instead, Gregory is interested in the spiritual aim (*σκοπός*) of the text, along with the virtue that allows one to obtain this end. For Gregory, the psalms, the human person, and the cosmos are one harmonious whole: they all serve the purpose of eternal blessedness in praise of God.

The need for anagogical transposition from the literal (or diastemic) to the spiritual (or adiastemic) comes to the fore particularly clearly in Nyssen's homilies on the Song of Songs, *In Canticum canticorum*. Gregory highlights the paradox of a biblical text "tinctured with passion" teaching us "impassibility."[36] Although the sensible body of the text is indispensable for Gregory, he does not want us to focus on the earthly, material bodies that the text portrays. The aim of the Song of Songs is that we undergo an anagogical "transposition" (*μετάστασις*). This transposition can be seen both in the exegetical move toward a spiritual reading and in the virtuous ascent away from bodily passions to a proper desire for God. The result is participation in the virtuous life of God. For Gregory, anagogical pursuit means that we leave behind the bodily text of Scripture in order to attain to a spiritual participation in divine goodness and beauty.

The next three chapters focus more particularly on the role that the physical, human body plays in Nyssen's theology. In Chapter 3 ("Gendered

[36] *Cant* 1.29.3–6.

Body"), I argue that Gregory depicts gender as something ultimately unstable. This instability, however, is not the result of a non-essentialist (postmodern) questioning of traditional heteronormative sexuality. Gender instability is for Gregory the result not of greater this-worldly sexual differentiation but of an anagogical, upward journey away from gender and sexuality altogether. Thus, *In Canticum canticorum* the believer replaces the temporary tunics of hide (which will not enter into the adiastemic paradisal future) with the holy garb of Christ. This "dress reversal" involves growth in virtue as we put on the virtues of Christ. Bodily "instability" thus stems from growth in virtue and from the recognition that our ultimate goal is a spiritual or angelic body. For Gregory, the bodily senses must be transposed into spiritual senses, as we ascend from sensible to spiritual realities.

Although it is true that in *De hominis opificio* Gregory depicts gendered existence as a pre-lapsarian reality (a gift from God resulting from his anticipation of the Fall), this acknowledgment by Gregory hardly constitutes a wholehearted affirmation of gender, marriage, and sexuality. Nyssen explains that embodiment and gender do not belong to the image of God, and if any procreation would have taken place in Paradise, it would have been an angelic, non-sexual kind of procreation. Marriage and sexuality, for Nyssen, are inevitably bound up with the passions, and as such they hinder our anagogical pursuit. I show that, although Gregory gets himself involved in some theological difficulties at this point—he has brutish, gendered bodies residing in a spiritual Paradise—the overall direction of his thought is clear: he regards gender as linked to sexuality and to the other passions, and as such it properly belongs to the problematic "tunics of skin" that the Fall introduced. Gender, then, is something to be overcome. In *Vita s. Macrinae*, Gregory depicts his sister, Macrina, as the virgin par excellence. On her deathbed, she no longer appears to Gregory as a woman. Instead, she has embarked on the angelic life, which for Gregory is a life modeled on Christ, in whom there is neither male nor female (Gal 3:28). For Gregory, then, the eschatological overcoming of gender is the result not of differentiation through greater gender fluidity but of the unity of male and female in an angelic, genderless eschaton.

I continue the discussion of sexuality in the first part of Chapter 4 ("Dead Body"), which deals in more detail with Gregory's understanding of virginity. I argue that one cannot interpret Gregory's encomium on virginity in *De virginitate* as an expression of irony. While it is true that Gregory acknowledges the goodness of the body and also of marriage, he nonetheless wants also his praise of virginity to be taken at face value. St. Gregory identifies virginity with God himself, which means that virginity is, ultimately, to be identified with incorruptibility, purity, and impassibility. Bodily virginity, then, which denies the passions, enables us to participate in divine incorruptibility. As such, bodily virginity is an answer to death and serves as a proleptic participation in the very life of God. While marriage leads to corruption and death, virginity yields hope and eternal life.

