GREGORY’S INTELLECTUAL DEVELOPMENT:  
A COMPARISON OF THE HOMILIES ON  
THE BEATITUDES WITH THE HOMILIES  
ON THE SONG OF SONGS  

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I. The Language of Ascent and the Structure of Reality – II. Human Nature –  
A. The Fall and its Consequences – B. The Present Situation – I. Human Nature  
as Mirror – 2. Man as a Liminal Being – III. Christ and the Church – Conclusions

The Homilies on the Beatitudes is among Gregory’s earliest works, written  
perhaps in the mid-370’s shortly after his appointment as bishop of Nyssa.¹ The Homilies on the Song of Songs is quite likely Gregory’s last work, written in the 390’s and dedicated to the lady Olympias,  
a well known Christian philanthropist.² The fifteen Homilies on the  
Song of Songs constitute what is by far Gregory’s longest work, while  
the eight Homilies on the Beatitudes are the shortest of any of his con­  
ected series of sermons, with the exception of the Homilies on the  
Lord’s Prayer. This difference in length notwithstanding, the two sets  
of sermons have much in common. Both belong to the same genre –  
exegetical essays on a relatively short piece of Biblical text. They  
share the same unifying theme – the ascent of the soul towards God.  
While the longer work has a verbal richness with which the earlier  
homilies cannot compare, Gregory uses some of the same images

¹ On the chronology of Gregory’s works see especially Jean DaniéloU, La chronolo­  
gie des sermons de Grégoire de Nyss: RevSR 29 (1955) 346–372; La chronologie des œuvres de Grégoire de Nyss: StPatr 7 (= TU 92), Berlin 1966, 159–69; Gerhard  
May, Die Chronologie des Lebens und der Werke des Gregor von Nyssa: Écriture et culture philosophique dans la pensée de Grégoire de Nyss. Actes du Colloque  
Reinhard Kees, Die Lehre von der Oikonomia Gottes in der Oratio Catechetica Gregors  
von Nyss (= SVigChr 30), Leiden 1995. There is no direct evidence for the date of  
these homilies. The absence of the distinctive themes that characterize his later  
works suggests an early date. The cosmology of the homilies, especially the notion  
of the “shell of heaven”, discussed below, is strikingly similar to that of Gregory’s  
Hexaameron, which was written shortly after the death of Basil in 379.  
² J.B. Cahill, The Date and Setting of Gregory of Nyssa’s Commentary on the  
Song of Songs: JThS NS 32 (1981) 447–460. On Olympias, see also Peter Brown,  
and metaphors in both works – especially that of the soul as a mirror in which the image of God is reflected.

A comparison of these images and themes as they appear in the two works suggests some striking conclusions. During the relatively short interval of fifteen or twenty years that separates the two sets of homilies, Gregory has undergone a profound intellectual transformation. In the earlier work, the language of ascent is all but literal. Gregory’s focus is on the upward journey of the individual soul from the cave of earthly darkness and deception towards the pure intelligence of the heavens. In the course of this journey, the soul polishes its own mirror so as to let the divine image shine forth. In the Homilies on the Song of Songs, Gregory describes instead the soul’s participation in the onward journey of mankind as a whole towards a perfection that can be realized only within a human community. The soul polishes its mirror so as to receive the quickening power of the image of Christ. Indeed, Gregory’s transformation is as much spiritual as it is intellectual. In the interim between these two works the Bishop of Nyssa seems to have discovered – or at least learned how to articulate – what it means to affirm that the church is the living Body of Christ.

I. The Language of Ascent and the Structure of Reality

Gregory’s understanding of the physical structure of reality conditions the language of ascent that dominates both works. In the Homilies on the Beatitudes, Gregory sees reality as vertically divided between an intelligible heaven and a material earth. Sin involves a literal fall from the intelligible to the material, and salvation accordingly requires a vertical ascent towards the original home. Gregory does not go so far as to suggest, following Origen, that God created the material cosmos for the explicit purpose of receiving fallen souls. But he does think of man as an essentially spiritual being whose life in a material body is a form of alienation. In the Homilies on the Song of Songs, the language of ascent continues to constitute the main theme, but the ascent has become more a passage through time than through space, the motion now more horizontal than vertical. Sin involves a

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