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Cover Sheet**



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Exodus as a metaphor for the spiritual journey in Origen's *Homily XXVII on Numbers* and Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Moses*

Introduction

In these two texts, both Origen and Gregory of Nyssa interpret the Exodus as a metaphor for the spiritual journey. This aim of this essay is to compare and contrast their metaphorical interpretations of the Exodus event, in order to highlight both the similarities and differences between their views.

For Origen, the chief 'metaphorical vehicle' in his exegesis is the progress of the whole people of Israel out of Egypt via the 'stages' (the place names in the journey). For Gregory, Moses' life is the main metaphorical vehicle, and the model for 'Perfection in Virtue', as the subtitle of the work states. His actions (particularly his ascent of Mt Sinai) are to be understood as having key significance.

Naturally, one might expect the different texts under consideration to lead to different interpretations, however, as I will attempt to show, the respective theological challenges of the day can also be seen to determine the course of the authors' exegesis. The primary challenge to the orthodoxy of Origen's day (the first half of the third century) can be considered to be that posed by Gnosticism, and it is possible that in his exegesis of the stages, he may have been attempting to set forward an orthodox explanation of a 'staged ascent'.

The main challenge facing Gregory at the time of writing (c.381-early 390's)¹ was the position of the neo-Arians (the Eunomians) who saw the naming of God as 'the ingenerate' as not merely one of his properties, but a full and complete definition of his being. This convenient labelling also enabled him, in their logical system, to be fully understood or comprehended. The desire to refute the position of the Eunomians is clearly in his mind as Gregory undertakes his exegesis of the ascent of Moses up the mountain.

This essay will initially consider the meaning of 'living in Egypt' for both authors and then examine the 'freeing act' of the Incarnation, before finally discussing the main metaphorical vehicles for each author (progress by stages and by ascent).

Egypt - The Start of the Journey

The Exodus journey begins with the people of Israel held in captivity and made to carry out forced labour in slavery to Pharaoh. Both authors provide a similar spiritual interpretation for this slavery in Egypt, seeing it as being essentially in bondage to 'earthly things'.

For Origen, life in Egypt is being 'in the errors of this world and in the darkness of ignorance [doing] the works of the devil in lusts and desires of the flesh'.² Further on in his text, Origen draws out further significance of captivity in Egypt by the name given to the starting point of the journey (Ramesse):

¹ For a brief consideration of the dating of *The Life of Moses*, see A. Meredith, *The Cappadocians* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1995), p.68

² *Hom. Num. 27*, p.249. Note: Due to the infrequency of paragraph numbers in the text, all references to Homily 27 on Numbers are given as page numbers taken from *Origen: An Exhortation to Martyrdom, Prayer and Selected Works* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979)

In our language Ramesse means ‘confused agitation’ or ‘agitation of the worm.’ By this it is made clear that everything in this world is set in agitation and disorder, and also in corruption; for this is what the worm means. The soul should not remain in them, but should set out and come to Sochoth.³

In Greek thought, flux, agitation and disorder are the undesirable properties which pertain to beings in the (imperfect) created order. By his interpretation of ‘Ramesse’ Origen reminds his readers of this. The contrast in Origen’s mind, and those of his readers, with the destination of the journey (God, described as unchanging, Unity, incorruptible, etc) is so explicit it does not even warrant a mention.

Also worthy of note is that fact that Origen perceives not just one, but a ‘double Exodus’ in his allegorical interpretation of the physical Exodus. The journey relates to ‘either when we leave our life as Gentiles and come to the knowledge of the divine Law or when the soul leaves its dwelling place in the body.’⁴

The first Exodus can be seen as our earthly spiritual journey whilst the second is the journey after death. On the subsequent pages⁵ Origen proceeds to set out his double interpretation in more detail, but unfortunately he is not always careful to clearly distinguish between the two alternatives - switching back and forth between the two a number of times without always clearly signposting the switch. What is clear is that both of his interpretations make use of the ‘stages’ (the place names spiritually interpreted) through which the people of Israel travel as they leave Egypt (and as set out in the Numbers text under consideration).

