

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

‘IN YOUR LIGHT WE SHALL SEE LIGHT’: VIRTUOUS READING AND A THEOLOGY OF INTERPRETATION IN GREGORY OF NAZIANZUS’S ORATION 31

Coleman M. Ford

Gregory of Nazianzus (c. 329–390 AD) developed a robustly Trinitarian framework for biblical interpretation. Understanding his pneumatological conception of illumination and deification enables us to understand his distinction between impious and pious (or virtuous) readings of Scripture. This speaks to some of the problems inherent in modern exegesis.

Introduction

Jerome praises Gregory of Nazianzus (c. AD 329–390) as ‘a man of outstanding eloquence’ who taught him the Scriptures at his school.¹ Undoubtedly this high praise is well deserved, although recent studies of biblical interpretation in the early church have noted the lack of extensive exegesis in Gregory’s work.² R.P.C. Hanson mentions the ‘ordinary common sense’ nature of Gregory’s exegesis.³ Ben Fulford states, ‘Gregory of Nazianzus does not conform to our expectations of patristic exegesis and has attracted relatively little sustained attention as a biblical interpreter.’⁴ With this in mind, we can perhaps say that Gregory’s most valuable contribution to biblical studies was in providing a theology of the proper Christian interpretation of Scripture. Though he never produced a body of sermons, Gregory was deeply concerned with interpreting Scripture in a properly Trinitarian manner. For Gregory, the pious see the Triune God revealed in Scripture. Trinitarian interpretation thus reveals the virtuous character of the reader, while non-Trinitarian interpretation demonstrates his impiety.

To achieve this end, the Holy Spirit must first transform the reader, making it possible for him to grasp the Trinitarian nature of Scripture.

¹ Saint Jerome, *On Illustrious Men* (trans. Thomas P. Halton; Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1999), p. 151.

² Andrew Hofer, *Christ in the Life and Teaching of Gregory of Nazianzus* (*Oxford Early Christian Studies*; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 35.

³ R.P.C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy, 318–381* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), p. 846.

⁴ Ben Fulford, ‘Gregory of Nazianzus and Biblical Interpretation’ in *Re-Reading Gregory of Nazianzus: Essays on History, Theology, and Culture* (ed. Christopher A. Beely; Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2012), p. 31.

At the same time, the reader will also grow in godliness and virtue. This process leads him towards greater understanding of Scripture in the light of the Triune God. Conversely, this theology of interpretation paints a picture of the unspiritual or impious reader. Those who do not see the Triune God in Scripture demonstrate a lack of understanding. They lack illumination and so remain unable to grow in virtue. Christopher Beeley describes this as a 'hermeneutic of piety' in Gregory's writings.⁵ An inability to discern God's Triune nature demonstrates not only deficient exegesis, but it demonstrates impiety as well.

In *Oration* 31.3 Gregory asserts:

Yes, some people, very eager to defend the letter, are angry with us for introducing a God, the Holy Spirit, who is a stranger and an intruder. They must understand that 'they are afraid where no fear is.' They must recognize clearly that their love for the letter is a cloak for irreligion, as shall be proved presently when we do our best to refute their objections. For our part we have such confidence in the Godhead of the Spirit, that, rash though some may find it, we shall begin our theological exposition to the Three...We receive the Son's light from the Father's light in the light of the Spirit: that is what we ourselves have seen and what we now proclaim—it is the plain and simple explanation of the Trinity. Let the treacherous deal treacherously, let the transgressor transgress—we shall preach what we know.⁶

Using this as our point of departure, we shall see how Gregory explains the means and manner of understanding the biblical text in the light of the Trinity and how such a reading reveals the virtuous nature of the reader.

⁵ Christopher A. Beeley, *Gregory of Nazianzus on Trinity and the Knowledge of God: In Your Light We Shall See Light* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 184.

⁶ *Orat.* 31.3 (SC 250:278). Quotations from *Oration* 31 are taken from St Gregory of Nazianzus, *On God and Christ: The Five Theological Orations and Two Letters to Cledonius* (ed. and trans. Frederick Williams and Lionel Wickham, Popular Patristics Series 23; Crestwood, N.Y.: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002). Quotations from the original Greek come from Gregory of Nazianzus, *Discours 27–31* (ed. and trans. Paul Gallay; SC 250; Paris: Cerf, 2008). I will cite according to chapter numbers in *Oration* 31, giving reference to the SC volume and page number.

