Gregory of Nyssa's Doctrine of *apokatastasis*: Theology and Hermeneutical Method

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Introduction

If the modern Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart is any indication, the idea of universalism (sometimes referred to by the ancient term ἀποκατάστασις) is enjoying something of a renewed popularity. "Universalism" is an expansive term that can cover a variety of ideas, but within Christian theology, it is the notion that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ maintains a salvific quality that applies to all persons, and indeed, all creation. Hence, in this scheme, it may be said that the work of Christ is totalizing in scope: it has accomplished quite literally all that is required for salvation. Moreover, this salvation has objectively obtained. The dynamic of universalism is less one of personal appropriation, though persons may come to accept this salvation in a subjective manner (a confession of faith, for example); rather, because of God "reconciling the world to himself in Christ," all things will find their end (both goal and *telos*) in God.[1] Hell, if it exists (some iterations of universalism do away with the notion entirely) is remedial and temporal.

Universalism is not a new idea, and its continued appeal and articulation addresses the perennial question of how a good and loving God could finally be estranged from his creation (whether in a conception of hell, annihilation, or conditional immortality). On its surface, the response of universalism is a hopeful, even attractive one. Yet the doctrine of universalism can also run counter to basic human notions of justice and righteousness and may run the risk of distorting the

[1] 2 Corinthians 5:19.

witness of the New Testament and that of the Church, which seems to speak of chastisement in atemporal terms, rather than a time of limited chastisement.[2] Even the question of meaning might emerge in the minds of those that consider universalism: if the end is already determined, then why strive? Why commit to a life of piety and *ascesis* at all?

The status of, and interest in, the question regarding universalism therefore remains rather lively. The above-mentioned David Bentley Hart's recent publication, *That All Shall Be Saved* is evidence of his own investment in the doctrine, along with a handful of his articles and decidedly idiosyncratic interpretations of passages within the New Testament.[3] But the interest goes beyond Hart. The recent work of historian and patristics scholar Ilaria Ramelli is even more thoroughgoing than Hart's, and no less effective in contributing to notably favourable attention to the historical articulation of "universal salvation."[4] There are, of course, those that do not consider the idea to be an orthodox one, but the interest is made all the more intriguing as a result.[5] Given that it appears to be a scholarly impossibility that one could offer a comprehensive judgment on the entirety of matter in less than multiple-hundreds of pages (both Ramelli and McClymond claim near 1000 pages each), we return to the question: why is the idea of universal salvation so contested? Is there no straight-forward account of this idea, sympathetic or otherwise? As with most complicated theological ideas, but perhaps especially in this case, the devil is in the details.

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[2] See, for example, Matthew 25:31-46.

[3] David Bentley Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019). See also, "God, Creation, and Evil: The Moral Meaning of *creatio ex nihilo*" in *Radical Orthodoxy: Theology, Philosophy and Politics* Vol 3. No. 1 (September 2015), 1-17; apropos of note 3, see Matthew 25:31-46 in David Bentley Hart, *The New Testament: A Translation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019).

[4] Ilaria Ramelli, *The Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis: A Critical Assessment from the New Testament to Eriugena* (Leiden: Brill Academic, 2013). See also Ilaria Ramelli, *A Larger Hope? 2 Vols.* (Oregon: Cascade Books, 2019). The inclusion of Hart and Ramelli here is to demonstrate interest beyond the traditional landmark theological interest of theologians such as Barth and Von Balthasar.

[5] Michael J. McClymond, *The Devil's Redemption*: *A New History and Interpretation of Christian Universalism* (Ada: Baker Academic, 2018).

Instead of a wholesale evaluation and pronouncement on universalism, the ensuing paper will examine a theological taproot for contemporary interest in the doctrine of universalism, Gregory of Nyssa. Again, to pronounce on the legitimacy of the idea, either for or against, is well beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, this paper will seek to sketch the basic theological contours of Gregory of Nyssa's thought on universalism and seek to demonstrate why markedly different pronouncements (Hart and Ramelli vs. McClymond, etc.) can stem from the same thinker.[6] To accomplish this, the paper will consider Gregory's philosophical and theological antecedents (the strains of thought that condition his theological approach), and his approach to interpreting scripture (hermeneutical method). These two avenues can scarcely be expected to give a *robust* account of Gregory's universalism, yet they go some distance in accounting for why, perhaps, Gregory was drawn to the idea of universal restoration. The paper will conclude with a brief reflection upon Gregory's lasting influence, and the contemporary state of the question of universalism.

