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THE CHRISTIAN MOSES

FROM PHILO TO THE QUR'ÂN

EDITED BY

Philip Rousseau and Janet A. Timbie

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presence of Pharaoh and his army, or of the perseverance Moses drew upon to lead the distractible Israelites through the wilderness, into a viable pattern to be adopted in the life of the reader was a loose process. Moses's inspired example was seemingly open to any who are willing to pursue a deeper knowledge of God. It is for this reason that Gregory's *Life of Moses* is a popular modern work: there are no fewer than three translations into English currently available, and the most frequently cited of those translations emphasizes the versatility of the pattern Moses strikes, introducing the text in a way that makes it directly applicable to any modern Christian reader.²

The highly adjustable correspondence between the pattern of Moses and the enactment of that pattern in a reader's life is in fact loose by design. The ancient author of the *Life of Moses* did not simply value mimesis for its own sake, but rather tried to engage the reader in an active pedagogical process, by which the figure of Moses could be converted into practical directions for facing new and different challenges. This is in part because the *Life of Moses* was composed in response to a request from a less experienced Christian for "some direction regarding the perfect life."³ Gregory responded to this request as a teacher would, offering both an example of the pursuit of the perfect life and a repeated warning that adopting the example would require painstaking, long work on the part of the reader. He suggested that the imitation of exemplary figures from the biblical past was certainly possible, and even desirable, because the very "reason why the custom of these lofty people has been narrated so carefully is in order to provide a direction to the life that leads to the good by way of the imitation of these early doers of good."⁴ The question, however, of precisely what details of a life like Moses's a reader should imitate remained obscure because of the distance between Moses's environment and the reader's own. No contemporary person could in fact stare down the Pharaoh or

2. Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson, *Gregory of Nyssa: The Life of Moses*, Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1978); see also the preface by John Meyendorff.

3. Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses* prologue 2, ed. H. Musurillo, in *Gregorii Nysseni: De vita Moysis*, Gregorii Nysseni Opera 71 (Leiden: Brill, 1964), 2.8–9. Throughout this essay, I will give the book and chapter numbers as established by Jean Daniélou in his edition and French translation, *Grégoire de Nyssa, La Vie de Moïse*, Sources Chrétiennes, 1 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1955), 1–135. Revised editions appeared in 1968 and 2000, with different pagination. Daniélou's divisions of the text have governed the most popular English translation; but I have made my own translations from the best critical edition, that of Musurillo, cited above.

4. Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses* prologue 13 (ed. Musurillo, *De vita Moysis*, 6.5–8).

Ellen Muehlberger

9. THE ASCETIC LEADER IN GREGORY OF NYSSA'S *LIFE OF MOSES*

Among the biblical exempla that early Christians utilized for pedagogical and moral lessons, none save Abraham received quite as much attention as did Moses. His career, as recounted in Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers, reflected a combination of courage, inventiveness, and perseverance that ancient authors often sought to evoke in their audiences. The virtues of that life were first retold by Philo of Alexandria, whose *Life of Moses* converted the narrative of Moses's journey out of Egypt and through the wilderness into a work of classical biography.¹ As was the case with many of Philo's works, his *Life of Moses* was read and preserved by later Christian communities; its influence is visible in the diverse ways that Christian writers have created later depictions of Moses. The works in this volume speak to that diversity, but they are just a beginning. For example, Gregory of Nyssa, the Cappadocian writer and bishop whose career spanned the second half of the fourth century, knew Philo's *Life* and took its form of retold biblical narrative to create his own, distinctive *Life of Moses*. It offered its audience a mechanism by which to transfer the virtues of Moses's various actions to their own daily struggles. That mechanism was underdetermined, so that the transfer of the courage Moses showed in the

1. Philo, *Life of Moses*, trans. F. H. Colson, in *Philo*, vol. 6, *On Abraham*, *On Joseph*, *On Moses*, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1935).

chastise the Israelites gathered at the base of Sinai for their idolatry, as Moses had, so what could episodes like these mean for a reader who wanted to imitate them? The difficulty of translating the pattern into action was, in fact, a spur to greater knowledge, because making use of such exempla required, as Gregory wrote, "a subtle use of one's intelligence and piercing vision" at the same time.⁵ In truth, all of this hedging about the trouble of imitation was not aimed at putting the reader off—just the opposite. The talk of the mechanism of imitation's difficulty worked in concert with the claims that imitation of Moses was the best way to accomplish the perfect life, to encourage the reader to pay extremely close attention not just to Moses, but also to his (the reader's) own interpretative practices. Getting the student to scrutinize the pattern of Moses and to work out precisely how to apply its lessons is the central goal of the *Life of Moses*.

