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SUBSTITUTIONARY THEMES IN NYSSEN'S
IN CANTICUM CANTICORUM

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SUBSTITUTIONARY THEMES IN NYSSEN'S

IN CANTICUM CANTICORUM

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To John and Yvonne Spallino

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PREFACE

There are many who have helped me throughout the journey of writing this thesis. I am grateful to God for saving me in high school and orienting my heart to pursue Him passionately. The journey He has taken me on is one that I did not expect, but one I needed.

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Jonathan Spallino

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CHAPTER 1

GREGORY OF NYSSA IN GUSTAF AULÉN'S *CHRISTUS VICTOR*

In the early twentieth century, the landscape of Christian academia and philosophy was shifting. One result of this shift was the questioning and abandonment of the substitutionary view of atonement, both historically and theologically. Leading this significant change was Lutheran theologian Gustaf Aulén (1879–1977). In his work, *Christus Victor: A Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Atonement*, Aulén wrote at length on the nature of the historical view of atonement, which has become a common place in modern discussions of this issue.¹ First published in 1931, Aulén was deemed forward thinking and can be accredited for aiding in the resurgence of the Christus Victory theory of atonement. For example, American theologian Gregory Boyd describes *Christus Victor* as a “landmark” in the discussion of atonement and asserts that one cannot seriously discuss the atonement without first reading Aulén.² Paul Fiddes, professor of systematic theology at the University of Oxford, contends that Aulén nearly predicted the resurgence of the Christus Victor theory given the “oppression current in

¹Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement*, trans. A. G. Herbert (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2003).

²Thomas R. Schreiner et al., *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views, Penal Substitutionary View*, ed. James Beilby and Paul R. Eddy (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 11.

society, psychology, literature and cinema.”³ Furthermore, many describe the influence of *Christus Victor* on postmodern society as monumental, because it emphasizes the resurrection, our participation in the life of Christ, and the communal nature of the atonement as opposed to individualistic forms. Denny Weaver, author of *The Nonviolent Atonement*, characterizes Aulén’s work as the renewed vision of a non-violent atonement.⁴ While Weaver’s work has earned a place in modern discussion on the topic in its own right, the effects of Aulén can be seen throughout his work. What these scholars maintain is that Aulén and his work have shaped the landscape of modern discussion of the atonement, which they are correct. It is surely one of the most important pieces of atonement theology to be written in the twentieth century. The question is, was Aulén correct in his assumptions?

An interest in the fourth-century Cappadocian Fathers began to rise around the same time as interest in Aulén’s work peaked, in particular with the youngest Cappadocian, Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 330–ca. 395). This Cappadocian’s work in the areas of the Trinity, universalism, mysticism, and the atonement of Christ are key to why his work is being explored in depth by many today. It is no wonder, then, that Aulén was fascinated with Nyssa and describes him as one of the most pivotal characters in the development of the *Christus Victor* theory of atonement. However, while Aulén’s work is substantial and his contributions to the field significant, there are many scholars who

³Paul S. Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation: The Christian Idea of Atonement* (London: Darton Longman & Todd, 1989), 112.

⁴J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2011), 111.

have theological and historical concerns with respect to how Aulén depicts Gregory of Nyssa, and the greater theological framework of Christus Victor.

Author and theologian, Thomas Schreiner, describes the major theological shortcomings of Aulén’s argument in *The Nature of the Atonement*. He writes, “If the Christus Victor motif is not tethered to penal substitution, we might conclude that human beings are merely victims of sin, held in thrall by evil powers. Penal substitution reminds us that sinners are enslaved to demonic powers because of our own moral failure and guilt.”⁵ George Evenson describes the “basic fault” of the Christus Victor theory by highlighting the fact that “it exaggerates one truth of Scripture to the neglect—denial almost—of another truth of Scripture without which ‘Christus Victor’ would not be real.”⁶ Both Schreiner’s and Evenson’s theological issue with Aulén is the dismissal of the wide biblical support in favor of substitutionary theories, which they regard as the basis for all the other forms of atonement.⁷

Furthermore, Evenson describes Aulén’s historical survey as a sweeping generalization.⁸ Others like Michael Vlach label Aulén’s historical assertions as “quite serious,” because it suggests that those who believe in penal substitutionary atonement “are accepting a doctrine that is relatively new, and by implication, something foreign to

⁵Schreiner et al., *The Nature of the Atonement*, 68.

⁶George O. Evenson, “Critique of Aulen’s Christus Victor,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 28, no. 10 (October 1957): 738.

⁷Schreiner et al., *The Nature of the Atonement*, 50. See Schreiner’s discussion on Penal Substitution.

⁸Evenson, “Critique of Aulen’s Christus Victor,” 741.

the church of the first thousand years.”⁹ If these assessments of Aulén’s work are correct, then his work misrepresents key figures in the early church, and at the same time, it discredits the historical depth of substitutionary atonement, which is present in the early church.

One of the victims of this misrepresentation is Gregory of Nyssa, whom Aulén seems to present as having a very narrow interpretation of the atonement. Therefore, this research will propose that upon examination of Gregory’s commentary, *In Canticum Canticorum (Homilies on the Song of Songs; hereafter Canticles)*, that Gregory held the necessary theological viewpoints needed to support the substitutionary theory of atonement. This is evidenced by his diverse and multifaceted understanding of the atonement, along with three key substitutionary themes found in the *Canticles*. He uses the theme of shepherd and sheep, spice and sacrifice, and metaphors of darkness and light to articulate the atonement in terms associated with penal substitution. However, a brief summary and analysis of Aulén’s work is needed to demonstrate the misconceptions that Aulén has made about Nyssa. This will be followed by a study of the life and work of Nyssa, before diving into the substitutionary themes found in the *Canticles*.

Critical Analysis of *Christus Victor*

Aulén begins his work with the following goal: to show that “there can be no dispute that [the classical atonement] is the dominate idea of the Atonement throughout the early church period the dominant idea in the New Testament the ruling idea

⁹Michael J. Vlach, “Penal Substitution in Church History,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 20, no. 2 (September 2009): 200.

of the Atonement for the first thousand years of Christian History.”¹⁰ While his aims are lofty, his execution is neither complex nor difficult to follow. In his words, “My aim, is therefore, simply to analyze the actual types of Atonement-doctrine, so that their characteristics may emerge with the greatest possible clearness, and to fix the actual development of these types in the course of Christian thought.”¹¹ Aulén compares, contrasts, and summarizes the Satisfaction theory, the Moral Exemplar theory, and the Classical theory in their historical contexts. In the end, Aulén argues that the Christus Victor theory, which he labels as the “classical theory,” prevails over the others in response to the question: *Cur Deus Homo?* For what reason did Christ come to die?

The first theory Aulén defines is the Satisfaction theory, otherwise known as the Latin theory or substitutionary theory. Aulén argues that this theory was popularized by Anselm of Canterbury (c.1033–c.1109) and prior to Anselm, nearly non-existent. This theory emphasizes man’s culpability of sin and the satisfaction of God’s wrath through the cross. As Schreiner defines it, “The Father, because of his love for human beings, sent his son (who offered willingly and gladly) to satisfy God’s justice, so that Christ took the place of sinners . . . so that in the cross both God’s holiness and love are manifested.”¹² For Schreiner, this is the primary way Scripture communicates the atonement of Jesus and this is the view that this research will explore in Nyssen’s *Canticles*, which stands in contention with Aulén’s proposed understanding of Nyssen’s theology.

¹⁰Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 17.

¹¹Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 19.

¹²Schreiner et al., *The Nature of the Atonement*, 67.

The Moral Exemplar theory is the second theory Aulén defines whose origin is often attributed to Peter Abelard (c.1079–c.1142). This theory emphasizes the moral change in humanity. In Abelard’s words, “Our redemption through Christ’s suffering is that deeper affection in us which not only frees us from slavery to sin, but also wins for us the true liberty of sons of God, so that we do all things out of love rather than fear—love to him who has shown us such grace that no greater can be found.”¹³ Mark Maddix writes, “Christ’s life and death saves us by giving us a perfect moral example of love, humility, and obedience to follow Jesus’ atonement is about God’s love, not about God’s dealing with the devil.”¹⁴ There are moments where Gregory also affirms this form of atonement. However, given the brevity of this paper, it will not focus on this element of Gregory’s thinking about the atonement.

The final theory Aulén presents is the “classical view” that Aulén defends as the historical view of the atonement.¹⁵ This theory is more commonly referred to as the “ransom theory,” and is often attributed to Origen, Irenaeus, as well as Gregory of Nyssa.¹⁶ This theory emphasizes Christ’s victory over Satan and demonic powers, hence the term, *Christus Victor*. Weaver writes, “Jesus’ resurrection turned the seeming defeat into a great victory, which forever revealed God’s control of the universe and freed sinful humans from the power of sin and Satan. This motif carries the designation of ‘classic’

¹³Jonathan Beeke, “Cur Deus Homo? A Closer Look at the Atonement Theories of Peter Abelard and Bernard Of,” *Puritan Reformed Journal* 1, no. 2 (2009): 47.

¹⁴Mark Maddix, “Moral Exemplarity and Relational Atonement: Toward a Wesleyan Approach to Discipleship,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 50, no. 1 (2015): 74–75.

¹⁵Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 15.