Antecedents: The Fathers and the Scope of Salvation

In Morwenna Ludlow's work on Gregory of Nyssa's theological vision, she commented that "Christian eschatological beliefs appear to have been very fluid in the first four centuries of this era."[7] This fluidity notwithstanding, Ludlow identified two distinct streams of eschatological thought: "dualistic eschatology" and "universalistic eschatology." Dualistic theology is the belief, promulgated by Irenaeus, among others, that there will be a separation at the end of the age. The

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[6] This exercise is surely not a novel one. Succinct summaries, such as the one provided by John Sachs, have already accomplished this task: "we may say that Gregory's doctrine of apocatastasis is logically based on four fundamental aspects of his thought: (1) the unity of the human race in its fullness; (2) the personal unity of all rational creatures; (3) the finitude and destruction of evil; and (4) the infinite goodness of God." John R. Sachs, "Apocatastasis in Patristic Theology", *Journal of Theological Studies*, Vol. 54, No. 4 (December, 1993), 638. These summaries notwithstanding, however, a re-examination of the primary source data themselves is at the heart of research and revision.

[7] Morwenna Ludlow, *Universal Salvation: Eschatology in the Thought of Gregory of Nyssa and Karl Rahner* (Oxford: OUP, 2000), 30. Ludlow has a very interesting portion of her work dedicated to understanding the semantic range of the term ἀποκατάστασις, 38-44.

righteous will dwell with God in harmony, the unrighteous will be consigned to everlasting punishment. The "universalistic" belief, espoused by Clement of Alexandria, and later (and to a more extreme degree), Origen, saw a more remedial aspect to the eschaton, wherein the punishment for the unrighteous after death had a "medicinal" and "pedagogical" value, with Clement going as far as to voice an anticipatory view of purgatory.[8] Important to note in Ludlow's analysis is the way these two streams proceed in different directions on account of unique starting points. Ludlow credits the influence of Gnosticism and Platonism upon the Clementine school, particularly with regard to the "intellectualist and speculative concerns, especially to their emphasis on the role of knowledge and learning in believers' attempts to perfect themselves."[9] This is not to say that Irenaeus ignored these concerns, but rather, saw his theology as critiquing a Platonist conception of the nature of the soul and "its superiority over the body."[10] Ludlow does not say so, yet it seems like Irenaeus and the dualists were content to take their starting place from a more rigidly "literalistic" reading of Holy Scripture, allowing it to condition their evaluation of the reigning Platonic consensus. The "universalists", however, did not disregard Scripture, but rather, allowed Platonic and Gnostic considerations to be a part of the broader hermeneutical horizon.

The distinction is important. Neither party is "wrong" or "bad" for either tack in their approach to eschatological understanding. Instead, this insight is an essential feature to comprehending the overall shape of Gregory's universalism and will come to bear upon questions later down the line, including the way in which Gregory read holy scripture. A direct descendent of the Clement-Origen line, Gregory was influenced by the two theologians in two ways: the first from Clement, a view of eschatological punishment as pedagogical and therapeutic, and from Origen, a sense in which the eschaton was cyclical, not linear. As Ludlow puts it, "[Origen's] usual schema emphasizes the aspect of return, summed up by the

[8] Ludlow, *Universal Salvation*, 32.

[9] Ludlow, *Universal Salvation*, 31-2.

[10] Ludlow, *Universal Salvation*, 31.

repeated assertion that 'the end is always like the beginning'."[11] Where then, do we see these views emerging in Gregory's work?