This essay engages in a different, but related, task. Instead of reading the *Life of Moses* as its author indicated, with an eye to understanding how to draw lessons about one's life from the details of Moses's example, I will scrutinize the *Life* with an eye to figuring out one of its most enticing puzzles: the location in which and social situation for which it was written. To whom did Gregory direct this text, and who was optimally suited to follow its guidance? In the first part of the essay, I will trace the current scholarly understanding of the context of the *Life of Moses*, rehearsing the foundation on which scholars have come to the conclusion that it is a work of Gregory's late career and a treatise meant to introduce a mystical tradition to the ascetics gathered in the community founded by Gregory's late brother, Basil of Caesarea. In so doing, I will call attention to the problematic nature of this understanding, both the thinness of its social location and the portions of the text that do not yield to its claims. In the second part of the essay, I will suggest an alternate context for the *Life*, based on the assumptions the text holds about the social and pedagogical priorities of the person to whom its lessons are directed. I argue that the person whom the text enjoins to imitate Moses was most likely an ascetic leader, and that the problems of life as a leader of a religious community are the central problems Gregory sought to address with his example of Moses. I explore prior identifications of the *Life of Moses* as a text about the role of bishops, and I suggest that, based on the detailed theological and anthropological assump-

5. Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses* prologue 14 (ed. Musurillo, *De vita Moysis*, 6.20–21).

tions expressed in Gregory's advice, it is likely that the ideal leader addressed by Gregory was not a bishop, but an ascetic leader conversant with one particular style of asceticism extant in late ancient Christianity. At the end of the essay, I will suggest how this novel context for the *Life of Moses* not only can change our understanding of Gregory and his use of Moses's career as an exemplar for one particular kind of Christian life, but also can add evidence to the ongoing conversation among scholars about the use of Scripture in late antiquity.

The Current Understanding of the Context of the *Life of Moses*

The biographical details of Gregory of Nyssa's own life have themselves been an important foundation for the current scholarly consensus regarding the purpose and environment for which the *Life of Moses* was written. Gregory was born in Cappadocia in 335 C.E. to a family whose members included several Christians later famous for their practice and their theological brilliance.⁶ Though Gregory wrote many pieces of literature, including homilies, philosophical and educational treatises, and biographies, his most well-known works were written on account of relationships he held with those famous family members. Gregory made many theological interventions, but his theology of the Trinity in the work defending his brother Basil *Against Eunomius* is chief among them; Gregory wrote often in praise of education, but his *Treatise on the Soul and the Resurrection*, an imagined dialogue including his sister Macrina, is the most widely read. Consequently, the portrait we have of Gregory's development as a theologian and a writer is built around his biography and the biographies of those around him, family as well as friends. And that is standard practice in early Christian studies: we often approach the early Christian period by parsing the field author by author, then parsing each author's output by arranging his texts in the flow of his life, ideas, and relationships. There are three or four works, however, that do not have any clear location in Gregory's life or any clear, direct relationship to other works of Gregory's, though they have a relationship among themselves. The *Life of Moses*, which is often grouped with two other mystical treatments of scriptural

6. For an extended overview of Gregory's life and works, see Anthony Meredith, SJ, *Gregory of Nyssa*, The Early Church Fathers (London: Routledge, 1999), 1–26.

themes, the *Homilies on the Song of Songs* and the *Treatise on the Inscriptions of the Psalms*, speaks of a path of Christian progress, a perpetual stretching out toward a good that does not exist as a fixed end, but retreats as it is approached.⁷ In the case of the *Life of Moses*, the highest part of this stretching takes place in darkness, signified in Moses's career by the darkness he encountered when he met God on Sinai. These formulations are distinctive; for that and for their lack of clear reference to known points in Gregory's biography, they do not square easily with other works more securely dated to well-documented eras in Gregory's life.

As a result, scholars of Gregory have posited a "mystical period" in Gregory's writing for these texts, the situational details of which explain the uniqueness of the ideas espoused in them when they are compared to Gregory's other writings. That period is assigned to the years assumed to be Gregory's last, between his last dateable work, a funeral oration given in or around 386 C.E., and his presumed death in the mid-390s C.E.. Though it is an elegant explanation of the mystery of these texts (not to mention the mystery of the end of Gregory's life, about which we know nothing), the notion of Gregory's "mystical period" is based on a slim foundation, the constructed nature of which has been obscured as scholars of Gregory repeat the notion in their introductory surveys of Gregory's work. The existence of this "mystical period" depends on three interlocking assertions. The first is that the three texts I have mentioned form a group, equally important and similar in theme and aim, a fair though not incontrovertible claim.⁸ The second is the mention of the author's "gray hair" in the prologue to the *Life of Moses*, which is taken literally in order to assign this work, and the two others, to Gregory's old age.⁹ In order to hold that assumption, a scholar must disregard both Gregory's earlier references to his "gray hair" (see, for example, its use in *Against Eunomius*) as well as the fact that other writers in Gregory's environment feel comfortable refer-

7. For the doctrine of *eppektasis*, see Lucas Francisco Mateo-Seco, "Eppektasis," in *The Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa*, ed. Lucas Francisco Mateo-Seco and Giulio Maspero, trans. Seth Cherny (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 265–68.