¹⁶Harper, “Christus Victor, Postmodernism, and the Shaping of Atonement Theology,” *Cultural Encounters* 2, no. 1 (2005): 37.

because it is the prevailing view found in the early church theologians.”¹⁷ Aulén describes it succinctly as “the idea of the Atonement as a Divine conflict and victory; Christ—Christus Victor—fights against and triumphs over the evil powers of the world, the ‘tyrants’; under which mankind is in bondage and suffering, and in Him God reconciles the world to Himself.”¹⁸ According to Aulén, this theory holds the rightful place as *the* Christian doctrine of atonement. In his words:

If our hypothesis is true, the Latin type of Christian doctrine [satisfaction theory] turns out to be really a side-track in the history of Christian dogma—admittedly of vast importance and influence, but still only a side track . . . the history of the doctrine of Atonement shows clearly that just at this central point the Latin view definitely deviates from the classic Christian view . . . It [classical view] has therefore every right to claim the title of the classic Christian idea of the Atonement.¹⁹

However, as many have argued, Aulén’s claims are based on a series of historical assertions that are over-generalized, resulting in an unbalanced picture of the atonement in the early church.²⁰

First, Aulén argues that the classic idea of atonement dominated the Patristic era. His line of logic starts with the presumption that the predominant view must unequivocally mean that it was the universal view. He writes,

The classic idea has in reality held a place in the history of Christian doctrine whose importance it would not be easy to exaggerate. Though it is expressed in a variety of forms, not all of which are equally fruitful, there can be no dispute that it is the dominant idea of the Atonement throughout the early church period.²¹

¹⁷Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 58.

¹⁸Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 14.

¹⁹ Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 15

²⁰Evenson, “Critique of Aulen’s Christus Victor,” 738.

²¹Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 15.

However, Evenson finds fault with this claim and lays out theological and historical rebuttals towards Aulén's premise. For example, he references notable scholars, A. A. Hodge, Alfred Cave, and George Foley, who deny that the classical idea of atonement was primarily taught in the ancient church.²² Garry Williams, whose scholarly work in this area has influenced both sides of this discussion, demonstrates the widespread acceptance of penal substitution amongst the early church Fathers.²³ In the end, Evenson, Williams, and others make a strong case that the classical theory was neither the dominant theory nor was it universally accepted.

Aulén's second assertion is that the satisfaction or substitution theory is a byproduct of medieval dogma. Aulén argues that the development of the idea of *penance* heavily influenced the satisfaction element of the atonement. He has this in common with Fiddes who claims that substitutionary atonement was "developed in the Reformation period."²⁴ He uses Tertullian, Cyprian, and Anselm to make his case that the Latin view of the atonement came into being around the twelfth century. He writes, "The Latin idea of penance provides the sufficient explanation of the Latin doctrine of the Atonement. Its root idea is that man must make an offering or payment to satisfy God's justice; this is the idea that is used to explain the work of Christ."²⁵ However, it is difficult to take Aulén's accusations seriously due to the overwhelming amount of support that suggests

²²Evenson, "Critique of Aulen's Christus Victor," 740.

²³Garry J. Williams, "Penal Substitutionary Atonement in the Church Fathers," *Evangelical Quarterly* 83, no. 3 (July 2011): 194.

²⁴Vlach, "Penal Substitution in Church History," 200.

²⁵Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 61.

the satisfaction theory was not the byproduct of the medieval church. Surely Tertullian, Cyprian, and Anselm helped to explain and clarify the satisfaction theory of view, but it is misleading to argue that prior to the Middle Ages, that this theory was non-existent. This is Vlach's proposal in *Penal Substitution in Church History*, where he provides through a series of historical examples, a detailed account of penal substitutionary atonement in the early church. Some of the figures he uses for his claim are Clement of Rome, Ignatius, Justin Martyr, Eusebius of Caesarea, Athanasius, the Cappadocians, and Augustine of Hippo among others.²⁶ The result is a well-rounded understanding of the historical case for substitutionary atonement.

Lastly, Aulén argues that the classical theory of atonement is also the predominant theme in Scripture. In his words:

If the classic idea of the Atonement dominated the whole patristic period, whereas the Latin doctrine only began to emerge in the West during that period, and did not attain its complete expression till the Middle Ages, then it is altogether likely that the classic idea will be found to be firmly rooted in the Apostolic Christianity. It would be in the last degree improbable that an idea of the Atonement which was unrepresented in the Apostolic Age should suddenly emerge in the early church and there win universal acceptance. We are, then, justified in approaching our consideration of the New Testament evidence with this a priori probability in mind.²⁷

Aulén operates under the assumption that if the classical view was the majority view in the early church, then it is likely that it is also the majority view found in Scripture. But does this argument hold up? Schreiner does not believe it does. In his work *The Nature of the Atonement*, he demonstrates the ample breadth of Biblical texts that establishes penal

²⁶Vlach, "Penal Substitution in Church History," 200.

²⁷Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 48.

substitution as a primary theme.²⁸ Likewise, George Smeaton highlights the important nature of satisfaction with regard to the atonement:

Nothing else therefore comes into consideration in estimating the enormity of sin but the infinite majesty, glory, and claims of Him against whom we sin. Accordingly, the terms used by the Lord to designate sin are noteworthy. He calls it darkness (John viii. 12), implying a state of isolation from God, that is an element where God is not. He calls it a trespass (Mark xi. 25), implying a violation of law. He terms it a debt (Matt. vi. 12), involving guilt or liability to punishment. He designates it a lie (John viii. 44), intimating a mental state which either resists or runs counter to divinely-manifested truth.²⁹

His goal is to demonstrate that God designates sin in a variety of ways, but one thing is consistent, it is man's offense against a holy God. At the center of this doctrine are two important and necessary ideas: man's responsibility for his sin and that his sinful nature needs to be changed. Aulén downplays these themes and seems to ignore passages like Mark 10:45, Ephesians 1:7, and 1 Peter 1:18, in the process.³⁰ His error is not his ability to justify Christus Victor through Scripture, but the limited way he interacts with Scripture in other areas of atonement. The result is an unbalanced view of the atonement in God's Word and the early church, especially in his depiction of Gregory of Nyssa, who would agree with the aforementioned necessary ideas of penal substitutionary atonement.

Aulén Interprets Gregory of Nyssa

Aulén especially leans upon the Cappadocian Fathers, especially the two Gregories, to support his claims. Gregory of Nazianzus (c.329–c.390) appears multiple

²⁸Schreiner et al., *The Nature of the Atonement*, 50. See Schreiner's discussion on Penal Substitution.

²⁹George Smeaton, *Christ's Doctrine of the Atonement* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1991), 351.

³⁰Evenson, "Critique of Aulén's Christus Victor," 743.

times in *Christus Victor*. Aulén quotes Gregory to show the costly extent of God’s purpose in the incarnation “that God, by overcoming the tyrant, might set us free and reconcile us with Himself through His Son.”³¹ It is odd that Aulén would paint Gregory as a strong proponent of the classical theory given that Gregory of Nazianzus rejects the ransom theory primarily because of the usage of “bondage” language. Even Aulén recognizes that Gregory of Nazianzus prefers the language of “sacrifice” instead.³² Nonetheless, Aulén’s emphasis on Gregory of Nazianzus is marginal compared to the younger Cappadocian.

Aulén refers to Gregory of Nyssa as a leading figure in the classical movement of atonement. There are a number of reasons for this claim that are not specifically mentioned by Aulén, but that can be deduced from his characterization of Gregory. First, Gregory’s writings about the captivity of sin and deliverance of man from Satan’s power indicate a strong classical theory. In fact, this sets the stage for the ransom language often found in Gregory’s writings. Secondly, Nyssen regularly uses emancipation language, which is a key indicator for ransom theories. Lastly, Gregory’s view of the disguise and deception of Jesus in human form has led many to believe that Gregory of Nyssa solely affirmed the classical theory. In fact, Aulén uses Gregory to show the clear emphasis that “the Divine act of redemption occurs in the context where the deception of the devil is depicted in realistic language.”³³ Aulén characterizes Gregory of Nyssa as someone who “plainly asserts that the devil acquired rights over mankind” and is “at the same time

³¹Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 36.

³²Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 41.

³³Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 39.

anxious to show the rightfulness of the deliverance of man from the devil's power."³⁴

With each quote Aulén uses to describe Nyssen's theology, it becomes apparent that it was done with the intent of limiting Gregory's understanding of the atonement as merely "classical."

However, Aulén is not alone in his assessment of Gregory. Ronald Fisher and Kyle Kirchoff contend that due to Gregory's framework of Christ's deception, there should be no doubt that he held a classical view of atonement.³⁵ Vincent Brümmer, in his book *Atonement, Christology and The Trinity*, ascribes the speculative mythology explaining God's victory over Satan to Gregory of Nyssa.³⁶ J. N. D. Kelly also acknowledges that Gregory's disposition and language favor the classical theory.

However, Kelly's perspective includes one major difference; he reminds the reader that Gregory also had "no difficulty in applying the Biblical language of sacrifice to it."³⁷ In fact, he suggests that one must "pick his way through a variety of theories, to all appearances are unrelated and even mutually incompatible, existing side by side, and sometimes sponsored by the same theologian."³⁸ His point is that a simple, concise, straight-forward answer on the issue of atonement in the early church is difficult; and it is likely that theologians like Gregory of Nyssa held to more than a singular view of the

³⁴Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 40.

³⁵Ronald Jeffrey Fisher and Kyle Kirchoff, "Even the Enemy Himself Would Not Dispute That the Action Was Just': Disguise and Self-Deception in Gregory of Nyssa," *Heythrop Journal* 57, no. 1 (January 2016): 94.

³⁶Vincent Brümmer, *Atonement, Christology and the Trinity: Making Sense of Christian Doctrine*, (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2005), 68.

³⁷J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, rev ed. (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1978), 382.

³⁸Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 375.

atonement. Kelly describes it as seeing “one great truth from multiple angles.”³⁹ Sarah Coakley, educator and scholar at the University of Cambridge, wrote a compelling piece on Nyssen and his understanding of the Trinity, where ironically she describes him as a “systematic thinker.”⁴⁰ Her point is that throughout the *Canticles*, Gregory sees his theology on a scale that develops over time progressing along the journey of one’s ascension to God. While there may be seeming inconsistencies and contradictions, it is all done as a part of this larger “systematic” framework. This is extremely important for those who study Gregory’s theology because often one can narrow Nyssen’s theology by failing to keep his expansive theological framework in mind.