Both Clement and Origen's influence may be perceived in Gregory's work *On the Soul and the Resurrection*. The text itself, a dialogue between Gregory and his beloved but ailing sister Macrina, exposits several ideas concerning the nature of the soul and the life to come. It is plausible that Gregory uses Macrina to propound "right teaching" (in Gregory's estimation) throughout the work. In their dialogue, eschatological punishment is explicitly referred to as purgatorial. Speaking of the "speculative and critical faculty" of the soul, Macrina states that it is either through ascesis on earth or "purgation hereafter" that our soul becomes free to fully contemplate the divine.[12] The purpose of the eschatological punishment in this case, is to loose from the soul the vain distractions that beset it. Gregory reflects, after this long discourse, and restates the purpose of divine punishment: "Then it seems, I said, that it is not punishment chiefly and principally that the Deity, as Judge, afflicts sinners with; but He operates, as your argument has shown, only to get the good separated from the evil and to attract it into the communion of blessedness."[13] Macrina continues with the notion that punishment is only commensurate to the sins committed in the body, and that the entire operation has as its aim the elimination of evil:

> In any and every case evil must be removed out of existence, so that, as we said above, the absolutely non-existent should cease to be at all. Since it is not in its nature that evil should exist outside the will, does it not follow that when it shall be that every will rests in God, evil will be reduced to complete annihilation, owing to no receptacle being left for it?[14]

Such a view of evil is rooted in Gregory's conception of creation—as humanity is created and declared good as a fundamental aspect of its being, evil

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[11] Ludlow, *Universal Salvation,* 33.

[12] Gregory of Nyssa, *De Anima,* https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/2915.htm, Accessed 07 December 2021.

[13] Gregory of Nyssa, *De Anima,* Accessed 07 December 2021.

[14] Gregory of Nyssa, *De Anima,* Accessed 07 December 2021.

can only be a *privatio boni,* as it is manifestly impossible for God, who is the *summam bonum* to create anything which is evil *in se*. Gregory commented: "And in this way is brought about the genesis of evil, arising through the withdrawal of that which is beautiful and good. Now all is beautiful and good that is closely related to the First Good; but that which departs from its relation and likeness to this is certainly devoid of beauty and goodness."[15] Gregory's views on the nature of evil, and its ultimate purgation in the eschaton, are inextricably linked to Origen's conception of the soul *returning* to that same state of blessedness and goodness that was a part of its original created state.

At the conclusion of *De Anima*, Gregory places a lengthy speech on the lips of Macrina—an exposition regarding the spiritual nature of the resurrection. But more than simply attributing the speech to Macrina, Gregory ties in his views to that of the Apostles. Gregory states that the Apostles (Paul, in this case) "indicate the very same thing that we have embodied in our own definition of it, wherein we said that the Resurrection is no other thing than the *re-constitution of our nature in its original form*."[16] Certainly, the reference here is not simply about a physical return (the re-animation of the body, now deified), but also a spiritual repristinating:

> it is to be observed... that this very same thing happens in the Resurrection also; and so we learn from [St. Paul] the fact, not only that our humanity will be then changed into something nobler, but also that what we have therein to expect is nothing else than that which was at the beginning... in this similitude clearly shows that all that blessed state, which arises for us by means of the Resurrection is only a return to our pristine state of grace.[17]

It would be a mistake to envision the "return to our pristine state of grace" as a simple regression line that traces back to the genesis account. Instead, and in accordance with Gregory's latent platonic views of the progress of the soul, the end is *like* the beginning. The similitude is to be found in the return to the goodness of

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[15] Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man,* XII.11, https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/2914.htm, Accessed 07 December 2021.

[16] Gregory of Nyssa, *De Anima,* Accessed 10 December 2021.

[17] Gregory of Nyssa, *De Anima,* Accessed 10 December 2021.

God—an ontological, but not a chronological return. This belief is evidenced in *On the Making of Man* when Gregory speaks of the creation account, and the telos of created humanity is to participate in that same goodness:

> The language of Scripture therefore expresses it concisely by a comprehensive phrase, in saying that man was made in the image of God: for this is the same as to say that He made human nature participant in all good; for if the Deity is the fullness of good, and this is His image, then the image finds its resemblance to the Archetype in being filled with all good.[18]

Gregory's views on this point certainly have a noble philosophical pedigree and find structural support in the Scriptures as well. There is a valid interplay here between philosophy and theology here, yet critics from a more Irenean persuasion might be tempted to ask where in the sacred writings might Gregory find support for his beliefs that the eschaton is primarily remedial, and that all souls will find themselves reconstituted in the goodness of God? To Gregory's views of Scripture we now turn.

