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The Role of Grace in Spiritual Progress According to Gregory of Nyssa in the *Life of Moses*

Introduction

Gregory of Nyssa's work, the *Life of Moses*, examines the story of Moses, the man of God, and his leading of the Israelites out of the bondage of slavery in Egypt. It was likely written in the early 390s¹ with the purpose of providing spiritual instruction to a monk named Caesarius,² who had written Gregory asking for advice in living “the perfect life.”³ Gregory wants to help Caesarius by making use of Scripture, and the examples of goodness given in the stories it contains, in order to provide a “beacon light” that would guide them in their spiritual journey.⁴ The *Life of Moses* is divided into four sections: (1) the Preface, which is a letter of introduction; (2) the History (*historia*), which summarizes the Biblical text; (3) the Contemplation (*theoria*), which gives the spiritual meaning of the text; and (4) the Conclusion.⁵

The “perfect life” that Gregory describes has two aspects: the work of grace that God does in the Christian, and the response of the Christian to that work of grace. The grace of God calls us to this “perfect life,” and God's grace provides what we need to answer that call. In this paper, I will look at Gregory's conception of the work of grace in the *Life of Moses*. The first part

1. Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses* (Toronto: Paulist Press, 1978), Intro., p. 1

2. Ibid., Intro., p. 2-3

3. Ibid., I, 2, p. 29

4. Ibid., I, 11-13, pp. 31-32

5. Ibid., I, Intro., p. 3

of this paper will first examine Gregory's text, calling attention to references to the work of God in the life of the Christian. The second part will synthesize these texts to come up with a picture of God's work of grace in the spiritual journey.

Analysis of the Text

In Book I, the History section, Gregory starts with the very beginning of Moses' life, where we see the grace of God at work. Although he was born into a hostile environment, to an enslaved people under a tyrant who ordered the destruction of all male offspring, Moses was blessed with an "outward grace" of beautiful appearance, which anticipated the role he would play as an adult, and caused his parents to save him from destruction.⁶ This outward grace of Moses also caught the attention of the king's daughter who adopted him as her son, thus obtaining not only salvation from destruction, but also the finest of Egyptian education for him.⁷

In Book II, the Contemplation, Gregory signifies the birth of Moses as the beginning of the virtuous life.⁸ If we apply this interpretation to the beauty of the child Moses indicated in the history, we see that the grace of God causes the life of virtue to appear beautiful. That is, our eyes are opened by grace to the beauty of the virtuous life. When we see that beauty, we are inspired to protect and nourish this virtuous life, just as the midwives and the parents of Moses chose to protect him.⁹ In this grace, there is first a work of God, making the virtuous life attractive, and then the response of choosing to nurture and protect that life.

After Moses reached adulthood, left Egypt, and spent some time in the wilderness tending sheep, the grace of a theophany was given to him, which was both visual and auditory.¹⁰

6. *Ibid.*, I, 16, p. 33.

7. *Ibid.*, I, 17-18, p. 33-34.

8. *Ibid.*, II, 5, p. 56.

9. *Ibid.*, II, 6, p. 56.

10. *Ibid.*, I, 20, p. 34-35.

Through this grace, Moses received a calling and the strength to carry out that calling, including specific directions and the ability to perform signs.¹¹ In the contemplation, Gregory interprets this theophany as the light of truth, which is the presence of God himself.¹² Moses was able to perceive God because of his quiet life, not entangled with worldly concerns, shepherding his soul under the guidance of reason.¹³ In this example of grace, we see the interplay of the preparation in the wilderness with the gift given by God in the burning bush.

The next thing that God provides for Moses was the companionship of his brother Aaron.¹⁴ Gregory's spiritual interpretation of the role of Aaron in the spiritual life is that of a good angel that God provides to help us and lead us to virtue, combating the demon that God allows to tempt one towards evil. If one withdraws from the seductions of the demon and turns to the good angel, "images and impressions of virtue, as it is shown to him by God, are imprinted on the purity of his soul."¹⁵ God's grace provides the angel, but we must choose to listen to him.

At this point, the combination of God's grace and Moses' cooperation has prepared him to confront Pharaoh with the message of God, accompanied by the signs God gave him. When Moses performed the "divine signs" before Pharaoh, Gregory contrasts them with the sorcery of the Egyptian magicians. When the serpent from the staff of Moses ate the snakes from the rods of the sorcerers, it was because those snakes "had no means of defense nor any power of life," implying that there was the power of life in the signs given by God to Moses.¹⁶ The grace given in the sign was not merely a spectacular illusion like the Egyptians performed, but it had power within it. Gregory's spiritual interpretation of the rod is that it is the power of virtue that

11. *Ibid.*, I, 21, p. 35; II, 36, p. 62.

12. *Ibid.*, II, 19, p. 59.

13. *Ibid.*, II, 18, p. 59.

14. *Ibid.*, I, 22, p. 35.

15. *Ibid.*, II, 45-47, pp. 64-65.

16. *Ibid.*, I, 24, p. 36.

overcomes the trickery of the devil. The virtuous life is a grace from God, imbued with the power of his life that strengthens the disciple so that he is able to overcome the deception of the devil, in the same way as Moses' snake devoured the snakes of the magicians.¹⁷

When the Hebrews were cornered by the Egyptian army at the Red Sea, the people were afraid, seeing no way of escape, but Moses turned to God, hoping in divine help. He was heard by God because he spoke from his heart through “meditation sent up from a pure conscience.”¹⁸ Moses received “counsel from above” as to how to save the people,¹⁹ and “by divine power” they were led by a cloud.²⁰ The leading of the cloud is interpreted as “the grace of the Holy Spirit, who guides toward the Good those who are worthy.”²¹ In obedience to the command of God, Moses struck the sea with his rod, causing it to be parted so that the Hebrews could cross.²² The crossing of the Red Sea resulted in life for the Hebrews, who would have otherwise been destroyed by the Egyptians, but the water brings death to the Egyptians. In a way, the water cleanses the Hebrews from the Egyptian presence.²³ In the episode at the Red Sea, the grace of God provided guidance, deliverance, cleansing, and the destruction of enemies because Moses called to God from a pure heart of faith, and was obedient to the instruction he received.

After the Hebrews had been in the desert a while, they ran out of water. When they did find water at Marah, they were disappointed to find that it was bitter and undrinkable. Gregory interprets Marah as the life removed from worldly pleasures.²⁴ By following “the counsel of God”, Moses found a piece of wood and threw it into the water, which made the water sweet.²⁵

17. *Ibid.*, II, 64, p. 68.

18. *Ibid.*, II, 118, p. 82.

19. *Ibid.*, I, 29, p. 38.

20. *Ibid.*, I, 30, p. 38.

21. *Ibid.*, II, 121, p.82.

22. *Ibid.*, I, 31, p. 38.

23. *Ibid.*, II, 124-125, pp. 83-84.

24. *Ibid.*, II, 153, p. 92.

25. *Ibid.*, I, 33, p. 39.

Gregory interprets this wood as the wood of the cross of Christ, upon which our Lord brought about the promise of the resurrection, which is a sweetness to those who place their hope in it.²⁶ The promise of God for the resurrection, made possible by the work of Christ, provides the ultimate hope that can make the sacrifices of discipleship sweet.

For Gregory, the story of Moses moves to a new level in his encounter with God at Mt. Sinai. The journey thus far is all preparation for the “contemplation of the transcendent nature.”²⁷ The Hebrews were led to Sinai by the cloud, fed with manna, and drank water from the rock. The cloud provided protection from the heat of the day and the darkness of night.²⁸ Grace has led them to this place, and has provided for their needs. Now God is calling the people to something deeper, and such depth requires purity. The cleansing rituals the Hebrews underwent signify the internal and external purity required for someone who “would approach the contemplation of Being.”²⁹ God leads us and provides the way to contemplation, but we have the responsibility to keep ourselves pure.

The mountain was enveloped in a fiery cloud from which came the blaring sound of a trumpet, which was an articulation of the law of God by divine power.³⁰ However, this manifestation of God was too much for the people so they asked Moses to mediate the law to them. The spiritual interpretation of entering the cloud is the contemplation of the divine mysteries. Not all are able to approach these depths, so God calls apostles and prophets, giving them gifts to draw near to him so that they can teach and minister to the others.³¹

26. *Ibid.*, II, 132, p. 86.

27. *Ibid.*, II, 153, p. 92.

28. *Ibid.*, I, 41, p. 41.

29. *Ibid.*, II, 154, p. 92.

30. *Ibid.*, I, 43-44, p. 42.

31. *Ibid.*, II, 160, p. 94.

Therefore, Moses climbed the mountain alone, and entered the darkness of the cloud. Gregory explains why at this point, God was manifest in darkness as opposed to his first appearance as light in the burning bush. In the early stages of spiritual growth, there is an awareness of divine attributes through creation.³² This revelation of God is like a light to the disciple, revealing truth where before there was only the darkness of that which is contrary to God.³³ As he is motivated by love to seek God beyond the visible world, and keeps penetrating deeper, the disciple sees that God is invisible and incomprehensible, and this incomprehensibility is signified by darkness.³⁴ Moses cannot see God in the darkness, having gone beyond all that is visible, but he believes that God is in the cloud. He is climbing the mountain and entering the darkness in order to provide mediation for the people, but he is also drawn by God's grace into a deeper relationship with him.³⁵

Similar to the cloud is Gregory's description of the Holy of Holies in the tabernacle. It is inaccessible and incomprehensible to the multitude, and signifies those divine realities that are beyond our comprehension and "should not be meddled with." One should rather believe in the existence of these realities, but realize they remain a mystery.³⁶

Although we see the presence of God's grace in the life of Moses, this is contrasted by the experience of the Israelites who were disobedient. On encountering the people worshipping the golden calf, Moses broke the tablets so that they would be punished by "having no share in the God-given grace" of the law.³⁷ When the people rebelled after the spies returned from the promised land, Gregory says that those who did not trust in "divine help" should not enter the

32. Verna Harrison, *Grace and Human Freedom According to St. Gregory of Nyssa* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 1992), 85.

33. *Life of Moses*, II, 162, p. 95.

34. *Ibid.*, II, 163, p. 95.

35. *Ibid.*, I, 45-46, p. 43.

36. *Ibid.*, II, 188, pp. 102-103.

37. *Ibid.*, I, 59, p. 46.

land.³⁸ Gregory says that as they crossed the desert, the water failed them because they forgot the “divine power” that had previously cared for them.³⁹ So the Israelites' lack of trust, which led to grumbling and disobedience, resulted in a loss of the benefits of God's grace, and in punishment.⁴⁰ Even so, God continued to provide healing⁴¹ and second chances.⁴² Even the punishment that God inflicts is “administered through love for mankind” for their correction.⁴³

After confronting the people's rebellion with the golden calf, Moses returns to the presence of God on the mountain to intercede on their behalf. When God grants his request, Moses is emboldened to make a greater request, that God would show Moses his glory.⁴⁴ Although he had already spoken to God face to face,⁴⁵ He desired more. Gregory explains that the soul naturally moves upwards, once it has been released from attachment to worldly things,⁴⁶ and always strains towards heavenly things.⁴⁷ Such exertion of the soul directed towards virtue actually increases the the soul's capacity to grow in virtue. The more the soul advances, the greater desire it has for God.⁴⁸ Therefore, Moses, after all he has been through, now has a greater desire for God than ever. He does not want a mere appearance of God made appropriate to man's limited perception, but Moses wants to behold God's true being.⁴⁹

God's response to Moses' request is that he cannot see God's face, “for man cannot see me and live.”⁵⁰ Gregory explains that this does not mean that the sight of God causes death, but that

38. *Ibid.*, I, 65, p. 48.

39. *Ibid.*, I, 66, p. 48.

40. *Ibid.*, I, 67, 69, pp. 48-49.

41. *Ibid.*, I, 68, pp. 48-49.

42. *Ibid.*, I, 60, p. 47.

43. *Ibid.*, II, 206, p. 108.

44. Exodus 33:18.

45. *Life of Moses*, II, 219, p. 111.

46. *Ibid.*, II, 224, p. 113.

47. *Ibid.*, II, 225, p. 113.

48. *Ibid.*, II, 226, p. 113.

49. *Ibid.*, II, 230, p. 114.

50. *Ibid.*, II, 233, p. 115.

God is not something that can be known, and those who think they can see God do not have life.⁵¹ The divine being is without bounds and cannot be enclosed by any thing, including the comprehension of any created mind. Therefore, the desire to know God is never fulfilled, but constantly expands as it receives more and more of God.⁵² Moses is to stand still on the rock, which Gregory interprets as immovably remaining in the Good.⁵³ By remaining on the firm grounding of the rock, which is Christ, he progresses in the course of virtue.⁵⁴ Not only does he find solid footing on the rock, but shelter in the hole in the rock.⁵⁵ Once he has this solid foundation and shelter in the rock, and is shadowed by the hand of God, he will hear the call of God, and will see his back, which means that he will follow God.⁵⁶ The way to behold God is to follow him wherever he might lead. God passes Moses by to signify that he is guiding him, “for someone who does not know the way cannot complete his journey safely in any other way than by following behind his guide... He who follows will not turn aside from the right way if he always keeps the back of his leader in view.”⁵⁷ The follower must not face the guide, for then he is in the opposite direction, which is another reason why God's face cannot be seen.⁵⁸

Synthesis

God has a plan for Moses, which begins in his infancy and childhood with his salvation and preparation, even before he is aware of his calling. God works in each of our lives by his grace to bring us to a point where we can hear and respond to his call. It is God who takes the initiative in Moses' life, and so he does for all of us. In looking at the relationship between God's

51. *Ibid.*, II, 234, p. 115.

52. *Ibid.*, II, 238, p. 116.

53. *Ibid.*, II, 243, p. 117.

54. *Ibid.*, II, 244, p. 117-118.

55. *Ibid.*, II, 245, p. 118.

56. *Ibid.*, II, 249, p. 118-119.

57. *Ibid.*, II, 252, p. 119.

58. *Ibid.*, II, 253, p. 120.

grace and human freedom, the question of who is responsible for a person's virtuous activity is raised. Is it God, or is it the person? While some see a conflict here, this was not so with the Greek fathers, who “regarded grace and human freedom as cooperating harmoniously with each other.”⁵⁹ We see this also in the *Life of Moses*, where the interplay between God's work of grace in the human life, and the response of the person to grace is like a dance. Both are necessary, and they work together seamlessly, each responding to the movement of the other. Repeatedly we see a gift of God's grace providing the enabling for the disciple to respond to God's call in obedience. Such obedience prepares the way for the disciple to receive additional grace, which again makes preparation for a greater response from the disciple.

Grace instructs the disciple, and provides for his needs. It destroys his enemies and provides healing and restoration when the disciple falls. Grace provides the ability more and more to perceive reality from God's perspective. In turn, the disciple is called to respond in faith. He must believe God and respond in obedience, even when the call of God does not make sense in earthly terms. He must break his attachment to worldly things which are contrary to God, and instead pursue virtue. Indeed, the life of discipleship is usually called “the virtuous life” by Gregory. However, this life of grace is more than an exchange of actions; the disciple, in choosing to move towards God participates in divine goodness.⁶⁰ Participation implies an uninterrupted growth in the goodness of God. It is a sharing in the divine perfections that have no limit.⁶¹

This limitless potential for participation in divine goodness is related to Gregory's idea of eternal progress, and the finding of God in darkness. The darkness is understood by Gregory in a

59. Harrison, 3.

60. Ibid., 30.

61. Matthew Sillers, “The Theology of Grace in Gregory of Nyssa's *Oratio Catechetica*.” (M.A. thesis, University of Dallas, 1996), 52.

mystical sense, expressing the fact that “the divine essence remains inaccessible even to the mind that has been enlightened by grace.”⁶² Andrew Louth says that the source of this idea is the doctrine of creation out of nothing (*ex nihilo*). God alone is the uncreated. Everything else that exists is a product of his creative act. Therefore, there is an unbridgeable gulf between the uncreated and the created such that “God is totally unknowable to the soul.” It is only by the Incarnation that God reveals himself and his love such that we can know him at all. Indeed, as we shall see, we can know him through love in a way that surpasses knowledge.⁶³

This inability to know God in our minds means that when we approach God's essence, we are engulfed in darkness. But the one who seeks God in love is not held back by the darkness because his love drives him forward. Indeed, by experiencing the darkness, the soul gains an awareness of the transcendence of the divine nature. “Thus the soul finds itself as it were elevated above all created things and at the same time lost in an infinite darkness wherein it loses its contact with things, though it is aware of God despite the total incapacity of its knowledge.”⁶⁴

This experience of God beyond knowledge actually increases the soul's capacity for knowledge of God. This increased capacity allows the soul to be filled with a greater measure of the light of God. The result of this greater participation in God's light is that the soul has a greater love for God. This love impels the soul to move beyond the limits of its knowledge, into the darkness again.⁶⁵ This cycle can repeat indefinitely because God is infinite, and the soul will never reach a limit of perfection. Also, the soul is never satiated.⁶⁶ Each time it is filled with spiritual nourishment, its capacity is increased. All of what the soul receives from God can be

62. Jean Daniélou, *From Glory to Glory: Texts from Gregory of Nyssa's Mystical Writings* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1979), 27.

63. Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 81.

64. Daniélou, 30.

65. Harrison, 86.

66. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Presence and Thought: An Essay on the Religious Philosophy of Gregory of Nyssa* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 44.

assimilated, and nothing is lost, so that the soul can grow in grace perpetually; “always filled to capacity, it can always receive more.”⁶⁷ Gregory's doctrine of Christian perfection is that it is perpetual progress. Implied in this doctrine is “a positive idea of the process of change”, which is in stark contrast with the Platonism of Origen, which considers change as imperfection. But to Gregory, change is “essential to man's nature; it is that which distinguishes him from God.”⁶⁸

Thus, the picture that Gregory gives us of grace is that it leads the soul in an eternal dance of ever increasing love. There is a constant interplay between God's work of grace, and our response to him in a process where we continue to grow in grace, knowledge, and love without limit. Not only does this process go on in this present life, but it is the way that we will live in eternity.

67. Daniélou, 63.

68. *Ibid.*, 47.

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