

13 Gregory of Nyssa: Life of Moses

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13.1 Introduction to Gregory of Nyssa and 'Life of Moses'

13.1.1 Who was Gregory of Nyssa

Gregory (ca 331-395) was the younger brother of Basil the Great, so he was raised in the same wealthy and pious *milieu* in Pontus as Basil. With Basil and their friend Gregory of Nazianzen, Gregory of Nyssa studied in Caesarea, Constantinople and Athens. Initially Gregory pursued a career as an orator in Caesarea. He was completely won over by the revival of Greek and pagan thinking that was at its height under Emperor Julian the Apostate

13.1.2 Gregory of Nyssa as bishop (371-395)

In 371-2, Basil, metropolitan of Caesarea, appointed Gregory to be the bishop of Nyssa. That city was 60 km west of Caesarea. Basil hoped that his brother would play a major role in sorting out the problems in the province. Basil had become the metropolitan of Caesarea in 370; his major fight was related to the efforts of Emperor Valens to stamp out the Nicean faith in favor of Arianism. Gregory, was not a strong administrator and Basil was disappointed.

In 375, Gregory was deposed as a bishop and replaced by an Arian anti-bishop. When Valens died (378) Gregory could return to his post in Nyssa. Shortly thereafter, Basil also died. It seems that Gregory then felt responsible to be the heir to the theological, monastic and ecclesiastical dreams of his brother. From this time on, Gregory's energy seemed limitless.

Gregory was present at the Council of Constantinople of 381. He was such a solid orthodox bishop, that Emperor Theodosius made communion with him (and with bishop Helladios of Caesarea and Otreios of Melitene in Armenia) the litmus test for any bishop in Pontus and Cappadocia.

13.1.3 Gregory versus Eunomius and Apollinaris

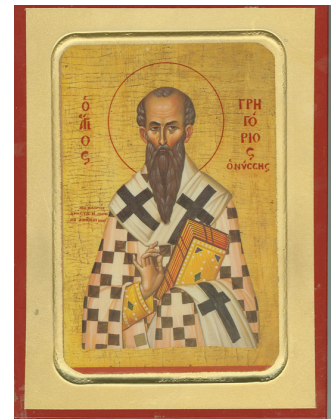
Gregory theologically fought both Arianism (Eunomius) and the opposite movement, that accorded Jesus no human soul (Apollinarius)

Eunomius

Eunomius (died 393), one of the leaders of the extreme Arians, was born in Cappadocia early in the 4th century. He studied theology at Alexandria and was appointed bishop of Cyzicus (Anatolia) in 360, but he was soon deposed. The Eunomian school taught that between the Creator and creation there could be no essential, but only a moral, resemblance. "As the Unbegotten, God is an absolutely simple being; an act of generation would involve a contradiction of His essence by introducing duality into the Godhead." Eunomius altered the baptismal formula; instead of baptizing in the name of the Trinity, he baptized in the name of the Creator and into the death of Christ. This was regarded by the orthodox as so serious that Eunomians on returning to the church were rebaptized, though Arians were not. The Eunomian heresy was condemned by the Council of Constantinople in 381.

Apollinaris

Apollinaris (died 390) was a bishop of Laodicea in Syria. As a noted opponent of Arianism, Apollinaris' eagerness to emphasize the deity of Jesus and the unity of his person led him so far as to deny the existence of a rational human soul in Christ's human nature, this being replaced in him by the logos, so that his body was a glorified and spiritualized form of humanity. It was alleged that the system of Apollinaris was really Docetism, that if the Godhood without constraint swayed the manhood there was no possibility of real humanity in Jesus. This idea was condemned by the Council of Constantinople.



13.1.4 Gregory of Nyssa's theology about God

Gregory was the most profound Greek theologian. His major accomplishment was the contextualization of Christian theology in the culture of the best of Greek thinking.

Gregory developed the theology of the Trinity into what the Eastern Church continued to teach. Following Basil's lead, Gregory argues that the three Persons of the Trinity can be understood along the model of three members of a single class: thus, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three in the same way that Peter, Paul, and Timothy are three men. So why do we not say there are three Gods? Gregory answers that, normally, we can distinguish between different members of the same class by the fact that they have different shapes, sizes, and colors. Even if they are identical, they still occupy different points in space. But none of this is true of incorporeal beings like God. Even lesser spiritual beings can still be distinguished by their varying degrees of goodness, but this does not apply to God either. In fact, the only way to tell the three Persons apart is by their mutual relations — thus, the only difference between the Father and the Son is that the former is the Father of the latter, and the latter is the Son of the former. As Gregory puts it, it is impossible to think of one member of the Trinity without thinking of the others too: they are like a chain of three links, pulling each other along.