For Gregory, one of the main points he is keen to make about Egypt is the futility of the pursuit of earthly desires (i.e. living in Egypt). This he does by expounding on the topic of ‘brick making’, a task which the captive people of Israel were compelled to undertake:⁶

Those who yearn after the pleasures of clay and keep on filling themselves with them never keep the space which receives them full; for although it is always being filled, it becomes empty again before the next pouring. In the same way the brick maker keeps on throwing yet more clay into the mould while it is constantly being emptied.⁷

Brick making (or the pursuit of pleasure) is thus an endless, unsatisfying process. Gregory goes on to explain⁸ that even changing one’s focus from one earthly desire to another (effectively ‘swapping moulds’) is also a dead end and will not solve the problem.

³ Ibid. p.258

⁴ Ibid. p.248

⁵ Ibid. pp.248-253

⁶ Exodus 1:14

⁷ *Life of Moses* 2.60

⁸ Ibid. 2.61

The 'Freeing Act'

The soul's task, then, is to flee slavery in Egypt, and begin its own Exodus. However, just as the physical Exodus journey was not spontaneous, but initiated by the actions of Moses, so both Origen and Gregory perceive that it is the actions of Christ which enable the chains of spiritual slavery to be broken and the start of the spiritual journey to begin. Whilst both authors see Christ as the one who effects this freedom, the difference in language used to describe Christ's work is worthy of note.

In discussing Origen's interpretation of Christ's 'freeing act', I shall make no attempt to distinguish between the two different Exodus interpretations in the text (as mentioned above). Instead I shall consider the simpler composite picture of the single 'freeing act' which appears on a more superficial reading.

For Origen, the action of Christ that enables our freedom from the 'earthly Egypt' is described in terms of descent and ascent:

Therefore, in descending to the Egypt of this world Christ passed those forty-two generations as stages; and those who ascend from Egypt pass by the same number, forty-two stages ... so, the person who ascends, ascends with Him who descended from there to us, so that he may arrive at the place from which He descended not by necessity but because He deemed it right.⁹

Just as Christ 'descended' via 42 human generations from Abraham, so the ascent of the soul occurs in an almost reciprocal fashion back with Christ via exactly 42 spiritual stages of ascent (the parallel number necessitated by Origen's technical exegesis).

The language used by Origen here almost makes the ascent of the soul sound like a Newtonian 'equal and opposite reaction' to the descent of Christ to earth. Such a reading is, however, prohibited by the addition of the careful rider that the ascent of the soul is 'not by necessity, but because He deemed it right'. Origen is careful to invoke grace at this point and disallow any Gnostic interpretation that would see the ascent of the soul as a *right* of the privileged Gnostic who understands his true nature.¹⁰

Gregory also has the same sense of reciprocity but this is couched in more explicitly incarnational terms¹¹ – the fact that he 'pitched his own tabernacle among us' is important:

It [Christ] did not need a temporal beginning (for how could what was before all times and ages be in need of a temporal origin?), but for our sakes, who had lost our existence through our thoughtlessness, it consented to be born like us so that it might bring that which had left reality back again to reality. This one is the Only Begotten God, who encompasses everything in himself but who also pitched his own tabernacle among us.¹²

⁹ *Hom. Num.* 27, p.249

¹⁰ For the ascent of the soul in Gnosticism see K Rudolph, *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism* (New York: HarperCollins, 1987), pp.171-204

¹¹ Gregory's fondness for incarnational typology has been commented upon by E. Ferguson, 'Progress in Perfection; Gregory of Nyssa's *Vita Moysis*', *SP*, 14 (1976), p.312

¹² *Life of Moses* 2.175

Indeed, throughout his text, Gregory appears more keen to explicitly mention the ‘incarnational angle’ of the events compared to Origen.¹³ For example, Gregory plainly names the act that frees the spiritual captives as the Incarnation:

These [the miracles of the transformation of Moses’ right hand and the turning of his staff into a snake] seem to me to signify in a figure the mystery of the Lord’s incarnation, a manifestation of deity to men which effects the death of the tyrant and sets free those under his power.¹⁴

