

# Gregory of Nyssa: Life of Moses

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## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 *Gregory of Nyssa*

Gregory (ca 335/40-395) was the younger brother of Basil the Great. The brothers were raised in a wealthy and pious milieu in Pontus. Gregory was mainly taught by his brother and by his sister Macrina. He was not educated in any of the formal educational centers, but he read widely, especially Greek literature, philosophy and the sciences. Earlier church fathers like Origenes inspired him as well. Initially Gregory pursued a career as an orator in Caesarea, to the dismay of his brother Basil who accused him of preferring the name *rhetor* over that of *Christian*. He was, it seems, won over by the revival of Greek and pagan thinking that was at its height under Emperor Julian the Apostate

In 372, Basil, since 370 Metropolitan of Caesarea, appointed his brother Gregory to be Bishop of Nyssa. That small city was 60 km west of Caesarea. Basil hoped that his brother would play a major role in sorting out the problems in the province. Basil's major fight was against the efforts of Emperor Valens to stamp out the Nicean faith in favor of Arianism. Basil was disappointed: Gregory was not the strong administrator he had hoped for.

In 376, Gregory was deposed as a bishop and replaced by an Arian anti-bishop. When Valens

died (378) Gregory could return to his post in Nyssa. Shortly thereafter, Basil also died. It seems that Gregory then felt responsible to be the heir to the theological, monastic and ecclesiastical dreams of his brother. From this time on, Gregory's energy seemed limitless.

Gregory was present at the Council of Constantinople of 381. He was such a solid orthodox bishop, that Emperor Theodosius made communion with him (and with bishop Helladios of Caesarea and Otreios of Melitene in Armenia) the litmus test for any bishop in Pontus and Cappadocia.

### 1.2 *Versus Eunomius and Apollinaris*

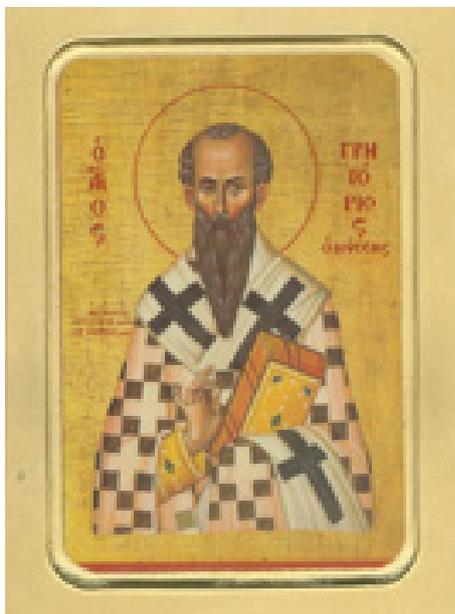
Gregory theologically fought both Arianism (Eunomius) and the opposite movement, that accorded Jesus no human soul (Apollinarius)

#### **Eunomius**

Eunomius (died 393), one of the leaders of the extreme Arians, was born in Cappadocia early in the 4th century. He studied theology in Alexandria and was appointed bishop of Cyzicus (Anatolia) in 360, but he was soon deposed. The Eunomian school taught that between the Creator and creation there could be no essential, but only a moral, resemblance. "As the Unbegotten, God is an absolutely simple being; an act of generation would involve a contradiction of His essence by introducing duality into the Godhead." Eunomius altered the baptismal formula; instead of baptizing in the name of the Trinity, he baptized in the name of the Creator and into the death of Christ. This was regarded by the orthodox as so serious that Eunomians on returning to the church were rebaptized, though in general Arians were not. The Eunomian heresy was condemned by the Council of Constantinople in 381.

#### **Apollinaris**

Apollinaris (died 390) was a bishop of Laodicea in Syria. As a noted opponent of Arianism, Apollinaris' eagerness to emphasize the deity of Jesus and the unity of his person led him so far



as to deny the existence of a rational human soul in Christ's human nature, this being replaced in him by the logos, so that his body was a glorified and spiritualized form of humanity. It was alleged that the system of Apollinaris was really Docetism, that if the Godhood without constraint swayed the manhood there was no possibility of real humanity in Jesus. This idea was condemned by the Council of Constantinople.

### 1.3 Gregory of Nyssa's theology about the Trinity

Gregory was a profound Greek theologian. His major accomplishment was the contextualization of Christian theology into the culture of the best of Greek thinking.

Gregory developed the theology of the Trinity into what the Eastern Church continued to teach.

