

## Encounters with a Homicidal Bath Demon: Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Gregory Thaumaturgus*

*Abstract: An exciting episode from the 4th century Life of Gregory Thaumaturgus affords readers the opportunity to examine key literary techniques employed by the author, Gregory of Nyssa. What role does physicality play in the demonic encounter, and what does this indicate about Nyssen's view of virtue or spiritual power as "embodied" qualities, able to be observed and even captured in narrative? How can characters and audiences within the text model or condition reader responses to such embodied power?*

“The aim of my address and that of the present assembly is the same. For Gregory the Great provides you with the occasion for gathering together, and me with that of speaking. And I think one and the same power is required both for accomplishing virtue in deed and for describing what is good worthily in a speech.”<sup>1</sup> So Gregory of Nyssa begins his oration on the life of Gregory Thaumaturgus, the Wonderworker. Invoking the Holy Spirit as a guide, Nyssen embarks on the retelling of the Wonderworker’s life and miracles, intent on providing a compelling, accurate description of Thaumaturgus’ deeds and on revealing the virtues that empowered those deeds.

In Greco-Roman and early Christian biographical narratives, or *bioi*, authors used a variety of direct and indirect characterization techniques to present such virtuous exemplars as Thaumaturgus and recommend them as models to readers or listening audiences. For example, through the use of physical description, an omniscient narrator’s commentary, and interactions between characters in the narrative, a *bios* can direct readers’ attention to key examples of what we can call “embodied virtue,” an observable, physical demonstration of a subject’s virtuous internal state. This virtuous internal state becomes manifest in external carriage, activities, speeches, and accomplishments, and these may be recorded by a biographer.

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<sup>1</sup> *Life of Gregory Thaumaturgus* (VGT 1), Migne 893. Working with the assumption that this text and its exciting encounter with the homicidal bath demon is unfamiliar to most readers, I have elected to go through the passage in some detail, providing extensive quotations of relevant portions of the text; all translations are my own unless otherwise noted. See the ‘Works Cited’ for Greek editions consulted.

*Bios*'s main appeal from a pedagogical or catechetical standpoint is that embodied virtue thus preserved in text can be imitated and re-embodied by those who read about it. The fourth-century Cappadocian Father Gregory of Nyssa has three biographical narratives that work with the concept of embodied virtue in order to present virtuous exemplars to reading and listening audiences: *The Life of Moses*, a re-telling and allegorical interpretation of biblical narratives about the lawgiver; *The Life of Macrina*, an encomiastic account of Gregory's oldest sister's birth, upbringing, admirable life, and noble death; and *The Life of Gregory Thaumaturgus*, a lengthy oratorical presentation of Gregory the Wonderworker's amazing feats and theological teachings. In each of these *bioi*, Nyssen describes, praises, allegorizes, and sometimes exploits his subjects' physical bodies as sites through which readers can discern the subjects' internal strengths. The works' prefaces disclose Gregory's didactic aims: each text not only illuminates but also recommends its subjects' virtues to the audience as worthy of imitation. A close reading of the bath demon episode in the *Life of Gregory Thaumaturgus (VGT)* provides us with an opportunity to examine Gregory of Nyssa's complex and multi-layered process of characterization, a crucial tool for narrating imitable embodied virtue.

In this paper we will examine the episode from three perspectives, which we might think of as expanding concentric circles. First, tightly focused on the events of the narrative itself, we will see that Gregory's use of detailed physical description has a variety of effects: it creates a vivid (and frankly frightening) sense of the narrative setting and atmosphere; it evokes the presence of his subject the Wonderworker even when this figure is not "on stage"; and it presents a manifestation of spiritual power that is decidedly material and expressed in the practitioner's physical behaviors. This power can be perceived with the senses, recorded in narrative form, then revisited and re-experienced by reading and listening audiences. This observation about the repeated evocation of physical, sense experience through text leads us to the second critical perspective, examining the potential effects of characterization techniques on an ideal audience. We can trace the way Gregory tries to carefully control his audience's vantage point and condition reader responses: how do characters on the level of the narrative react to the miraculous

events? What interpretations and behaviors does Gregory recommend for his audience? Finally, we may view the episode within Gregory's wider literary corpus, as an example of the *bios* genre that is profoundly shaped by Gregory's own theological and exegetical assumptions. After a careful examination of the demonic encounter, I will briefly outline some fruitful connections between the text - depicting spiritual power as embodied and imitable - and broader trends in Nyssen's theological anthropology.