And finally, later in the work, he interprets the heavenly tabernacle seen by Moses in the darkness, as symbolic of the incarnate Christ:

This tabernacle would be *Christ who is the power and the wisdom of God*, who in his own nature was not made with hands, yet capable of being made when it became necessary for this tabernacle to be erected among us. Thus, the same tabernacle is in a way both unfashioned and fashioned, uncreated in pre-existence but created in having received this material composition.¹⁵

The heavenly tabernacle for Gregory is not merely an archetype for the handmade structure that Moses is instructed to build, but also a mystical image of the true ‘constitution’ of the incarnate Christ.

In summary, for both authors the actions of Christ are the means of freedom – Gregory perhaps taking more care to explicitly spell out that it is the Incarnation (properly understood as true God taking flesh) which is the pivotal point of redemption. Such a heightened incarnational focus for Gregory is only to be expected given the Arian debate that had rumbled on for much of the 4th century. Both authors also see a kind of ‘reciprocity’ in the descent of Christ and the corresponding ascent of the soul, although careful to state that this return journey is by grace.

Progress by the ‘Stages’

Our attention must now turn to the main metaphorical vehicles used by each author, starting with Origen’s stages. The Numbers text under consideration in Origen’s homily (Numbers 33), may at first glance appear to be a potentially tedious and meaningless list of places through which the people of Israel journeyed. Indeed, in anticipation of this reaction, Origen chastises his audience at the very start of his homily,¹⁶ explaining that seemingly indigestible food (a difficult or seemingly meaningless passage of scripture) may actually be a sign of their own weak constitution (capacity to ‘digest’ the meaning). The biblical text comes alive under Origen’s allegorical eye and is packed with significance.

¹³ For a full discussion of the concept of the Incarnation in Origen’s ascent of the soul, see A. Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition – from Plato to Denys* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), p.62-70.

¹⁴ *Life of Moses* 2.27

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 2.174

¹⁶ *Hom. Num.* 27 pp.245-247

His spiritual interpretation of the stages is the key thrust of this homily and he provides an explanation of each and every stage of the journey. (The only exception to this is ‘Oboth’ for which even his allegorically-wired brain is at a loss to find an obvious deeper meaning).¹⁷ The derivation of each of the stage names by means of etymological analysis (examining the Hebrew origin of the word, or its meaning in translation) is a key feature of Origen’s approach to wringing the maximum spiritual meaning from every word of scripture. In this manner he maps out many instantly recognisable features of help or hindrance on the spiritual journey such as health,¹⁸ toils,¹⁹ lust,²⁰ temptation (several times)²¹ and encouragement/endurance.²²

Origen thinks that the concept of stages as the soul’s means of progress is applicable to, or ‘points towards’,²³ both of the spiritual interpretations of the Exodus journey (the journey of the soul after death, and the journey of the soul through this life).

With regard to the meaning of the stages in the post-death ascent of the soul, he is surprisingly reserved in his exposition in this homily, and limits his speculation to pondering whether there is a connection with John 10:9:

And in the case of each [stage] what purpose, what sojourn of use to the soul, or what instruction or enlightenment a person may receive is something only the Father of the age to come knows. He says of Himself ‘I am the door ... no one comes to the Father but by me’. He will probably become in each of the different stages the door for each soul, so that it may go through Him and go out through Him and find pasture, and again so that it may go into another and from there to another stage until it attains to the Father Himself.²⁴

In Origen’s work, the staged ascent of the soul as the means of the journey after death is not unique to this homily, but is also set out, in a more typically speculative fashion, in *On First Principles*.²⁵ In this other work, the stages form what he terms the ‘school of souls’, in which the soul is instructed as to the meaning of earthly things and the things that are to come, before continuing to ascend through the other layers of heavenly spheres.

Whether for the soul on its earthly journey, or on its journey after death, the idea of movement from stage to stage is important for Origen, and conveys a number of meanings which can be detected in his exposition.