In the second part of this chapter on "Dead Body," I deal with the issue of death from another angle. I show specifically how St. Gregory deals with the emotion of grief in the face of bereavement. On Gregory's understanding, death marks the moment of ultimate progression in the anagogical progress. Thus, while Gregory deeply grieves the (anticipated) loss of Macrina, she herself—both in *Vita s. Macrinae* and in *De anima et resurrectione*—makes clear that grief is the result of an erroneous rational judgment, one that fails to take into account the hope of 1 Thessalonians 4:13 ("But we would not have you ignorant, brethren, concerning those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope"). Gregory's three funeral orations display the rhetorical skills of a remarkably pastoral theologian. He certainly appreciates the loss that his audience experiences. In fact, he actively encourages them to vent their grief rather than to suppress it. In no way, however, does Nyssen give a positive appraisal of the passion of "worldly grief." Instead, the approach of his funeral orations mirrors that of Macrina in her dealings with her younger brother's grief: recognizing its power, St. Gregory allows his congregation to give voice to their bereavement; it is only once the passions have been sufficiently spent that the mourners will be open to the rational judgment that is offered by the Christian hope of eternal life. For Gregory, then, a "dead body" does not have the final say: the person whose loss one mourns is moving on toward a state of eternal virginal purity, and it is by properly ridding themselves of the passion of grief that also those who are left behind and are mourning make progress in their anagogical journey into the impassible, virginal life of God.

The chapter entitled "Oppressed Body" (Chapter 5) shows that the otherworldly bent of Gregory's theology does not imply indifference with regard to questions of social justice. No other church father is as unequivocally and passionately opposed to slavery as Gregory. He bases his rejection of slavery particularly on two Christian beliefs: first, the doctrine of the image of God, which implies, for Gregory, a radical "sameness" and equality of human beings; and second, faith in the resurrection, since manumission is for Nyssen an anticipation of God's ultimate redemption on the last day. Gregory also has a number of strongly worded homilies dealing with poverty, leprosy, and usury, in which he draws attention to the kinship between his listeners and the homeless people who are often badly mistreated. For Nyssen, the body is never merely an object, and he is convinced that believers never have the right to mistreat others, particularly since the body—including the body of the leper—points to the image of God that it contains. Compassion and justice—with regard to basic health and economic well-being—are closely linked in Gregory's approach, and embodied concerns are always close at hand as he speaks up for the most vulnerable in society.

At the same time, Gregory's writings on slavery, homelessness, and leprosy reach beyond concern for bodily and material well-being. Also when it comes

to social justice concerns, Gregory refuses to make this-worldly ends ultimate. First, it is precisely the objectification of the body that he opposes in his rejection of slavery. It is because the bodies of the poor are like "coins" stamped with the image of the king that they are to be treated with respect. Second, by manumitting slaves and caring for the disadvantaged in society, the rich secure their own eternal future. When slave owners free their slaves, they reflect and participate in divine generosity, thereby progressing in their anagogical journey toward God. Since manumission involves the renunciation of the privileges of wealth, freeing slaves is part and parcel of the ascetic program that Gregory is intent on promoting. Similarly, care for the bodies of the lepers and the poor allows for a "reverse contagion": the beauty of the souls of lepers "infects" the souls of those who care for them. And since the poor are "doorkeepers of the kingdom," it is they who control access to the kingdom of God. Social justice thus benefits not just the poor but also the rich. Their renunciation of material well-being and their anagogical pursuit of eternal life in the kingdom of God are foundational reasons to invest heavily in matters of social justice. Gregory, then, regards care for oppressed bodies as integral to the anagogical pursuit of believers.