Gregory is the first Christian theologian to argue for the infinity of God. Origen of Alexandria, a major influence on Gregory, had explicitly argued that God is limited, since to be limited is to be clearly defined and knowable. Gregory, however, argues that if God is limited he must be limited by something greater than himself. As there is nothing greater than God, He is therefore without boundaries, and thus infinite. The idea had already been developed by Neoplatonic philosophers, especially Plotinus. But he is the first Christian to defend it.

13.1.5 Gregory of Nyssa's and knowing God

Gregory argues that since God is infinite he cannot be comprehended. Origen had spoken of the spiritual journey as a progression of increasing illumination, as the mystic studies Scripture and comes to learn more about God. Gregory taught on the other hand that God was knowable in his manifestations but that ultimately one must transcend gnosis, since knowledge is based on reflection. Gnosis is limited and can become a barrier between man and God. If one wishes to commune with God one must enter into the Divine filial relation with God the Father through Jesus Christ, one in *ousia* with the Father which results in pure faith without any preconceived notions of God. Once one reaches this point one can commune with God just as Moses did in Nyssa's mystical classic, *The Life of Moses*.

Gregory speaks of three stages of spiritual growth: initial darkness of ignorance, then spiritual illumination, and finally a darkness of the mind in contemplation of the God who in being or essence (*ousia*) cannot be comprehended. Like earlier authors, including Philo, he uses the story of Moses as an allegory for the spiritual life. Moses first meets God in the burning bush, a theophany of light and illumination, but then he meets him again in the cloud, where he realizes that God cannot be seen by the eyes. Ascending Mount Sinai, he finally comes to the "divine darkness", and realizes that God cannot be known by the mind either.

It is only through not-knowing and not-seeing that God can, paradoxically, be known and seen, knowledge that can only be gained through an "ascending life of holiness". This notion would be extremely influential in both Western and Eastern spirituality. Thus he is a major figure in the history of theology and spirituality.

13.1.5 Epektasis (constant progress)

Related to this is Gregory's idea of epektasis or constant progress. Platonic metaphysics teaches that stability is perfection and change is evil. In contrast, Gregory described the ideal of human perfection as constant progress in virtue and godliness. In his theology, God himself has always been perfect and has never changed, and never will. Humanity fell from grace in the Garden of Eden, but rather than return to an unchanging state, humanity's goal is to become more and more perfect, more like God, even though humanity will never understand, much less attain, God's transcendence. This idea has had a profound influence on the Eastern Orthodox teaching regarding theosis or "divinization".

13.2 The Life of Moses

13.2.1 introduction

- > **Read together** Book 1 #2-11 (from Arabic book, translation by Magdi Fahim)
- > **Discuss together** how does St Gregory describe 'The Perfect Christian Life'
- > **Discuss together** how does he describe God?

13.2.2 Stage One: The Burning Bush

- > **Read together** Book 1 #20 and note the focus on knowing God through the senses.
- > **Read individually** Book 2 # 19-26
- > **Discuss together** what we must learn about God from the Burning bush.
- > **Discuss together** which person in the Trinity get the attention here. Why is that so?

13.2.3 Stage Two: Moses on the Mountain

- > **Read individually** Book 1 #42-43, 46-47
- > **Note** that Gregory introduces the concept that deeper knowledge of God is linked to a virtuous life and that it goes beyond the senses into the realm of the mind – even beyond the mind. 'He should believe that the Divine exists, and he should not examine it with respect to... [its] mode of being... since it is unattainable.' So, neither the senses nor the mind make us comprehend the divine nature.
- > **Read together** Book 2 #154-161
- > **Discuss together** how we can know God. Not by the senses, not by the mind, but by contemplation in a state of purity.
- > **Read in groups** Book 2 #163-165
- > **Discuss in groups** how we can know God according to Gregory of Nyssa.

13.2.4 Stage Three: Moses in the Rock

- > **Read individually** Book 2 #219-227 and note how Gregory shows how this 'back of God' must not be taken literally.

Gregory then shows how Moses was always desirous for knowing God more. He desired to know God in his true Being.

- > **Read together** Book 2 #230-231, 235 and 239
- > **Discuss** how the lack of satisfaction in knowing the Being of God proves true knowledge of the Being of God
- > **Read together** Book 2 #248-255 and
- > **Discuss together** where we find the deep knowledge of God.