¹⁷ Ibid. p.266

¹⁸ ‘Raphaca’ - Ibid. p.261

¹⁹ ‘Halus’ - Ibid. p.262

²⁰ ‘Kibroth-hattavah’ - Ibid. p.262

²¹ ‘Ressa’, ‘Galgad’, ‘Sin’, ‘Dibongad’ - Ibid. p.263, 265, 266, 267

²² ‘Cataath’ - Ibid. p.264

²³ Ibid. p.248

²⁴ Ibid. pp.248-249

²⁵ *On First Principles*, 2.11.6-7

Firstly, the movement from stage to stage is mapped out and linear - a discernable route where the many stages simply 'lead to the Father'.²⁶ Just as Christ 'descended' via 42 generations from Abraham, we must therefore ascend through the same number of stages.²⁷ The spiritual journey has already been mapped out for us by Moses, the inspired cartographer of the Exodus:

“And Moses wrote down their starting places and their stages by the Word of the Lord”. He wrote them down, then, “by the Word of the Lord” so that when we read them and see how many starting places lie ahead of us on the journey that leads to the kingdom, we may prepare ourselves for this way of life.²⁸

The sense of rational, linear progression (stage 1, stage 2 ... stage 42) is tangible throughout Origen's exposition. Origen is convinced that there is a reason for each of the stages, even though it may be known only to the Father.²⁹ This desire to tease out the (*real*) underlying reason behind all things of God is a key feature of Origen's exegetical approach to scripture in general.

Secondly, as each stage is tackled, there is no sense of the random placement of helps and hindrances for the journey. Instead, Origen sees a definite connection, or proper sequence, between each of the stages and the one which precedes/follows, and this is spelled out in his insistence that 'we must examine the entire order of stages as it is narrated'.³⁰ The precise sequence of the stages is itself of significance³¹, Origen often stressing the impossibility of reaching one stage without having first been through another. For example, Helim (a place with pleasant springs) follows Bitter Waters,³² Raphaca ('health') follows Sin ('temptation')³³ and Halus ('toils') follows Raphaca ('health').³⁴

Thirdly, movement via the stages is a movement of transition from one temporary location to another. The stages are educational steps – the means by which the soul ascends. Origen's interpretation of John 14:2 – 'With my Father are many stages [μοναί]'³⁵ sees the stages as staging posts, temporary stopping-off points on the journey, each of which provide some 'sojourn of use to the soul'.³⁶ There is no sense of the static quality found in the usual English translation of John 14:2 (e.g. 'There are many dwelling-places in my Father's house')³⁷ which

²⁶ *Hom. Num.* 27, p.248

²⁷ *Ibid.* p.249

²⁸ *Ibid.* p.254

²⁹ *Ibid.* p.248

³⁰ *Ibid.* p.253

³¹ Although Ludlow has argued that the significance which Origen finds in the literal sequence of stages in this homily is untypical of his exegesis as a whole: M. Ludlow, 'Theology and allegory: Origen and Gregory of Nyssa on the unity and diversity of scripture', *IJST*, vol 4 number 1 (2002), p.50-52

³² *Hom. Num.* 27, p.260

³³ *Ibid.* p.261

³⁴ *Ibid.* p.262

³⁵ *Ibid.* p.248

³⁶ *Ibid.* p.248

³⁷ *Revised English Bible*, (OUP and CUP, 1989)

completely fails to convey a sense of movement or progress. Origen's interpretation manages to hold together the seemingly opposite ideas of the static (being with the Father) and the dynamic (continued movement) in the spiritual journey.

Fourthly, it is the very movement from one stage to another which helps to convey the sense of progress for Origen:

And by passing through each of the different stages, that is, those 'many stages' that are said to be with the Father, it [the soul] will be increasingly enlightened as it passes from one to another. It will always gain an increase of enlightenment until it grows accustomed to the true Light Himself, who lightens every man, and can endure looking upon Him and bear the splendour of His marvellous majesty.³⁸

Movement from one stage to another symbolises increasing enlightenment (understanding). This (self observed) increase in enlightenment is the reward for the soul as progress is made. Here Origen uses the common patristic metaphor of weak eyes being unable to withstand the brightness of beholding God.³⁹ Progress through the stages will cause the eyes of the soul to gradually adapt to the supreme brightness of the Divine.