Chapter 6 ("Ecclesial Body") makes clear that the embodied sacraments, too, are both indispensable and penultimate at the same time, since they serve the anagogical purpose of salvation in Christ. Gregory's exposition on Psalms 22 (23) and 23 (24) in *In ascensionem Christi oratio* deals with the sacraments of initiation—Baptism, Chrismation, and Eucharist—that enable the new believer to ascend with Christ onto his royal mountain. The sacramental life of the church, on this understanding, is mystagogical in character; the sacraments constitute one's initial transposition into the ecclesial reality of the eschaton. St. Gregory's sermon on the Baptism of Christ, *In diem luminem*, indicates that Nyssen is deeply interested in the material particularity of the element of water in Baptism; the reason is that sacramental actions make for real changes. At the same time, Gregory makes clear that water does not work regeneration of its own accord and that Baptism is meaningless if it does not go accompanied by a life of virtue. In connection with the Eucharist, too, Gregory acknowledges both its indispensability and its penultimate character. On the one hand, Gregory indicates in his *Oratio catechetica magna* that it is through the "transforming" of bread and wine that God changes us. On the other hand, the purpose of this transformation is anagogical: our divinizing transposition into the life of God.

St. Gregory's teaching on the church as body of Christ further illustrates the anagogical thrust of his ecclesiology. In *Tunc et ipse* Gregory discusses what St. Paul means when he writes in 1 Corinthians 15:28 that Christ himself will be "subjected" to God. Nyssen understands this as shorthand for the subjection of all believers in Christ: since the believers' body is that of Christ himself, St. Paul can refer to the subjection of the believers as the subjection of

Christ. And since, on Gregory's understanding, this subjection of the believers implies their salvation, he highlights the aim of the (universal) salvation of believers as the body of Christ. We find a similar close identification between Christ and the church in Nyssen's sermons on the Song of Songs. St. Gregory sees the Song's erotic descriptions both of the bride and of the Groom as depictions of the church. Christ and his church are so closely linked, according to Gregory, that when the Song portrays the Groom's (Christ's) virtues as desirable, we actually are to interpret them as virtues of the believers. Thus, desire for the beauty of the bride's virtues is identical to the anagogical desire to share in the infinite life of God himself. In short, the very concrete, material descriptions of the body parts of bride and Groom serve to lead the reader away from bodily concerns to matters of spiritual or divine significance. Gregory's ecclesiology serves the anagogical aim of stirring up desire for the never-ending journey into the life of God.

The final chapter ("Virtuous Body") ties together the various strands of each of the preceding chapters by making clear that the anagogical transposition enabled through the various forms of embodiment discussed in this book entails, for Gregory, growth in virtue. Put differently, embodiment serves anagogical transposition, while this anagogical transposition, in turn, means growth in virtue. Furthermore, since Gregory identifies virtue with Christ and with God, we may also say that for Gregory embodiment serves the purpose of participation in the life of God. By looking at the virtuous life as participation in Christ, Gregory largely avoids moralism. Virtue is never something we attain on our own, as autonomous human beings. Instead, Gregory is convinced that divine grace always precedes human willing and invariably accompanies human action. Both *De professsione Christiana* and *De perfectione* provide virtue with a thoroughly Christological grounding, which avoids moralism. While imitation of Christ is crucially important for Gregory, he regards this imitation not as an extrinsic modeling, but as participation in the divine virtues of Christ. *De vita Moysis* looks to Moses as an example of someone who lived the perfect life. Moses' "upward calling" is, for Gregory, the calling to a never-ending progress (*ἐπέκτασις*) in the life of God, which is a participation in the adiastemic, immeasurable life of divine virtue, depicted by Gregory as our indwelling of the heavenly tabernacle, Christ himself. To grow in virtue, therefore, means to rely increasingly on Christ. The aim of this life is that we leave behind the diastemic realities of this-worldly existence in order to participate in the luminous darkness of paradisal reality. Nyssen's call for the virtuous life of perfection is, therefore, at the same time a call for anagogical participation in the paradisal reality of the divine life. Gregory, while he is convinced of the significance and even the indispensability of embodied existence, aims ultimately at transposition into the paradoxical reality that lies beyond human discourse and beyond the diastemic realities of the bounded existence of time and space.