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Slavery as Foil:

Gregory of Nyssa's In Ecclesiasten Homiliae IV

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ABSTRACT: Gregory of Nyssa's *In Ecclesiasten homiliae IV* has been read by many as a polemic statement against the institution of slavery. However, few scholars have explored the reasons Gregory authored these lines in the historical and intellectual context of the fourth century, in which the prevailing sentiment, both inside and outside of the church, was overwhelmingly accepting of slavery. Beginning with the question "Why did he say this?" this paper proceeds with close analysis of the sermon, demonstrating Homily 4 to be a theological assertion rather than abolitionist diatribe. That is, to appreciate the full rhetorical weight of Gregory's argument against slavery, it is essential to recognize that Gregory is utilizing the concept of enslavement as a foil to explicate his views on God's authority, the sin of pride, and the *imago Dei*.

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Many bombastic assertions have been made about Gregory of Nyssa's (CE 335 – 395) three paragraphs in *In Ecclesiasten homiliae IV* which appear to denounce, in no uncertain terms, the institution of slavery. To cite but two examples, John Francis Maxwell calls this passage "the first truly 'anti-slavery' text of the patristic age."¹ In the same vein, Jennifer Glancy credits

¹ John Francis Maxwell, *Slavery and the Catholic Church: The History of Catholic Teaching Concerning the Moral Legitimacy of the Institution of Slavery* (Chichester: Barry Rose Publishers, 1975), 32.

Nyssen with “the most scathing critique of slaveholding in all of antiquity.”² However, while many have commented on this passage, few have asked why Gregory made these bold statements. In the literature on this topic, two diametrically-opposed camps have developed. On the one hand are those scholars who take the literal approach, believing that Gregory simply said these lines because he was devoutly opposed to the institution of slavery. The foremost scholar of this approach is certainly Illaria Ramelli, whose recent work has presupposed that the Nyssen intended his audience to view the sermon as abolitionist in nature.³ This perspective, however, is somewhat difficult to maintain in light of a close reading of the text, as Gregory does not call for an abolition to slavery in Homily 4, nor does he decisively order his audience to immediately manumit their slaves.

On the other side of the controversy are commentators who take these lines to be a farce, and find Gregory to be, at best, utilizing a rhetorical tool, or, at worst, a slave-owning hypocrite. The foremost representative of this opinion is Susanna Elm, and her *‘Virgins of God’: The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* is often quoted as having authoritatively demonstrated that Nyssen owned slaves himself and was therefore less than forthright in his condemnation of slavery.⁴ Nevertheless, despite being a historically astute opinion, commentators

² Jennifer A. Glancy, *Slavery as Moral Problem: In the Early Church and Today* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 78.

³ Illaria Ramelli, *Social Justice and the Legitimacy of Slavery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). See also “Gregory of Nyssa’s Position in Late Antique Debates on Slavery and Poverty, and the Role of Asceticism,” *Journal of Late Antiquity* 5, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 87-118.

⁴ Susanna Elm, *‘Virgins of God’: The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 103 n87. This essay will avoid digression into the topic of whether or not the Nyssen owned slaves himself. While this seems an important point in the debate on why Gregory made the statements contained in Homily 4, there are at least two valid reasons for sidestepping this issue: First, as Ramón Teja, Hans Boersma, and Illaria Ramelli have all stated, there is currently not enough evidence to make any sound pronouncement on this issue (see Ramón Teja, “San Basilio y la Esclavitud,” in *Basil of Caesarea: Christian, Humanist, Ascetic*, ed. Paul Jonathan Fedwick (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1981), 397; Hans Boersma, “This is the Day which the Lord has made: Scripture, Manumission, and the Future in Saint Gregory of Nyssa,” *Modern Theology* 28, no. 4 (October 2012): 659-60; and Illaria Ramelli, *Social Justice and the Legitimacy of Slavery*, 192). Any opinion on the matter will thus be speculative. Second, and perhaps more importantly, a great deal of psychological research has established the possibility of cognitive dissonance, making the question of whether or not Gregory himself owned slaves have less bearing on the question of why he preached Homily 4. Just as many smokers believe that smoking is an unhealthy activity, yet continue to smoke, so the ownership of slaves many not have had such a dominating influence on his thought-patterns regarding of the evils of slavery.

who take this position lack a lucid explanation for why Gregory uttered these words. Furthermore, in the wake of criticizing the text, these commentators often fail to place the content of these lines within the broader context of Gregory's theological system.