Gregory of Nyssa and the Interpretation of Scripture

One need not read far into the New Testament to find two eschatological refrains in Scripture: "exclusion and embrace" (to quote the work of Miroslav Volf). Roberto Noval: "as universalists never tire of pointing out, there are in fact 'two strands' in the Scriptures concerning the final outcome of history, and this necessitates selection and interpretation, with one set of texts making sense of the others."[19] Noval's point might quickly frustrate those looking for a settled solution, but his conclusion is not only warranted, but necessary. To understand the fierce disagreement over the issue of universalism, it is vital to consider the intricacies (and idiosyncrasies!) of exegesis and hermeneutics. How then, did Gregory read his Bible?

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[18] Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man,* XVI.10.

[19] Roberto J. De La Noval, "Divine Drama or Divine Disclosure? Hell, Universalism, and a Parting of the Ways" in *Modern Theology* 26:1 (January 2020), 206.

Gregory was not *opposed* to a literalistic, "straight-forward" reading of the text, and said as much in his preface to his commentary on the Song of Songs.[20] Where he drew the line, however, was when those same people refused to admit that there might be a more profound "non-literal" interpretation of the Biblical text:

> If there is profit even in the text taken for just what it says, we have what is sought right before us. On the other hand, if something is stated | in a concealed manner by way of enigmas and below-the-surface meanings, and so is void of profit in its plain sense, such passages we turn over in our minds, just as the Word teaches us in Proverbs, so that we may understand what is said either as a parable or as a dark saying or as a word of the wise or as an enigma.[21]

Gregory spends the rest of the preface providing an "apologia" for his hermeneutical method—instances of obviously deeper meanings within the text of Scripture. Gregory believed that the expositor of Scripture must "prepare" the text in the same way as one prepared a meal—fit for consumption, not raw materials on a table.[22] When the plain meaning of the text was objectionable (such as Hosea's experience with Gomer), Gregory believed that it compelled the reader to a higher plane of meaning.[23] This insight into Gregory's reading strategy matters because it provides an insight into how, informed by his philosophical and theological priors (an affinity for Platonism, the influence of Clement and Origen), Gregory might come to texts that seemed to be obviously dualistic in their eschatological vision and read them in a way that evacuated their most natural conclusions. Of course, the concern in such an approach is the latent tendency to commit the *petitio principii* fallacy, particularly when a philosophical paradigm operates as *apriori* obviously as it does in Gregory. Getting back to Noval's point, the "strand" that Gregory followed through the Scriptures was clearly the one that favoured a non-

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[20] Ludlow, *Universal Salvation,* 27-8.

[21] Gregory of Nyssa, trans. Richard A Norris Jr., *Homilies on the Song of Songs* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), 3.

[22] Gregory of Nyssa, *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, 11.

[23] Gregory of Nyssa, *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, 5.

dualist conception of eschatological judgment but was a result of a hermeneutic applied with reasonable consistency, as his commentary upon *Songs* suggests.

In 1997, Steven Ray Harmon submitted a doctoral dissertation at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, detailing Gregory's use of scripture as it related to universalism (along with Clement and Origen, following the same line that Ludlow traced). Methodologically, Harmon's approach is rather wooden; almost clinical in its analysis, yet it yields some interesting results. After recounting Gregory's universalist impulse in *De Anima* Harmon argued that Gregory found chief exegetical support for his views in 1 Cor 15:28 and Phil. 2:10-11. A universalistic reading of these texts is not difficult to support out of a "plain reading" and so it should not surprise us that Gregory naturally reads them this way. More interesting, and emblematic of Gregory's hermeneutic above, was Gregory's interpretation of Exodus 10:21-23.[24] Absent a "plain reading" that would endorse Gregory's conception of universal restoration, Gregory was comfortable reading a somewhat surprising conclusion out of the text. Commenting upon the plague of darkness, Gregory supposed:

> Perhaps someone, taking his departure from the fact that after three days of distress in darkness the Egyptians did share in the light, might be led to perceive the final restoration which is expected to take place later in the kingdom of heaven of those who have suffered condemnation in Gehenna. For that *darkness that could be felt,* as the history says, has a great affinity both in its name and in its actual meaning to the *exterior darkness*.[25]

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[24] "Then the Lord said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand toward heaven that there may be darkness over the land of Egypt, a darkness to be felt." **22** So Moses stretched out his hand toward heaven, and there was thick darkness in all the land of Egypt three days; **23** they did not see one another, nor did any rise from his place for three days; but all the people of Israel had light where they dwelt." RSV translation.