Historical Background

Following the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD, much work remained in elucidating the person and work of the Spirit. Many theologians, including Athanasius and the Cappadocians, dedicated much of their work to filling in these gaps from the original Nicene declaration. Gregory of Nazianzus was the Spirit's most ardent defender. T.A. Noble declares, 'Gregory stands out among the Cappadocian Fathers as the one most ready to declare the deity of the Spirit.'⁷ Regarding *Oration 31*, Beeley praises this 'premier example...in urgent need of re-evaluation.'⁸ Gregory demonstrates an unyielding adulation of the Holy Spirit as God. His critics contended, however, that he had introduced an unscriptural deity. These critics, known as the *Pneumatomachi* or 'Assailants of the Spirit,' reduced the Spirit to little more than a high-ranking angel.⁹ In response, Gregory asserted that their apparent love for Scripture was nothing but a 'cloak for irreligion.'¹⁰ Such irreligion (or impiety) demonstrated their inability to understand the biblical text and the Triune God revealed therein.

His *Five Theological Orations*, delivered while serving as bishop in Constantinople around 380 AD, provide a window into his shrewd theological acumen. In *Oration 31*, commonly known as his *Fifth Theological Oration*, Gregory resolves to expose those who accuse him of introducing this supposedly counterfeit god. This theological oration focuses solely on the deity of the Holy Spirit. It is here that Gregory posits the idea of a virtuous reader and introduces his theology of biblical interpretation. Gregory asserts that confessing the Holy Spirit as God is logically essential, theologically unavoidable and biblically incontrovertible. Understanding the deity of the Spirit assures one of the illumined status of the virtuous reader, because it demonstrates his piety and ability to read Scripture properly. Gregory argues that only someone who has been changed by the Spirit can confess the Spirit's deity. In

⁷ T.A. Noble, 'Gregory Nazianzen's Use of Scripture in Defence of the Deity of the Spirit,' *Tyndale Bulletin* 39 (1988): p. 123.

⁸ Christopher A. Beeley, 'The Holy Spirit in Gregory Nazianzen: The Pneumatology of *Oration 31*,' in *God in Early Christian Thought* (eds. Andrew B. McGowan, Brian E. Daley S.J. and Timothy J. Gaden; Leiden: Brill, 2009), p. 153.

⁹ For a summary of the *Pneumatomachi* and their assertions see Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*, pp. 760–772. For a full treatment on the Pneumatomachian controversy and the pro-Nicene response see Michael A.G. Haykin, *The Spirit of God: The Exegesis of 1 and 2 Corinthians in the Pneumatomachian Controversy of the Fourth Century* (Leiden: Brill, 1994).

¹⁰ *Orat.* 31.3 (SC 250:278).

essence, people need divine eyes in order to see the Spirit in Scripture. This change demonstrates an understanding regarding the nature of progressive revelation, the nature of illumination and sanctification and the nature of Scripture in knowing God the Holy Spirit. Proper knowledge of all three aspects confirms proper knowledge of the Holy Spirit as truly God.

The Necessity of Progressive Revelation

In *Oration 31*, Gregory argues for a progressive revelation of the persons of the Godhead, relating this process to the redemptive history found in Scripture. Each era of history, or 'shaking' (*seismos*) corresponds to an additional revelation of God's nature.¹¹ While Gregory understands biblical history as a progressive shedding of layers (idols for law and law for gospel), the revelation of God *adds* layers of understanding. If readers can see how God's redemptive plan unfolds in Scripture, understanding the progressive revelation of his nature should follow easily. The old covenant reveals the Father while hinting at the Son. The new covenant reveals the Son while giving us 'a glimpse of the Spirit's Godhead.'¹² This progressive revelation of the Godhead is based on a capacity to receive him safely. Gregory asserts:

It was dangerous for the Son to be preached openly when the Godhead of the Father was still unacknowledged. It was dangerous, too, for the Holy Spirit to be made [known] when the Son had not been received. It could mean men jeopardizing what did lie within their powers, as happens to those encumbered with a diet too strong for them or who gaze at sunlight with eyes as yet too feeble for it.¹³

God reveals according to man's capacity. This leads Gregory to ask that if the Spirit is of God, how could he be anything but fully divine? The revelation of the Spirit does not diminish divinity—rather, it fulfils it. This insistence drives the entire oration.