It is this thinking that has led many to disagree with Aulén’s assertion that Gregory of Nyssa was *only* a proponent of the Christus Victor theory. Perhaps Gregory was also a proponent of an atonement that was both penal and substitutionary, and did not find it incompatible to believe both. George Heider mentions that Aulén’s work has been “faulted for historical inaccuracy and a reductionistic typology of models and particularly for producing a caricature of the objective model.”⁴¹ It might be possible that Gregory’s view of atonement was bigger than just Christus Victor, which he undoubtedly affirmed. This is the point that Adonis Vidu mentions in *Locating Atonement*, which centers on the inseparability of the Trinity and its relationship with the atonement. He argues that the Trinitarian framework, which Gregory of Nyssa affirmed, is intrinsically linked to an

³⁹ Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 376

⁴⁰Sarah Coakley, “Gregory of Nyssa on Spiritual Ascent and Trinitarian Orthodoxy: A Reconsideration of the Relation between Doctrine and Askesis: *Gregory of Nyssa: In Canticum Canticorum*,” *Vigiliae Christianae, Supplements*, vol. 150 (August 2018): 362.

⁴¹George C. Heider, “Atonement and the Gospels,” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 2, no. 2 (September 2008): 259.

atonement that is both penal and substitutionary.⁴² Therefore, he focuses on Augustine and the Cappadocians, specifically Gregory of Nyssa in his research.

Given the inaccuracy of Aulén's historical assertions and Kelly's analysis of the theological culture during the fourth century, there is space for exploration into the theology and mind of this Cappadocian father. This in no way negates his contribution to the classic perspective of atonement, but rather that Nyssa had a multifaceted view of the atonement, including substitutionary atonement. This is consistent given his background and the *Canticles* itself.

A Proper Understanding of Nyssen

Gregory was born into a Christian family in Cappadocia during a time that some consider the most significant time in church history.⁴³ He describes in brief the type of education that his family received in his account of *The Life of St. Macrina*. Macrina received training by their mother in the home, while his older brother Basil had the privilege of attending the university.⁴⁴ Coming from a wealthy family, Gregory was given many opportunities to debate, critically think, and explore the coherence and depth of theological thought. Both Macrina and Basil entered the monastic lifestyle before Gregory did. Even so, it is thought that he received most of his education from Basil, who studied in Athens.⁴⁵ Jean Daniélou gives a detailed account of Gregory's life and puts

⁴²Oliver D. Crisp and Fred Sanders, *Locating Atonement: Explorations in Constructive Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 22.

⁴³Alan Dunstone, *The Atonement of Gregory of Nyssa* (Glasgow: Tyndale Press, 1963), 7.

⁴⁴“Gregory of Nyssa, Life of St. Macrina (1916), 17-79 ; English Translation,” 17, accessed March 20, 2018, http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/gregory_macrina_1_life.htm.

emphasis of the theological change in Gregory after Macrina and Basil died. The main change, Daniélou notes, is Gregory's interest in the monastic lifestyle, which he avoided prior to this time.⁴⁶ His literary career varied in topics showing his vast knowledge on the interwoven nature of theology. Of note, *On Virginity, Against Eunomius, On the Making of Humanity, On the Soul and Resurrection, Homilies on the Song of Songs* paved the way for his most popular contributions, *Life of Moses, Homilies on the Ecclesiastes*, and the *Catechetical Oration*. Given this range of activity from leading the Eastern church through Ecumenical councils to writing these literary achievements, one thing constantly becomes evident: Gregory had an ability to hold multiple theological viewpoints as viable without sacrificing theological coherency. Gregory was comfortable with establishing and supporting a variety of theological convictions even if they seemed to overlap, contradict, or nuance certain aspects of another doctrine.

Patristic scholar Brooks Otis labels Gregory as “far more concerned with building a coherent system of thought. . . . In one respect he can be said to have given coherence and consistency to Cappadocian thought; in another to have revealed its fundamental incoherence or inconsistency.”⁴⁷ Otis presents a side of Gregory that longed for coherence with the other Cappadocians even if it seemed incompatible. His focus on theological coherence should not be understated, because it was this type of thinking that led to the Cappadocians outstanding work in the doctrine of the Trinity. Gregory not only

⁴⁵Emerson, Stephen, *The Work of Christ According to Gregory of Nyssa* (Ann Arbor, MI:UMI, 1999), 1.

⁴⁶Jean Daniélou, *From Glory to Glory: Texts from Gregory of Nyssa's Mystical Writings* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimirs Seminary Press, 1997), 3.

⁴⁷Brooks Otis, “Cappadocian Thought as a Coherent System,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 12 (1958): 97.

desired coherence, but characterized himself as a learner from many perspectives. This is most clearly seen in the way he balances the perspectives of Plato, Origen, and his fellow Cappadocians, Basil and Gregory of Nazianzus. Again Otis is helpful. He writes, “he did not think of himself as an originator so much as a faithful disciple.”⁴⁸ What Otis and others are referring to is his ability to affirm multiple theological viewpoints on a singular issue.

For example, Stephen Emerson explores Gregory’s multifaceted view of the atonement by using Hugh Turner’s categories of redemption, showing that Jesus came to bring saving knowledge, defeat the forces of evil, and restore immortality to mankind.⁴⁹ He describes separate theories of atonement and how Nyssen’s influence can be seen in each one. The multifaceted view that Emerson recognizes in Gregory’s theology is in part because of his diverse background. This is one example where Gregory held to multiple views in a particular area of theology and at the same time, held to true coherence. Regrettably, like many Nyssen scholars, Emerson underestimates the scope of Gregory’s atonement. He writes, “Turner’s fourth category, Christ the sacrificial victim failed to play a prominent role in his description of the work of Christ.”⁵⁰ This understanding of Gregory’s atonement is regrettable, because it neglects an area of Nyssen’s theology that appears throughout many of his writings. With this in mind, if there are hints of substitutionary atonement in his writings, regardless of how limited, they should be

⁴⁸Otis, “Cappadocian Thought as a Coherent System,” 97.

⁴⁹Emerson, *The Work of Christ According to Gregory of Nyssa*, 3–4. See Hugh Turner’s work, *The Patristic Doctrine of Redemption: A Study of the Development of Doctrine During The First Five Centuries*.

⁵⁰ Emerson, *The Work of Christ According to Gregory of Nyssa*, 4.

considered, discussed, and explored in an effort to ascertain a well-rounded view of Gregory's view of atonement.

It would be a disservice to characterize him as anything but single-minded. It seems that commentators base their judgments of Gregory's atonement from *The Catechetical Oration* alone, which leads to a limited view of his atonement. In doing so, they present an insufficient view of Nyssen's atonement and portray it as solely remedial in nature.⁵¹ For our purposes it is important to note that this is not a discretization of others' work in this area, but a recognition that Nyssen's understanding of substitutionary atonement seem to be unexplored and often explained away as unsubstantial. Therefore, one needs to examine other sources beyond *The Catechetical Oration* in order to inquire if Gregory utilized language that may suggest a wider interpretation, which he does in *Sermon One On the Resurrection of Christ*, his letters *Against Eunomius*, and his lengthy commentary, *In Canticum Canticorum* to name a few. With this in mind, the *Canticles* seem to be a likely starting point given the length, depth, and breadth of his writings in this fantastic commentary. In the end, I would like to advance the hypothesis that based on his *Canticles*; Gregory held a belief in substitutionary atonement through his use of substitutionary atonement themes.

The largest obstacle to this thinking, as Dunstone suggests, is that according to Gregory, "humanity is thus pitiable, rather than culpable. There seems to be little sense of deliberate disobedience to the divine imperative and the resulting offence to the holy majesty of God."⁵² His point is that Gregory seems to focus on the results of sin instead

⁵¹Adolf von Harnack, *History of Dogma* (Charleston, SC: BiblioLife, 2008), 276–300.

of man's responsibility for their sin. However, as this paper will demonstrate, there is significant evidence in the *Canticles* to suggest the culpability of mankind and the substitution needed in the atonement. After all, Steve Jeffrey, Michael Ovey, and Andrew Sach in their influential discourse, *Pierced for our Transgression: Rediscovering the Glory of Penal Substitution* observe, "If a writer makes a passing, but nonetheless explicit, reference to the doctrine of penal substitution in a work largely devoted to another subject, this probably indicates that penal substitution was both widely understood and fairly uncontroversial among his contemporaries."⁵³

The open-mindedness of Gregory is further supported by Kelly's analysis:

For Gregory of Nyssa, however, the incarnation, culminating in the resurrection, is the sovereign means for restoring man to his primitive state. His theory is that the effect of the Fall has been a fragmentation of human nature, body and soul being separated by death. By becoming man, and by dying and rising again in the human nature which he assumed, Christ has forever reunited the separated fragments.⁵⁴

And at the same time, Gregory affirmed, "Christ's death, we notice, was integral to the scheme, and so Gregory had no difficulty in applying the Biblical language of sacrifice to it who offered himself on our behalf, the great high-priest who sacrificed his own body for the world's sin."⁵⁵ Kelly seems to understand the ebb and flow of theological thinking in the fourth century. While the classical theory of atonement may be his diving board into atonement, Nyssen seems to swim in a larger pool of thought. It seems likely that he would have affirmed or at the very least accepted substitutionary atonement even

⁵²Dunstone, *The Atonement of Gregory of Nyssa*, 10.

⁵³Steve Jeffery et al., *Pierced for Our Transgressions: Rediscovering the Glory of Penal Substitution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 163.

⁵⁴Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 381.

⁵⁵ Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 382.

if he did not specifically develop it in all of his writings. Based on the metaphors used in the *Canticles*, this research will conclude that Nyssen would have affirmed an atonement that is substitutionary in nature. The texts that follow suggest that Christ's death was an exchange on humanity's behalf whereby Jesus took the curse of humanity, despite his innocence and humanity's culpability. This definition satisfies both the substitution and penal aspects of atonement in a general sense, which Gregory seems to support. Williams clarifies this position that an author approves of penal substitution if they state, "that the punishment deserved by sin from God was borne by Jesus Christ in his death on the Cross."⁵⁶ It is this statement of substitutionary atonement that we see in the *Canticles*.

⁵⁶Williams, "Penal Substitutionary Atonement in the Church Fathers," 196.

CHAPTER 2

SHEEP AND SHEPHERD THEME IN THE *CANTICLES*

Richard Norris Jr. dated the *Canticles* towards the end of Gregory's life. While the date is specifically unknown, it is believed to be his last writing, which gives the reader the benefit of understanding his theology at the end of his life, in its most mature state. Norris recounts that the *Canticles* were originally addressed to Gregory's congregation, but the work was initiated by the request of Lady Olympias.¹ He writes, "Gregory is quite clear about what he himself is up to. He announces it in his dedicatory letter, where he explains to Olympias that his homilies are not intended to be 'of assistance to [her] in the conduct of [her] life', but are on the contrary to give 'some direction to more fleshly folk for the sake of the spiritual and immaterial welfare of their souls.'" ² Gregory decided to write the *Canticles* for the populace as opposed to a more narrow audience that provides the reader with a generalized sense of his theology when discussing certain passages. In order to gain a true appreciation for Nyssen's writing, it is vital to understand the overall message narrative of the *Canticles*: which is the journey of one's soul towards God.

Therefore, Nyssen sets out to decipher how the soul unites with God through the transformation of the soul and the pursuit of virtues. Michael Laird writes, "In

¹Richard A. Norris, Jr. *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on the Song of Songs*, critical ed. (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2013), xx.

² Norris, *Gregory of Nyssa*, xxxiv.

Homily One he tell us that union with God is the purpose of the Song of Songs itself . . . “According to Gregory, the purpose of erotically charged imagery in the text of the Song of Songs itself, is to train human desire to long for God.”³ Union with God is central to the *Canticles* and the desire of every soul transformed by the light, as Gregory makes clear in Homily 6 where he attributes this transformation to the work of Christ and the Spirit.⁴ In the *Canticles*, Gregory covers a variety of theological topics ranging from anthropology to Christology in this commentary. However, what seems to stand out is the amount of discussion given to the atonement of Christ. In fact, Gregory spends a considerable amount of time discussing how the union begins through the atonement and not just the ascent in virtue towards God; which begs the question, why have so many scholars failed to consult this homily in their exegesis of Nyssen’s atonement?

It is also just as beneficial to understand that Nyssen writes from a highly allegorical approach, which he balances with his view of dividing reality into two parts. On one hand, his allegory shows the spiritual application of a physical reality, while on the other hand, he is fascinated by the idea of two realities: perceptible and intelligible. This is a key element to understanding Nyssen, because he describes God as “that reality . . . which transcends the entire structure and order of being, [and] is unapproachable, impalpable, and incomprehensible.”⁵ Therefore, his goal in the *Canticles* is to describe the “mysteries” of the Christian faith, which he considers to be meanings that are “enigmas and below-the-surface meanings, and so void of profit in it’s plain

³M. S. Laird, “‘By Faith Alone’: A Technical Term in Gregory of Nyssa,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 54, no. 1 (2000): 40.

⁴Norris, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 119.

⁵Norris, *Gregory of Nyssa*, xxvii.

sense.”⁶ This is the side of Nyssen’s theology that understands the complexity and unfathomable nature of God.

For the purposes of our discussion, three themes will guide our study through the *Canticles*, none conclusive apart from one another, but when held together demonstrate that Gregory held to the propositions found in the previous chapter, “that the punishment deserved by sin from God was borne by Jesus Christ in his death on the Cross.”⁷ The first theme describes the relationship between the Shepherd and his sheep in a sacrificial manner. The second theme describes the atoning connection between sacrifice and corresponding spices used in substitutionary sacrifices, i.e., *frankincense and myrrh*. The final theme shows the importance of the exchange between humanity’s sin for Christ’s righteousness, as described by theme of darkness and light. This theme provides substantial clues into the culpability of man for their sin and the atonement of Christ. When these three themes are placed side by side in a coherent system of atonement, it suggests that Nyssa had an understanding of substitutionary atonement that he affirmed.

Throughout the *Canticles*, Nyssen uses a series of metaphors to describe the relationship between God and man. As one would expect, the Bride and Bridegroom’s relationship is commonly explored. What is unexpected is how frequently he uses the sheep and shepherd relationship to describe what happens in the atonement. Gregory uses this relationship at least twelve times explicitly in the *Canticles* to describe God’s union

⁶Norris, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 3.

⁷Garry J. Williams, “Penal Substitutionary Atonement in the Church Fathers,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 83, no. 3 (July 2011): 196.

with mankind, and a number of indirect connections can be made throughout the *Canticles* as well. For example, in Homily 5, Nyssen describes the Good Shepherd as the one who nourishes the sheep with lilies and provides for them with spiritual nourishment, which results in the changed “nature” of the sheep.⁸ He affirms this again in Homily 7.⁹ This is telling because Nyssen refers to our state before Christ’s atonement as a change in nature and not just a change in situation; where Christus Victor theory would emphasize the latter and not the former. In Homily 14, Nyssen describes the Shepherd as the one who “gathers the lambs” for preservation.¹⁰ Elsewhere in the *Canticles*, it describes how God guides, provides, separates the sheep from the goats, gives truth, changes the nature of the sheep, and calls the sheep to himself. As a whole, Nyssen goes to great lengths to stress the sheep-shepherd relationship in connection with answering the question: for what reason did Christ come to die?

This is irrevocably true in Homily 2, where Gregory makes a series of statements centered on this relationship. He writes,

Where do you pasture your flock, O Shepherd, you who carry the whole flock on your shoulders? . . . For how shall I not love you, who so loved me—even when I was dark—as to lay down your life for the sheep that you shepherd? It is not possible to conceive a love greater than this: to give up the well-being of your life in exchange for mine.¹¹

As Gregory begins his discussion in the *Canticles*, he introduces the theme of the Shepherd. According to Nyssen, the Shepherd in Homily 2 carries the flock, lays down his life for the sheep, and exchanges his life for his sheep. There is an inherent

⁸Norris, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 181.

⁹Norris, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 233.

¹⁰Norris, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 425.

¹¹Norris, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 69.

implication that the flock is completely dependent upon the Shepherd to carry them. When they were dark, there was no way for them to escape such a fate outside of full dependence on the Shepherd to bring them to his pasture. Gerald Aranoff wrote an article entitled, “Shepherding as a Metaphor,” which sheds light upon the importance of this relationship. Aranoff argues that the Patriarchs are often used as the archetypes of describing a shepherd. Thus inherently, “the standard midrashic explanation for Moses and David being shepherds is that taking care of sheep was a prelude and, in a way, a training ground for leading the Israelites.”¹² However, Aranoff contends that if Moses and David are the standard of understanding this metaphor then one will sorely miss out on the greater spiritual implications. Therefore, he argues that Abel, the first mention of a shepherd in the Hebrew Scriptures, is the correct archetype. In his words, “From the first sacrifice reported in the Bible, the shepherd’s offering is considered the appropriate one, thus validating that occupation in the context of bringing the correct sacrifice individuals who were, in practice, capable of bringing the right kind of offering to God.”¹³ Aranoff’s premise is that the shepherd relationship is set in the context of sacrifice and suffering. It is the shepherd’s prerogative to prepare a proper offering of sacrifice on behalf of the people. This is a theme that Gregory endorses throughout the *Canticles*. For example, in the previous text, Nyssen is shocked that the Shepherd would lay down his life for the “sheep that you shepherd.” The implication is that he is fully aware of the sacrificial context that the Shepherd replaces his sheep and it is utterly

¹²Gerald Aranoff, “Shepherding as a Metaphor,” *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 42 (2014): 87.

¹³Aranoff, “Shepherding as a Metaphor,” 38.

shocking to him.¹⁴ The very phrase “the very well-being of your life in exchange for mine” is not only clear, but also a direct way to describe substitutionary atonement.¹⁵

In Homily 9 amongst others, Gregory references the Old Testament sacrificial system and in particular the “expiatory sacrifices to God purifying sacrifices, and sacrifices for sin.”¹⁶ In the following paragraphs, we will explore Nyssen’s use of sacrificial terms and ideas signifying proper worship and offering under the law. However, suffice it to say, Nyssen presents a certain irony in his language. He is astounded that the Shepherd will lay down his life for his sheep for the payment of sin. Either Nyssen is arbitrarily stressing the point that the Shepherd would put his life in danger for unknown reasons or he specifically has in mind the sacrificial system and “the sacrifices for sin.”¹⁷ Therefore, Homily 2 is pivotal in understanding the whole book because it clarifies the nature of the union between God and humanity. It is like a Shepherd, who carries his sheep, lays down his life for his sheep, and does so in place of his sheep. The result of this relationship is an exchange where his sheep receive a changed nature. In his words:

The Good Shepherd knows how to take herds of goats to himself and turn the herds into sheep For when he said: *I will betake myself | to the mountain of myrrh, and to the hill of frankincense*, indicating by *myrrh* his suffering and by *frankincense* the glory of the Godhead, he added: *You are beautiful through and through, my close one, and there is no flaw within you*. By these words he teaches first that no one takes his life from him but that he has the power to lay it down accepting death on behalf of sinners not as a result of any deeds of ours, ‘lest anyone boast’ (Eph. 2:8), but out of his own graciousness; and then that it is not

¹⁴Norris, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 69.

¹⁵Norris, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 69.

¹⁶Norris, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 281.

¹⁷Norris, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 281.

possible for human nature to be purified of its flaw unless, ‘the lamb that takes away the sin of the cosmos’ destroys the evil himself.¹⁸

Gregory makes two important comments. First, that only the ‘Good Shepherd’ can make goats become sheep and second, ‘the lamb’ that takes away the sin of the world is the only way this change of nature is accomplished. Not only does mankind depend on the Shepherd to change our nature as noted above, but this is how the Nyssen defines and classifies love. In Homily 2, he writes, “For how shall I not love you, who so loved me—even when I was dark—as to lay down your life for the sheep that you shepherd?”¹⁹ Our dependency on him and his graciousness to lay down his life is the context of love in the *Canticles*.

Nyssen’s use of love and sacrifice above only further his understanding of why Christ came to die. First, it is the Good Shepherd who has the ability to turn the nature of goats into sheep through his sacrifice. In the *Canticles*, Nyssen refers to the effects of the atonement as changing the nature of the soul, and not just freeing us for the powers that lay outside of us. Here definitions are important. Nyssen affirms that the atonement changes the nature of the person, not just their situation. Fundamental to the Christus Victor theory is the idea that the atonement changes the outward situation of captivity for the believer, which the biblical witness warrants. What is not essential to the Christus Victor theory is the belief that the atonement changes humanity’s nature. So the question remains: why does Gregory describe the atonement in terms of a changed nature and not just freedom from oppression? His description of goats becoming sheep is more consistent with a substitution theory of atonement. According to Gregory, it is depicted as

¹⁸Norris, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 233, 253.

¹⁹Norris, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 69.

the Good Shepherd taking the place of his sheep where he took humanity's curse in exchange for his righteousness. The result of which is changed nature: goats becoming sheep. Both of which Nyssen seems to present and uphold as systems of atonement. This suggests that Nyssen has this form of atonement in mind when writing the *Canticles*. In fact, this theme is so pervasive in Nyssen's writings that references to the nature of humanity changing from something that opposes God to something that loves God occurs repeatedly throughout all of the *Canticles* through a variety of metaphors including the goat and sheep, darkness and light, ugliness and beauty, and so on.²⁰ Second, he accepts "death on behalf of sinners" willingly. This is another idea that is regularly explored by Gregory. He spoke freely about Christ's death, and that "the beautiful Lover of our souls has commended his love, on account of which 'Christ died for us' even 'when we were still sinners.'" ²¹ Third, it is outside the power of human nature to purify itself, "*lest anyone boast.*" ²¹ He writes clearly that it is only by the "lamb" that takes away sin.²² Virtually on all occasions in the *Canticles*, when he compares the prior nature of the soul to the soul's current state in Christ, he does so by showing the inability for humanity to enact the change itself. When he references the pursuit of the virtues with similar metaphors, he does so in the context of growing in our union with God. Thus Nyssen uses similar metaphors to describe two different but coherent realities, sanctification through the virtues, and justification through the work of Christ. Lastly, Nyssen uses what seems

²⁰Norris, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 53. In the *Canticles*, homilies 2, 5, 7, and 9 speak the most frequently about these changes and contain the most metaphors concerning the change of nature.

²¹Norris, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 399.

²²Norris, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 253.

to be a distinctively substitutionary reference to John 1:29. Therefore, the question is asked: What is his understanding of the term, “lamb” used here?

Theologian George Carey, during the 1980’s wrote a Tyndale Biblical Theology Lecture entitled “The Lamb of God and Atonement Theories,” in which he analyzes the prevailing theories of the John 1:29 passage, “The lamb of God takes away the sins of the world,” in the ancient church. The breadth and depth of this article as it explores different theories is fair, balanced, and well developed. In sum, he proposes five interpretations that the early church would have adopted. The first theory is the Passover Lamb theory, which understands Jesus to be “the true Paschal sacrifice.”²³ The second is what he calls the “Tamid Offering,” which is the daily lamb sacrificed in the temple.²⁴ The third theory he develops is “The Aqedah,” or “Binding of Isaac” theory. In this theory, the main focus is upon the story of Isaac’s deliverance by means “of a victim supplied by God himself and not provided by man, is an obvious OT illustration, if not type, of the Son of God who is slain for us.”²⁵ The key focus here is the victim language. The fourth is the Apocalyptic Lamb theory, which suggests that this phrase is about the eschatological act of dealing with sin, which he renders unlikely.²⁶ Lastly, he mentions the Isaianic Servant theory, which postulates that the lamb that John refers to is from Isaiah 53.²⁷ The importance of this theory is that it connects the idea of Jesus with the

²³George Leonard Carey, “The Lamb of God and Atonement Theories,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 32 (1981): 101.

²⁴Carey, “The Lamb of God and Atonement Theories,” 102.

²⁵ Carey, “The Lamb of God and Atonement Theories,” 102.

²⁶Carey, “The Lamb of God and Atonement Theories,” 104.

²⁷Carey, “The Lamb of God and Atonement Theories,” 105.

sheep that was slaughtered for humanity's sin. In the end, he concludes that the first and last theories are the most likely believed by the early church. Regardless of which theory won the day, there are similarities between them that are important for this research. First, the Passover Lamb theory and the Isaianic Servant theory both affirm a sacrificial substitute in place of humanity. Second, both affirm that the sacrifice atones for the sin, guilt, and shame of the people, which God has the right to judge. Finally, they both frame the atonement in the appeasement of the wrath of God by placing blame on humanity's rebelliousness and sin. Both of these theories are viable options for Nyssen and are present in his writings.

However, what is more surprising is Nyssen's frequent allusion to the story of Abraham and Isaac on Mt. Moriah. The Hebraic link to the sacrificial spice of myrrh is something Gregory uses to describe the atonement on a frequent basis by playing on the word "Moriah." While the play on the word myrrh is not concrete it can help provide a key insight into how he is using the term, "lamb." It is consistent with two specific connections that Nyssen makes in Homily 15. In the homily, he describes the lamb in John 1:29 and then immediately explores the story of the miracle of Abraham and Sarah. Gregory's reference here may indicate that he views atonement in the context of a substitute sacrifice found in the story of Abraham and Isaac.²⁸ If God supplies a victim substitute in this story, then there is a strong indication that Nyssen sees the overall context of atonement in this way. What seems to be clear from the *Canticles* is that he would have seen the reference to John 1:29 as a substitutionary lamb, not just as a ransom.

²⁸Norris, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 459.

The shepherd-sheep relationship begins to form a picture of a shepherd exchanging his life for his sheep in a substitutionary and sacrificial manner. Whether he frames the “lamb of God” in terms of the Passover, Isaianic Lamb, or the story of Isaac, makes no difference in the end, because each theory emphasizes the sacrifice in the context of offering for the sin of the people, done in place of the people. This idea is common in other writings of Nyssen. For example, in *Sermon One On The Resurrection of Christ*, he writes,

He offered Himself for us, Victim and Sacrifice, and Priest as well, ‘Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world (4).’ When did He do this? When He made His own Body food and His own Blood drink for His disciples; for this much is clear enough to anyone, that sheep cannot be eaten by a man unless its being eaten be preceded by its being slaughtered. This giving of His own Body to His disciples for eating clearly indicates that the sacrifice of the Lamb has now been completed.²⁹

Notice how Gregory describes Jesus. He offers himself as victim, sacrifice, and priest. As a victim because he is innocent, as a sacrifice because he is a substitute, and as a priest because he is appeasing the wrath of God through a sacrifice which was the priest prerogative in the Old Testament. This theme continues to build and gain a footing when one considers how Nyssen describes this sacrifice through the use of spices and his discussion on the nature of the soul changing from darkness to light.

²⁹William A. Jurgens, trans., *The Faith of the Early Fathers* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1979), 2:59.

CHAPTER 3

SACRIFICE AND SPICES IN THE *CANTICLES*

Another key feature of the *Canticles* is Nyssen's recurring use of scent and spices to describe the atonement and one's assent to becoming more like him. In the cases where the bride is said to have spices of myrrh and frankincense, it is most frequently used to denote voluntary submission and the mortification of sin in her life. This fits with the overall theme and aim of the *Canticles*. However, when the Bridegroom is referenced in connection with these spices, it is regularly connected with his death and sacrifice. This should not be surprising because of Gregory's understanding of Old Testament sacrifice. According to Nyssen, it is the bridegroom who can obtain, use, and give these various spices to the bride as a peace offering. For example, in Homily 9, Nyssen writes:

Furthermore, the law subsequently brings many expiatory sacrifices to God, as well as offerings of thanksgiving and offerings for deliverance, purifying sacrifices, and sacrifices for sin. All of these are included among the spices, and also whole offerings and burnt offerings and hallowings of particular portions Scripture teaches us to be sweet-smelling, as, for example, when Noah brings a sacrifice to God, 'and the Lord smelled the sweet smell'. *Spices*, then, means sacrifices brought to God.¹

In the text above, Gregory connects spices with peace offerings amongst others, which is often associated with the sacrificial system. More importantly, there are a number of indications that Nyssen connected these spices with the offering of sins. According to

¹Richard A. Norris, Jr., *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on the Song of Songs*, critical ed. (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2013), 281.

Gregory, “it is not possible to live together with [God] until you have been changed by the myrrh of death into the deity of frankincense.”² His underlying belief is that through death and sacrifice one obtains a right nature before God. This is how he describes the exchange that takes place through Christ sacrifice. This sets the context for the numerous references to the smell of the offerings, frankincense, and myrrh. As previously seen in Song 3:9-4:7a, the Good Shepherd changes the nature of the sheep and then refers to these spices. He writes,

For when he said: *I will betake myself | to the mountain of Myrrh, and to the hill of frankincense*, indicating by *myrrh* his suffering and by *frankincense* the glory of the Godhead . . . as he makes his journey *to the mountain of myrrh*, accepting death on behalf of sinners not as a result of any deeds of ours, ‘lest anyone boast,’ but out of his own graciousness; and then that it is not possible for human nature to be purified of its *flaw* unless ‘the lamb . . . that takes away the sin of the cosmos’ destroys the evil himself.’³

Gregory’s makes three statements above that lend support to a substitutionary reading. First, Christ accepts suffering and death indicated by the term, *myrrh*, and gives the glory of God, indicated by the term, *frankincense*. The consensus in his writings is that at the atonement, *myrrh* was given in exchange for *frankincense*. Gregory remarks, “You came to the hill of frankincense (for you rose with me and were exalted to communion with the Godhead, which is what the word *frankincense* indicates) . . . For this frankincense, which you have come to share in the resurrection, is for you the beginning of faith.”⁴ Elsewhere, Nyssen highlights this change. “For it is not possible to live together with me until you have been changed by the myrrh of death into the deity of

²Norris, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 263.

³Norris, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 253

⁴Norris, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 263.

frankincense.”⁵ Norris points out that this is a key allusion to baptism, which brings up an interesting question.⁶ Does Gregory see the atoned life as an ongoing process or a one-time event? The short answer is both. He firmly describes the Christian ascent as starting at baptism in pursuit of the virtues of Christ. For example, he writes, “She says that her hands themselves drip myrrh by their very own agency—and by ‘myrrh’ she refers to the mortification of bodily passions.”⁷ That is why he regularly describes humanity as being washed clean by water.⁸ This is an aspect of his theology that emphasizes the ascent to God with the killing of sin through the practice of virtues. At the same time, Nyssen frequently describes the changed life as a moment of completion. He uses phrases that indicate this when he mentions the nature of the sheep changing, the sinner transferring from darkness into light, and the sinner’s nature changing from black to white, which will become evident in the next section. Therefore, it is consistent with Nyssen’s understanding that when he mentions, “by *myrrh* his suffering and by *frankincense* the glory of the Godhead,” he has in mind both these ideas in mind.⁹ On one hand, he sees *myrrh* as growing in virtue, and on the other, Christ’s suffering and exchange. It is the latter which is important. When he writes that Christ exchanges the *myrrh* for *frankincense*, he is describing the exchange between Christ’s sacrifice as indicated by *myrrh* and the giving of Christ’s righteousness as indicated by *frankincense*.

⁵Norris, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 263.

⁶Norris, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 263.

⁷Norris, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 363.

⁸Norris, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 53.

⁹Norris, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 253.

Second, according to Nyssen, Christ accepts this suffering to the glory of the sinner out of grace. Notice how Gregory classifies humanity. He designates them as sinners, not as victims of a satanic power or divine captivity. While that is common language elsewhere, here he regulates humanity as sinners. A good question to ask of any theological question is, “Why did the theologian use this term instead of another?” While this seems simple, his terminology is pivotal in his understanding of the atonement. Gregory describes humanity’s nature by the terms “sin,” “filth,” and “curse” on several occasions in the *Canticles*, all-referring to the sinner’s nature. For example, he writes, “when I was made dark with sin and at home in the dark because of my deeds, he by his love made me beautiful, exchanging his own beauty for my ugliness.”¹⁰ On another occasion, Nyssa writes in reference to this change, “the husbandman came down to his garden and changed the nature of the fruit so that they became better and of more worth. | Finding myrrh, he plucked it from the garden with fragrant spices of his own (for he is the source of anything lovely) . . . for ‘from him and through him and for him are all things [Rom 11:36].’”¹¹ The value of the statements above is that Gregory strongly believes that Christ accepts death in order to exchange and change humanity’s sinful nature. This line of evidence will be discussed in detail in the next section due to the overlap in theological themes. However, for the purposes of this sacrificial theme, it is important to note that Nyssen designates that human being are sinners who need a changed nature, not a changed circumstance alone.

¹⁰Norris, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 49.

¹¹Norris, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 323.

Lastly, as has been noted, it is impossible for mankind to be purified of what makes them sinners, except by the lamb's sacrifice on the cross. The text above in connection with the sacrificial spices make it likely that Gregory had in mind the sacrificial system when he describes the atonement and the change that takes place in the human soul. This is not only consistent with his sheep—shepherd relationship, but continues to build Gregory's understanding of substitutionary atonement. For example, in Homily 9, Gregory writes, "But no one becomes a participant in the divine glory without first being conformed to the likeness of death I mean myrrh and aloe—is meant a sharing in burial (even as the sublime Gospel records that the One who tasted death on our behalf [Heb 2:9] was prepared for his burial by these very spices [John 19:39])."¹² In referencing Hebrews 2:9, Nyssen makes the connection that Christ experienced death for humanity, on and in humanity's behalf. It is one thing to believe that Christ died to free us from the outside powers of the devil, and another to say that Christ died on our behalf. The latter implies the idea that Christ died in place of humanity, not just to free it.

So what do believers receive in this exchange? Homily 9 gives the answer.

Nyssen's text concludes,

"If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink; for those who believe in me, as the Scripture says, 'Rivers of water shall flow from their hearts Everywhere, then, it is the divine Nature that is understood when living water is mentioned, | and here in our text the truthful witness of the Word constitutes the Bride *a well of living water*, the direction of whose flow is *from frankincense*."¹³

¹²Norris, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 305–6.

¹³Norris, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 309.

Gregory argues that those who drink will have the divine nature flowing through them. At one moment, they did not have the divine nature. This is the original state of man: without water and frankincense. After the change, they have flowing waters from frankincense. As mentioned above, the term “frankincense” in Nyssen’s writing refers to the divine nature. What is interesting here is his use of “living water.” Robert Louis Wilken identifies this use of water in Homily 9 as describing the life of God that flows through the new believer.¹⁴ With these examples, Nyssen demonstrates his overall thought process on what happens during this exchange: Christ dies on behalf of sinners [Heb 2:9] in their place as substitute, having made payment for sin by taking the punishment that was destined for them. Again, according to Nyssen, the result is living waters of the divine nature and life of God flowing through humanity from God himself. This type of language again is consistent with penal substitutionary atonement.

Gregory uses ordinary language to describe the substitution that took place. Deep in the recesses of his theological framework was a picture of an Old Testament sacrificial system as evidenced by his sheep-shepherd relationship, followed by his understanding sacrificial spices. He combines these thoughts on his scale of theology to understand that the divine nature of God comes to a sinner from a sacrifice only made possible by the living water, Christ. However, this would be incomplete if Nyssen did not demonstrate man’s culpability of sin, which he does in the next theme.

¹⁴L. Gregory Jones and James J. Buckley, eds., *Theology and Scriptural Imagination: Directions in Modern Theology* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1998), 36.

CHAPTER 4

DARKNESS AND LIGHT IN THE *CANTICLES*

The theme of darkness and light is scattered throughout Nyssen's writings and is the most detailed in its support for substitutionary atonement. He uses this theme so regularly that it would not be inaccurate to label his atonement as an atonement of color—those who were *dark* becoming light. In fact, Gregory uses the terms, *dark* and *darkness*, *blackened* and *black* and their corresponding opposites at least forty times to describe the atonement. This is not to mention the various times he uses the terms 'ugliness' and 'beauty' to carry the same notion. Therefore, this is not a minor theme for Gregory, but a major one that appears throughout the *Canticles*. Martin Laird writes, "If Orthodox theologian Olivier Clément can call Gregory of Nyssa the 'poet and dramatist of darkness,' Gregory is equally the poet and dramatist of light."¹ Many scholars understand the significance of color throughout history and literature, but none have captured the history of color as well as Michel Pastoureau. In his book *Black: The History of a Color*, he traces the color black from the earliest moments in history. In his discussion of the Biblical text, he writes,

The fiancée in the Song of Songs proclaims 'I am black and beautiful,' biblical blacks—and all other dark colors as well—are frequently considered bad. This is the color of evildoers and the impious; the color of the enemies of Israel and divine malediction . . . Light alone is the source of life and manifestation of the

¹Martin Laird, "Gregory of Nyssa and the Mysticism of Darkness: A Reconsideration," *The Journal of Religion* 79, no. 4 (1999): 594.

presence of God. It is opposed to the ‘darkness’—one of the words that appears most frequently in the biblical text—always associated with evil, impiety, punishment, error, and suffering by the same token, white, the color of Christ and light, is also the color of glory and resurrections; in contrast, black appears as the color of Satan, sin, and death.²

What is noteworthy from Pastoureau’s analysis is the vital role the color black plays in the Song of Songs. Out of a dozen other references in the Bible to describe this dichotomy between dark and light, black and white, he uses the Song of Songs to prove his point. This dichotomy of color presents itself in the Bible in two ways which Pastoureau references. First, these colors are used to describe the cosmic spiritual battle between darkness and light (i.e., Satan and his followers verse God and his followers). Second, they are used to describe strong soteriological themes. For example, the most common understanding is that the color “black” often refers to sin and death, and the color “white” references to life and presence with God.

Nyssen uses both of these understandings throughout his writings, including the *Canticles*. While some dismiss it as classic eastern asceticism, Gregory goes to great lengths to underscore and deepen the Christian understanding of atonement and soteriology by the use of color. Mark Scott, in his article “Shades of Grace: Origen and Gregory of Nyssa’s Soteriological Exegesis of the Black and Beautiful Bride in Song of Songs 1:5,” presents compelling evidence to suggest that both Origen and Nyssa’s aim was to use black imagery “to convey soteriological truth rather than racial stereotypes or anti-black sentiments.”³ Crucial to this point, he writes:

²Michel Pastoureau, *Black: The History of a Color* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 30.

³Mark S. M. Scott, “Shades of Grace: Origen and Gregory of Nyssa’s Soteriological Exegesis of the ‘Black and Beautiful’ Bride in Song of Songs 1:5,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 99, no. 1 (2006): 66.

For Gregory, the Bride represents the soul, and the predication of blackness denotes its sinfulness: ‘I have become dark through sin’. The Bride’s blackness signifies the ‘repulsiveness’ that results from the souls wicked deeds. Consequently, in harmony with Origen, Gregory explicitly characterizes blackness as the antithesis of beauty. Something *Makes* the Bride beautiful despite being black: ‘Although I am black, I am not this beautiful form, for the image of blackness has been transformed into beauty.’⁴

It is this premise that needs to be explored in order to pull the prior arguments together in order to make a case for Gregory’s substitutionary atonement. Therefore, when Nyssen uses *darkness*, or the color black, to describe man’s disposition before God, he demonstrates a two-fold premise: (1) that the blackness or darkness of the soul is the result of the fall and humanity’s sin, and (2) that the exchange that takes place replaces humanity’s blackness or darkness with Christ’s corresponding opposites, i.e., his righteousness.