[25] Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses*, 2.82, http://www.newhumanityinstitute.org/pdf-articles/Gregory-of-Nyssa-The-Life-of-Moses.pdf, 72, accessed 08 December 2021. See also Harmon's analysis of the passage, Steven Harmon, "*Apokatastasis* and Exegesis: A Comparative Analysis of the use of Scripture in the Eschatological Universalism of Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Gregory of Nyssa", Unpublished PhD Dissertation, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, TX, September 1997, 136.

To Gregory's mind, the darkness experienced by the Egyptians was, or would be, analogous to the darkness of those in Gehenna before the universal restoration. Note the corrective element: just as the Egyptians were chastened by the 9th plague so that they would acknowledge the power and authority of YHWH, so too will the darkness of Gehenna chasten those in disobedience, so that they might finally turn to the light. Modern readers, and indeed, contemporary critical method might find Gregory's reading to be specious. After all, there is nothing in the text from a grammatical-historical standpoint that would legitimate his reading. And yet, Gregory's reading cannot be dismissed so easily. Gregory draws out an almost pastoral application from the text and takes care not to establish a sort of 1:1 hermeneutical correspondence.

Gregory's reading of scripture was not devoid of idiosyncratic tendencies, including a willingness to read a somewhat subjectively determined higher meaning out of certain biblical texts. The objection might be raised that Gregory's reading was selective or displayed a prejudice, and to an extent this might be true. Yet all readings of Scripture involve the reader as an instrumental aspect of interpretation. This is not hermeneutical relativism (the meaning of a text is not forever determined subjectively), but rather, a plain acknowledgement that one's prior *weltanschauung* will be a driver in interpretation. In Gregory's case, as we have seen, his proclivity to understand eschatological punishment as remedial, and the restoration of all things affected the way he read plain, and obtuse, scriptures.

Conclusion: That All *Might* be Saved: Evil, Goodness, and God

Where do these observations about Gregory's philosophical and hermeneutical paradigms leave us? To begin with, it remains important to acknowledge Gregory's tectonic influence upon not just the question of universalism, but Christian theology generally defined. So monumental is his basic approach that David Bentley Hart remarked:

> The first theological insight I learned from Gregory of Nyssa—and I suspect the last to which I shall cling when all others fall away—is that the Christian doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* is not merely a cosmological or metaphysical claim, but also an

> eschatological claim about the world's relation to God, and hence a moral claim about the nature of God in himself.[26]

Hart's observations are incisive, to be sure, and they evidence an almost emotive response to the idea of universalism. Few theological doctrines strike so deeply in the heart as that of the doctrine of salvation. Humanity suffers. Sin and death encroach upon life and goodness; so fundamental is the existential plea for help that the very idea that it could go unanswered, or worse, rejected, is intolerable. And so universalism retains an intuitive appeal that transcends mere cogitation—it is a *cri de coeur*. But the way is not so straightforward. Paradoxically perhaps, the media of divine revelation (the God-man Christ Jesus, the Holy Scriptures, the Tradition of the Church) all speak of consequence: of reward and punishment, of glory and agony. It is these media that make fundamental sense of the human story—it will not do to take the beginning of the story and write our own ending, no matter how much we desire the conclusion. And so we find ourselves, in the words of David Jeffrey "inextricably middled."[27] Caught between moral intuitions and divine revelation that includes a disclosure of perdition of which we struggle to make sense. Gregory's philosophical framework and hermeneutical method should, I think, be an encouragement to those struggling with the same question(s) today. To give quarter to the voices of the past (in Gregory's case, Clement and Origen) and apply a thoughtful hermeneutic to the reading of scripture will, God willing, yield progress in understanding fraught theological issues such as eschatological judgment. I confess that I am not persuaded by Gregory's conception of the eschaton—but this is of little consequence. I am rather more persuaded by Gregory's attentiveness to the tradition and to the Scriptures, and by his willingness to speak from a deep-seated confidence in the goodness of God who will, in the last day, be all in all.

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[26] Hart, "God, Creation, and Evil", 2.

[27] Jeffrey, quoted in Loren Wilkinson, "Stories, Your Story and God's Story", *Crux Journal*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (September 1997), 30.

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