

## Research Article

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# Cultivation as Immanent Critique: Horticultural Metaphors in Gregory of Nyssa's Reception of Origen and Basil

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**Abstract:** The present article asks after Gregory of Nyssa's debts to Basil the Great, and this by re-examining two texts the former wrote shortly after the latter's death: *De hominis opificio* and *Apologia in Hexaemeron*. It does so on the premise, mostly promissory for now, that Gregory's efforts to sort through Basil's legacy in his late brother's wake was part and parcel of the Nyssen's career-long project to reprise Origen of Alexandria under a "pro-Nicene" banner. Defending his elder sibling's apparently incomplete *Homiliae in Hexaemeron* while also disputing their basic premise, that is, gave Gregory an opportunity to negotiate the dialectic of dependence and distinction that ultimately determined his reception of earlier authorities, including the great Alexandrian they both revered. With that much longer story in sight, this article focuses on Gregory's deployment of horticultural metaphors, especially in the *Apologia in Hexaemeron*, to describe his stance toward both Basil and Origen. Closer scrutiny of these images alongside his more technical means of differentiating between himself and Basil suggests that Gregory considered his own work to be both a natural development of his predecessors and, precisely thereby, the immanent perfection of their thought.

**Keywords:** Gregory of Nyssa, Basil of Caesarea, Origen of Alexandria, early christianity, historical theology, history of interpretation, reception history

## 1 Origen's bole

If the phenomenon of reception were restricted to explicit references, study of St. Gregory of Nyssa's relationship to Origen of Alexandria would be a short romp.<sup>1</sup> Besides the biographical sketch of Gregory Thaumaturgus in his panegyric to the Alexandrian's "wondrous" disciple, Gregory of Nyssa mentions Origen by name just once in his vast corpus, at the start of *In Canticum canticorum*.<sup>2</sup> The invocation follows

<sup>1</sup> Perhaps this is why there are still "no full-length studies of the relationship between Origen and Gregory," and this in spite of our consensus that Gregory is among Origen's closest disciples. See Meredith, "Origen," 555.

<sup>2</sup> To these one should add the more oblique reference to the author of "the treatise *On first principles*" at *Op hom.* 28.1. (NPNF 5: 419; PG 44, 229B). All quotations from *De hominis opificio* in English will be taken from the NPNF (unless otherwise noted) and modified when necessary according to the Greek text retrieved from Migne's *Patrologia Graeca* 44, cols. 123–56.

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upon an “apologia” for allegorical exegesis<sup>3</sup> that takes up most of the work’s preface: “If, however, we are eager, even after Origen has addressed himself diligently to the study of this book, to commit our own work of writing,” Gregory entreats, “let no one who has before his eyes the divine saying of the apostle to the effect that ‘each one will receive his own reward in proportion to his labor’ lay a charge against us.”<sup>4</sup> A brief remark, but it conveys a rather complex relationship.<sup>5</sup> As a matter of course, Gregory puts his deference to Origen front and center. He even feigns worry that his own work will be thought superfluous since Origen had already studied the Song so “diligently” (φιλοπόνως). Nevertheless, his regard for the latter’s legacy clearly hasn’t made Gregory any less “eager” (σπουδάσαντος) to put forward his own commentary. He asks only that his readers remember the Apostle’s warning: that his work need not measure up to his master’s because each writer will receive recompense “in proportion to *his own* labor” (κατὰ τὸν ἴδιον κόπον), not the other’s. There may be rhetorical reasons to signal such a strong connection to Origen’s allegorical approach to the Song of Songs – the reference confers the authority of tradition on Gregory’s text, for starters, even as it scores a polemical point against his Antiochene opponents – but Gregory wants to make it clear enough that his commentarial efforts don’t intend to replace those of his teacher.

Rhetorical tropes notwithstanding, however, it’s Gregory’s *own* invocation of Origen’s name that invites such comparisons in the first place. Why raise the issue at all if you mean only to ward off the very suspicion your comments risk conjuring? Gregory, that is, worries aloud at his readers “laying a charge” (ἐγκαλέω) against him for daring to tread a path Origen has already blazed – but was this really a risk his homilies incurred? Assuming his readers held the great Alexandrian in similar esteem – and Gregory must have assumed they did, otherwise he wouldn’t have preempted their scorn to begin with – why would Gregory suppose they’ll mistake *his* work for an affront to Origen’s legacy? Doesn’t the very act of projecting such a reaction onto his readers already presume a competitive relationship between his texts and those of his master?

Anticipating the reader’s response is a precarious venture, for it may end up revealing just as much about your own anxieties as those of the audience you’ve tried to assuage. We might justifiably infer that Gregory has been reticent to mention Origen by name throughout his writing career, despite his more or less obvious debts to the latter’s system at nearly every turn.<sup>6</sup> Whatever the exact reasons – likely some combination of wariness at the Alexandrian’s dubious relationship to an “orthodoxy” of which he was partisan and humility in the face of the great exegete’s spiritual authority – it seems more likely than not that Gregory perceived his ties to Origen as more of a liability than an asset to air in public. When, therefore, Gregory invokes Origen’s name explicitly in one of his final texts, it’s all but bound to speak volumes, for its presence here evokes its absence everywhere else. What seemed like an offhand remark, buried in the final lines of a preface to one of his longest and latest works, carries the weight of Gregory’s career-long silence about his relationship to a theologian by turns celebrated and spurned throughout the 4th century. Such, anyway, were the stakes upon which Gregory raised Origen’s name in his preface. Little wonder, then, that the mention says more than Gregory likely meant it to mean, for the comment attempts to compress, in impossibly short compass, a whole lifetime of living in Origen’s immense shadow – and wondering whether his own shade would possibly fill it, were the light not obscured by so great a spirit. When Gregory finally does speak his mentor’s name, the comment appears to betray anxiety about the latter’s undeniable influence just as much as admiration.

<sup>3</sup> See Heine, “Gregory of Nyssa’s Apology for Allegory,” 360–70. See also the insightful comments on Gregory’s defense of allegory at Mitchell, *Paul, the Corinthians and the Birth of Christian Hermeneutics*, 1–4.

