PLATONIC AND PAULINE ELEMENTS IN THE ASCENT OF THE SOUL IN GREGORY OF NYSSA'S DIALOGUE ON THE SOUL AND RESURRECTION

BY

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In the dialogue On the Soul and the Resurrection,1 St. Gregory of Nyssa attempts to present the doctrine of the resurrection of the body in terms of the Platonic philosophical tradition but also in accord with the biblical revelation. There are those who believe that he failed to integrate his philosophy with his Christianity. Harold Cherniss in particular claims that Gregory was a Platonist in his heart, and that it was an intellectually dishonest concession to his overbearing older sister Macrina which made him insert Christian doctrine into his writings.2 Charalambos Apostolopoulos considers Gregory to be a Greek philosopher of notable originality who, because he feared the ecclesiastical authorities, disguised the boldness of his thought with pious formulas and biblical citations.3 Jean Danielou, on the other hand, believes that Gregory's thought is wholly Christian, though expressed in Platonic terminology.4 I hope by studying the literary form of this dialogue to come to some conclusions about its unity or disunity. In this paper I shall deal with a short passage which appears especially indebted to Plato, and show how Gregory has woven words and themes from St. Paul into a Platonic warp. I shall consider what message is conveyed by the interaction of Gregory's two languages, the biblical and the philosophical.5

First of all, something should be said about the overall form of the treatise. The choice of a dialogue form in itself shows that Gregory wanted to be recognized as a follower of Plato. It has often been pointed out that his dialogue shows many parallels with Plato's Phaedo.6 In both dialogues the death of a beloved teacher gives occasion to a discussion of the nature of the soul and its possible continuance after the death of the body. Phaedo reports the conversation which Socrates purportedly had with his friends on his last day, and the dialogue concludes by describing the death of Socrates. Gregory's
dialogue is set at the time when his brother Basil has just died. When Gregory goes to commiserate with their sister Macrina, he finds her also on her deathbed but still able to discourse at length on the destiny of the soul. Although Gregory reserves the description of her actual death for her biography, in this dialogue she takes the role of Socrates in the *Phaedo* as the dying teacher who consoles and instructs those who will be left behind. It is undoubtedly true to say that Gregory meant the dialogue to be read as a kind of Christian *Phaedo*. He had some other dialogues in mind as well, however. He refers to the chariot image from the *Phaedrus* and the question of how the various aspects of the soul relate to one another. For the relationship which he presents between himself and Macrina, he has obviously drawn on Plato's *Symposium*. There Socrates shows himself as having the tables turned; he becomes the not-so-apt pupil of the wise woman teacher Diotima. Gregory similarly makes himself the pupil of his wise older sister, putting the stubborn and foolish questions into his own mouth. Is this merely modesty? Is it an honest depiction of his respect for Macrina's authority? Is it a means of avoiding full responsibility for the conclusions reached? Is it, as Apostolopoulos well suggests, a means by which Gregory can portray his own inner conflict, as he struggled to reconcile his Hellenism and his Christianity? In that case it makes sense that Macrina, who led him into an ecclesiastical career, takes the "Christian" part, while Gregory himself, the former teacher of rhetoric, takes the contrary side.

The passage which I propose to discuss here concerns the ascent of the soul to union with the beautiful, which may also be the good. Of course Gregory has Plato's *Symposium* in mind, as well as the *Phaedo* and *Phaedrus*. As Apostolopoulos points out, the fact that Gregory imagines the soul journeying upward puts him in the company of Plato and Plotinus, in contrast with (for example) Philo and the Hermetic writings. However, as will be seen, the dichotomy of upward movement as opposed to descending grace is not really applicable to this dialogue.

In the course of the dialogue, Gregory and Macrina discuss how the soul maintains its connection to the elements of the body even after death. Gregory raises the question of heaven and hell, which are traditionally thought of as locations for the souls of the dead. Macrina, referring to the parable of Lazarus and the rich man, explains that the places are not to be taken literally, and goes on to draw another lesson