## The Text

The *bios*'s subject is Gregory Thaumaturgus, also known as Gregory the Great, Gregory of Pontus, or "the Teacher." He was born in Cappadocia ca. 210-215 CE into a pagan family. He intended to study law in Berytus (modern Beirut), the capital of legal studies in the Roman Near East, but instead attached himself to the school of Origen in Caesarea, studying there between 233 and 238 and converting to Christianity.<sup>2</sup> Upon his subsequent return to Neocaesarea, he was appointed as its bishop and continued in that capacity until his death sometime between 270 and 275.<sup>3</sup> He held the See during the Decian persecution of 250 and 251 and gained his privileged place as a beloved and fabled patron of Cappadocian Christianity through his evasion of persecutors and his protection of local Christians during this period.<sup>4</sup> Thaumaturgus' role as benefactor and protector is also the reason for his connection to Gregory of Nyssa, his older brother Basil of Caesarea, and their family: the Cappadocian Fathers both attribute the spiritual formation of their paternal grandmother, Macrina the Elder, to the Wonderworker's influence.<sup>5</sup> In his

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<sup>2</sup> In Gregory the Wonderworker's own writings, his theology appears not as fully worked out as Origen's, nor does he express himself in consistent terms like his predecessor. Possible explanations for this are proposed by Slusser, including that the theological works are 1) exoteric and intended for uncatechized Christians, 2) composed early in Thaumaturgus' life and therefore unsophisticated, or 3) simply reflective of Gregory's own "rudimentary" grasp of Christian dogma (Slusser, 8-10). Lane Fox provides a brief but useful discussion of Gregory's apparent relation to Origen's works and known teaching methods in *Pagans and Christians*, 519-525. In any event, Gregory does not mention Jesus or the Holy Spirit very often, tends to treat the Incarnation as instrumental, and Abramowski and Slusser both point out that the sophisticated *Creed* is more likely to have been composed by Gregory of Nyssa than by the Wonderworker.

<sup>3</sup> Lane Fox gives approximate dates of 220-272 CE for Gregory Thaumaturgus' life (Lane Fox, 516).

<sup>4</sup> Slusser 1-3. On the importance of Berytus as a center for legal studies in the period, see Fergus Millar, *The Roman Near East, 31 BC - AD 337*.

<sup>5</sup> Van Dam 2003, 72-81 on Gregory and Basil's reconstruction of a Christian landscape for Cappadocia, largely informed by their knowledge of Gregory Thaumaturgus and other figures, including those of legend (e.g. Longinus, centurion from the crucifixion, being of Cappadocian extraction).

*Epistle 204*, written to the people and bishops of Neocaesarea, Basil remarks on the kinship his family has with the entire congregation in that city and the resulting integrity of his family's faith:

What more prominent demonstration of our faith could there be than that we have been brought up by a blessed grandmother from your midst? I mean the famous Macrina, by whom we were taught the words of the most blessed Gregory, preserved for her by obedience of memory; she also guarded us, still young, and formed and shaped us with the doctrines of piety.<sup>6</sup>

Basil is seeking here to emphasize the bond between himself and the community in order to shore up his own reputation and counter attacks made by the Neocaesarean bishop Atarbios; nevertheless, his respect for the Wonderworker and his own ancestors seems genuine.<sup>7</sup> Gregory's *bios* is a lengthy meditation on the life of Thaumaturgus and his effects on others' faith.

The *VGT* is one of Nyssen's earlier compositions, delivered as an oration probably in Neocaesarea on Gregory's feastday, November 17<sup>th</sup>, in or after 381 CE.<sup>8</sup> He appears to have added some chapters to a written version before making it available for circulation.<sup>9</sup> When the text is mined for straightforward historical detail, a number of issues arise. Scholars generally accept that the account must rely, at least in part, on oral accounts from the region of Neocaesarea and that it thus provides access to very early traditions about the region's founding saint.<sup>10</sup> This idea is corroborated by the existence of other Lives in Latin, Syriac, and Armenian that appear to have used similar source material.<sup>11</sup> However, Raymond Van Dam and Robin Lane Fox have convincingly shown that Gregory does not seem to know any of Thaumaturgus' own writings.<sup>12</sup> In fact, the *Creed* attributed to Gregory Thaumaturgus and preserved in this *bios* was most likely composed by Gregory of Nyssa specifically for the oratorical occasion. Including this

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<sup>6</sup> Epistle 204, *Basil to the People of Neocaesarea, through their priests* (375 CE). Translation from Barrois, 26.

<sup>7</sup> Nyssen's great respect for the influence of Macrina the Elder certainly colors his introduction to the *Life of Macrina*. Van Dam, *Families and Friends*, describes Basil's attitude toward his paternal grandparents on pp 16-18 especially.

<sup>8</sup> with Abramowski, based on the orthodox nature of the *Creed* and its prominent placement in the text as a means of legitimating Thaumaturgus' spiritual authority. Van Dam 1982 argues for a date in 380 while Telfer gives no specific date but thinks the address was probably delivered in Pontus closer to Nyssen's homebase of Annisa rather than in Neocaesarea itself (he suggests Iborá; Telfer 229).

<sup>9</sup> Added chapters would include the stories from VGT 98, Migne 956A on (see Slusser, 16).

<sup>10</sup> Slusser, 13-14.

<sup>11</sup> The Syriac is a 6<sup>th</sup> century composition. Rufinus also includes some stories about Thaumaturgus in his Latin translation of Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*, though Rufinus' source seems to be Gregory of Nyssa's *bios*. (Telfer, 231).

<sup>12</sup> Van Dam 1982

creedal statement provided Nyssen a way of defending the Wonderworker's orthodoxy by Nyssen's contemporary standards (after the Council of Constantinople in 381).<sup>13</sup> Despite its doubtful value as an accurate historical record of Thaumaturgus' life and teachings, the *bios* nevertheless affords us a glimpse of the Wonderworker's late-fourth-century popular cult and provides an opportunity to watch Gregory of Nyssa the biographer at work.

### **The Episode & Physical Description**

To set the scene for the encounter with the homicidal bath demon, we begin with a wonder Gregory Thaumaturgus performs much earlier in the story: banishing “demons” from a temple and converting its guardian to Christianity. It is Gregory's first conquest of an external enemy. Of course, this is not counting his prior victories over all sorts of temptation and youthful folly, for “at a time when for others the soul is very slippery on account of ignorance, since the majority of youth easily slides down toward foolish and unprofitable things... he was immediately complete in the acquisition of the virtues, always choosing what was useful for his age.”<sup>14</sup> As an adult, with these virtues in full bloom, he left his desert retreat and proceeded to a region “held fast by the deception of demons.”<sup>15</sup> This ungenerous description of the Roman Cappadocian city of Neocaesarea probably reflects the real presence of pagan shrines and artwork in the urban landscape, but it also creates an ominous setting for Gregory's procession into the city. Against this backdrop, the Wonderworker is said to be “like a noble soldier.”<sup>16</sup> The martial metaphor anticipates a battle, while the qualification of this soldier's superior, noble status foreshadows his eventual success. Undeterred by the obvious demonic possession of a certain temple's custodians, he spends the night in the space, keeping a vigil of prayer and song that renders the demons impotent: the next morning, the

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<sup>13</sup> Slusser, 8; Telfer, however, holds the *Creed* to be one of Thaumaturgus' authentic compositions. If the *Creed* does have an historical kernel that was inscribed on the church in Neocaesarea, it was most likely a basic tripartite statement about the divine persons that Nyssen has significantly expanded. I am inclined to agree with Slusser, who suggests the simple form “One God, One Lord, One Holy Spirit, Perfect Trinity” (Slusser 55 n. 28); Lane Fox also argues for the historicity of such a formula (Lane Fox, 521).

<sup>14</sup> VGT 11, Migne 900C

<sup>15</sup> VGT 34, Migne 913

<sup>16</sup> VGT 34, Migne 913

custodians find that the demons are unable to perform their usual tricks because Gregory had spent the night in their sanctuary. One of the custodians, enraged but intrigued, convinces Gregory to perform a series of miraculous deeds to demonstrate his authority over the demons and prove his evangelical statement that “this [Christian] faith was not confirmed by arguments, but commanded assent by the wonders that had happened.”<sup>17</sup> Gregory commanded an enormous rock to relocate itself, and the custodian “straightaway believed in the word and left everything” in favor of “the association with the Great One and a share in his labors and that divine philosophy and instruction.”<sup>18</sup>

It is this same temple guardian who now serves as Gregory’s deacon and plays a starring role in our episode. The deacon accompanied the Thaumaturge when, as Nyssen recounts, Gregory wished to evade capture at the hands of persecutors. In case any members of the audience were tempted to use this flight as evidence of the Wonderworker’s cowardice, Gregory reports that it was, in fact, a demonstration of his deep regard for his fellow Christians:

Then that Great One, seeing the weakness of human nature, how most people were unable to bear out the fight for piety to the point of death, became a counselor to the church to pull back a little from the fearful attack, thinking it better that by flight their souls should be preserved than that, by standing on the battle line, they should become deserters from the faith. And so that people might be as strongly persuaded as possible that it was no hazard for their soul to preserve their faith through flight, by his own example he became a counselor of retreat, since he himself withdrew before the others from the approach of danger.<sup>19</sup>

Returning to the narrative proper, we find that Gregory and the former temple guardian, now deacon, have made their way to a hilltop. Here the Wonderworker and his companion reenact a scene reminiscent of the Israelites’ battle against Amalek (Exod 17:8-16) and Jesus’ transfiguration (Mk 9:2-8 and parallels) in order to escape the notice of their pursuers:

He, having ordered his companion to stand with firm and certain confidence facing God and to believe in salvation, holding up his hands in prayer, and not to let his faith be knocked out by fear even if the pursuers got very close, made himself an

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<sup>17</sup> VGT 39, Migne 917B

<sup>18</sup> VGT 40, Migne 917C

<sup>19</sup> VGT 84, Migne 945D

example of that command for his deacon, looking to heaven with unwavering gaze and hands stretched in an upright position. And this is the way they stood.<sup>20</sup>

As in this episode, so throughout the *bios* Gregory of Nyssa continues to come back to Scripture in order to validate the Wonderworker's power and characterize his exemplary qualities as biblically grounded.<sup>21</sup>

Standing completely still, with their internal belief and devotion truly embodied in the vertical gaze and hand position, they appear to their foiled enemies in the form of trees. Once explained, this miraculous event leads to the conversion of an astounded would-be informant, who abandons his persecuting goals.

According to Gregory's account, this incident confirmed the devotion of the Wonderworker's followers and particularly of the temple custodian turned deacon. The young deacon commended himself to the Teacher's protection by asking for his intercessory prayer and then went on his way. Arriving in a nearby city around evening time, he hoped to enjoy a bath after his travels. His desire for refreshment is vividly described as a wish to attend to his bodily fatigue (κόπτος). But things were not so simple. As Gregory the narrator informs us, "a certain homicidal demon was in control of that place, who habitually visited the bath, whose destructive power was effective against those who came after dark, and for this reason that bath was unused and inactive after sunset."<sup>22</sup> To round out the fearsome picture, Gregory also

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<sup>20</sup> VGT 85, Migne 948

<sup>21</sup> See especially the episode in VGT 73-75, Migne 941: two men attempt to deceive Gregory, with one of them lying in the road pretending to be dead. Gregory throws his cloak over the man's prone body and the man actually does die. Nyssen claims this event shows that neither Gregory nor God is deceived, and he makes a direct comparison to Peter condemning Ananias to death for deceit (Acts 5:1-11). Other examples, some with explicit comparisons by Nyssen, include settling a dispute between two brothers with the wisdom of Solomon and the power of Moses in VGT 49-55, Migne 924-929 // 1 Kings 3:16-28 and Exodus 14:15-22; casting out a demon in VGT 77, Migne 941-944 // Mk 9:14-29; Gregory praying in thanksgiving "like David" in VGT 88, Migne 949 // Psalm 124:6.

<sup>22</sup> VGT 92, Migne 952; Bonner's 1932 essay "Demons of the Bath" addresses another narrative with a haunted bath: the apocryphal *Acts of John* by Pseudo-Prochorus. In this case the homicidal demon is Satan himself, who habitually strangles or drowns (πνίγω) young people who attend the bath. However, this haunting is explained by the occurrence of a foundation sacrifice during the building of the bathhouse, and it is this horrible background that makes the space a suitable setting for demonic activity. There is no such backstory for Gregory's evil bathhouse, but one important parallel remains; in both stories, the demon is able to use some bodily form and physical strength to attack his victims, suggesting an early Christian belief in embodied demonic forces.

Since the *Acts of John* are typically believed to belong to the early fifth century CE, it is not impossible that Nyssen's story about Gregory of Thaumaturgus, if circulated widely enough, might have influenced the *Acts'* author (Bonner, 206). Bonner offers a list of other early texts that deal with bath demons: most significantly three demonic sightings in baths from the *Acts of Andrew* (see also Klauck's summary of the story in his *The Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles: an Introduction*, pp 113-140, and the note that the public

informs his readers that the bath's doorman "testified that none of those who had dared it at that hour had returned from the water on his own two feet, but that the demon had overpowered them all after nightfall, and that many had already, out of ignorance, suffered fatal results; in place of the anticipated relaxation, laments and wailing had received them."<sup>23</sup> The double testimony of narrator and eyewitness sounds like the lead-in for every slasher horror film set in a youth hostel. But this detailed scene, evoking death through metonymy of reference to funeral accoutrements and mourning customs, plays an important role in highlighting the Wonderworker's power: against a dark backdrop of nighttime inside the deserted bathhouse where we are told to expect a foul murder will occur, the brilliance of the deacon's miraculous victory over the demon can shine more brightly.

Events proceed as follows:

When he was inside and naked, multiform kinds of frights and shapeless terrors were contrived by the demon: manifold apparitions showing the mingled nature of fire and smoke, in the shape of men and beasts, falling upon the eyes, sounding in the ears, pressing upon his breath, and pouring out in a circle around his body. Making the Sign upon himself and calling on the name of Christ, he traversed the first chamber unscathed. When he entered the inner one he met with more terrible sights, since the demon had been transformed into the most fearful apparition, and at the same time he thought the room was being shaken by an earthquake and the pavement beneath torn asunder to reveal the naked flame below, and that flaming sparks were being thrown up from the waters, and again the Sign was an adequate armor for him, and the name of Christ, and the aid furnished through the Teacher's prayers scattered the terrors of the sights and happenings. When he had already left the water and was hastening for the exit he was again hindered, since the demon was holding the doors shut. Once again even this impediment was undone of its own accord through the same power, as the door withdrew for the Sign. But since he thought that everything had yielded to himself, it is said that the demon cried out to him with a human voice not to attribute to himself that power through which he had escaped destructions; for the voice of the one who had commended him to the protector had granted him the impassibility.<sup>24</sup>

The passage is dominated by detailed physical description of the setting, of the deacon's subjective experience, and of his self-defense maneuvers. His progress through the various chambers of the bath is

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bathhouse is "a favorite lodging for demons," p 121), Tertullian's warning against demons in pools and baths from *de Baptismo*, and Psellus' 11<sup>th</sup> century *De operatione daemonum*.

<sup>23</sup> VGT 92, Migne 952

<sup>24</sup> VGT 93, Migne 952

also noted at several points, creating a clear impression of the tale's setting. At each of its three stages, the terrible demonic attack is described primarily in terms of its physical effects on the deacon: in the first chamber, the eyes, ears, and breath are mentioned individually, and Nyssen ends with a summary comment about the encircling of the deacon's whole vulnerable, naked body. The defensive response, in a complementary fashion, involves both oral and kinesthetic components. The deacon employs the sign of the cross, marking himself with a distinct physical motion, while he speaks the name of Christ, and is thus able to move through the oppressive space without experiencing actual bodily damage. The protective force apparently infuses the areas of his body that were being pressed upon by the demon.

In the second chamber, the demon's manifestation seems stronger, with more extreme effects that target the entire bathhouse structure and threaten the deacon not with suffocation but with immolation: pronounced seismic activity ruptures the floor, and flying sparks emerge from the water in the chasm. In the face of all these unnatural obstacles, the deacon employs the same simple, physical action to defend himself. This time, however, to match the escalation of demonic activity, the sign or seal of the cross is actually compared to armor, and readers are asked to imagine the maneuver forming a virtually solid barrier between the deacon's body and the force of the demon's attacks. Simultaneously, Nyssen reminds readers of a stronger defensive power in the form of the Thaumaturge's help. Even though the Wonderworker is still out in the countryside while all this activity is taking place in the city, it is his aid, transferred by means of intercessory prayer, that actively "scatters" or disperses the terrible visions and other events. Gregory Thaumaturgus, whose physical stance in prayer became a means of disguise on a country hilltop, now sends his protective presence across a significant distance, and it is similarly effective.

By the time the deacon and the demon face off for their final showdown, the demon himself has adopted a physical form, becoming embodied enough to lay hold of the door (*ἀντιλαμβάνω*) and prevent egress. This time, the sign of the cross also has a stronger effect on the material world, expanding its influence even beyond the deacon's body: it seems to empower the inanimate bathhouse door to fling itself

open. This physical action of marking the sign or seal of the cross on one's body serves as a focal point in the narrative, a clear source of spiritual power that is, conveniently, a physical action that the story's audience could easily imitate. We can perhaps imagine that while the story is being related, Nyssen building narrative tension and stirring up a palpable fear in his audience, listeners might begin crossing themselves in solidarity with the beleaguered deacon. Up to this point, it would seem that Gregory of Nyssa has succeeded in bringing his audience through a visceral experience, dragging them to the very edge of their seats.

It seems an appropriate moment for us, then, to step back and consider just how this audience is also subtly invited to assess and identify with other characters in the tale.

### **Characterization & the Reader's Vantage Point**

Perhaps the most intriguing question is this: who does the work of interpreting the deacon's actions and their significance? That is, what types of direct and indirect characterization does Gregory of Nyssa use to guide his audience through the story? How much interpretive range are readers really granted? For one answer, let's turn to the final piece of our episode, the demon's pronouncement as the deacon leaves the bathhouse. The demon himself performs a direct characterization of the deacon and of the Wonderworker in this speech. He points out that the deacon should not attribute the miraculous events to himself but instead to Gregory Thaumaturgus, specifically to that figure's powerful prayer. It seems significant that in order to make this point, the demon cried out for the first time in a human voice, interacting with the deacon through the sense of hearing and taking on a less supernatural, perhaps less terrifying, way of communicating key information. He delivered a warning against unwarranted pride: "But since [the deacon] thought that everything had yielded to himself, it is said that the demon cried out to him with a human voice not to attribute to himself that power through which he had escaped destructions; for the voice of the one who had commended him to the protector had granted him the impassibility."<sup>25</sup> Gregory of Nyssa uses the

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<sup>25</sup> VGT 93, Migne 952

demon himself to do important interpretive work inside the passage. The one who was vanquished gives the most reliable testimony about who or what actually defeated him. If readers are interpreting correctly, then, they must identify with the interpreting demon!

But that's not all. In case anyone listening caught on to this invitation and did not want to accept demonic testimony, she could just back up to the phrase that introduces the demon's words; here Gregory the narrator informs us, "But since he thought that everything had yielded to himself, it is said that..." At least two things are going on in this introductory formula. First, Gregory exercises his omniscient point of view to tell readers that the deacon had an interpretation of the events and that it was in need of correction. As far as interpretation goes, then, readers who had put themselves in the deacon's shoes while he was battling the demon are told they should now distance themselves and find another, more authoritative guide to understanding the events. Although the deacon can embody spiritual power, he does not, apparently, embody good sense. Second, anyone who doubts Gregory's omniscience gets reassuring evidence that he is working from a source of some kind: "it is said that" this demonic utterance took place. This neat transition from the demon-haunted bathhouse to the outside world thus offers a whole complex of cues directing the readers' gaze away from the previous vantage point inside the deacon's physical experience and immediately toward the narrator-sanctioned interpretation of events.

To follow up on this sharply focused analysis of the power displayed in the battle of the bathhouse, Gregory of Nyssa proceeds to explain the significance of the episode by describing various characters' responses to it and then applying his own ecclesiastical lens. We could say he is expanding the target now that he has made sure to mark its bullseye, giving readers a wider range of acceptable interpretive options that stem from the first, most correct remark on the event as a demonstration of the Wonderworker's influence. Figures in the narrative recognize the dramatic and miraculous nature of the deacon's demonic encounter. Nyssen explains how the bath's usual operators reacted; the deacon "was a source of

consternation (ἔκπληξις) to the people who ran the place”<sup>26</sup> on the basis of his unprecedented survival of a nighttime bath. These people are not just shocked witnesses; instead, they seem to be assimilated to a larger group when Gregory immediately writes about other miraculous events that had taken place in the city. The deacon runs around to consult others who have experienced miracles firsthand, all of them miracles that the Wonderworker had predicted from far off. This reporting role is crucial for the preservation of any records about Thaumaturgus’ and others’ spiritual power, and Nyssen’s narrative seems to take it for granted that people who saw wonders would willingly testify about them. After finding out as much as he can about other wonders the Teacher knew about, the deacon eventually reports back to Thaumaturgus, offering in his own person a living testimony to the idea that believers ought to flock to powerful spiritual teachers.

The wider framing of the episode presents Gregory of Nyssa with another opportunity for characterization in his own narrative voice. Adopting the long historical view, he explains that the demonic encounter story should be read as a foundation narrative for an important ecclesiastical practice, that of intercessory prayer. This very deacon “left to his own and to those to come later a common protection, namely, that each should commend himself to God through the priests.”<sup>27</sup> So important was this contribution, the author argues, that “even now, throughout the church, but especially among them, the same saying (φωνή) is a memorial of the aid which helped that man then.”<sup>28</sup> Gregory Thaumaturgus becomes the spiritual model for a key element of priestly responsibility and authority, and Gregory of Nyssa extends to the whole Church the promise that the Wonderworker’s spiritual victory can be re-enacted.

All of these characterization techniques – direct description of the subject, the narrator’s framing of events, the assessments and reactions of other characters – work together to set up a further interpretive task, a task that belongs to the reader. It seems that the reader has been asked to put herself in the shoes of

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<sup>26</sup> VGT 94, Migne 952

<sup>27</sup> VGT 94, Migne 953

<sup>28</sup> VGT 94, Migne 953

the deacon experiencing the demonic encounter and is subsequently asked to choose which other characters to imitate. She can join the demon in tracing out the real spiritual authority behind a wonder. She can marvel along with the city's inhabitants, a fairly straightforward reaction, but one that further seems to obligate her to broadcast news of the miraculous event. She can follow the example of the deacon and employ the protective sign of the cross, seek out testimony from other believers, or attach herself to a spiritual teacher. She can follow the devotional practice introduced into the broader church and request intercessory prayer.

So to answer the question that opened this portion of the paper - who does the work of interpreting the deacon's actions and their significance? – the work is divided at least three ways. Gregory the author controls the setting, the narrative pacing, and the framing of the story in an attempt to impose his preferred interpretive boundaries on the audience. The characters on the level of the narrative join him in this crusade to properly direct the reader's gaze and provide appropriate interpretations of the events seen. Finally, the reader herself must take on the most important interpretive task: bringing the narrative lesson to life and embodying again the virtues, from courage to faith, that the narrative subject(s) modeled.

### **Characterization and Theology**

We turn now to a very brief examination of ways in which this episode, with its focus on physical manifestations of spiritual power and its various techniques for guiding reader interpretation, may reflect Gregory of Nyssa's broader ideas about anthropology and exegesis. I will present a few points of contact with his more explicit reflections on virtuous exemplars from another of Gregory's *bioi*, *The Life of Moses (VM)*, in the interest of suggesting that Nyssen's biographical narratives are entertaining and engrossing without compromising their ability to be effective vehicles for catechesis.

Gregory's anthropology centers upon a concept of continuous human development. In fact, human change and development is, for the Cappadocian, never-ending. He begins with a God who is infinite and unchanging, who has created human beings that are limited and changeable. Working with a modified

Platonic view of the soul, Gregory asserts that created human beings can learn to correctly channel their passionate nature into a powerful desire for closeness to their creator God. Unlike his predecessor Origen, Gregory does not believe that a person's desire for God can ever be sated, since the unlimited God will eternally be able to reveal more of Himself to the believer.<sup>29</sup> For Gregory, the portrait of Paul in Philippians 3:13, the man who is "continually stretching out (ἐπεκτείνω) toward what lies ahead," epitomizes the goal of the changeable human in relation to the unchanging God; the person who can practice this *epektasis* participates in "the activity that should characterize man as a creature and, consequently, involved in change."<sup>30</sup> Gregory's literary depictions of human life, his biographical narratives, thus contain discussions of development and formation of character over time and in response to new situations.

The *VM* is actually written for the purpose of illustrating such advancement. A younger man, presumably training for the priesthood, requests advice about how to live a virtuous life, and Gregory says he will describe Moses, who learned and possessed perfect virtue. Near the beginning of the *VM*, he makes a broad statement about continual aspiration to the good and indicates for his young reader that the very desire to advance toward greater virtue is already "the perfection of human nature."<sup>31</sup> It is the desire of any rightly oriented human nature to seek advancement in virtue, and if Gregory can provide texts that describe virtuous individuals and present occasions for readers to imitate these subjects, his *bioi* are meeting an essential human need.

Second, and not surprisingly, Gregory sees Scripture as the most reliable teacher for those seeking an education in virtue and *epektasis*. When Gregory begins his presentation of Moses' life in *VM* I.10-15, he presents the Biblical exemplar as a model of virtue for all humans, but then makes a distinction as regards gender. In this way Gregory reinforces the significance of a physical category (what he calls gender but what most modern thinkers would refer to as biological sex) for the embodied manifestation of virtue in his own

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<sup>29</sup> On Gregory's position vis-à-vis Plato and Origen, see Heine, 36.

<sup>30</sup> Heine, 93.

<sup>31</sup> *VM* I.10

day. His text becomes a point of triangulation between Scriptural realities and contemporary life, a place where proper Scriptural interpretation is necessary for right living. He insists that a Scriptural education can implant virtue in the human soul, regardless of gender and historical circumstances. It is Scripture, he says, that furnishes its readers with the models for imitation. He goes on to make even more clearly his point about men and women being differentiated but both furnished with Scriptural guidance:

Since human nature is divided among female and male, and to both equally is presented the free choice between virtue and evil, for this reason to each group the corresponding example has been presented by the divine voice, so that with each looking to the cognate - the men to Abraham, the women to Sarah - both might be directed to the virtuous life by means of the appropriate examples.<sup>32</sup>

That is to say, the central text of Christian education is already geared toward helping humans fulfill their fundamental role as changeable beings continually reaching out toward the unchanging God. Those who know how to read Scripture – a skill Gregory can teach with his allegorical interpretation of Moses’ life – will find a reliable guide toward the divine.

Finally, Scripture is the best but not the only “text” that can be interpreted to point readers toward the virtuous path. Creation itself gives indirect access to the divine by being a manifestation of divine activities (ἐνέργεια). Human senses cannot access the divine nature (οὐσία) directly, but the senses can perceive the results of divine activity and learn something about the proper relation between humans and God, namely faith.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, the activities and behaviors of a human being, which stem from his internal character, do not provide direct access to his actual character, but can hint at qualities that do exist in that character and teach something about the proper relation between humans and the world, namely virtuous living. The *bios* literary form provides readers with access to its subject’s body in action, to demonstrations of embodied virtue, and thus to virtue. It is no accident that each of Gregory’s *bioi* seems to focus on a

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<sup>32</sup> VM 1.12

<sup>33</sup> Meredith 1999, 94.

particular virtue and presents a whole variety of instances in which the subject models ways to embody that virtue.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

The deacon's encounter with and victory over the homicidal bath demon contains the essential elements for helping audiences embark on the path of continual advancement in virtue. Readers receive a clear, detailed portrait of physical circumstances that resonates with their own experiences of fear and protection, even if none of them will ever face down a fiery demon in a haunted bathhouse. Gregory uses several narrative techniques to direct the reader's gaze such that his audience is shown how to correctly "read" the deacon's situation and learn its significance, a significance that touched immediate participants and Gregory's contemporary period in equally powerful ways. Ultimately, he lays out a script for types of behavior members of his audience can practice to mimic the deacon's and the Wonderworker's spiritual power in their own physical settings. Having been guided through the interpretive process, an ideal reader is now equipped to understand other demonstrations of embodied virtue, take specific and universal lessons from these, and themselves embody such virtues in their own lives.

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