For Gregory, this is a doxological matter. Proper worship of God includes proper worship of the Holy Spirit. Each era of biblical history brings a new revelation by which God is properly worshipped. The church, inaugurated by the coming of the Spirit, fulfils the worship of God through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Noble remarks:

¹¹ *Orat.* 31.25 (SC 250:322). Here Gregory alludes to Matthew 27:51.

¹² *Orat.* 31.26 (SC 250:326).

¹³ *Orat.* 31.26 (SC 250:326).

Gregory thought of himself as living in the period that began with Pentecost, the apostolic age. He is not saying therefore that the full revelation of the Spirit's deity came after the New Testament Scriptures were completed, but that the Spirit's deity was revealed when he came at Pentecost to dwell with the disciples. It was then that the things which the disciples could not bear before the Passion were taught by the Spirit.¹⁴

Believers today have the benefit of this progressive revelation that, for Gregory, continues into the present. For Gregory, this light 'shines on us bit by bit...neither revealing it suddenly nor concealing it to the last.'¹⁵ With this, Gregory provides theologians with the first patristic understanding of the ongoing role of the Spirit in doctrinal development.¹⁶ The age of the Spirit also brings with it illumination and deification, aspects of *Oration* 31 to which we will now turn.

Illumination and Deification

In line with his progressive understanding of revelation, Gregory argues for the divinity of the Spirit based upon his effects on believers. According to Gregory, it is impossible to become like God if the Spirit who regenerates is not truly divine. The Spirit enlightens and sanctifies. Becoming like God involves God himself as the agent of change in process known as *theōsis*. He states, 'If he has the same rank as I have, how can he make me God, how can he link me with deity?'¹⁷ Toffelson expounds the use of 2 Peter 1:4 and 1 John 3:2 regarding this point for Gregory.¹⁸ Donald F. Winslow notes the interchangeable nature between the terms

¹⁴ Noble, 'Gregory Nazianzen's Use of Scripture,' p. 118.

¹⁵ *Orat.* 31.27 (SC 250:328).

¹⁶ See J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (5th edn.; London: Continuum, 2011), p. 261. See also Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition* (vol. 1 of *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), p. 211.

¹⁷ *Orat.* 31.4 (SC 250:282).

¹⁸ For a thorough treatment of *theōsis* in the Greek fathers see Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). For a closer look at *theōsis* in Gregory, see Torstein Tollefsen, 'Theōsis According to Gregory,' in *Gregory of Nazianzus: Images and Reflections* (eds. Jostein Børtnes and Tomas Hägg; Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2006), pp. 257–270. Toffelson notes the importance of these texts as a basis for *theōsis* in Scripture and subsequently demonstrates how Gregory relies on these texts in his understanding of *theōsis*.

salvation and *theōsis* for Gregory.¹⁹ This process of *theōsis* includes both a point of salvation and the growing in Christlikeness. As such, there was no restricted meaning for either term but each encompassed aspects of the other.²⁰

Gregory does not separate illumination from deification in any clear way. The Spirit is responsible for our rebirth, and this rebirth is linked to new creation while further linked to 'recognition of the worth of him who effected it.'²¹ Beeley observes:

The fundamental basis of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit...lies in the Christian life of deification, which begins in baptism. The Spirit is known to be God, and is therefore worshipped and adored, because it deifies Christians. Paradoxically, this means that the Spirit's divinity is recognized only from the Christian's actual experience of the divine life, as it is conveyed through the Holy Spirit in the Church....Elsewhere in *Oration 31* Gregory seems to argue for the Spirit's divinity on the basis of worship: that because Christians worship the Spirit it must be God.... the direct proof from baptismal deification is the basis of this argument as well.²²

Baptism enlightens the recipient to the divine life in the Holy Spirit and thus establishes the basis for deification.²³ This understanding of deification—identified with baptism—leads to worship and adoration; links in what Gregory calls 'a truly golden chain of salvation.'²⁴

¹⁹ Donald F. Winslow, *The Dynamics of Salvation: A Study in Gregory of Nazianzus* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Philadelphia Patristic Foundation, 1979), p. 179.

²⁰ For more on this aspect of *theōsis*, see J.A. McGuckin, 'The Strategic Adaptation of Deification in the Cappadocians' in *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Traditions* (eds. Michael J. Christensen and Jeffery A. Wittung; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), pp. 95–114; see also Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*, pp. 213–225.