This article will take seriously Gregory's thesis that the act of owning a human being transgresses God's authority while attempting to answer the question of *why* he authored this opinion. It will demonstrate that Nyssen is using the institution of slavery as a foil to elucidate his position on human nature in relation to the Divine. As a preliminary to this argument, an examination of the text, audience, and historical milieu of the homily will be conducted in an attempt to mine these fields for clues as to why Gregory made these statements. Then, a careful reading of Homily 4 will reveal how Gregory utilizes the concept of slavery to bring into sharp relief the dissimilarities between the institution of slavery and his views on theological anthropology. In doing so, three themes will prevail: First, the transcendence and authority of God over the created world: Gregory's argument is thoroughly theocentric. Second, the foolishness of pride by which one human claims ownership over another human. Finally, the extent of human authority and the *imago Dei* in which all humans are created.

Text, Audience, and Historical Background

Text

The manuscript tradition for Homily 4 on Ecclesiastes has been well-established by Paulus Alexander in W. Jaeger's (general editor) authoritative *Gregorii Nysseni Opera*, volume V.⁵ However, while the manuscript tradition for this sermon is quite good,⁶ no information remains as to how the text was originally produced. If Richard Norris's observations regarding Gregory's prefatory letter to *In Canticum canticorum*, preached about 15 years earlier, have any bearing on the compilation of *In*

⁵ Stuart George Hall, "Introduction: Adjustments to the Text of Gregory," in *Gregory of Nyssa Homilies on Ecclesiastes: An English Version with Supporting Studies*, ed. Stuart George Hall (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1993), 1.

⁶ Paulus Alexander, "Praefatio," in *Gregorii Nysseni Opera* vol. V, *In Inscriptiones Psalmorum, In Sextum Psalmum, In Ecclesiasten Homiliae* (GNO), ed. Wernerus Jaeger (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1962), 197-275. See also Hall, "Introduction," 1.

Ecclesiasten homiliae, then it is likely that the sermon was originally delivered either extemporaneously or from shorthand notes. During the presentation, audience members would have taken notes which were provided to Gregory. Nyssen reports, in the aforementioned letter, that he then adjusted the text, changing the sequence so that it more closely followed the order of the Biblical text (to more closely resemble Origen's commentaries) and adding what he thought the notes lacked to make a cogent discourse. Norris, following Dünzl, maintains "there is no reason to suppose that Gregory's revisions or additions were either extensive or thorough. Gregory himself suggests that he had little time to work on revisions 'during the days of fasting.'" ⁷ Therefore, if it is reasonable to surmise that the compilation of the text of the *Homilies on Ecclesiastes* took a similar shape, then it is likely that the text of Homily 4, as preserved in the manuscripts, closely resembles both what Gregory preached and what he intended to be read as a commentary on the Scripture.

Audience

As Stuart Hall succinctly states, "The origin and circumstances of Gregory's eight Homilies on Ecclesiastes must be deduced from what he writes."⁸ That is to say, no historical evidence survives regarding the original audience for which the homilies were composed. However, some interesting suggestions have been made regarding the possible original audience to which the sermons were addressed. Hall posits, in congruence with Norris's observations on *In Canticum canticorum*, a strictly ecclesial congregation.⁹ Lionel Wickham takes this a step further and speculates that the assembly was comprised of people unfamiliar with Roman law governing the buying and selling of slaves.¹⁰ Thus, the audience was almost certainly not comprised of lawyers and likely not slave-owners either. The basis of this assertion is Wickham's observation that Gregory errs in stating

⁷ Richard Norris, Jr., "Introduction," in *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on the Song of Songs* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), xxii.

⁸ Hall, "Introduction," 1.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Lionel Wickham, "Homily 4," in *Gregory of Nyssa Homilies on Ecclesiastes: An English Version with Supporting Studies*, ed. Stuart George Hall (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1993), 178-9.

“the property of the person sold is bound to be sold with him too.”¹¹ Wickham notes that this “does not square with Roman Law, which rules that a slave’s property is not sold along with him unless expressly stipulated.”¹² However, though Wickham is liable to be correct regarding the makeup of Gregory’s audience, this evidence speaks more clearly to Gregory’s lack of knowledge regarding the law concerning the purchasing of slaves: it must be remembered that these words came out of *his* mouth and flowed from *his* pen. It is unknown if his congregation would have caught the mistake.