Following Basil's lead, Gregory argued that the three Persons of the Trinity can be understood along the model of three members of a single class: thus, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three in the same way that Peter, Paul, and Timothy are three men. So why do we not say there are three Gods? Gregory answers that, normally, we can distinguish between different members of the same class by the fact that they have different shapes, sizes, and colors. Even if they are identical, they still occupy different points in space. But none of this is true of the incorporeal being of God. Even lesser spiritual beings can still be distinguished by their varying degrees of goodness, but this does not apply to God either. In fact, the only way to tell the

three Persons apart is by their mutual relations — thus, the only difference between the Father and the Son is that the former is the Father of the latter, and the latter is the Son of the former. As Gregory puts it, it is impossible to think of one member of the Trinity without thinking of the others too: they are like a chain of three links, pulling each other along.

### 1.4 Knowing God

Gregory is the first Christian theologian to argue for the infinity of God. Origen of Alexandria, a major influence on Gregory, had explicitly argued that God is limited, since to be limited is to be clearly defined and knowable. Gregory, however, argues that if God is limited he must be limited by something greater than himself. As there is nothing greater than God, he is therefore without boundaries, and thus infinite. The idea had already been developed by Neoplatonic philosophers, especially Plotinus. But Gregory is the first Christian theologian to defend the concept.

Gregory argues that since God is infinite he cannot be comprehended. Origen had spoken of the spiritual journey as a progression of increasing illumination, as the mystic studies Scripture and comes to learn more about God. Gregory taught on the other hand that God was knowable in his manifestations but that ultimately one must transcend *gnosis*, since knowledge is based on reflection. *Gnosis* is limited and can become a barrier between man and God. If one wishes to commune with God one must enter into the Divine filial relation with



God the Father through Jesus Christ, who is one in *ousia* (essence) with the Father; that results in pure faith without any preconceived notions of God. Once one reaches this point one can commune with God just as Moses did in Nyssa's mystical classic, *The Life of Moses*.

Gregory speaks of three stages of spiritual growth: initial darkness of ignorance, then spiritual illumination, and finally a darkness of the mind in contemplation of the God who in being or essence cannot be comprehended. Like earlier authors, including Philo, he uses the story of Moses as an allegory for the spiritual life. Moses first meets God in the burning bush, a theophany of light and illumination, but then he meets him again in the cloud, where he realizes that God cannot be seen by the eyes. Ascending Mount Sinai, he finally comes to the 'divine darkness', and realizes that God cannot be known by the mind either.

It is only through not-knowing and not-seeing that God can, paradoxically, be known and seen, knowledge that can only be gained through an 'ascending life of holiness'. This notion would be extremely influential in both Western and Eastern spirituality. Thus he is a major figure in the history of theology and spirituality.

### **1.5 *Epektasis (constant progress)***

Related to this is Gregory's idea of *epektasis* or constant progress. Platonic metaphysics teaches that stability is perfection and change is evil. In contrast, Gregory described the ideal of human perfection as constant progress in virtue and godliness. In his theology, God himself has always been perfect and has never changed, and never will. Humanity fell from grace in the Garden of Eden, but rather than return to an unchanging state, humanity's goal is to become more and more perfect, more like God, even though humanity will never understand, much less attain, God's transcendence. This idea has had a profound influence on the Eastern Orthodox teaching regarding *theosis* (deification).

## **2 The Life of Moses**

### **2.1 Introduction**

> **Read Book I**, #2-11 (pp. 3-5) and Discuss: How does St Gregory describe the perfect Christian life? And how does he describe God?

### **2.2 Stage One: *The Burning Bush***

> **Read together** Book 1 #20 (p. 8)

Note: The focus is on knowing God through the senses.

> **Read:** Book 2 # 19-26 (pp. 27-28) and Discuss: What must we learn about God from the Burning bush? Which person in the Trinity gets the attention here. Why is that so?

### **2.3 Stage Two: *Moses on the Mountain***

> **Read:** Book I #42-49 (pp. 14-16)

Note: Gregory introduces the concept that deeper knowledge of God is linked to a virtuous life and that it goes beyond the senses into the realm of the mind – even beyond the mind. 'He should believe that the Divine exists, and he should not examine it with respect to... [its] mode of being... since it is unattainable.' So, neither the senses nor the mind make us comprehend the divine nature.

> **Read:** Book II #152-161 (pp. 56-59) and Book II #162-165 (pp. 59-60) and Discuss: How we can know God according to Gregory of Nyssa?

### **2.4 Stage Three: *Moses in the Rock***

> **Read:** Book II #219-227 (pp. 74-76)

Note: Gregory shows how this 'back of God' must not be taken literally.

Gregory then shows how Moses was always desirous for knowing God more. He desired to know God in his true Being.

> **Read:** Book II #230-239 (pp. 76-78) and Discuss: How does the lack of satisfaction in knowing the Being of God prove true knowledge of the Being of God?

> **Read:** Book II #248-255, 320 (pp. 80-82, 97) and Discuss: Where do we find the deep knowledge of God?