²¹ *Orat.* 31.28 (SC 250:332).

²² Beeley, *Gregory of Nazianzus*, p. 175.

²³ For a discussion on the image of illumination in baptism with reference to Gregory see Robin M. Jensen, *Baptismal Imagery in Early Christianity: Ritual, Visual, and Theological Dimensions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), p. 115. For a summary of Gregory's baptismal theology, including the concepts of illumination and deification, see Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), pp. 596–602.

²⁴ *Orat.* 31.28 (SC 250:332).

Illumination and Baptism

Gregory focused on the Trinitarian baptismal formula as a clear indication of a Trinitarian confession. He states, ‘But if he is a creature, why do we believe in him, why does he make us complete in him?’²⁵ Baptism in the name of the Son and the Spirit along with the Father makes little sense if the Son and Spirit are not divine in the same manner as the Father. There is an equality of attribution that would take exegetical gymnastics to avoid, according to Gregory. Gregory surmises that one’s illumination through baptism verifies that the Spirit is worthy of adoration. He exclaims, ‘Were the Spirit not to be worshipped, how could he deify me through baptism?’²⁶ For Gregory there is an intimate relationship between baptism, illumination and worship of the Spirit, a relationship necessarily broken by his opponents. By questioning their erroneous interpretation, Gregory challenges the legitimacy of their baptism and salvation.

Only those who have been illumined (and thus deified) by the Holy Spirit can understand his divine nature. Beeley adds, ‘[T]he ground of Gregory’s praise of the Spirit and his confession that the Spirit is God lies in his own experience of the Spirit’s making him God, so that the Spirit’s work in the Christian life is the source of the doctrine of the Spirit.’²⁷ The Spirit in the church—experienced first in the water of baptism—is the source of personal confession, leading to personal adoration of the Spirit as God. But according to Gregory, this notion is not without biblical support. He warns, ‘May he who does not stand thus, who is a time-serving turncoat, irresolute on matters of import—may such a man, as Scripture has it, ‘not see the day star rising’ nor the glory of its heavenly brilliance!’²⁸

Illumination and Purity

Anthony Meredith notes Gregory’s use of ‘light’ and ‘darkness’ in regards to salvation.²⁹ Salvation for Gregory is the process of receiving vision through the enlightening of the Holy Spirit in order that one may be able to behold the light and glory of God. Gregory states, ‘We receive the Son’s light from the Father’s light in the light of the Spirit.’³⁰ Meredith

²⁵ *Orat.* 31.6 (SC 250:286). Translators Williams and Wickham take this as a reference to baptism. See Gregory, *On God and Christ*, p. 121.

²⁶ *Orat.* 31.28 (SC 250:332).

²⁷ Beeley, *Gregory of Nazianzus*, p. 175.

²⁸ *Orat.* 31.28 (SC 250:330).

²⁹ Anthony Meredith, *The Cappadocians* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1995), pp. 42–3.

³⁰ *Orat.* 31.3 (SC 250:280)

also notes the strong moral flavour of this light—purity of life being key for Gregory, as with other Cappadocians.³¹ Enlightening and purity are intimately connected, just as darkness and impurity are similarly related.

Beeley helpfully explains the 'two poles of Gregory's spiritual dialectic' regarding illumination.³² On the one hand, Gregory asserts that a divine light is conveyed to the believer. On the other, the need for purification and the removal of impurities plays a key role in his work. In some instances Gregory discusses the need for purification, which then leads to illumination. Virtuous living leads to greater knowledge of God, with action leading one to a greater contemplation of God. In another instance Gregory speaks of the need for purification first through actions, which only then is followed by receiving illumination from the Spirit. Rather than occurring in chronological sequence, Gregory presents a 'dynamic relationship between...purification and illumination, so that they are, in effect, two dimensions of a single movement.'³³

Proper Christian Interpretation

Frances Young shows that Gregory's use of Scripture was part of a 'Christianised literary form,' with the Bible serving as the main strand of an intricate oratorical fabric interwoven among various literary forms such as eulogies, orations and festal declamations.³⁴ Hofer describes this as '[a] panoramic vision of the Biblical Word.'³⁵ Gregory exhibits a masterful use of the biblical text interlaced throughout *Oration* 31. Commenting on the Spirit-deniers he states, 'Let the treacherous deal treacherously, let the transgressor transgress—we shall preach what we know. We shall climb a lofty mountain and shout it out; if we are not given a hearing below. We shall extol the Spirit; we shall not be afraid.' Relating Isaiah 21:2 to the treachery of those who believe falsely, Gregory paints a rich biblical portrait of the impiety of his opponents.