It is easy to see Origen's mapping out of the journey of the soul via the stages as a conscious effort to construct an orthodox theology of the spiritual life to rival those of the heretical Gnostics of his day. Many of the features of his exposition (e.g. ascent of the soul by a known series of stages, knowledge/understanding connected with the stages of ascent) are also found in the teaching of well known Gnostics such as Basilides, Valentinus and Heracleon⁴⁰ (all of whom have Alexandrian connections).

However, in contrast with Gnostic teaching, Origen's system emphasises a number of key points of importance for the orthodox church. Origen's system has a place for grace (the ascent is 'not by necessity, but because [Christ] deemed it right')⁴¹ and, most importantly, the emphasis is on progress by 'the steps of faith and the virtues'⁴² – the ascent is made by faith and moral achievement, rather than secretly acquired gnosis or by a person's fortunate birth as a 'spiritual man'. However, Origen is clearly also concerned with the *reward* of progress, which is increased knowledge and understanding – enlightenment.

At this point, a brief consideration of the concept of the 'stages' in Gregory's *Life of Moses* will suffice. As mentioned in the introduction, Gregory's main metaphorical vehicle is Moses the man, and the stages are not a major focus in his exegesis of the Exodus story. However, he does pick out a few of the same stages as Origen for comment (e.g. Bitter Waters⁴³ and Helim⁴⁴) but thinks it more appropriate to pass over the majority of the camps

³⁸ *Hom. Num.* 27, p.252

³⁹ The same idea, for example, is used by Gregory Nazianzus in Oration 27.3 and 28.3

⁴⁰ See K. Rudolph, *Gnosis* pp.308-322

⁴¹ *Hom. Num.* 27, p.249

⁴² *Ibid.* p.250

⁴³ *Life of Moses* 2.131-132

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 2.133-134

(stages) with a few comments, in order to ‘speed our journey through the text’.⁴⁵ Interestingly, Gregory does expend significant exegetical effort in drawing out the baptismal symbolism of the crossing of the Red Sea⁴⁶ - an event which Origen surprisingly fails to interpret in baptismal terms in Homily 27⁴⁷ although he does elsewhere.⁴⁸

Gregory’s cursory treatment of the stages also highlights a fundamental difference in exegetical approach between the two authors. Gregory confesses himself quite happy to miss out events which don’t fit with his spiritual interpretation:

If the events require dropping from the literal account anything written which is foreign to the sequence of elevated understanding, we pass over this on the grounds that it is useless and unprofitable to our purpose, so as not to interrupt the guidance to virtue at such points.⁴⁹

Gregory’s treatment of the text is in strong contrast to Origen’s fastidious exegetical approach⁵⁰ – Origen is unable to let anything pass without intense scrutiny and interprets each stage as listed in the text. This is not, however, to say that ‘sequence’ for Gregory is unimportant, but rather that his search for the real, underlying sequence is better served on this occasion by modifying or omitting sequences of scripture.⁵¹

Progress by Ascent

We now turn to consider the main metaphorical vehicle used by Gregory in describing the spiritual journey, that of the ascent of Moses up Mt Sinai. With the classical worldview shared by Origen and Gregory, heaven was clearly located in a physically upward direction and the journey of the soul must therefore be an upward journey. As we have seen, Origen transposes the horizontal staged journey into an upward ascent by associating it with the return journey of Christ (following his ‘descent’).