<sup>4</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Cant. praef.*; GNO VI: 13. All quotations from this text will be taken from Norris, ed. and trans. *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on the Song of Songs*, and modified when necessary according to the critical edition of the Greek text in the Gregorii Nysseni Opera included in the same volume.

<sup>5</sup> For a recent comparison between their respective approaches to the Song that points up (surprisingly) Origen’s greater sensitivity to the literal sense, see Edwards, “Origen and Gregory of Nyssa on the Song of Songs.”

<sup>6</sup> It is something of a commonplace among scholars of the period to say that Gregory was among Origen’s most devoted disciples in the 4th century. Consider, as a representative judgment, Ramelli, *The Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis*, 373: “the most insightful and faithful follower of Origen’s *true* thought, in very many respects [...]”

## 2 Basil's branch

Gregory's posture toward Origen is clearly a delicate position – poised, as it is, somewhere between deference and detachment, not to mention mimetic desire – but the Alexandrian was not the only figure of authority to whom the youngest Cappadocian bore a somewhat ambiguous relationship.<sup>7</sup> It is well known that Gregory conceived his two cosmological treatises – *De hominis opificio* and *Apologia in Hexaemeron* – as humble additions to Basil of Caesarea's celebrated *Homiliae in Hexaemeron*.<sup>8</sup> He says as much in the opening sections of both works. But in these texts, too, the rhetoric of deference constantly runs the risk of turning into its opposite. Addressing his opening remarks to Peter of Sebaste, another brother, Gregory extols their elder sibling. Basil, he writes, “by his own speculation (τῆς ἰδίας θεωρίας) made the sublime ordering of the universe generally intelligible, making the world as established by God in the true Wisdom known to those who by means of his understanding are led to such contemplation (τῇ θεωρίᾳ).” Their brother was capable of discerning the creator's wisdom, Gregory explains, because he “alone” (μόνος) had a “soul fashioned in the image of him who created him” (ἐν εἰκόνι τοῦ κτίσαντος τὴν ψυχὴν).<sup>9</sup> In this respect, Basil's “speculation” bears the double sense already implicit in the English word's Latin root: his θεωρία turns on the soul as *speculum*. Gregory's praise here could hardly be higher, especially given the theological significance he will attach to the soul's mirror-like status in this text and others.<sup>10</sup> But this paean only serves to accentuate the audacity of Gregory's own musings. For, despite these various assurances that his brother was uniquely qualified to interpret the text of Genesis, the Nyssen's eagerness to wager his own opinions wins out once more: “we, who fall short even of worthily admiring him,” says Gregory, “yet intend to add to the great writer's speculations that which is lacking in them” (ὁμοῦ τὸ λείπον τοῖς τεθεωρημένοις τῷ μεγάλῳ προσθεῖναι διενόηθμεν).<sup>11</sup> Immediately, of course, a proviso follows: he offers these additions to Basil's homilies “not so as to interpolate his work by insertion” (οὐχ ὥς νοθεύοντες δι' ὑποβολῆς τὸν ἐκείνου πόνον), but so that “the glory of the teacher may not seem to be failing among his disciples.”<sup>12</sup> He has no interest, that is, in borrowing the authority of Basil's tongue, or shoehorning his own thoughts in between his brother's words, but wants instead to shepherd the late bishop's hexameral project to completion by supplementing it with a new text altogether. Gregory means to protect his brother's legacy from future readers who might think less of Basil for leaving his collection of homilies incomplete but wishes to leave the bishop's literary remains largely intact – or so he says, at any rate.

But the idea that someone – whether real detractors or merely Gregory himself – could possibly think the *Homiliae in Hexaemeron* an incomplete project in the first place already suggests something about Basil's legacy as a biblical exegete, and why his brother should have been so eager to shore it up.<sup>13</sup> Though recent scholarship has done a great deal to complicate older characterizations of Basil as a “proto-Antiochene”<sup>14</sup>

7 Ludlow, “Texts, Teachers and Pupils in the Writings of Gregory of Nyssa,” offers a characteristically brilliant discussion of Gregory's relationship to his “sibling-teachers,” Basil and Macrina, wherein she argues that the act of writing itself serves to shift, however subtly, his own stance from that of a quondam “pupil” to a “teacher” in his own right, thereby assuming the role of his siblings in their stead.

8 All quotations from the *Homiliae in Hexaemeron* in English will be taken from Way, C.D.P., trans., *Saint Basil: Exegetic Homilies*, and the Greek from Stanislas Giet, ed. and trans., *Basile de Césarée. Homélie sur l'Hexaéméron*.

9 Gregory of Nyssa, *Op. hom.* praef. (NPNF 5: 387; PG 44, 125B).

10 See Hart, “The Mirror of the Infinite.”

11 Gregory of Nyssa, *Op. hom.* praef. (NPNF 5: 387; PG 44, 125C).

12 Ibid.

13 Costache, “Approaching An Apology for the Hexaemeron,” 53–81, agrees with the earlier assessment of Corsini, “Nouvelles perspectives sur le problème des sources de l'Hexaéméron de Grégoire de Nysse,” that, as Costache puts it, “the Nyssen's treatise was not primarily about defending and/or continuing the Basilian *Hexaemeron*, and that St Gregory entertained his own distinct aims.” (70). Risch, ed. and trans., *Gregor von Nyssa. Über das Sechstageswerk*, 8, concedes that “*apologia in hexaemeron* is also zwar ein relativ eigenständiges Werk neben dem Hexaemeron des Basilius, aber nicht, wie Corsini [and Costache, we should add] meint, im Sinne einer Konkurrenz oder gar einer Polemik.”

14 Cf. Tieck, “Basil of Caesarea and the Bible.” For reappraisals of Basil's exegetical profile, see Pelikan, “The ‘Spiritual Sense’ of Scripture;” Lim, “The Politics of Interpretation in Basil of Caesarea's *Homiliae in Hexaemeron*;” Hildebrand, *Basil of Caesarea*, 44–57.

and the like, not to mention problematize the categories of “Antiochene”<sup>15</sup> and “Alexandrian”<sup>16</sup> altogether, it’s nonetheless true that the bishop of Caesarea practiced an exegetical habit more palpably “literal” than the sort of biblical interpretation pioneered by the great scholars at Alexandria.<sup>17</sup> No work of Basil’s better demonstrates this strict observance of the literal sense than his monumental set of homilies on the six days of creation, likely one of his last and surely finest literary achievements.<sup>18</sup> The basic design of the series is a verse-by-verse exposition of the opening chapter of Genesis, with a view to interpreting the “book of creation” through “the book of Scripture.” His wager being that the Holy Spirit has so arranged the latter that it functions as a “guidebook” for the former.<sup>19</sup> By the end of the ninth and final homily – almost 150 pages of translated text – Basil has plodded through just twenty-six verses. Not only do the sermons stay close to Scripture’s sequence, but the exegesis rarely exceeds its plain sense. Take, for instance, Basil’s gloss on Gen 1:1: “He [i.e., Moses] placed first ‘the beginning,’ that no one might believe that it was without a beginning. Then he added the word, ‘created,’ that it might be shown that what was made required a very small part of the power of the Creator.”<sup>20</sup> Much of the discourse proceeds with just such “grammatical” precision, even as it extols the beauty of creation with rhetorical pomp.

So eager is Basil “to follow the ‘letter’ (γράμμα) of creation alongside Scripture, to do justice to the *datum*, the concrete reality (πράγμα) of what the eye sees,”<sup>21</sup> in fact, that (in this text, at least) he openly disavows “allegorical” exegesis altogether. Witness the pointed remarks with which he opens his final homily on the *Hexaemeron*: “Those who do not admit the common meaning of the Scriptures (οἱ μὴ καταδεχόμενοι τὰς κοινὰς τῶν γεγραμμένων ἐννοίας) say that water is not water, but some other nature, and they explain a plant and a fish according to their opinion.” Thusly, the allegorists behave like “dream interpreters, who interpret for their own ends the appearances seen in their dreams.” By contrast, he continues, “[w]hen I hear ‘grass,’ I think of grass, and in the same manner I understand everything as it is said, a plant, a fish, a wild animal, and an ox.” Finally, Basil marshals a biblical proof-text for his commitment to the plain sense: “Indeed,” he proclaims, “I am not ashamed of the gospel.” (Rom 1:16).<sup>22</sup> It may well be that the intended purpose of these comments was less an outright condemnation of spiritual interpretation than a pastoral concern for the theologically impressionable *simpliciores* in the pews, as Richard Lim<sup>23</sup> has argued. Besides, says Paul Blowers, the Cappadocian’s “project is not that of a modern apologist trying to convince skeptics” of a positivistic reading of the text but rather a Christian bishop striving to identify “the *theologically* literal sense” of Scripture wherein the “integral relation of sacred history and cosmology within a single divine *oikonomia*” might become manifest.<sup>24</sup> Still, it seems unavoidable that Basil’s mature position gives priority to the literal sense. Whatever else one might say of the scriptures, he urges, their “common meaning” must take precedence – not because allegory in and of itself is out of bounds, but because properly observing the progression of Scripture is the hermeneutical key to understanding the order of nature itself. Sacrifice the first, Basil thinks, and you risk losing sight of creation’s rationale altogether.

Needless to say, Basil’s sibling demurred from his dismissal of allegory. It’s surely striking, as we’ve already seen, that Basil brought his literary career to a close with a set of homilies openly critical of

<sup>15</sup> See, e.g., O’Keefe, “‘A Letter that Killeth.’”

<sup>16</sup> The standard reassessment of Antiochene and Alexandrian exegesis remains Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture*, esp. 161–85. See also Young, “The Rhetorical Schools and Their Influence on Patristic Exegesis.”

<sup>17</sup> For a sturdy introduction to the intellectual climate at Alexandria, from Pantaeus to Clement, see Dawson, *Allegorical Readers and Cultural Revision in Ancient Alexandria*.

<sup>18</sup> For an overview of Basil’s text, see Blowers, *Drama of the Divine Economy*, 126–9.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Hildebrand, *Basil of Caesarea*, 37–40.

<sup>20</sup> Basil of Caesarea, *Homiliae in Hexaemeron* 1.2 (FOC 46: 6; SC 26: 94–5).

<sup>21</sup> Blowers, *Drama of the Divine Economy*, 128.

<sup>22</sup> Basil of Caesarea, *Homiliae in Hexaemeron* 9.1 (FOC 46: 135; SC 26: 478–81).

<sup>23</sup> So Lim, “The Politics of Interpretation in Basil of Caesarea’s *Homiliae in Hexaemeron*,” 364: “I do not think that he was condemning Origen when he inveighed against allegory in the *Hexaemeron*, but rather, the unsuitability of allegory for an audience like his, given the dangers of heresy.”

<sup>24</sup> Blowers, *Drama of the Divine Economy*, 128.

allegorical interpretation, while Gregory all but dedicated his final series of sermons to a spirited defense of allegory.<sup>25</sup> Even so, the brothers are much closer on the issue of scriptural interpretation than they may at first appear. For one thing, Gregory of Nyssa's defense of allegory is a bit more categorical than Basil's departure from it: Stephen M. Hildebrand<sup>26</sup> has shown that Basil's exegesis of the Psalms, for instance, demonstrates a conspicuous commitment to spiritual reading, and Darren Sarisky has recently recommended Basil as a premier example of "theological interpretation" in the premodern tradition.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, non-literal interpretation as such proves not to be the primary point of contention between Basil and Gregory's respective approaches to biblical cosmology at all. For, by and large, both of the Nyssens' cosmological treatises follow a fairly "literal" itinerary themselves. Far from ignoring the plain sense, in fact, Gregory prizes the order of Scripture's opening chapters just as much as Basil. Since Jean Daniélou's landmark study on the topic, scholars have recognized the concept of "sequence" (ἀκολουθία) as something of a "leitmotif" in his thought.<sup>28</sup> Its principal meaning, both within Gregory's corpus and elsewhere, is that of a logical entailment between two or more ideas.<sup>29</sup> But the Nyssen dilates the scope of ἀκολουθία to encompass the whole of being: "the word designates, at one and the same time, the material coherence (ἀκολουθία ὑλική) of the biblical text, the necessary connection between the various realities of salvation history, and the analogical correspondence that obtains between these two planes." Hence the impression that "we are in the presence of the *key word* for a theology completely preoccupied with heeding the connections between every domain of reality."<sup>30</sup> However resolutely the Nyssen may have defended allegorical exegesis from its anti-Origenist critics, therefore, his convictions on that score could never compromise his clear-eyed attention to "sequence" in all its sundry forms – and this is because Gregory had elevated ἀκολουθία into a basic metaphysical principle of his thought, thereby surpassing Basil by subsuming his "literal" sensibility into a still broader theological vision.

### 3 Gregory's bloom

How so? For immediate purposes – measuring the distance between Gregory and Basil's interpretation of Genesis, that is – the scriptural dimension of ἀκολουθία proves most pressing. As it happens, Daniélou's very first example of *enchaînement* in Gregory's corpus comes from the latter's encomium to Basil in the *Apologia in Hexaemeron*. Written at the request of the same brother to whom Gregory addressed his earlier

<sup>25</sup> Scholarly consensus places *In Canticum canticorum* in Gregory's final years, somewhere between 391 and his death in c.395. See Maraval, "Chronology of Works," 158.

<sup>26</sup> Hildebrand, *Basil of Caesarea*, 48–52.

<sup>27</sup> Sarisky, *Scriptural Interpretation*, 28, even suggests that, "whatever the differences between Basil and Gregory in terms of style and substance, they begin to seem minimal, even negligible, when Basil is set alongside theologians of today [...]" Basil's exegetical approach counts as "theological interpretation," according to Sarisky, because of his commitment to the idea that "[r]eading is a spiritual matter, training readers in knowledge of God and divesting them of whatever encumbers this." (34). Which is to say, Basil believes that the task of interpreting Scripture not only presupposes an implicit theology of human flourishing but directly contributes to it. "While modernity works with a bifurcation between theology and exegesis," Sarisky says, "Basil is innocent of this recent development," (23). Exactly so, he suggests, Basil and his brother share a basic approach to "theological interpretation," no matter their hermeneutical differences.

<sup>28</sup> Daniélou, "Akoulouthia chez Grégoire de Nysse." This article was later reprinted in Jean Daniélou, *L'être et le temps chez Grégoire de Nysse*, 18–50. See also Gregorios, *Cosmic Man*, 47–63; Gil-Tamayo, "Akoulouthia."

<sup>29</sup> Henry Liddell, et al., eds, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, s.v. ἀκολουθία, suggests a Stoic provenance to the logical sense of the term. Gregorios, *Cosmic Man*, 47, is surely correct that the Stoics are Gregory's most likely source for his own usage, even though Gil-Tamayo, "Akoulouthia," 19, rightfully notes that Gregory himself occasionally connects the word to Aristotle's philosophical method, as at *Contra Eunomium* I.46 (GNO I: 37). But see also Daniélou, *The Lord of History*, 241: "Gregory took the term ἀκολουθία from the language of Greek philosophy, especially from Aristotle, who uses it in connexion with the laws governing physical change and motion [...]" Finally, Alexandre, "La Théorie de l'exégèse dans le *De hominis opificio* et *L'In Hexaemeron*," 95–6, suggests that Gregory likely followed Philo's in applying the concept of ἀκολουθία to the text of Genesis.

<sup>30</sup> Daniélou, *L'être et le temps chez Grégoire de Nysse*, 49. My translation; my emphasis.



treatise on the creation of humankind, the *Apologia* represents a sort of sequel to *De hominis opificio*.<sup>31</sup> But whereas the latter was largely an effort to supplement Basil's homilies by filling in their lacunae, the former takes up the task of solving difficulties in the sermons themselves, posed to Gregory by Peter of Sebaste at some point in the wake of their brother's death. Once again, the undertaking puts Gregory in something of a difficult position: on the one hand, he must show deference to the authority of Basil's interpretations; on the other hand, he must elucidate their meaning without insinuating that his brother's own commentary was somehow opaque. To thread that needle, he devises an elaborate metaphor in the proem, to point up not only where he stands in relation to Basil but also where his brother stood with respect to the author of Genesis himself.<sup>32</sup> Just as "the ear of corn" (ὁ ἄσταχυς) depends upon "the seed" (τον κόκκον) for its very existence, even as it "alters the size of the seed, along with its beauty and colorfulness and shape," so too the "thoughts developed by Basil the Great through his industrious contemplations" bear a similar "relationship" (λόγον) to "the voice of the great Moses."<sup>33</sup> For that which "the latter said in just a few and well-chosen words, our teacher amplified through higher philosophy," such that "it was not just an ear of corn he created, but a tree (δένδρον), like the mustard seed (τὸν τοῦ σινάπεως κόκκον) likened to the kingdom (τῇ βασιλείᾳ) of heaven." But "instead of branches," Basil's tree "unfolds in doctrines and stretches aloft towards the goal of piety (τῷ σκοπῷ τῆς εὐσεβείας)."<sup>34</sup> The horticultural metaphor allows Gregory to accentuate Basil's achievement – without disparaging Scripture's own authority, of course – by portraying his brother's discourse as a cultivation of the very same seed Moses planted. There is a natural progression, as it were, from the hexameron to the homilies in their honor. Meanwhile, the Nyssen wonders aloud whether his own efforts will measure up: "How is it possible for us to plant the paltry clippings of our own thoughts opposite so great a tree of words?"<sup>35</sup> Having posed the question, though, Gregory once again clarifies that he does not intend to supplant his brother's homilies, but merely to supplement them. He had already specified as much in *De hominis opificio*, of course, but this time he can exploit the horticultural context to make the same point. "Just as gardeners work wonders, wisely devising (σοφίζόμενοι) a multitude of fruit (καρπῶν) from a single plant," he says, "so, having attached my mind to the wisdom of our teacher, like a small offshoot (τινα βραχὺν μόσχον) to the sap of a great tree, I will try to become engrafted (ἐμφυόμενος) to that one, so far as it's possible, and become irrigated (ἐπαρδόμενος) by the abundance of juice offered there at the base."<sup>36</sup> With one turn of the apodosis, Gregory "engrafts" himself into his own metaphor, thereby depicting the *Apologia* as a branch of both Moses and Basil's towering trunks of text.

On its own, of course, the image of a tree and its distant limbs already serves as an elegant figure for the dialectic of dependence and distinction so characteristic of literary reception – not to mention that "grafting" was a metaphor the Apostle Paul had already used (Rom 11:16–21) to such great effect – but Gregory's more technical means of distinguishing his treatise from Basil's accentuates what's really at stake in the horticultural metaphor. Witness, for instance, the following proviso at the end of the proem: "Before beginning, let it be known that we do not intend to contradict (ἀντιδογματίζειν) the holy Basil's philosophical explorations of the cosmogony – even if, setting out from a certain sequence, the account should lead us to a different interpretation (μεδ' ἂν πρὸς ἑτέραν ἐξήγησιν ἔκ τινος ἀκολουθίας ὁ λόγος ἔλθῃ)."<sup>37</sup> For though "his teaching was authoritative and second in rank to sacred Scripture itself," the Nyssen continues, "let me be permitted, so far as I am able, to explicate the sense of the words according to my own aim (τὸν ἴδιον σκοπὸν)," namely, "to strike upon a coherent (ἀκόλουθον) contemplation of the creation of things which were made, while maintaining the proper sense of the text."<sup>38</sup> Gregory has already stipulated at this point that the "goal" of Basil's sermons was that of "piety" (εὐσεβεία), as I mentioned above. Later in the

31 Maraval, "Chronology of Works," 157, dates the *Apologia in Hexameron* to the early months of 379, "shortly after" the composition of *De hominis opificio*. See the fuller discussion of the text's date in Risch, *Über das Sechstageswerk*, 11–5.

32 For an excellent discussion of this passage, see Köckert, *Christliche Kosmologie und kaiserzeitliche Philosophie*, 402–6.

33 Gregory of Nyssa, *Apologia in Hexameron* 1 (GNO IV/1: 6–7). All translations from *Hex.* are mine.

34 Gregory of Nyssa, *Hex.* 1 (GNO IV/1: 7).

35 Ibid., *Hex.* 2 (GNO IV/1: 7).

36 Ibid., *Hex.* 2 (GNO IV/1: 8).

37 Ibid., *Hex.* 6 (GNO IV/1: 13).

38 Ibid., *Hex.* 6 (GNO IV/1: 14).

text he draws the distinction between their respective σκοποί even more explicitly: “the goal (σκοπός) of the teacher [i.e., Basil] was not to lay down his own opinions as absolute for his audience, but to make the truth accessible to his students through his teaching – and we have also studied the teachings he handed down to us in our own efforts to understand the sequence (τὸ ἀκόλουθον).”<sup>39</sup> Commenting on these passages, Daniélou summarizes their discrepancy thus: “While Basil had been content to explain the meaning of different episodes of creation, Gregory wishes to show their coherence [*enchaînement*], the necessary connection that unites them.”<sup>40</sup> Likewise, Juan Antonio Gil-Tamayo agrees that “while Gregory remains faithful to the teachings of Basil in this work, he does not cease to distinguish himself from his teacher through his continuous concern for systematics and methodological rigor.”<sup>41</sup> For them, in other words, that which distinguishes Gregory’s approach to Scripture is a stricter attention to its ἀκολουθία: not just the way the text unfolds but the rationale for why it does so, and what a coherent account of that intrinsic order might say about the economy of creation as a whole.<sup>42</sup> No matter what he says at various points across his corpus about the significance of allegorical exegesis, therefore, it’s abundantly clear that Gregory was concerned with the plain sense of Scripture at least as much as Basil had ever been.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, it might be more accurate to say that Gregory did not believe his brother’s method of interpretation was “literal” enough. Basil may have pursued the “common meaning” of the text, but Gregory insists that he seeks to understand its logical entailments – and does so with every confidence that “the ἀκολουθία of the biblical account of creation is identical with the ἀκολουθία of nature itself.”<sup>44</sup> He could scarcely think higher of the literal sense, in other words, since he feels convinced that it alone discloses the underlying order of creation as a whole. By contrast, the Nyssen implies, Basil merely skimmed the surface – not only of the book of Scripture but also, and thereby, the book of nature.<sup>45</sup>

When one considers Gregory’s well-documented conviction that each book of Scripture possesses a single σκοπός, moreover, the distance between his and Basil’s approach only widens.<sup>46</sup> During his discussion of the second “difficulty” posed by his other brother, Gregory specifies the σκοπός of Genesis itself like so: “the prophet has written the book of Genesis as an introduction to the knowledge of God (εἰσαγωγικὸν πρὸς θεογνωσίαν), and the goal of Moses was to lead those enslaved to sense through the sensible itself to that which transcends the clutches of sense.”<sup>47</sup> Despite his apparent differentiation of their respective σκόποι earlier in the treatise, it seems more likely that Gregory thinks both he and Basil share the basic

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., *Hex.* 28 (GNO IV/1: 41–2).

<sup>40</sup> Daniélou, *L’être et le temps chez Grégoire de Nysse*, 19. My translation.

<sup>41</sup> Gil-Tamayo, “*Akolouthia*,” 14.

<sup>42</sup> So Daniélou, *L’être et le temps chez Grégoire de Nysse*, 19: “Il écrit pour ceux qui cherchent l’*akolouthia*. Il s’agit clairement ici d’esprits ayant des exigences scientifiques et que ne satisfait pas un simple exposé populaire, comme celui de Basile qui se contentait d’exposer les faits. Ainsi la position de Grégoire est claire. Il dépend, dans l’ensemble, de l’enseignement de Basile, mais il cherche à lui donner une forme systématique, quitte à ce que ceci l’amène à corriger son frère sur quelque point et sans prétendre que ce qu’il expose soit autre chose qu’un exercice d’école.” Cf. May, “Einige Bemerkungen über das Verhältnis Gregors von Nyssa zu Basilios dem Grossen,” 509–15; Risch, *Über das Sechstageswerk*, 107–8, rightly notes that Daniélou’s judgment is “nicht ganz richtig” insofar as Basil was also interested in the “Schrittfolge und Ordnung” of Scripture, even in the *Homiliae in Hexaemeron* themselves, but he nevertheless concedes that Basil was not interested in “ἀκολουθία als Notwendigkeit der Natur selbst erklären,” as Gregory clearly was.

<sup>43</sup> Ludlow, “Theology and Allegory,” 64, suggests that Gregory’s attention to Scripture’s intrinsic “sequence” ultimately sets his exegetical approach apart from that of Origen: “Origen’s method focuses entirely on establishing the connections between various parts of Scripture; Gregory, on the other hand, first establishes the *akolouthia* and *skopos* of the text, before interpreting individual passages and words both in the light of the *akolouthia* and *skopos* and by reference to other passages and words to which the overall direction of the text points the exegete,” with the result that “Origen’s approach is predominantly *synchronic* [...] while Gregory’s method is thoroughly *diachronic*.”

<sup>44</sup> Köckert, *Christliche Kosmologie und kaiserzeitliche Philosophie*, 407. My translation.

<sup>45</sup> See Blowers, *Drama of the Divine Economy*, 318–22, for a discussion of patristic use of the “two books” motif.

<sup>46</sup> See Heine, *Gregory of Nyssa’s Treatise on the Inscriptions of the Psalms*, 24–34, for a discussion of Gregory’s use of σκοπός, which was possibly dependent on Iamblichus of Chalcis but almost certainly influenced by Origen. Cf. Ross, “The Inextricability of Hermeneutics and Metaphysics in Late Neoplatonism and Patristic Theology.”

<sup>47</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Hex.* 8 (GNO IV/1: 17).

aim of Moses himself, even if they execute it differently.<sup>48</sup> Charlotte Köckert describes the dynamic best: “Gregory’s remarks upon the σκοπός of the interpretation shows that, from his perspective, Moses, Basil, and he himself pursue the same goal: with their contemplation of creation, they want to arrive at knowledge of God.” Even so, she continues, “Moses, Basil, and Gregory nevertheless achieve this goal in different ways: Moses in the form of a story, Basil through a clear description of the wonders of creation, and Gregory by coherently outlining the inner logic of creation.”<sup>49</sup> If something like Köckert’s view is correct – and I think it must be – then Gregory’s aforementioned distinction between his and Basil’s respective σκοποί ought to be understood within the context of a more fundamental agreement.<sup>50</sup> Allowing something less than a univocal deployment of the term on Gregory’s part, that is, they share a basic σκοπός. After all, there is but a difference in degree, not kind, between Basil’s reputed “goal” of leading his mostly lay audience<sup>51</sup> to pious recognition of their creator through contemplation of the six days of creation and Gregory’s “goal” of describing the sequence of that cosmogony so as to grasp its inherent rationale. Both resume, in their own ways, Moses’s “efforts to demonstrate to us the underlying order of sensible things (τὴν ἐν τοῖς αἰσθητοῖς διακόσμησιν) through the phenomena themselves instead of expounding upon the intelligible things directly,” as the Nyssen puts it.<sup>52</sup> Which is to say, both Gregory and Basil set their sights on “knowledge of God” (θεογνωσίαν).<sup>53</sup> By the same token, though, it’s difficult to deny that Gregory’s description of Moses betrays a judgment about which one of the brothers followed that biblical σκοπός more faithfully. The suggestion that Moses meant to lay bare creation’s “underlying order” already tips Gregory’s hand, but the following passage makes his position unambiguous: “once more,” he writes, amidst a discussion of Gen 1:4, “Moses relays that which happens necessarily according to the sequence of nature in a certain order and

48 Alexandre, “La Théorie de l’exégèse dans le De hominis opificio et L’In Hexaemeron,” 97, remarks that “[l]e but de Grégoire correspond au but de l’auteur sacré,” and likens both to the overarching σκοπός of Scripture discerned by Origen at *De principiis* 4.2.7, viz. “l’enseignement sur Dieu et la Trinité, les créatures douées de raison célestes et terrestres, la différence des âmes et leur origine, le monde et pourquoi il est constitué l’origine du mal.” But she also uses this connection to distinguish them both from Basil: “comme Origène, Grégoire pense qu’il y a comme un système théologique qu’il faut tenter de restituer dans la lecture de l’Écriture. Il y a là, malgré l’accord fondamental, une distance avec Basile que Grégoire a marquée. Basile a voulu seulement ‘ouvrir une voie à la vérité,’ ‘conduire par la main à la connaissance du créateur de toutes choses’ [...] et non dégager le système théologique inclus dans le texte.” Meanwhile, Köckert, *Christliche Kosmologie und kaizerzeitliche Philosophie*, 409n49, dissents from Alexandre’s suggestion; she does not think there is “einen qualitativen Unterschied” between Basil and Gregory, let alone Moses. Surely Köckert’s statement is closer to the truth, but one cannot fault, e.g., Risch, *Über das Sechstageswerk*, 8, for taking Gregory at his word when he concludes, in an attempt to exonerate the Nyssen from an overly polemical stance toward his elder brother, that the *Apologia* “stellt einen eigenen, unpolemischen Versuch dar, die biblische Kosmogonie unter einem veränderten Skopos zu begreifen.” As I say, the best evidence for a view like Köckert’s – which maintains a fundamental continuity between the respective “aims” of Basil and Gregory, even as the latter departs significantly from his brother’s manner of reaching that goal, and says as much on several occasions – is Gregory’s insistence, in other works, that the very first task of biblical exegesis is to determine the unified σκοπός which governs a given text, and then discern the proper order by which the book arrives at that end. So, for instance, *In Inscriptiones Psalmorum*, 1.2 (Heine, 83; GNO V: 24–5): “First, one must understand the aim (τὸν σκοπὸν) to which this writing looks. Next, one must pay attention to the progressive arrangements (δι’ ἀκολουθίου [...]) κατασκευὰς) of the concepts in the book under discussion.” Given the fact that Gregory follows this precise procedure in the *Apologia* – i.e., insofar as he explicitly identifies the σκοπός of Moses, then attempts to follow diligently the ἀκολουθία by which the book of Genesis arrives there – it seems reasonable to conclude that the Nyssen believes both he and Basil have composed variations on a single “purpose” set down by Moses himself, despite the conceptual slippage in his use of the term σκοπός itself.

49 Köckert, *Christliche Kosmologie und kaizerzeitliche Philosophie*, 409. My translation.

50 Consider, too, the fact that Gregory’s “panegyric” for his brother at *In Basilium fratrem* 20–3 (SC 573: 270–83; GNO X.1: 125–30) culminates with an elaborate typological comparison between Basil and Moses, at the start of which he remarks: “The great Moses offers himself as a common model for all those who look toward virtue, and so we will not be wrong if we make the virtue of the lawgiver the goal (σκοπός) towards which to direct one’s own life. Nor is there anything at all to reproach us if we demonstrate that our teacher [i.e., Basil] imitated him the lawgiver in his life [...]”

51 So, e.g., Gregory of Nyssa, *Hex.* 14 (GNO IV/1: 24): “Those who say this and things like it [i.e., those who criticize Basil’s homilies] do not seem to have considered the intent (σκοπός) of the teachings of our father, who preached to so great a number in the church, molding his discourse to the needs of those in the audience out of exigency.”

52 Gregory of Nyssa, *Hex.* 14 (GNO IV/1: 24).

53 Cf. *Ibid.*, *Hex.* 8 (GNO IV/1: 17).



harmony (τὸ ἀναγκαίως κατὰ τὴν ἀκολουθίαν τῆς φύσεως ἐν τάξει τινὶ καὶ ἁρμονίᾳ γεγόμενον), by dint of the divine activity.”<sup>54</sup> Just like that, Gregory reinscribes his own stated “aim” into the mind of Moses himself, thereby insinuating that his exegesis of the hexaemeral narrative bears out the biblical σκοπός more scrupulously than his brother’s homilies. If the ἀκολουθία of a given text is a “function” of its σκοπός, as Marie-Josèphe Rondeau put it, then the plain implication of Gregory’s portrayal of Moses is that his own attention to Scripture’s “sequence” succeeds in seeing the author’s original intention to its end precisely where Basil’s stopped short.<sup>55</sup>

All of which, in my judgment, affords a slightly different perspective on the horticultural metaphor with which Gregory begins the treatise. Given the foregoing discussion of Gregory’s sometimes fraught negotiation between his and Basil’s exegesis of Genesis, that is, the connotations of that image become somewhat less clear. Recall its basic conceit: the biblical narrative of Moses represents a “seed” (τον κόκκον), out of which Basil’s homiletic “tree of words” (δένδρον τῶν λόγων) grew, onto which great trunk of text Gregory then “grafts” (ἐμφυόμενος) his own treatise. At first glance, the metaphor appears to be a gesture of sheer deference, one whereby Gregory merely assumes the role of pious appendage to his brother’s more substantial body of work. But his undeniably ambiguous comments regarding their respective realizations of the biblical σκοπός puts a somewhat different spin on Gregory’s situation atop the tree of Basil’s sermons. Witness, once more, how he makes the comparison: “Just as gardeners work wonders, wisely devising (σοφίζόμενοι) a multitude of fruit (καρπῶν) from a single plant,” he writes, “so I, having attached my mind to the wisdom of our teacher, like a small offshoot (τινα βραχὺν μόσχον) to the sap of a great tree, will try to become engrafted (ἐμφυόμενος) to that one, so far as it’s possible, and become nourished (ἐπαρδόμενος) by the abundance of thoughts offered there at its base.”<sup>56</sup> It’s difficult not to be struck by the mention of “fruit” on a second pass through this pericope. Though he doesn’t broach the budding status of the plant prior to his intervention, Gregory’s metaphor clearly implies that it’s the scion (i.e., his treatise) which finally fosters the tree’s fruit. Precisely so, the reader is left to wonder why such a horticultural procedure was required in the first place. The cuttings certainly need the trunk’s already established root system for its continued flourishing, much like the tree itself depends upon the seed, “apart from which it would not be,” as Gregory put it.<sup>57</sup> And to that extent, his treatise bears roughly the same relationship to Basil’s homilies as the latter bore to the book of Genesis. But a graft can benefit the host just as much as the new shoot.<sup>58</sup> Indeed, it may be the case that an experienced gardener introduces a novel limb to the body of an older plant in order to bring it (back) to life. Which is to say, the practice of grafting may well be the horticulturist’s means of

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., *Hex.* 13 (GNO IV/1: 23). My translation. With this passage in mind, the reconstruction of Gregory’s “aim” at Risch, *Über das Sechstageswerk*, 8–9, seems justified: “Der dementsprechende eigentliche inhaltliche Skopos ergibt sich aus dem eher formalen der Akolouthia und ist kein anderer als die Anagogie. Denn der Nachweis der Akolouthia ist der Nachweis einer vernünftigen Struktur im Weltall. Die Vernünftigkeit in der Natur deutet nicht nur darauf, daß die Welt von Gott verursacht ist. Sie ist auch die Vernünftigkeit Gottes selbst, da die Welt dadurch entsteht, daß Gottes Vernunft und nicht eine andere, geschaffene, in die Materie gelegt ist. Diese Vernünftigkeit und Weisheit zu betrachten heißt Gott zu erkennen, soweit dies möglich ist. Deshalb nennt Gregor den Schöpfungsbericht eine Einführung in Gotterkenntnis.”

<sup>55</sup> Rondeau, “Exégèse du Psautier et anabase spirituelle chez Grégoire de Nysse,” 517.

<sup>56</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Hex.* 2 (GNO IV/1: 8).

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., *Hex.* 1 (GNO IV/1: 6).

<sup>58</sup> Though it would be difficult to prove Gregory’s literary dependence on this point, it should be noted that antiquity already possessed fairly sophisticated horticultural practices – including techniques of grafting. It’s clear that Gregory possesses a more than passing familiarity with the particulars of grafting practices, as Drobner, *Archaeologia Patristica*, 173–4, attests, with reference to other pericopes in the Nyssen’s corpus to boot. The locus classicus for the ancient discussion of grafting is Theophrastus, *De causis plantarum* 1.6.1–16.1.10 (LCL 471: 42–53). But perhaps the more immediate reference, for Gregory, is the Pauline metaphor of “grafted branches” from Rom 11: 11–24, as I’ve already suggested. Further study of Gregory’s attention to these verses of Romans would be useful, especially given his otherwise well-documented soteriological attachment to the “whole lump” image in Rom 11: 16. On which, see Zachhuber, “PHYRAMA;” Idem., “From First Fruits to the Whole Lump.”

fulfilling a plant's true purpose – namely, to bear (more) fruit.<sup>59</sup> If we grant that Basil's "tree of words" and Gregory's fruit-bearing "branch" both share the same σκοπός, as I think we must, it seems all but obvious which one has followed the ἀκολουθία of that "seed" Moses first planted to its final end. Yet again, the dialectic of dependence and distinction rears its not so deferential head. All the same, it's not at all clear what sort of gesture could be more deferential to one's mentors than taking charge of their literary remains after they're gone, hence tending their "tree of words" until they yield fruit like they were always intended. If that task ultimately requires pruning their beloved projects, too, the cultivation need not be taken as a sign of disrespect.

## 4 Conclusion

At the start of the present essay, I claimed that Gregory's brief reference to Origen in his famous preface to the *In Canticum canticorum* suggests a far more complex relationship between the two authors (or at least the Nyssen's impressions thereof) than the otherwise benign statement seems to suggest. Beyond an immediate concern to confer the authority of tradition on his apologia for allegory, that is, Gregory's comment also divulges a certain anxiety about whether his and Origen's homilies are competing for the same conceptual space, as if his own work is somehow at risk of displacing that of the master instead of submitting to its authority. Something similar to that same dynamic shows up in Gregory's far more elaborate efforts to discharge his intellectual debts to Basil, I've argued. The dialectic of dependence and distinction prompts Gregory to negotiate its passage by way of a somewhat ambiguous horticultural metaphor, whereby his own treatise on the hexaemeral narrative becomes likened to a "branch" grafted onto the "tree" of Basil's homilies about the same. Both are products of that "seed" originally planted by Moses, to be sure; and the *Apologia in Hexaemeron* depends on the *Homiliae in Hexaemeron* no less than the latter builds upon the book of Genesis itself, no doubt; but Gregory's more discursive means of differentiating between his and Basil's texts betray an unmistakable assumption that his own treatise has actually seen the biblical σκοπός to its logical conclusion, and this by tracing Scripture's ἀκολουθία more carefully than his sibling's homilies. Exactly so, what seemed at first like a clever image of literary dependence becomes a conspicuous sketch of the younger brother's effort to assert his distinction from the elder sibling: Gregory's treatise becomes the fruit-bearing branch of Basil's "tree of words," thereby fulfilling the biblical seed's intrinsic purpose.

Allow me to suggest, in closing, that the horticultural mold in which Gregory cast his relationship to Basil ought to warrant a closer look at the ways in which he figured his reception of other figures. If we return to the invocation of Origen with which we began, in fact, this essay's detour through Gregory's treatment of Basil already begins to pay dividends. Consider, again, the passage in question. "If, however, we are eager, even after Origen has addressed himself diligently to the study of this book, to commit our own work of writing," writes Gregory, "let no one who has before his eyes the divine saying of the apostle to the effect that 'each one will receive his own reward in proportion to his labor' lay a charge against us."<sup>60</sup> The section of 1 Cor 3:8 quoted here conveys the complexity of Gregory's connection to Origen on its own, of course, but it's surely significant that the first half of the verse also contains a horticultural image as well: "The one who plants and the one who waters are one (ὁ φυτεύων δὲ καὶ ὁ ποτίζων ἓν εἰσιν), and each will receive his own reward in proportion to his own labor." The superiority of Origen's sowing may seem obvious until one remembers that his seeds remain unsprouted just so long as Gregory isn't there to water

<sup>59</sup> Ludlow, "Texts, Teachers and Pupils," 93, notes the same ambiguity in Gregory's otherwise obsequious metaphor: "Gregory describes himself not as a mere branch of Basil's tree, but as a new variety engrafted into it. Although Gregory appears to be describing the production of a tree with two or more varieties of the same fruit – a technique still used today – in another common form of grafting used in viniculture it is only the scion, when grafted into the old stock, which bears the fruit! In any case, the relationship between scion and stock is perhaps slightly more ambiguous than it appears on the surface."

<sup>60</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Cant. praef.*; GNO VI: 13.

them.<sup>61</sup> Once more, that is, the horticultural metaphor proves somewhat more ambiguous than it initially seemed, and the latter's achievements once again threaten to overshadow those of his predecessors just where they appear most dependent upon their influence. Further study of Gregory's "cultivation" of Origen, especially, would be required for a fuller picture, but whether one considers the image of a newly grafted branch or a gardener watering young seeds, his rhetoric raises unavoidable questions about where exactly he thought the "proportion" between fellow workers ought to fall. Then again, the Apostle himself offers some reason to think that such divisions of labor fail to obtain on the far side of things. The workers share a "common purpose," as some English translations supply, because they are both "coworkers (συνεργοί) of God" (1 Cor 3:9).<sup>62</sup> For Gregory, too, there is but one goal: "[T]hose who grouse and grumble about the ineluctable sequence of necessary events (τῷ εἰρμῷ τῆς ἀναγκαίας τῶν πραγμάτων ἀκολουθίας) are ignorant of the single purpose (σκοπός) towards which everything in the economy tend – that, in a certain order and sequence (τάξει τινὶ καὶ ἀκολουθίᾳ), according to the cunning wisdom of the one who leads them, all these things should be reconciled to the divine nature."<sup>63</sup> But, of course, that was a lesson he learned from Origen himself.

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<sup>61</sup> The image becomes more poignant still when one considers that the nature of "seed" was among the points on which Gregory both depended and departed from Origen, and did so in the *Hex* itself, as detailed by Köckert, "The Concept of Seed in Christian Cosmology." Indeed, Blowers, *Drama of the Divine Economy*, 146n42, notes that although both authors use the biblical term καταβολή to describe God's creative act, Origen uses it "to convey the down-laying – inevitably a degrading, albeit remedially – of the spiritual creation into the materially embodied one," while Gregory "avoids Origen's interpretation entirely in opting for the simpler image of a sower casting seed."

<sup>62</sup> For the classic study of Gregory's doctrine of synergism, see Mühlenberg, "Synergism in Gregory of Nyssa."

<sup>63</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *De anima et resurrectione*; GNO III.3: 78). My translation.

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