This impiety manifests itself through an improper reading of Scripture and an assertion of the Spirit's lack of divine status. Regarding his opponents Gregory states, '[They] must have something to blaspheme

³¹ Meredith, *The Cappadocians*, p. 5.

³² Beeley, *Gregory of Nazianzus*, p. 109.

³³ Beeley, *Gregory of Nazianzus*, p. 109.

³⁴ Frances M. Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 97–116.

³⁵ Hofer, *Christ in the Life and Teaching of Gregory of Nazianzus*, p. 37.

or life would be unliveable.³⁶ These readers truncate Scripture and miss the Triune God revealed therein. Their truncation reveals and confirms their impiety. In doing this they have excluded themselves from the God of Scripture who is worshipped in the church. Frederick Norris notes,

Gregory would be reticent to think of the Bible as a totally separate component in theology, but what it says is of utmost importance; no position should ever be taken without scriptural support. Yet the totality of revelation should be involved in the interpretation of each text. Holy Writ has its own *skopos*, its own intent. And that intent is made known to the church in worship.³⁷

As Gregory asserts, the impious defend the letter to the detriment of the Spirit.³⁸ They adulterate the meaning of the text because they provide a piecemeal presentation incongruent with the essence of the whole.

The Divine Hermeneutical Lens

Analysing Romans 1:4, Michael Haykin remarks, ‘Since innate holiness belongs only to God, to call the Spirit ‘holy’ is to imply that he is holy by nature and must be divine. There is, however, no extended discussion in the New Testament of the Spirit’s nature.’³⁹ Gregory identifies his critics in *Oration* 31 as those who deny the divinity of the Spirit based on a supposed paucity of biblical references to it. Scriptural attestation of the Spirit’s deity was the heart of the issue for all parties involved. Knowing this, Gregory argues from a theological interpretation of Scripture. The issue was not the Bible—the issue was its interpretation.

³⁶ *Orat.* 31.2 (SC 250:278).

³⁷ Frederick Norris, ‘Gregory Nazianzen: Constructing and Constructed by Scripture’ in *The Bible in Greek Christian Antiquity* (ed. and trans. Paul M. Blowers; Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), p. 153. See also Robert Louis Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeing the Face of God* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003). Wilkin highlights early patristic exegesis which upheld the Bible as ‘the ground and pillar of our faith,’ quoting Irenaeus. The Scriptures were an essential whole, and could not be broken less the full story of Scripture be ruptured. This understanding of Scripture would be the approach that ‘informed all later interpretation’ (p. 68).

³⁸ *Orat.* 31.3 (SC 250:279)

³⁹ Michael A.G. Haykin, *The Empire of the Holy Spirit* (Mountain Home, Ark.: Borderstone, 2010), p. 38.

One must have a divine hermeneutical lens in order to bring the Spirit into focus.⁴⁰

Gregory introduces his exegetical method in 31.22 stating, 'Some things mentioned in the Bible are not factual; some factual things are not mentioned; some nonfactual things receive no mention there; some things are both factual and mentioned.' We know some things about God through direct statements, others from inference, yet others from interpreting metaphor. We know that God does not truly 'forget' or 'sleep.' Likewise, Gregory asks where in Scripture do we find descriptive terms such as 'ingenerate' or 'unoriginate?'⁴¹ These words are true yet inferred. Likewise, many literal statements can be believed at face value, but relying solely on this interpretative lens makes one guilty of an 'overthrowing of 'the faith' and an emptying of 'the mystery.'⁴² His point can be summed up as: do not just read your Bible, read it correctly.