A better tack for gaining possible information about Gregory’s audience would be the location of sermon’s original delivery. Unfortunately, no evidence survives that would clearly establish this. The uncertain dating of the homilies compounds this problem, with Hall claiming that “most scholars place the composition about 380, shortly before the Council of Constantinople.”¹³ Even if this dating were accurate, the location of the sermon would still be uncertain, as Anna Silvas has Gregory travelling between Antioch and Sebasteia advocating for neo-Nicene causes from 378 to mid-380, at which time he was restored to his position as bishop of Nyssa.¹⁴ Furthermore, Silvas, citing Daniélou and May, suggests the Homilies on Ecclesiastes belong to the period of Gregory’s exile (375/6 – 378) to an unknown location outside the jurisdiction of the “Arian” Demosthenes.¹⁵ This dating boasts decent internal evidence, as Gregory mentions in the Homilies on Ecclesiastes that “Arian faithlessness presently prevails” during the time of the sermon.¹⁶ Nonetheless, since there is no indication in the Homilies on Ecclesiastes where the sermons

¹¹ Gregory of Nyssa, “Homily 4 on Ecclesiastes,” in *Gregory of Nyssa Homilies on Ecclesiastes: An English Version with Supporting Studies*, ed. Stuart George Hall, trans. Stuart George Hall and Rachel Moriarty (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1993), 74, GNO 5.336.21: “ἀναγκή γὰρ πᾶσα καὶ τὸ κτῆμα τοῦ πωλουμένου συναποδίδοσθαι.”

¹² Wickham, “Homily 4,” 179.

¹³ Hall, “Introduction,” 1.

¹⁴ Anna Silvas, “Biography,” in *Gregory of Nyssa: The Letters* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 39-46.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* See also Gerhard May, “Die Chronologie des Lebens und der Werke des Gergor von Nyssa,” in *Ecriture et culture philosophique dans la pensée de Grégoire de Nysse*, ed. Marguerite Harl (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1971), 56-7.

were given, nor is dating the series of homilies with any surety possible, no critical appraisal of the audience is possible.

Historical Context

The most pertinent aspect of the historical milieu of Homily 4 on Ecclesiastes is the pervasiveness of slavery in the Roman Empire and the institution's widespread acceptance. While the debate rages on whether the Empire was a "slave society" or merely a "slave-owning society," what is not debated is that the practice of owning slaves was common. As Illaria Ramelli writes, "Ancient authors, and ancient people in general, could hardly envisage or imagine slavery as a stand-alone institution, separate from the socio-economic, political, cultural and religious milieu in which they lived on a day-to-day basis."¹⁷ It seems, then, that slavery, beyond being prevalent in the society of the late Roman Empire, was generally justifiable in the minds of the vast majority of the people. Ramelli continues, "The ancient economy, and ancient society, were based on slavery, which was also deeply rooted in ancient ideology, to the point that in the case of Aristotle . . . ideology seems to have been wrapped up, and intentionally dignified, in philosophical clothes."¹⁸

Furthermore, in the fourth century world of late antiquity, it was not only philosophical clothing that dressed-up the ideology of slavery's legitimacy: the vast majority of church leaders failed to speak out against slavery or explicitly endorsed it. For example, Peter Garnsey reports that Gregory's own brother, Basil of Caesarea, held that the institution of slavery was a benefit to slaves themselves.¹⁹ Moreover, it is clear that Basil himself owned slaves.²⁰ Perhaps more famously, Augustine of Hippo (CE 354 – 430), a junior contemporary of Gregory Nyssen, maintained that slavery was a result of humanity's fall into original sin and did not encourage Christian slave-owners to manumit their slaves. Moreover, Augustine understood the imposition of slavery on individuals to be God's

¹⁷ Ramelli, *Social Justice and the Legitimacy of Slavery*, 1.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Peter Garnsey, *Ideas of Slavery from Aristotle to Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 84.

²⁰ Teja, "San Basilio y la Esclavitud," 397.

just punishment for a person's moral, as opposed to original, sin.²¹ For Augustine, sin and slavery were inherently connected, and the former served to explicate the justice of the latter.²²

Though only two key examples of Church leaders validating slavery on theological grounds have been marshaled here, the intellectual milieu surrounding slavery was overwhelmingly in support of the *status quo*, both inside and outside of the Church in the fourth and fifth centuries.²³ The import of this circumstance is twofold: First, it is for this reason that Gregory's comments in Homily 4 stand out as quite singular.²⁴ Second, and more importantly for this article, it demonstrates the likelihood that these remarks were not made to please an audience or to appeal to popular sentiment. Rather, it is apparent that the Nyssen's comments certainly went against the grain of common opinion. Although it is not possible to say much else about the congregation to which this sermon was delivered, even a brief survey of the historical context reveals Gregory was not pandering to the crowd or "just preaching to the choir."

Elucidation of the Text

Two additional observations should be made as preludes to mining the text of Homily 4 for indications as to why Gregory authored these remarks on slave-owning. Initially, it should be noted, as Rachel Moriarty rightly does, that this discourse appears in the midst of a series of eight homilies primarily directed against vice: Gregory is attempting to persuade his hearers to avoid or give up what he deems to be sinful habits.²⁵ Indeed,

²¹ Ilaria Ramelli, "Gregory of Nyssa's Position in Late Antique Debates on Slavery and Poverty, and the Role of Asceticism," *Journal of Late Antiquity* 5, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 91-2.

²² See Susanna Elm, "Sold to Sin Through *Origo*: Augustine of Hippo and the Late Roman Slave Trade," in *Studia Patristica* 24, ed. Markus Vinzent (Louvain: Peeters Publishers, 2017): 1-21.

²³ William L. Westermann, *Slave Systems of Greek and Roman Antiquity* (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1955), 159: "For one starts with full knowledge that Christianity, like all of the religious beliefs which it overcame, had inherited the going slave system, and had accepted it as unquestionably as the pagan worships had done before it."

²⁴ As Peter Garnsey writes, "It [Homily 4] happens to be unique in the surviving evidence. That evidence is substantial, and it includes many indications that slavery was accepted by church leaders and tolerated within the Christian community at large." See *Ideas of slavery from Aristotle to Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 84.

²⁵ Rachel Moriarty, "Human Owners, Human Slaves: Gregory of Nyssa, *Hom. Eccl. 4*," in *Studia Patristica* vol. XXVII, ed. Elizabeth A. Livingstone (Leuven: Peeters, 1993), 62-3.

while Homily 4 opens with a section on the evils of slave ownership, the following portions of the sermon are aimed at the uselessness of gold, the evils of usury, and the perils of music and wine. It would then be natural to assume the comments on slavery are made simply because slavery, for Gregory, belongs in a list of vices that one should avoid or cease. This interpretation is confirmed in the concluding remarks of Homily 4, wherein Gregory specifically lists slavery alongside the evils which the author of Ecclesiastes has found to be vain: “After examining all such things, therefore, he trains mankind to be favourably inclined to nothing here [in the sensible realm], such as wealth, ambition, rule over subjects, revelry and luxury and feasts and everything else which is reckoned estimable, but to see that the only end of such things is futility, whose advantage is afterwards not to be found.”²⁶

The second observation is that Homily 4 is a commentary on Ecclesiastes. This appears to be a rather pedestrian point, but upon closer examination it offers insight into why Gregory spoke of slavery. Indeed, it can be stated with confidence that a major reason Nyssen spoke on slavery is because he encountered the topic in the Scripture on which he was speaking. It is reasonable to believe, therefore, that Gregory did not go out of his way to preach on slavery. Instead, when he encountered the statements, “I got me slaves and slave-girls, and homebred slaves were born for me, and much property in cattle and sheep became mine, above all who had been before me in Jerusalem,”²⁷ he saw an opportunity to deploy the example of slavery as a foil to reinforce his doctrine on God, demonstrate the foolishness of human pride, and highlight his understanding of theological anthropology.

Throwing the First Punch: Establishing a Theocentric Argument

Gregory begins his diatribe by subjecting all things to God’s authority via a reference to Psalm 118: “For we hear from prophecy that *all things*

²⁶ Gregory of Nyssa, “Homily 4,” 84, GNO 5.352.11-15: “ταῦτα οὖν πάντα καὶ τὰ τοιαῦτα κατασκευάμενος παιδεύει τὸν βίον τὸ πρὸς μηδὲν τῶν ὧδε θαυμαστικῶς διατίθεσθαι, πλοῦτον, φιλοτιμίαν, τὴν κατὰ τῶν ὑποχειρίων ἀρχὴν, θυμηδίας τε καὶ τρυφάς καὶ συμπόσια καὶ εἴ τι ἄλλο τῶν τιμίων εἶναι νενόμισται, ἀλλ’ ὁρᾶν, ὅτι ἐν τέλος τῶν τοιοῦτων παντῶν ἡ ματαιότης ἐστίν, ἧς περισσεία εἰς τὸ ἐφεξῆς οὐχ εὐρίσκειται.”

²⁷ Eccl 2:7.

are the slaves of the power that transcends all.”²⁸ Though this point has been missed by most commentators, this is a crucial first step in the argument, framing the entire discussion and establishing the conversation as theocentric. It is as if Gregory is making clear at the onset: *This is a discourse about God. I will speak of human pride and human nature, but only in light of God’s nature.* It is in this vein that Gregory’s first argument is stated in the form of a rhetorical question, followed by a definitive answer: “I got me slaves and slave-girls, he [the Ecclesiast] says, and homebred slaves were born for me. Do you notice the enormity of the boast? This kind of language is raised up as a challenge to God.”²⁹

Despite the oratorical power of these statements, and the positioning of this argument at the very onset of the homily, one could object to the conjecture that this is a theocentrically-framed discussion based on how little Gregory actually speaks of God’s nature in Homily 4. However, it is here that history comes to the rescue, for in the context in which the sermon was given, one can be certain that the audience it was intended for would have been thoroughly aware of Nyssen’s positions on God’s essence and nature. Regardless of whether one ascribes to the earlier dating of *In Ecclesiasten homiliae* by Silvas, Daniélou, and May or the slightly later dating of Hall, it can be stated with relative certainty that Homily 4 was preached after Gregory’s deposition from his see at Nyssa. This indicates that Gregory had been active in the Trinitarian controversies prior to the production of Homily 4. For this reason, it is likely that Gregory would not have had to go into depth on the nature of God: His views on the topic were likely well-known to his audience.

Furthermore, as the next two sections of this article will make clear, Gregory’s arguments make little sense if not seen in light of God’s nature. The pride of humans who would dare to own another human is only problematic when viewed within the preview of God’s authority. More importantly, the human nature which should ensure freedom for all is understood by Gregory as the image of God in humanity: the *imago Dei*.

²⁸ Gregory of Nyssa, “Homily 4,” 73, GNO 5.334.17-19: “τά σύμπαντα γάρ δούλα εἶναι τῆς πάντων ὑπερκειμένης ἐξουσίας παρά τῆς προφητείας ἠκούσαμεν.”

²⁹ *Ibid.*, GNO 5.334.15-17: “Ἐκτησάμην γάρ, φησι, δούλους καὶ παιδίσκας, καὶ οἰκουενεῖς ἐγένοντό μοι. ὁρᾷς τὸν ὄγκον τῆς ἀλαζονείας; θεῶ ἄντικρυς ἢ τοιαύτη φωνὴ ἀντεπαίρεται.”

That Gregory's argument is theocentric is demonstrated by the power and placement of the opening rhetorical questions on God's nature and authority; it is proved by the fact that the next two points, elaborated in depth, make little sense if not viewed in the context of Gregory's concepts of the person of God.

The Sinful Pride of Slave Ownership

"So, when someone turns the property of God into his own property and arrogates dominion to his own kind, so as to think himself the owner of men and women, what is he doing but overstepping his own nature through pride, regarding himself as something different from his subordinates?"³⁰ Having established the authority over all things inherent in God's nature and power, Gregory then connects the ownership that slave-owners *believe* they have, to the sin of pride. In many ways, the discussion of pride works as a bridge argument in the homily, connecting the concept of God's authority to the discussion of human nature, building on the former and prefiguring the latter. Indeed, the introduction of the sin of pride only works within the argument if juxtaposed between God's authority and human nature. However, having set-up the discussion in this manner, one may be tempted to think that Gregory's intention is to knock humanity down a notch while elevating God's nature. This would be a gross oversimplification of the case. Rather, Nyssen wants to demonstrate the fundamental dignity of humanity when actualized within its proper limitations, as will be seen when the conversation turns more directly to human nature.

The issue of pride arises when people attempt to seize what God has created to be free, thus challenging the very authority of the divine. Gregory continues, "You condemn man to slavery, when his nature is free and possesses free will, and you legislate in competition with God, overturning his law for the human species."³¹ Here Nyssen clearly

³⁰ Ibid., GNO 5.334.19-335.4: "ὁ οὖν κτῆμα ἑαυτοῦ τὸ τοῦ θεοῦ κτῆμα ποιούμενος ἐπιμερίζων τε τῷ γένει τὴν δυναστείαν, ὡς ἀνδρῶν τε ἅμα καὶ γυναικῶν ἑαυτὸν κύριον οἴεσθαι, τί ἄλλο καὶ οὐχὶ διαβαίνει τῇ ὑπερηφανίᾳ τὴν φύσιν, ἄλλο τι ἑαυτὸν παρά τοὺς ἀρχομένους βλέπων."

³¹ Ibid., GNO 5.335.5: "δουλίᾳ καταδικάζεις τὸν ἄνθρωπον, οὗ ἔλευθέρα ἡ φύσις καὶ αὐτεξούσιος, καὶ ἀντινομοθετεῖς τῷ θεῷ, ἀνατρέπων αὐτοῦ τὸν ἐπὶ τῇ φύσει νόμον." See Hans

demonstrates how pride enters the fray between God’s authority and human nature, though the demarcation is not as clear as one would assume on first blush, for it is authority of God which creates humanity with a free nature. Gregory thus elevates human nature by the liberty granted in its very nature and creation, based, of course, on God’s authority. The sin of pride, then, is not in slave-owners thinking too highly of their own nature. Instead, by attempting to subordinate that which God has created to be, by nature, free, the slave-owner challenges the very systems of God. For Gregory, it seems, defying God’s laws is tantamount to confronting God’s authority.

While pride can easily be seen as a bridge argument connecting the issues of human nature and God’s authority, since the sin of pride only makes sense if one understands the relationship between these topics, it should not be forgotten that it is also the crux of the homily. This is substantiated by placing the relatively short passage on slavery and the dignity of human freedom within the broader context of *In Ecclesiasten homiliae*, the over-arching theme of which is the vanity of life, the avoidance of vices, and the re-direction of the passions toward the good.³² Moreover, it is instructive to note that Gregory is explicit in his interpretation that the author of Ecclesiastes’s comments on slavery are made by way of confession. Indeed, the very first lines of Homily 4 read as follows:

We still find the occasion for confession controlling the argument. The one who gives an account of his doings [the Ecclesiast] relates one after another almost all the things through which the futility of the activities of this life is recognized. But now he reaches as it were a more serious

Boersma, *Embodiment and Virtue in Gregory of Nyssa*, 153, for a lucid discussion of the difference between freedom (ἐλευθερία) and self-determination (αὐτεξούσιος) in this passage and the significance in Nyssen’s use of both in this passage.

³² Gregory of Nyssa, “Homily 8,” 143, GNO 5.441.1-12: “Then he [the Ecclesiast] says, I know that there is no good in them, except of rejoicing and doing good in his life. These words sum up the argument. For if the use of God’s creatures at the right moment determines what is good in human life, there should be one good thing, the perpetual joy in good things, and that is the child of good deeds. Keeping the commandments gives joy now through hope to the one who promotes good deeds, but hereafter the enjoyment of good things when hopes are fulfilled holds out everlasting joy to the worthy, when the Lord says to those who have done good, *Come you blessed ones, inherit the kingdom prepared for you* (Mat 25:34).”

indictment of things he has done, as a result of which one is accused of the feeling of Pride.

If Gregory views the comments in Ecclesiastes regarding slavery as being primarily (or strictly) a confession of pride,³³ then one cannot avoid the conclusion that the homily based on this passage took seriously the problem of the human arrogance. Finally, as previously noted, the concluding statements of Homily 4 confirm the importance of the issue of pride, and clearly establish the link between slavery and vices, such as pride, that are to be avoided.³⁴ It is reasonable to say, therefore, that Homily 4's controlling argument is the avoidance of vice, pride in particular, and that the issue of slavery, arising naturally in the Scriptural text, is then deployed as an example of a vice to be avoided because it is a source of sinful pride.

The Authority Granted to Humanity and the Image of God

"You have forgotten the limits of your authority, and that your rule is confined to control over things without reason."³⁵ Nyssen continues by reminding his interlocuter (perhaps the Ecclesiast, the text is unclear as to exactly whom Gregory is speaking to) that enslaving other humans transgresses the bounds of the authority that God has granted to humanity. Gregory delimits this authority at rational creatures endowed with agency. Therefore, enslaving a rational human being crosses the line of authority that God has established. It is important at this juncture to remind the reader that Gregory views human nature as united in rationality and freedom,³⁶ something he does somewhat oddly in a later section of the

³³ Maria Bergadá makes this salient observation: "Une fois ainsi attirée l'attention sur ce texte, il entre de plein pied dans le cœur du problème: dans toute cette longue et présomptueuse énumération il n'y a rien qui mette si fortement en évidence la superbe et la folie de celui qui parle--'la phrase a pour nous la valeur d'une confession,' signale Grégoire au début (334.4)--comme cette affirmation qui énonce un fait vraiment monstrueux." See "La condamnation de l'esclavage dans l'Homélie IV," in *Gregory of Nyssa Homilies on Ecclesiastes: An English Version with Supporting Studies*, ed. Stuart George Hall (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1993), 186.

³⁴ Gregory of Nyssa, "Homily 4," 84, GNO 5.352.11-15 (quoted above).

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 73, GNO 5.335.11: "πέιλέλθσαι τῶν τῆς ἐξουσίας ὄρων, ὅτι σοι μέχρι τῆς τῶν ἀλόγων ἐπιστασίας ἡ ἀρχὴ περιώρισται."

³⁶ With regards to the unity of human nature and its illegitimate division by slavery, no commentator can rival Ramelli for clarity and depth. In *Social Justice and the Legitimacy of*

homily, by means of enumerating the similarities between slave and master. This list culminates, not coincidentally, with reference to the final judgement, further connecting the discussion of slavery to the larger principle of sin.³⁷ That is to say, it is clearly a sin for one to enslave another when both possess a common human nature.

However, it is important for Gregory's rhetoric going forward to note that human authority, though limited, is substantial. Citing Psalm 8, Gregory maintains that all things have been subjected by God to humanity, but goes on to state that this includes only irrational things, such as cattle, oxen, and sheep.³⁸ This observation provides an occasion for some levity, as Gregory asks, tongue-in-cheek, if human beings had been produced from slave owners' cattle stock; if cows had conceived humans. The answer being an obvious "no," Nyssen exposes the structural paradox of slavery: "But by dividing the human species into two with 'slavery' and 'ownership' you have caused it to be enslaved to itself, and to be the owner of itself."³⁹ Gregory continues by elevating the dignity of humanity, specifically those enslaved. At this juncture it is necessary to remember that the authority given to humans is substantial, for the argument proceeds by demonstrating the value of a human based on both the authority over creation and the rationality of humans.

It is at this point that Gregory's argument reaches a crescendo, as he declares: "*God said, let us make man in our own image and likeness* (Gen 1:26). If he [the slave] is in the likeness of God, and rules the whole earth, and has been granted authority over everything on earth from God, who is his buyer, tell me? Who is his seller?"⁴⁰ In a fascinating turn, Gregory then

Slavery (177) she writes, "God granted humans sovereignty over irrational creatures, not over other humans. Whoever presumes to own slaves arbitrarily and impiously divides human nature, which is one, into two states: slavery and mastery. According to Gregory, it is not God who divided humanity in this way, either before or after the Fall, or even as a result of individual sins, but only hubristic men."

³⁷ Gregory of Nyssa, "Homily 4," 75, GNO 5.338.12: "οὐχ ἔν τὸ κριτήριον; οὐ κοινὴ βασιλεία καὶ γέεννα κοινή;"

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 74, GNO 5.335.17: "Πάντα ὑπέταξας τῷ ἀνθρώπῳ, βοᾶ διὰ τῆς προφητείας ὁ λόγος"

³⁹ *Ibid.*, GNO 5.336.4-5: "σύ δὲ τὴν φύσιν δουλεία καὶ κυριότητι σχίσας αὐτὴν ἑαυτῇ δουλεύειν καὶ ἑαυτῆς κυριεύειν ἐποίησας."

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, GNO 5.336.10-14: "Ἐἶπεν ὁ θεός: ποιήσωμεν ἄνθρωπον κατ' εἰκόνα ἡμετέραν καὶ ὁμοίωσιν. τὸν καθ' ὁμοίότητα τοῦ θεοῦ ὄντα καὶ πάσης ἀρχοντα τῆς γῆς καὶ πάντων τῶν ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς τὴν ἐξουσίαν παρά τοῦ θεοῦ κληρωσάμενον τίς ὁ ἀπεμπολῶν, εἰπέ, τίς ὁ ὠνούμενος;"

denies this power even to God, explaining that God granted the gift of freedom to humanity, and would not revoke this gift.⁴¹ This stands in contradistinction to Augustine's justification of slavery based on sin; Gregory, remembering that God recalled humanity to freedom after being enslaved to sin, uses the Christian concept of redemption to demonstrate God's opposition to slavery.

Furthermore, this can be seen as the culmination of the sermon because Gregory finally introduces the concept of the image of God, or, rather, Gregory finally names what he has been constantly referring to. That is, during the discussions of human nature, agency, and authority, the Nyssen had, in the back of his mind, the understanding that each of these attributes are bestowed on humanity by the original grace of the *imago Dei*, the creation of all humans in the image of God.⁴² Giulio Maspero sums this up succinctly:

For Gregory, the creation of the human being in the image of the Trinity corresponds to the divinization of the human being, through which God has made him a participant in every perfection, since the divine nature is the sum of all perfections. Among all these, the first and most proper is liberty, as the responsibility and capacity to choose the good.⁴³

Therefore, while Gregory speaks directly of the *imago Dei* only occasionally over the course of Homily 4, his theology of the image and likeness of God as inherent in human nature pervades the entire discussion. When he finally uses the exact words "image and likeness of God," one may imagine, they must have had enormous rhetorical power.

⁴¹ Ibid., GNO 5.336.15.

⁴² It is worth noting here that Gregory of Nyssa does not appear to draw any distinction between 'image' and 'likeness' as many Greek patristic thinkers did. See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Presence and Thought: An Essay on the Religious Philosophy of Gregory of Nyssa* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 117-8.

⁴³ Giulio Maspero, "Slavery," in *The Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa*, ed. Lucas Francisco Mateo-Seco and Giulio Maspero (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 683.

Conclusion

This study has revealed several possible avenues for exploring why Nyssen concluded that humanity oversteps its bounds when one human owns another human created in the image of God. First, by briefly examining how the text likely came to be formed, using the prefatory letter for the Homilies on the Song of Songs as a guide, it was established that Gregory intended for these comments to be heard, read, and circulated. These were not some off-handed comments that he did not really mean. Second, by looking at the original audience and the historical context in which the sermon was given, the remarks were demonstrated to be quite singular in the intellectual milieu in which they were given. Gregory was not parroting a common position or “preaching to the choir.”

Following this setting of the stage, as it were, two pivotal observations were made about the text: that it was an elucidation of Ecclesiastes and that the thrust of the sermon, when seen as a whole, was an admonition to avoid vices found to be useless by the Ecclesiast. The first observation, though an obvious point, provides the most overlooked, yet apparent conclusion as to why Gregory gave these remarks. That is, Gregory was compelled to speak on the topic of slavery because it appeared in the Scriptural text on which he was speaking. Furthermore, according to Gregory’s interpretation, the issue of slavery was raised by the Biblical author as a confession of his sins. This important point prefigures the bulk of Gregory’s argument, which, rather than being abolitionist *per se*, is directed against the sin of pride. In this way, slavery can be seen as a preeminent example of human arrogance against God, a rebelling against the divine law and human nature itself. For Gregory, resisting God and flaunting human freedom are vices *par excellence*. This observation, coupled with the recognition that Gregory does not call for abolition nor manumission in the homily, demonstrate the thesis that these comments were not made as political or civil statements. Instead, Gregory, encountering the issue of slavery in the Biblical text, uses the “peculiar institution” as a foil to explicate his views on the authority of God, the sin of pride, and the image of God in all humanity.

On a final note, however, simply because Gregory is using the institution of slavery to expound on essentially theological points does not

preclude his opposition to the ownership of one human being, created in the *imago Dei*, by another human, sharing a common human nature. He clearly opposes this, as his argument makes clear. What is not clear, where nuance is needed, is exactly what Nyssen wanted to do about this situation.

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