A TEXTUAL PROBLEM IN GREGORY OF NYSSA’S
IN SANCTUM PASCHA (GNO IX, 254.8)

BY

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In Gregory’s Nysseni Opera, vol. IX p. 253.19–254.9 Gregory gives in a
short survey his view on God’s dealing with man in the course of history.
God created man as a being of the highest dignity and made him king of
his creation. This election would have been in vain, if God had made man
mortal. Such an opinion would make God like children, who build sand-
castles and destroy them again, playing without any sense of permanence.

In fact, Gregory says, we have learnt quite the opposite. God created
the first man immortal. But when transgression and sin arose, God took
away man’s immortality. Yet this was not the end, for God redeemed
man. According to the GNO text, edited by E. Gebhardt, Gregory
describes this act of God as follows: έπι ή πηγή τῆς ἀγαθότητος
ὑπερβλέποντα τὴν φιλανθρωπίαν καὶ πρὸς τὸ ἔργον ἐπικλασθείσα τῶν
ιδίων χειρῶν σοφία καὶ ἐπιστήμη κατεκόσμησεν οὖς εἰς τὴν ἀρχαίαν
ήμας] ἐνδόκησεν ἀνακαινίσαι κατάστασιν. Gebhardt wrote οὖς instead
of the δς of all manuscripts but one (S) and had in consequence to delete
ήμας. (For the reading of S, see below.)

Gebhardt was correct in rejecting the reading δς, because 1) this relative
pronoun cannot but refer to the subject of the sentence, viz., ή πηγή τῆς
ἀγαθότητος; this change of gender would be extremely harsh, particularly
after the two feminine participles, and 2) the verb κατεκόσμησεν would
not have an object.

The reading οὖς, it is true, does away with these syntactic difficulties.
But now the question arises: how does one explain the actual reading of
the manuscripts? One has to assume that the, from the view-point of con-
struction, rather simple οὖς was corrupted to the difficult δς, which more-
over forced the scribe to add an object, ήμας. (One should notice that, if a
scribe had added an object, he would more likely have chosen αὐτό,
referring to τὸ ἔργον, or αὐτόν, referring to τὸ πρωτόπλαστος.)

But Gebhardt seems not to have noticed that with both readings, δς and
οδι, one gets in serious trouble. For what does Gregory say about redemption according to both readings? “The source of goodness, abounding in love and moved to pity towards the work of his hands, adorned with wisdom and knowledge those whom he...” (if one reads δς the sentence becomes very awkward, as was said above). In other words, God’s act of redemption is characterized as ‘an adornment with wisdom and knowledge’, which cannot be correct. In fact, this is a characterization of the act of creation, not of redemption. Gregory’s words in this very passage may suffice to argue this; speaking about God creating man’s dignity he says: τοιοῦτον ἀπαρτίσας σοφὸν καὶ θεοειδή καὶ πολλῆ κατακοσμήσας τῆς χάριτι (p. 253, 22–23).

When I had come to this point in my deliberations my colleague, Dr. van Heck, drew my attention to the reading of manuscript S, which puts the relative pronoun δ before σοφία and omits the pronoun after κατακόσμησεν. In this reading Gregory’s description of the redemption runs as follows: “then the source of goodness, abounding in love and moved to pity towards the work of his own hands, that he had adorned with wisdom and knowledge, benevolently renewed us into our primordial state”. The relative δ refers to τὸ ἔργον.

This reading solves all our problems:
1) the ‘adornment with wisdom and knowledge’ no longer refers to the redemption but to the creation. It underlines the primordial dignity of man, as it was stated in the former part of the paragraph.
2) The verb ἐστέρησεν is now contrasted with εὐδόκησεν ἀνακαίνισαι, which makes the right balance.
3) ἡμᾶς is retained.

One should, moreover, notice that the description of God’s creative act as an adornment with wisdom and knowledge was not Gregory’s own invention, but is almost a quotation of Exodus 36,1 ὁ ἐδόθη σοφία καὶ ἐπιστήμη: see also Ex. 31,3 and 35, 31, all about Bezalel. (On several other places one finds the pair ἐπιστήμη καὶ σύνεσις. See the Concordance by Hatch and Redpath.) The language of Gregory is strongly biblical in this passage. The characterization of man as “the work of God’s hands” is found in Ps. 137, 8, Isa. 64, 8 and Job 14, 15. All this confirms the thesis that the words σοφία καὶ ἐπιστήμη can only refer to the creation, and this is only achieved if one accepts the reading of S.

On the other hand, the characterization of God’s redeemptive act as a bringing back of man to his primordial state (εἰς τὴν ἀρχάν κατάστασιν) is a typical formula of Gregory. See p. ex. in the same sermon, p.