Despite a lack of any explicit attestation of the Spirit's deity, Gregory remains undeterred. Noble observes, 'For Gregory as for Athanasius, the meaning of the *onomata*, the words of Scripture, lies in the *pragmata*, the divine realities to which they refer. And the words may imply more than they explicitly state.'⁴³ Gregory, while providing numerous texts for reference, is no mere proof-texter. If read properly, Scripture will attest the divine nature of the Holy Spirit. But how should this be done? Beeley notes, 'For Gregory the confession of the Spirit's divinity arises from the interpretation of Scripture according to the Spirit, or spiritual exegesis from the perception of the deeper meaning of Scripture, which comes only with the illumination of the interpreter by the divine light.'⁴⁴ Gregory's so-

⁴⁰ John J. O'Keefe and R.R. Reno have coined the term 'sanctified vision' in order to help modern readers understand the nature of early Christian interpretation. While O'Keefe and Reno focus on the Christological lens of early church exegesis, this idea is helpful for understanding Nazianzen's pneumatological interpretive emphasis. For additional insight see John J. O'Keefe and R.R. Reno, *Sanctified Vision: An Introduction to Early Christian Interpretation of the Bible* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005). Additionally, Michael Graves provides a helpful summary of early Christian formulations regarding illumination and interpretation. Numerous fathers insisted on 'special' or 'divine' grace for proper understanding of Scripture. For more see Michael Graves, *The Inspiration and Interpretation of Scripture: What the Early Church Can Teach Us* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), pp. 43–44.

⁴¹ *Orat.* 31.23 (SC 250:318).

⁴² *Orat.* 31.23 (SC 250:320).

⁴³ Noble, 'Gregory Nazianzen's Use of Scripture,' p. 115.

⁴⁴ Beeley, 'The Pneumatology of Oration 31,' p. 155.

called ‘swarm of proof-texts’ can only be properly read by those who are not ‘utterly dense or utterly alien to the Spirit.’⁴⁵ Additionally, tradition plays a primary role in the interpretation of Scripture for understanding the deity of the Holy Spirit.⁴⁶

A Trinitarian Grammar

Brian Daley emphasizes Gregory’s skill as a theological grammarian. His is a grammar ‘for using the language of substance and individual, universal and particular, in a way that allows real growth in the understanding of the Church’s baptismal faith without upsetting the delicate internal balance of its paradoxes.’⁴⁷ Gregory’s grammar dealt intimately with the Triune God. Though his language delicately weaved the fabric of Trinitarian theology, it was much more than just words on the page. This language, grounded in Scripture, described the God who is revealed through redemptive history, and not just what Christians happen to believe *about* God.⁴⁸ This point must not be missed. John McGuckin adds, ‘For Gregory, the Trinity is a dynamic and soteriological experience, the beauty of God experienced in the liturgy of prayer and expressed in the Church’s confession of praise...To approach Trinitarian doctrine outside this nurturing context...renders theology into an abstract, sterile, and ultimately arrogant exercise of impiety.’⁴⁹

Proper reading about the God of Scripture leads to understanding the reality of his Triune nature. If scriptural language is read and interpreted any other way, then it is a false and immoral reading. Such a reader is immoral because he does not believe rightly about God. Consequently, he remains in the dark, unable to perceive the things of God despite the fact that he holds his Word in his hands. For Gregory, all interpretation is necessarily Trinitarian. When Scripture speaks of God, it is the Triune God to which it refers. In this way, Gregory asserts the deity of the Spirit and describes his character and actions in union with the Father and Son.

⁴⁵ *Orat.* 31.29 (SC 250:332).

⁴⁶ See Noble, ‘Gregory Nazianzen’s Use of Scripture,’ pp. 113–4. For a comparison regarding the role of tradition for Basil and Gregory see R.P.C. Hanson, ‘Basil’s Doctrine of Tradition in Relation to the Holy Spirit,’ *Vigiliae Christianae* 22, no. 4 (1968): p. 255.

⁴⁷ Brian E. Daley, *Gregory of Nazianzus* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2006), p. 49.

⁴⁸ Daley, *Gregory of Nazianzus*, p. 49.

⁴⁹ John A. McGuckin, ‘Perceiving Light from Light in Light’ (Oration 31.3): The Trinitarian Theology of Saint Gregory the Theologian,’ *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 39, no. 1–2 (1994): pp. 18–19.

Not to read Scripture that way is to deny the Trinitarian confession of the Christian faith.

