

SAILING UP THE WALL OF OCEAN

part I

How should one live life? What choices should be made such that one lives a “successful” life? Throughout history, there have been many different opinions on the best path to take. Often times a writer will use a model of some sort to represent the path to be taken. Through this model, the author explains how the path is used to reach some goal. Not all paths are the same and not all goals are the same. This paper discusses two paths with two seemingly different but relatively similar ends. The first of these paradigms is that of ascension, presented in *The Life of Moses*. The second is an original idea based on the travels of a sailor.

The first of these paradigms is the view presented by Gregory of Nyssa in his writing *The Life of Moses*. In this text, Gregory says the truth of ascent will lead to union with G-d. Gregory uses Moses as an example of someone who followed the path of ascent and achieved a level of intimacy with G-d. Gregory presents answers to the questions: “Who is G-d?”, “What is self?”, “What is goodness and virtue?”, and “To what kind of commitment does this lead?”. The answers to these questions define the paradigm which one should follow in order to achieve union with G-d.

For Gregory, G-d is the creator of the world and the one who instructs Moses in the ways of life. Moses’ first encounters G-d when he stumbles across a bush that has burst into flames for no apparent reason. Gregory says this of the encounter:

And if the flame by which the soul of the prophet was illuminated was kindled from a thorny bush, even this fact will not be useless for our inquiry. For if truth is G-d and truth is light...such guidance of virtue leads us to know that light which has reached down even to human nature. Lest one think that the radi-

ance did not come from a material substance, this light did not shine from some luminary among stars, but came from an earthly bush and surpassed the heavenly luminaries in brilliance. (Gregory, 59)

Gregory makes several references to ascent in this passage. The parallels between heavenly light and the light G-d exudes from the bush uncover the elevated position of G-d. This indirectly implies that in order obtain closeness with G-d you must ascend to his location. Also, he refers to G-d as light and directly states that He is the “light which has reached *down* even to human nature.” Gregory tries to demonstrate the path one must take to reach G-d, and he does this by showing that G-d is elevated at a level higher than humans.

From this, it can be seen that Gregory believes G-d is better than humans, as shown by His elevated position. The reference to “G-d as light” shows that Gregory believes G-d is good. In many texts, including the Bible, light has an association with good.¹ This shows Gregory’s belief in G-d as good, pure, and clean.

Gregory’s notion of self can be seen in his description of Moses’ birth. He starts by stating that our world is characterized by change, and then continues “Everyone knows that anything placed in a world of change never remains the same but is always passing from one state to another, the alteration always bringing about something better or worse” (Gregory, p.55). He is referring to the change in which human beings undergo in the world. This world of change requires us to continue do so. Gregory believes that we have only two choices: change for the better, which in this case means following the path of ascension to become closer to G-d; or for the worse by turning away from G-d. Gregory talks about what G-d sees as a good self: “This is truly the vision of G-d: never to be satisfied in the desire to see him”(Gregory, 116). Again Greg-

¹ Later on Gregory talks about Moses ascending Mount Sinai, and talks about Moses entering a cloud of darkness. This Darkness is where G-d lives. It would potentially be easy to get confused about G-d as light and his later depiction of G-d living in the dark cloud, but understand that each has their purpose. In this example of G-d as light, Gregory is showing the pureness/virtue of G-d. In the dark cloud, Gregory is showing the mystery that surrounds G-d, not a direct characteristic of G-d.

ory is showing that the good self requires constant attention to the change that will always be occurring in our life.

Gregory's view on self hints at his model for virtue and goodness. In order to obtain union with G-d, one must recognize goodness and strive for it. Other aspects of one's life can show virtue. Gregory says: "Their immoderation at once became destructive to their bodies, and their satiety ended in sickness and death. This example became to them and to those watching them a sufficient cause for moderation"(Gregory 48). Gregory is acknowledging aspect of asceticism as good. In the same discussion Gregory talks about faith in G-d as being central to virtue. "G-d decreed that those who had no confidence in diving help should not see the promised land"(Gregory, 48). According to Gregory's model, only two things matter for goodness: faith in G-d and continued change towards virtue. That is not to say there aren't other evils that can get in the way of virtue, and for Gregory there are many. But by model of ascent Gregory would say that we could rise above these pitfalls.

The last topic of Gregory's model is the that of commitment. This topic has already been discussed through the other three. It has been shown that Gregory believes in change, and that in order to be good, one should try to rise above all evil, by ascending. This is the commitment that Gregory believes one should have. His belief is that when changing we should be committed to G-d and strive to be closer to G-d.

But one must always, by looking at what he can see, rekindle his desire to see more. Thus, no limit would interrupt growth in the ascent to G-d, since no limit to the Good can be found nor is the increasing of desire for the Good brought to an end because it is satisfied. (Gregory, 116)

Here Gregory shows that the commitment to learning and growing is everlasting and therefore cannot come to end. It is this commitment that Gregory asks of us with his model.

In summation of this model of ascent we see that change and faith are important and that the overall goal is to achieve union with G-d. Since the level to which we have risen is a product of our work, we can determine our self and goodness by our closeness to G-d.

part II : Sailing

Gregory's model culminates with achieving union with G-d. The other model presented has a different goal. The goal here is to successfully make it through life. The question would be, how is success defined? While many people have different ideas of what a successful life might be, understand that model presented is not limited to any one of these. Success is at the discretion of the person who applies the model to their life. The second model presented is that of a captain sailing a boat in the open ocean. The destination of the ship is a successful life. The questions covered in relation to this model are still applicable: "Who is G-d?", "What is self?", "What is goodness and virtue?", and "To what kind of commitment does this lead?". These are the same questions explained above for Gregory's model. Comparisons with Gregory's model are presented after the answer to each question.

The parallel in the Sailing model for G-d is that of the ocean.² The ocean is often times unpredictable, and dangerous, yet it still provides for transportation and beauty. It is used by the Captain³ to reach his destination. It is integral to the journey. In strong weather, however, the ocean can be disagreeable. Large waves can toss and turn the boat, making it difficult for the Captain to navigate to Success.⁴ Like the ocean, G-d is both necessary and powerful. As the ocean is necessary for a sailor to travel to his destination, G-d is necessary for someone to

² This definition of ocean also refers to the forces acting on the ocean, such as the wind.

³ The Captains is capitalized because it refers to a specific instance of a captain that will be discussed throughout.

⁴ Here Success is used as metaphorical destination port.

achieve success. In modern society, it is often hard to admit that G-d is present or necessary, but reveals Himself in subtleties. On a smooth day with a calm wind, a sailor may not notice the ocean, and become preoccupied with another aspect of the journey. This does not mean the ocean is not there. Similarly, just because G-d is not clearly present does not mean that G-d is not around. Despite the differences between Gregory's model of ascent and the sailing model, the view of G-d is similar. Both show G-d as force of power. The sailing model might be confusing in that it displays G-d in a more neutral than ultra good view; but that would be incorrect. The seas are strong for a reason, G-d may appear to be tough, but this does not mean G-d is evil. Akin got ascending to G-d, sailing to success implies assistance from G-d (or the ocean).

The sailing model presents that of a Captain, alone on a relatively small boat, traveling through all sorts of seas. The Captain is all alone with the boat and the water. The boat is the tool, and the water the path. This model displays the true isolation of self. It shows that while we do live in a social society, we travel through our path alone, at least symbolically.⁵ It is up to each person individually to make the right choices to achieve success in their life. In this model the self is powerful, and capable of making decisions that will either lead to or away from the success. When sailing a Captain may make a mistake and head in the wrong direction or possibly veer off course at some points along the journey. This does not mean that the Captain will never reach the destination, but it may delay arrival. The paradigm here suggests that we might make a few bad decisions in the our journey to a successful life, but in the end these decisions do not prevent us from reaching success. Gregory's vision of self is that of someone who continues to climb upwards while never reaching the top. He says that people have some choice in the path

⁵ Some may argue this point by saying that if you get married you aren't living by yourself, but instead sail through life with a partner. Careful analysis of this situation would show that while you are intricately involved with your partner, you are still the only one who can actually makes your personal decisions.

they decide to climb. This choice is, however, very limited in Gregory's mind. He gives less power to the individual. The sailing model has multiple paths, it does not set you in any specific way. This is more free form than Gregory's model, it allows for more mistakes. Both models provide for free will either of the person climbing or the Captain sailing. In this aspect they are similar.

A sailboat is made up of many different things, such as lines, masts, booms, sail, winches, rudders, and a hull. All these pieces work together at the hand of the Captain to achieve motion. Taking care of the ship is no small matter, and the Captain must be educated on how to use the pieces of the boat with the aspects of nature he encounters. If the Captain is negligent and lets the boat fall apart it will cease to sail. It then becomes impossible to reach Success. This model shows a path to virtue and goodness that rewards being prepared and being armed with knowledge. If one's path is that of union with G-d, as in Gregory's case, one should arm themselves with knowledge about G-d. If one's goals should be betterment of society, one should arm themselves with the problems in society that need attention. Like Gregory's model, this model requires that a person never stops working. If you stop taking care of the boat and sailing towards Success, you will never get there. The models are in agreement at this point. This is the commitment required, but is also the description of what is good and virtuous.

Goodness in sailing is knowledge of the water and winds. This is a skill, and with the skill comes goodness. In sail races this knowledge translates into victories. In a journey on sailboat, this can lead to a faster trip, as well as a safer one. A good sailor can recognize trouble spots. Like the sailor, knowledge of surroundings will help one succeed in life. While complete success might be impossible, levels of success are always achieved by those who use the right tools. Goodness is not defined as reaching ultimate success. Unlike a sail race, there is no compe-

tition in plain sailing, or in life. It is not a level of how fast you get there, it is a matter if you travel well. This model is similar to Gregory's model.

The sailing model presents a different view on the path to success than Gregory's. This model can be applied to Gregory's goal of union with G-d. When this happens, the paths will be almost identical. The view on G-d is different. The view on self is relatively similar. Goodness, virtue and commitment are all along the same lines.

Conclusion:

The similarities between the model for ascent and sailing lead me to the conclusion that my thoughts are akin to that of Gregory. We both believe in setting a goal. In Gregory's case it is reaching union with G-d. In my world it is living a successful life. Both require respect of powers outside the range of our personal control. Both require constant attention in order to achieve the final results. They both end in a quest that is hard if not impossible to finish before death. All these factors lead to the aforementioned conclusion, that the two theories are similar. This is interesting because it implies that theories that were applicable in the fourth century are still relevant to life today.⁶

The study of early Christian spirituality has led me to greater define my personal beliefs on G-d and the way in which I live life. It has also brought me to a greater level of understanding of Christianity and the society that exists around me. Beyond the basic knowledge provided in the class, I have enjoyed the readings. They have provided certain levels of justification for some of my beliefs. For example, the readings on Christian marriage and philosophy against divorce have only strengthened my opinion the subject.

⁶ I would only assume that others agree with this or this book would not still be in print. It is also interesting to realize that after a thousand years, people still have similarities in the way they live. Technology, while revolution in all aspects of life, does not change the fundamental human morals, and thus humans live life in a way similar to that in the time of Gregory.

Spirituality for me is the belief in G-d and the path set out before me. It is the belief that good things come to those who work for them. Attention and drive really do matter; anything is possible.⁷ My definition of G-d did not change in this course. I believe that G-d is energy. The law of Conservation of Energy states that energy can never be created nor destroyed, it only changes forms. It can be seen in the atom, even as technology becomes available to see what was perviously unknown, more questions arise. Spirituality, for me, is belief in this energy and its presence in every event.

⁷ The certain level of qualifications. For example one could say that a man can never fly, but the airplane was invented for that purpose.