Darkness of the Soul

According to *Canticles*, humanity’s main plight lies in their *dark* nature. Its counter opposite is the *light*, which Gregory speaks about often. One author writes, “The concept of light; and its lexical family recurs with such frequency in Gregory’s writings that it is impossible to attempt to exhaustively document its use.”⁵ So why does Gregory speak in such breadth about darkness and the light? First, Gregory loved to use terminology that was found in Scripture; therefore, it was his normal practice to favor the language of darkness and light as the way to describe what happens on behalf of sinners by Christ’s work. Second, Nyssen loved to use metaphors and examples that were easy to

⁴Pastoureau, *Black*, 71.

⁵Lucas Francisco Mateo-seco, ed., *The Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 447.

understand making darkness and light, black and white, and their variations a likely choice. Many scholars maintain that Gregory's understanding of sin was primarily one of victimhood. Humanity is the victim of a cosmic battle in which man sinned and is now held captive until our Victor comes. Others reduce Nyssen's understanding of sin as merely a positional switch from free to slave. Manfred Hauke comments on Nyssen's view here:

The image of God is 'obscured' through the first sin, some of its elements remain (such as free will), but others are lost That which remains is also wounded; the intellect goes off track, liberty becomes a slave of sin and of Satan. Simplicity in the communication with God is substituted by fearful shame Human nature held prisoner by the devil.⁶

There is very little doubt in Gregory's writings that the aforementioned aspects of sin are present in his writings. However, there is more that can and should be said about his understanding that normally does not gain much attention. Hauke continues in his analysis:

At the heart of the consequences of the fall is the 'double death'; The soul is stripped of divine life, while the body is destined to dissolution. The human being is born already in the state of spiritual death. . . . Further, human nature itself assumes the sin and culpability since every human being participates due to his descent from Adam in the fallen state of progenitor. . . . The 'filthiness' of Job 14:4-5, with which every human being is born, 'is the sin born together with human nature.'⁷

Notice the emphasis that Hauke places upon the sinful nature, which is just as prevalent in Nyssen's writings than the pitiable situation humanity has found itself in. Ernest McClear writes,

Although Gregory calls the devil the tempter and the father of sin, he does not absolve Adam from the guilt of the Fall. Faithful to the narrative of Genesis, he speaks of the deception as practiced first on Eve, and speaks of her as the first to

⁶Lucas Francisco Mateo-seco, *The Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa*, 557.

⁷Lucas Francisco Mateo-seco, *The Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa*, 557.

revolt and the mother of death. But the choice between good and evil fell to Adam. Adam, following the counsel of Eve, sinned freely and is himself the creator of evil.⁸

Therefore, Gregory's understanding of sin is more defined and established than he is often credited for. In the *Canticles*, he attributes sinful nature to three specific things: outside forces, a sinful nature, and failed responsibility. He describes Satan at work in the lives of human beings by keeping them captive, saying that mankind was "blackened" by the sun.⁹ At the same time, he writes that it is individual choice that causes the darkness that is rendering humanity "dark through disobedience."¹⁰ In one of his more pointed statements he writes, "For having transferred to himself the filth of my sins, he shared his own purity with me and constituted me a participant in his own beauty—he who first made something desirable out of one who had been repulsive and in this way acted lovingly."¹¹ Mark Scott emphasizes this aspect of Nyssen's language by highlighting the fact that there is a reason that the Bride became black. For Scott and others, they see a correlation between man's sinfulness and the coloration of their nature.¹² The question that follows is to what extent is the soul *dark*? Is humanity darkened beyond recognition? Is their soul past the point of salvage? Gregory clarifies this:

⁸Ernest Vernon McClear, "The Fall of Man and Original Sin in the Theology of Gregory of Nyssa," *Theological Studies* 9, no. 2 (June 1948): 186.

⁹N Richard A. Norris, Jr., *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on the Song of Songs*, critical ed. (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2013), 55.

¹⁰Norris, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 57.

¹¹Norris, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 51.

¹²Scott, "Shades of Grace," 72.

How did the faithful city Zion, full of judgment, become a whore' (Isa. 1:21)? How was 'the daughter of Zion' left 'like a tent in a vineyard' (Isa.1:8)? 'How does the city that was full of people sit in solitude, how was she who ruled among the territories become a tributary (Lam 1:1)? 'How did the gold lose its' gleam and the good silver get altered' (Lam 4:1)? How did she become dark who at the beginning shone with the true Light? 'All these things happened to me,' she says, 'because *I did not guard my vineyard*.¹³

In the text above, Gregory asks a series of questions about how humanity was separated or altered from the light and divine goodness of God. Even though it is clear that Nyssen believes that outside forces are one of the causes of humanity's plight, he places the emphasis on mankind's responsibility to guard the goodness that was given to him. According to Gregory, even the outside forces are the Bride's fault. Therefore, mankind's failure in protecting the vineyard renders humanity culpable.

Gregory also uses one of the strongest descriptions in Scripture for the sinner, "a whore," to emphasize the effect and depth of mankind's responsibility for their sin. Regardless if humanity is a "tent left in a vineyard" through negligence or "gold that lost its gleam" through erosion, the reason for humanity's darkness according to Gregory is their failed responsibility. The Bride in the *Canticles* mentions that all these things happened because she did not guard the vineyard. Personal responsibility for sin leaves mankind without excuse, which is why "not Adam alone, but 'human nature' has been penalized" for not only Adam's sin, but also the sin that follows.¹⁴ This is why Gregory had no problem using language that was directed towards the nature of humanity, "And once death had once mingled with human nature, deadness, in step with the successions

¹³Norris, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 65–67.

¹⁴McClellan, "The Fall of Man," 190.

of offspring to parents, made its way everywhere.¹⁵ The core fundamental problem with humanity is not their captivity to sin, but their nature and their continued disobedience towards God.

Gregory mentions this again in *Homily 2*. He writes, “The treachery of the hostile powers stripped humanity of what belonged to it, when it did not guard the good fortune that had been given it by God as a natural endowment.”¹⁶ Repeatedly and consistently, Gregory maintains that humanity did not “guard” the vineyard and that the reason for their darkness, i.e., separation from God is their sin. In fact, in *Homily 11*, Nyssen says the reason that the outside forces scorched the seed was due to her negligence in watching the vineyard.¹⁷ So while Gregory does believe that outside forces are considered “evils” that are pressing themselves upon humanity, it is never to the neglect of the truer issue, which is mankind’s failed responsibility and sinful nature. Therefore, Gregory expands his understanding of sin and responsibility by indicating that their sinful nature—the curse of the fall—is the bedrock problem for mankind.¹⁸ His soteriology, then, holds mankind responsible for their sin, which causes the curse of their sinful nature and as a result they are also held in captivity. Therefore, humanity did not need to be freed from captivity as much as they need a changed nature. With regard to the atonement, arguing that Nyssen solely sees the effects of the atonement as freeing humanity from the devil, misrepresents what he believed to be the actual problem. It is more accurate to conclude that he understood the atonement to be a nature transference,

¹⁵Norris, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 371.

¹⁶Norris, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 61.

¹⁷Norris, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 341.

¹⁸Norris, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 61.

where Christ pays for our sinful nature in exchange for which he gives us his righteousness.

This idea is not only limited to the one sermon in the Songs, but throughout his commentary. In *Homily 4*, Nyssen writes,

At the beginning, human nature was golden and gleaming because of its likeness to the undefiled Good. But later, by reason of the admixture of evil, it became discolored and dark—just as, at the opening of the Song, we heard the Bride say that negligence in keeping her vineyard made her dark.¹⁹

In this text, Nyssen acknowledges our nature before the fall, and the darkening that took place afterward. This change leads Gregory to categorize all people into two groups based upon their choice and underlying responsibility, those whose nature is light and those whose nature is dark.²⁰ Furthermore, he writes, “Even though I was loved at the beginning, because of my transgression I was reckoned among the enemies of God He who for love of humanity grew up in the woods of our nature became an apple by sharing flesh and blood became the willing sharer of our lowliness and descended to the point of experiencing death.”²¹ Notice that while humanity was loved at the beginning, it was a personal transgression that Nyssen maintains is the reason humanity has been given the name, “enemy of God.” Likewise, he uses terms that are also individual, as opposed to corporate, to describe this darkness. “My transgression” and “I became dark,” are just a few of the expressions he uses to describe a personal decision and offense against God.

¹⁹Norris, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 113.

²⁰Norris, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 63.

²¹Norris, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 134, 139.

Given the lack of emphasis in scholarship on Nyssens's theology of human responsibility for sin is staggering, especially when passages like the above suggest that man is responsible for their dark nature. Therefore, the hypothesis that some scholars have suggested, that Nyssen believes mankind to be pitiable, but not culpable, is flawed. Nyssen finds humanity *both* pitiable and culpable. In this light, it is the disobedience of humanity that is the cause of their darkness. Nyssen writes, "This is why I became dark—because I guarded the weeds and wicked vines of the Adversary and took care of them and did not guard the vineyard that was mine."²² The importance of this cannot be understated. If man is not responsible for their sin, then reconciliation is not needed and justice need not be administered. If humanity's problem does not lie in their nature then a substitution is not needed, merely an outward emancipation would suffice. This is where Steve Jeffrey, Michael Ovey, and Andrew Sach are helpful. "Reconciliation is necessary because we have sinned against God. We are at fault, we are in the wrong...reconciliation is therefore inseparably connected to the issue of justice, for sin cannot simply be ignored."²³ Culpability of sin is unnecessary in the Christus Victor theory of atonement, but it is central to an atonement that is both substitutionary and penal. This may suggest a larger understanding of atonement on Nyssen's part. While many interpret the *Oratio Catechetica* as definitive for Nyssen's understanding of the atonement they are left with a very limited perspective on his theology and thus they fail to consider the *Canticles* and the view it represents.²⁴ However, in the *Canticles* all the pillars of substitutionary

²²Norris, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 65.