Gregory and Virtuous Reading

An ideal of virtuous reading emerges from this analysis of biblical interpretation in Gregory's *Oration* 31. This ideal both presupposes and guarantees growth in virtue. For Gregory, a Christian—that is, Trinitarian—reading of Scripture is the virtuous one. Any other reading demonstrates impiety on the part of the reader, no matter how well-intended that reader may be. To those who read differently Gregory states, 'You must be literally impenetrable, utterly unspiritual, if you feel any hesitancy here or need any further instruction.'⁵⁰ Interpretation that divides the Godhead to 'three separate causes' or combines the Godhead into a single persona is 'equally irreligious.'⁵¹ For Gregory, interpretation turns to impiety when interpreters isolate passages and produce idiosyncratic inferences. Though readers may see and read the same text, a virtuous disposition wrought by the Spirit distinguishes true from false readings of Scripture.

This is more than misunderstanding the historical data of the text. In regards to modern biblical studies, the goal of interpretation does not necessarily focus on character transformation. Green observes:

[T]heological interests are not the standard fare in biblical scholarship... biblical scholars typically have been trained in ways that are at best agnostic and at worst antithetical to theological interpretation, and... the accredited standards of biblical scholarship are commonly articulated in ways that circumvent the interests and needs of the church of Jesus Christ.⁵²

Gregory recognized this issue in his day. When interpreters of the text do not yield Triune results, their impiety is manifest. Reading Scripture does not guarantee comprehension of the divine. The reader must first be transformed and be in the process of transformation. Apart from this process of illumination and deification, as Gregory understood it, the thrust of the biblical text remains outside the grasp of its reader. This is the crux of a hermeneutic of piety.

⁵⁰ *Orat.* 31.30 (SC 250:336); see *Orat.* 2.36.

⁵¹ *Orat.* 31.30 (SC 250:338).

⁵² Joel B. Green, *Practicing Theological Interpretation: Engaging Biblical Texts for Faith and Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), p. 8.

In several modern conceptions of exegesis, meaning and explanation become the goal.⁵³ For Gregory, meaning cannot be ascertained apart from the illuminative effects of the Spirit. Though individual components of Scripture may be apprehended, the Spirit himself is not. This was the issue with the *Pneumatomachi*; it remains an issue today. Retrieving this understanding of a pious reading of Scripture will serve modern interpreters by elucidating their main task. Many contemporary interpreters have begun calling readers back to this hermeneutical journey.⁵⁴ Cultivating virtuous practices as integral to interpretation serves to reclaim that which Gregory heralds. N. Clayton Croy states, ‘The pious reader hopes to encounter God in the text and be led by the Holy Spirit in discovering meaning and being transformed by it.’⁵⁵

Conclusion

In responding to his critics, Gregory deals a potentially fatal blow. Those who do not confess the deity of the Spirit read Scripture improperly, because they lack illumination and deification. In essence, they are non-believers and idolaters, worshipping a false god. In saying this, Gregory establishes a theology of interpretation and a ‘hermeneutic of piety.’ Because his opponents misread Scripture, they are unable to worship the Triune God revealed therein. For Gregory, such interpreters are unspiritual and impious. While everyone may be reading the Bible, not everyone is reading it correctly. The Triune God reveals himself progressively—a progression that in many ways mirrors his redemptive plans seen throughout Scripture. Illumination and deification allow one to confess the deity of the Spirit and continue the growth in virtue. This in turn opens a believer’s eyes to the reality of the Spirit’s deity infiltrating

⁵³ For a short but helpful distinction between ‘explanation’ and ‘understanding,’ see J. Todd Billings, *The Word of God for the People of God: An Entryway to the Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), pp. 38–9.

⁵⁴ See Billings, *The Word of God for the People of God*, pp. 4–11. See also Jonathan T. Pennington, *Reading the Gospels Wisely: A Narrative and Theological Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012). Also ch. 7 in Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning in This Text?: The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009).

⁵⁵ N. Clayton Croy, *Prima Scriptura: An Introduction to New Testament Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), p. 8. Croy outlines a helpful paradigm for what he calls ‘The Virtuous Reader.’ Here he includes hermeneutical humility which includes self-awareness regarding one’s prior commitments as well as a prayerful approach to interpreting the text.

all of Holy Scripture. Many modern exegetes bypass this understanding of the Spirit's work; some are recovering it. Gregory can help us further in this recovery process. While Jesus says, 'He who has ears let him hear,' Gregory could be seen to say, 'He who has eyes, let him see.'

COLEMAN M. FORD is a PhD student in Church History at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky.