The Likeness to God and the Imitation of Christ: The Transformation of the Platonic Tradition in Gregory of Nyssa

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The Platonic tradition, which regards the perfection of human nature as ‘becoming like God’ or ‘likeness to God’ (ὁμοίωσις θεῷ), deeply influenced not only the Hellenistic philosophers but also the Greek church fathers. Expressed in the ‘allegory of the cave’, which is another aspect of the tradition, it speaks of human beings attaining this exalted status by ascending from the underground cave to the world above ground filled with sunlight; in other words, from the illusory world of the senses, so full of misdeeds, to the real world of intelligible Ideas. In his Theaetetus (176a–b) and Phaedo (69b–c), in particular, Plato recognises that the purification (κάθαρσις) of the soul in ‘becoming like God’ is consonant with the flight from the world, which is symbolised as a cave. At the same time, Plato’s belief that the ‘practice of virtue’ makes it possible for a human being to become like God has an extremely important meaning. What kind of virtue makes it possible? Moreover, what does the idea of ‘return to the cave’ mean for the soul that has been purified by an escape from the cave and has become like God? Such questions must have arisen for Platonists, and later writers, both Christian and non-Christian. However, as Anthony Meredith argues in his distinguished article, the tide of the Platonic tradition was obviously turned by Gregory of Nyssa’s reshaping of the cave allegory.

1 The term ‘likeness’ (ὁμοίωσις), of which the corresponding verb is ‘to become like’ (ὁμοιοῦσθαι, ἀφομοιοῦσθαι), has its well-known synonyms, for example, in ‘imitation’ (μίμησις, verb μιμεῖσθαι) and ‘image’ (εἰκών). Therefore, the phrase ‘becoming like God’ or ‘likeness to God’ (ὁμοίωσις θεῷ, ὁμοίωσις πρὸς θεόν) also has various similar expressions. At the same time, we need to pay attention to the subtle difference between ὁμοίωσις θεῷ and related expressions, such as ‘becoming God’ (θεῶν γενέσθαι), ‘participation in God’ (μεθουσία θεοῦ), and ‘deification’ or ‘making God’ (θέωσις). For a comprehensive study of ὁμοίωσις θεῷ see Hubert Merki, ΟΜΟΙΩΣΙΣ ΘΕΩ: Von der Platonischen Angleichung an Gott zur Gottähnlichkeit bei Gregor von Nyssa (Freiburg: Paulusdruckerei, 1952).

In this essay I wish to clarify the shift in the Platonic cave allegory tradition from the viewpoint of ‘becoming like God’, about which Meredith hardly speaks, at least in his above-mentioned article. In the first section I consider how the idea of ‘becoming like God’ or ‘likeness to God’ in the cave allegory was argued in the context of moral purification and the restoration of human nature, by referring to Philo, Origen, Plotinus, and Basil. According to Meredith, the meaning of the cave allegory is reinterpreted innovatively by Gregory of Nyssa, who places it in a soteriological context by emphasising the importance of the ‘incarnation’. Therefore, in the second section, I examine Gregory’s reinterpretation of the cave allegory as ‘the descent of the sun into the cave’, comparing it with Origen’s elucidation. Finally, in the third section, I refer to the idea mentioned by Gregory in De beatitudinibus, that human beings can ‘become like God’ by imitating the virtue of the incarnated Christ’s ‘modesty’ (ταπεινοφροσύνη). I then show that this Christian reshaping of Platonic tradition is added to the notion of a ‘virtuous assimilation to God’. Thus, it focuses on the Christian dogmas of the incarnation and resurrection of Christ, especially the spiritual restoration of the union of soul and body after death, and not the release from the body. Seen in this light, I conclude that Gregory of Nyssa essentially modifies or reinterprets the Platonic notion of ‘becoming like God’ and the allegory of the cave.

1 Ascent from the Cave and Becoming Like God

1.1 The Tradition of the Cave Allegory

There are several interpretations of the cave allegory of Respublica 7. First, some thinkers regard the cave as a symbol of this whole world. In On the Descent of the Soul into Bodies, Plotinus, for instance, writes, “it seems to me that Plato’s cave represents this whole world, as Empedocles’ den.” In his discussion of Homer’s ‘cave of the nymphs’, Porphyry also insists that “Pythagoreans and,