

Allegory and Mysticism in Gregory of Nyssa

Gregory of Nyssa is often treated in western scholarship as a norm of orthodoxy, notwithstanding the reservations of his eastern co-religionists; in his *Commentary on the Song of Songs* he gave currency to that form of mysticism which seeks the consummation of knowledge in the renunciation of knowledge. In recent years his admirers have protested that this work is too often read as an echo of Origen's lucubrations on the same text. Since Origen still has the reputation of being more a Platonist than a Christian, the virtue of Gregory is supposed to lie in his rediscovery of the body as an integral part of the person, in accordance with Pauline teaching and in contrast to the philosophy which disparages it as a temporary vehicle of the soul. These judgments are apt to rest on the quotation of a few passages in Gregory, seldom accompanied even by a desultory study of his predecessor.

A closer examination of both will suggest, if anything, that Gregory is the Platonist, at least if this term is taken to connote an indifference to history and a lower valuation of the written text as a medium of instruction. In explaining how I have come to this conclusion I pass no verdict either on Gregory's orthodoxy or on the quality of his thought: Plato had a more capacious mind than either Gregory or Origen, and there are many Christians who have been led by reading him to a deeper understanding of their own faith.