Apokatastasis and Epektasis in Cant and Origen

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1 The Key Dedication to Olympias

Gregory dedicated Cant to Deaconess Olympias,1 whom he with deference and admiration calls σεμνοπρεπεστάτη, “most dignified, most reverend”. Σεμνοπρεπεστάτη was a respectful, ceremonial style of address, used e.g. for a bishop by Nyssen (Epist xx1) and Nazianzen (Ep. 202). For Olympias, also an ordained ecclesiastical minister, Gregory even employs the superlative. This move is significant. For Olympias was a sympathiser of Origen and his followers. Nazianzen, another Origenian and, according to tradition, the compiler of the Philocalia of Origen, sent her a poem for her marriage. After her husband’s death, she founded a monastery in Constantinople, spending her wealth for charitable works. Not only did Nyssen dedicate Cant to her, but also his brother Peter was the object of her beneficence.2 She defended the Origenian monks expelled from Egypt by Theophilus—an Origenian scared by the Anthropomorphites.3 They were received in Constantinople by Olympias and, on her recommendation, her bishop John Chrysostom.4 From the Dialogue on the Life of St. John Chrysostom attributed to Palladius,5 Olympias’ key role emerges. Palladius, an Origenian monk himself, a supporter of Chrysostom, an acquaintance of the Tall Brothers, and Evagrius’ disciple,6 reports how Olympias courageously received the Origenian monks7 and describes Nyssen as “the wisest, freest from passions, illustrious for the wealth of his learning, the brother of bishop Basil, honoured like an apostle”.8 The Dialogue is inspired by Plato’s Phaedo, like Nyssen’s An et res.

It is therefore no chance that Gregory dedicated to the Origenian Olympias his last work, in which he still supported apokatastasis and followed Origen’s

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2 Palladius, Dialogus de vita sancti Ioannis Chrysostomi, 17.
4 Socrates, Historia ecclesiastica VI 7–9; Sozomen, Historia ecclesiastica VIII 11–13.
5 AD 407/8.
6 HL 23.
7 Palladius, Dialogus de vita sancti Ioannis Chrysostomi, 16–17.
8 HL 86, PG 34,1188C.
exegesis and theology in many respects. This dedication comes in a Preface defending Biblical allegoresis in the Origenian tradition, which detects the φιλοσοφία hidden in the *Song of Songs* (ςς). Gregory overtly defends Origen's allegoresis in his programmatic preface to his own exegesis in *Cant*. Against “certain churchmen” who attacked Origen, Gregory endorses the investigation into Scripture's αἰνίγματα and υπόνοιαι. The terminology itself is Origen's—note the absence of ἀλληγορία, as in Origen's works addressed to Christians: Origen and Gregory disliked this term due to its relation to “pagan” allegoresis of myths. Gregory’s characterisation of the *Song of Songs* as the Holy of Holies follows Origen's inclusion of the Song in the δευτερώσεις as Scripture's culmination.

This and else, already in the Preface, is a declaration of Origenian allegiance, still at the close of Gregory’s life. This indicates that his *sequela Origenis* never ceased, but continued to the end. This does not mean that every exegetical solution in *Cant* depends on Origen. Gregory's reception of Origen was insightful and creative; it is the deepest, most intelligent and exact I know. Gregory is likely the theologian who best understood Origen's thought, so misunderstood on many sides.⁹ Origen's heritage in Gregory's *Cant* is clear in the main doctrines and exegetical lines, even to the point of verbal borrowings from Origen's commentary—as, e.g., Gregory’s exegesis of 1 Cor 15.28 takes every passage of its main argument, and many words, from Origen.¹⁰ Origen's importance in shaping the Christian exegetical tradition of the *Song of Songs* is hard to overestimate;¹¹ his importance in shaping Gregory’s *Cant* is still harder.

2 **Apokatastasis and Epektasis: Interconnection, Christological Foundations, Roots in Origen**

The *apokatastasis-epektasis* relation in Gregory’s *Cant* is grounded in Christology and comes from Origen. Of Gregory's two nominal mentions of Origen, one comes—strategically—in *Cant*, the other in *Thaum* 13.11. In *Cant* 13,3 Gregory refers encomiastically to Origen's rich, splendid exegesis of the *Song of Songs*.

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