²³Jeffery et al., *Pierced for Our Transgressions*, 149.

²⁴Mateo-seco, *The Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa*, 548.

atonement are there. He acknowledges the substitution between Christ and humanity; he references the sacrificial system and its use for the payment of sin in justifying God's wrath; and he is vocal about the culpability of man for their sin and their need for a changed nature. At the very least, Nyssen alludes to an atonement that is substitutionary and penal. At best, he acknowledges this understanding with his full weight. The culmination of his understanding comes in the form of his description of the exchange and of the substitution that takes place on mankind's behalf: our darkness for Christ's light.

The Exchange of Darkness for Light

In order to understand the full scope of Nyssen's atonement one must remember the argument that he is building throughout the *Canticles*. This exchange is predicated by a relationship that Nyssen describes as a Shepherd and his sheep. The Shepherd is tasked in leading his sheep, preparing the sheep for sacrifice, and takes the place of his sheep as noted in Homily 2, "to give up the well-being of your life in exchange for mine."²⁵ This vital relationship not only emphasizes a substitution in the place of the sheep, but also highlights irony of such a substitute. This is further clarified by Nyssen's understanding of the sacrificial system and the way he uses spices to denote the sacrificial offering as a day of atonement. And as the previous section demonstrated, the atonement was not limited to our rescue from captivity, but needed in order to change a sinful nature. Considering this, Gregory describes the type of exchange and substitution that takes place on behalf of sinners throughout the *Canticles*. For example, Gregory writes,

²⁵Norris, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 69.

There he establishes the love of God for us on the ground that, when we were sinners and *dark*, God made us full of light and lovely by shining upon us with his grace. For just as at night everything, bright though it be by nature, shares the black look of dominant darkness, but once the light comes, there remains no trace of darkness in things that had before been obscured by the night, just so when the soul has been transposed from error to truth, the dark form of her life is transformed into radiant beauty.²⁶

The sinner is dark but she is transformed in radiant beauty. There is a transformation that happens when Christ “makes dark ones bright,” as he describes in Homily 2.²⁷ Shortly after, he answers the question why did Christ come down from heaven? He writes, “Christ came into the world to make dark ones bright,” and to give us the righteousness that causes the sinners to become lovely and full of light.²⁸ This culminates with statements that repeat throughout the *Canticles*: “the light has shined in the darkness, the darkness may be transformed into brightness and the dark one may once again become beautiful.”²⁹ Repeatedly Gregory mentions the transformed life as one that has been given goodness, whiteness, light, righteousness, deity in exchange for evilness, blackness, darkness, sinfulness, mortality. The more one reads the *Canticles*, the more it becomes evident that Gregory is convinced the greatest need for change is human nature, not circumstances. Therefore he emphasizes the need for a dark nature to be made into one of light. Where darkness is often associated with the sinful nature, its corresponding opposite, light, denotes Christ’s holy nature according to Nyssen. This nature is spoken of in a variety of ways including the *frankincense* given in exchange for the *myrrh* in Homily 9. The divine waters flow from the Bride as a result of Christ’s work through

²⁶Norris, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 53.

²⁷Norris, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 53.

²⁸Norris, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 67.

²⁹Norris, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 64–65.

salvation in Homily 5.³⁰ So that in the end the Bride can say, “Now she who is everywhere attested as beautiful and cleansed of every blemish does not utter anything of the ‘more’ that is the devil’s portion. Rather does she speak from God, from whom there comes whatever is good and beautiful.”³¹

Thus those who propose that Nyssen solely affirmed a Christus Victor theory of atonement err on account that they limit his teaching on the sinfulness of mankind’s nature and the substitution that takes place, to make dark ones bright. The curse that is removed is only possible through a substitutionary form of atonement that makes peace with God through the sacrificial offering of his son, Jesus, which Nyssen supports. The *Canticles* consistently use a substitutionary theme to describe the atonement, especially when one considers the responsibility placed on the culpability of humanity for their sin and the type of exchange that takes place: our darkness for Christ’s light.

³⁰Norris, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 161.

³¹Norris, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 393.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Aulén's compelling theory concerning the understanding of the atonement in the early church, when tested with regard to Gregory of Nyssa's thinking, seems to be full of problems. However, the damage was already done, leading many to believe that the substitutionary atonement was absent in the first few centuries and a by-product of the Protestant Reformation. Nothing can be further from the truth. Aulén's classical theory of the atonement while a major theory in the early church is just one of many that seemed to have circulated in the early church fathers. In fact, his leading example, Gregory of Nyssa held to more than one view. As shown in his *Canticles*, Gregory uses a series of ideas to describe one key component of his theology that seems to be undervalued: his thoughts on substitutionary atonement. What can be said of the *Canticles* is that it presents a picture of atonement that is substitutionary in form as seen in the substitution of a Shepherd for his sheep. It is clear from his understanding of the Song of Songs, specifically in Homily 2, that the Shepherd substitutes his life for the sheep. In no uncertain terms, Nyssen is marveled at this prospect of substitution. It is also clear in the *Canticles* that he uses a list of spices to depict the sacrificial offering that appeases God's wrath and gives new life. A minor point to some, but this indicates that Nyssa understood a sacrificial system of sacrifice where the end result was justification before God by

appeasing his wrath, lest his imagery fall short of their intended meaning to describe expiatory and sin offerings. Lastly, the most crucial point of his argument is how he describes what the exchange actually accomplishes. In essence, he describes it as the sinful becoming sinless through his use of light and dark metaphors.

Given this research, the question at hand is does Nyssen only support a Christus Victor theory of atonement? Does he believe that it is sufficient to transform the nature of mankind, or just their circumstances? Nyssen certainly would have understood the atonement in terms of victory by releasing humanity free from the powers of sin. But at the same time, he would say that “no one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord!’” except by the Holy Spirit” [1 Cor 12:3],” and that through Jesus sinners are transformed into his image, which Nyssen describes as beautiful and glorious.¹ His emphasis that Christ makes sinners beautiful in the *Canticles* is evident and he is just as clear in how he makes dark things bright. The Shepherd takes the place of his sheep for their sin and punishment reserved for them. Therefore, it would be a disservice to the great Cappadocian to dismiss this emphasis as insignificant in his broader theological framework.

This has made many scholars ask the question, “Can the penal substitutionary motif of the atonement be disposed of, reinterpreted, or pushed to the side so easily?”² To turn a blind eye to Nyssa’s allusion to the Old Covenant sacrificial system and disregard the New Covenant implications that he making would diminish what he believes is a core reason Christ came to the world to die. The result can be very toxic to the Christian

¹ Richard A. Norris, Jr., *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on the Song of Songs*, critical ed. (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2013), 119.

² Andrew V. Snider, “Worthy Is the Lamb That Was Slain: Penal Substitution and Christian Worship,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 20, no. 2 (2009): 218.

“because the reality of penal substitution arises directly from the theology of sacrifice, any denial or diminishing of the doctrine of penal substitution is devastating to worship as God intends.”³ Therefore, the definition provided in chapter 2, that Christ’s death was an exchange on humanity’s behalf whereby Jesus took the curse of humanity, despite his innocence and our culpability, should be revisited. Gregory affirms a sinful nature and it is often portrayed as a curse; especially given Nyssa’s focus on the Genesis creation and fall narratives that run throughout all of his writings, including the *Canticles*. He certainly affirms mankind’s culpability for their sin and believes their deepest need is a changed nature, not a changed circumstance. In homily 2, Gregory describes the soul as needing “cleansed of evil.”⁴ Therefore, his language about the exchange that took place when Christ substituted himself on behalf of humanity is nothing short of an affirmation that he considers penal substitution as coherent with his system of thinking. That is why throughout the *Canticles*, he uses terminology that depicts an exchange of darkness for light, transgressions for virtue, and blindness for sight; all of which stem from the Shepherd giving his life in exchange for his sheep as a substitution.

In closing, there are several steps that could be made in order to understand Nyssen’s view of atonement in a better way and build upon this research. First, developing a working understanding of Nyssen’s theology as progressing over time is important. His ability to hold multiple theological viewpoints in tandem with one another even if they seem incompatible with one another is a unique feature of Gregory’s thought process, which needs further research. Second, analysis of *The Catechetical Oration*,

³Snider, “Worthy Is the Lamb That Was Slain,” 218.

⁴Norris, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 65.

Sermon One On the Resurrection of Christ, and his letter *Against Eunomius*, warrant further study because they may reference a substitutionary form of atonement. Due to the brevity of this project, this research was done but not included. Lastly, continued discourse is needed between peers in order to unravel the complexity that is Nyssen's theology. There is so much to be explored in Gregory's writings that continue efforts should be made in understanding his life, theology, and wisdom. The end result should spur one another in the ascent towards God that Nyssen has so passionately written about in the *Canticles*. Gregory gives a summation of his viewpoint in Homily 13 by quoting Romans 3:23, "Since, then, the beautiful Lover of our souls has commended his love on account of which 'Christ died for us' even 'when we were sinners.'"⁵ For Gregory, love has been shown in the substitution of the Messiah on humanity's behalf, taking their filth and darkness in exchange for his light and glory. It is this divine transformation from darkness to light that makes the rest of the spiritual ascent possible.

⁵Norris, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 399.

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ABSTRACT

SUBSTITUTIONARY THEMES IN NYSSEN'S *IN CANTICUM CANTICORUM*

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This thesis explores the substitutionary themes of atonement in Gregory of Nyssen's *In Canticum Canticorum*. As his last known work, this commentary provides the reader with the matured insights of Gregory concerning one's ascent to God. This Cappadocian's understanding of the Song of Songs is full of beautiful imagery, as well as, thought provoking theology that stirs up affection for God. When it comes to the issue of atonement, there are three key themes that suggest that he viewed atonement in terms of substitution, and not just freedom, as many have argued in the past. These themes revolve around his use of the Shepherd and Sheep relationship, the use of spice during sacrifices, and the use of dark and light metaphors that he mentions throughout.

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