For Gregory, no such transposition is required from the historical narrative to the allegorical interpretation, as a key element in his work is the physical ascent of Moses up the mountain. In seeing the ascent of Moses up Mt Sinai as a metaphor for the ascent of the contemplative soul to God, Gregory is closely following in the footsteps of Philo.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 2.135

⁴⁶ Ibid. 2.120-129

⁴⁷ *Hom. Num.* 27, p.259

⁴⁸ *Exodus Homily* 5.5 – Here Origen interprets the Red Sea crossing as ‘baptism in Moses’ (following 1 Cor. 10:2)

⁴⁹ *Life of Moses* 2.50

⁵⁰ Indeed, Gregory’s actual *inversion* of the sequence of events has been commented upon by C.W MacLeod, ‘Allegory and mysticism in Origen and Gregory of Nyssa’, *JTS*, ns, 22 (1971), pp.374-375.

⁵¹ My conclusion here is the opposite of Ludlow’s findings (op. cit., pp. 55-56) who sees Gregory as exactly following the sequence of the text in contrast to Origen’s freer sequential interpretation. However, on a superficial inspection (merely with regard to a line by line exegesis of the text, in the two works under consideration in this paper) it is clear that it is actually Origen who follows the literal sequence of the scriptural text whilst Gregory does not. My intention here is not to deny the well attested sense of *akolouthia* (‘sequential order’) in Gregory’s exegesis.

Gregory brings out a number of factors of key importance in the upwards progress of the soul in his consideration of Moses' physical ascent. Firstly, the soul has a natural tendency to 'rise' ever higher towards the Good⁵² once it has been freed from the heaviness of earthly things.⁵³ Ascent is the *natural* direction for the soul, it being drawn ever upwards by the almost magnetic quality of attraction between itself and the Good – 'for the nature of the Good attracts to itself those who look to it'.⁵⁴

Secondly, progress made in the ascent by virtue does not dull the desire for the ultimate, transcendent goal but rather intensifies it.⁵⁵ The gaining of some spiritual 'height' merely serves to intensify the soul's desire for more, rather than provide any sense of satiety. Unlike all other activities, the practice of virtue paradoxically 'causes its capacity to grow through exertion'⁵⁶ rather than cause exhaustion.

Gregory's fondness for paradox comes out again later in his description of ascent by standing still - a spiritual 'running on the spot'.⁵⁷ God commands Moses to 'stand on the rock' as he passes by,⁵⁸ yet as this sits uncomfortably with Gregory's theme of constant progress, he deduces that standing on the rock symbolises remaining steadfast in the Good, which naturally results in progress in virtue, and hence progress, or ascent. The importance of a firm 'grounding in the Good'⁵⁹ also provides the occasion for another vivid metaphor – that of a man trying to run up a sand dune.⁶⁰ Huge effort is expended in an attempt to ascend, but all such effort is in vain without a firm foothold on the rock.

The final point to be drawn from Gregory's account of Moses' ascent is that the journey of ascent is limitless. Gregory is clear that 'the Divine is by its very nature infinite',⁶¹ so there is no danger of arriving at, or objectively defining God. But neither did Moses himself place any limits on his journey - '[he] at no time stopped in his ascent, nor did he set a limit for himself in his upward course'.⁶² Despite all his previous experiences which Gregory summarises (the burning bush, water from the rock, producing bread from heaven)⁶³ Moses is left with an insatiable thirst for more:⁶⁴

⁵² *Life of Moses* 2.225

⁵³ *Ibid.* 2.224

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 2.225

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 2.226

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* 2.226

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* 2.243

⁵⁸ Exodus 33:21

⁵⁹ *Life of Moses* 2.243

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* 2.244

⁶¹ *Ibid.* 2.236

⁶² *Ibid.* 2.227

⁶³ *Ibid.* 2.228-229

⁶⁴ Gregory's doctrine of the endless straining of the soul (ἐπεκτασις) is classically explained by J. Daniélou in *From Glory to Glory* (London: John Murray, 1962), pp.56-71

And although lifted up through such lofty experiences, he is still unsatisfied in his desire for more. He still thirsts for that with which he constantly filled himself to capacity, and he asks to attain as if he had never partaken, beseeching God to appear to him, not according to his capacity to partake, but according to God's true being.⁶⁵

The desire for God is answered and so, in a sense, the request is granted, but at the same time the capacity of the soul is also increased. The contrast with the fruitless and cruel Egyptian 'brick making' (the pursuit of pleasure) where the brick mould is constantly filled, and then emptied, just as it seems almost full, is plain.⁶⁶

In his exegesis, Gregory manages to affirm the traditional upward path of ascent of the soul, present in Plato, Philo, Origen, et al, yet by insisting on the boundlessness of God, the ascent becomes transformed into an endless journey into the infinity of God. Thus Gregory succeeds in 'squaring the circle' of safeguarding the Divine transcendence whilst still allowing for the traditional spiritual motif of the ascent of the soul. The journey itself is the destination, or in Gregory's own words, 'the true sight of God consists in this, that the one who looks up to God never ceases in that desire'.⁶⁷

Conclusion

Although the main metaphorical vehicle used by each author in their application of the Exodus story is different (the stages for Origen, and the life of Moses, or more specifically the ascent up Mt Sinai, for Gregory) a number of elements in both texts are similar. For both authors, the soul needs to escape from its Egyptian bondage to the things of this life, the 'freeing act' being the event of the Incarnation. Also, the current stage the soul has reached is only a temporary stopping off point, the urge to make progress by moving to the next stage is constantly present,⁶⁸ and progress is made by the practice of virtue.

However, differences are apparent too. For Origen, the journey is clearly mapped out in scripture, the stages all have names, the journey is a process of increasing enlightenment as the soul moves from one to another until it reaches its goal. The strong sense of linear, sequential and measurable progress is present. For Gregory, on the other hand, the infinity of the Divine means that no map *can* be made of the journey. It is an *endless* journey into the unknown, following the magnetic pull of 'the Good'. As soon as the soul perceives that progress has been made, its own capacity for the Divine is increased, leaving it paradoxically no closer to its goal than before.

Two reasons for this fundamental difference of opinion can be proposed. Firstly, Gregory's stress on the impossibility of the soul achieving a state of satiety with the contemplation of

⁶⁵ *Life of Moses* 2.230

⁶⁶ This contrast has also been noted by Ferguson, op. cit., p.310

⁶⁷ *Life of Moses* 2.233

⁶⁸ The fact that both works emphasise the theme of constant progress (crystallised in Gregory's doctrine of *ἐπεκτασις*) has been pointed out by both J. Daniélou in *Origen* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1955), p.303-304 and H. Crouzel in *Origen* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1989), p.114

God could be seen as a conscious correction to Origen's cosmology.⁶⁹ For Origen, the fall of souls (or minds) is due to their satiation with the Divine,⁷⁰ a possibility which Gregory's scheme expressly denies – there can be no limit to the Good and no limit to our 'satisfaction'. Gregory may have been spurred on to provide a correction to Origen's cosmology by the gathering storm clouds of the Origenist controversy. Questions over some of Origen's speculations had already been raised by Methodius at the start of the 4th century, Epiphanius had issued his *Panarion* (with the condemnation of Origen's ideas as the source of the Arian heresy) at the end of the 370's, and Jerome's crusade against Origen was to commence within a few years of the publication for *The Life of Moses*.

Secondly, whether Origen's cosmology was a factor in Gregory's exegesis or not, his affirmation of the Divine unknowability is clearly a firm rebuff to the Eunomians. Gregory's exegesis in *The Life of Moses* could therefore be seen as providing an argument from the perspective of the spiritual life, to complement his more extensive treatise set out in *Against Eunomius*. Origen, on the other hand, writing with the heretical Gnostics in mind, can be seen as positing a more orthodox path of ascent tied to increasing knowledge – a path which had yet to encounter the extremes of Neo-Arian logic.

In summary, both texts set out a 'spiritual' interpretation of the physical Exodus journey. Whilst on the majority of topics both authors provide similar, or at least compatible interpretations, the main differences are attributable, at least in part, to the different theological challenges of the times.

⁶⁹ This is more fully argued by R.E. Heine in *Perfection in the Virtuous Life* (Cambridge, MA: The Philadelphia Patristic Foundation Ltd., 1975) pp.71-97

⁷⁰ See *On First Principles* 1.8

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