8. See the way that scholars interested in mysticism focus now on the *Songs* homilies and often leave *Life of Moses* to be mentioned only in passing; for an example, look at Sarah Coakley's treatment in the introduction to *Re-thinking Gregory of Nyssa* (London: Blackwell, 2003), 1–14.

9. Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses* prologue 2 (ed. Musurillo, *De vita Moysis*, 2.13). See the reconstruction of Jean Daniélou, *Platonisme et théologie mystique: Essai sur la doctrine spirituelle de saint Grégoire de Nysse* (Paris: Aubier, 1944).

ring to their own "gray hair" as early as their early thirties.¹⁰ The third assertion that supports the existence of a "mystical period" at the end of Gregory's life is even stranger: scholars assume these works were written at the end of Gregory's life because that is when he finally became a widower and, unencumbered, could indulge the mystical thoughts he had previously suppressed on account of the commitment it took to maintain a relationship with his spouse.¹¹ Questionable assertions, but the chronology they support—created by one influential scholar, Jean Daniélou, and later upheld by the premier editor of Gregory's work, Werner Jaeger—has long been understood as a fact of Gregory's life, such that all current editions of the *Life of Moses*, the *Songs* homilies, and any works associated with them are assigned to this late, mystical period in Gregory's life.¹²

The field of early Christian studies, however, has expanded since the scholarship that established this date for the *Life of Moses* appeared, adding new knowledge about the diversity of early Christian thought; new awareness of the tropes of self-presentation used by Christian writers; and new caution about imparting psychological motivations to authors whose cultural contexts are quite different from our own. Instead of seeking the context of a piece of writing in its author's biography, many scholars now mine the details of the surviving texts *themselves* to try to establish a thicker account of the social contexts in which and for which they were written. Such historical and intellectual investigation has unearthed the local frameworks for many ideas voiced by Gregory, even such heady theological concepts as the infinity of the divine and the love between God and the church.¹³ This approach has the benefit of

10. See, for example, Gregory of Nazianzus's wide-ranging use, as in the twelve instances noted by Bradley Scirin, "The Letters of Gregory of Nazianzus: Discourse and Community in Late Antique Epistolar Culture" (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 2012), 204n181.

11. For his arguments about Gregory's wife, Theosebeia, and Gregory's turn to mysticism as a result of his having free time and freedom after her death, see Daniélou, "Le mariage de Grégoire de Nysse et la chronologie de sa vie," *Revue des Études Augustiniennes* 2 (1956): 71–78, where he concludes, "In 385, Gregory lost Theosebeia. From that point on, the monastic ideal, which had been only an instance of nostalgia for the previous fifteen years, finally lay open to him."

12. See Jaeger's reconstruction in *Two Rediscovered Works of Ancient Christian Literature: Gregory of Nyssa and Macarius*, Harvard Institute for Classical Studies (Leiden: Brill, 1954), 115–42, especially 118–22.

13. On divine infinity, see Mark Weedman, "The Polemical Context of Gregory of Nyssa's Doctrine of Divine Infinity," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 18 (2010): 81–104; on the purpose of the *Songs* homilies being the advancement of doctrine, rather than a generic mysticism, see Coakley's introduction to *Re-thinking Gregory of Nyssa*, 1–14.

expansiveness: it is not tied to any person, or to any particular theory about the motivations or intentions of human beings, and, in a time when historians are ever reminded of the tenuous nature of our identification of authors of texts from the past, it does not require us to be absolutely certain of the author's identity in order to make claims about the text.¹⁴

I want to impress upon the reader the limits of our current estimation of the *Life of Moses* because I think that the text itself offers far richer evidence about its composition and use than do psychologizing assumptions about Gregory's life path or taking literally a creative element in Gregory's elaborate self-fashioning. In the next section, I will consider the *Life of Moses* afresh, looking at the text as if it had just been discovered for the first time and needed to be located, not even necessarily among Gregory's works and in the time frame of Gregory's career, but at the least among the various theological and anthropological positions held by writers represented in the full range of existing late ancient Christian texts.

The Advice of the *Life of Moses* as a Clue to Its Context

To read the *Life of Moses* from start to finish is to recognize its pedagogical nature. Though the work is a retelling of Moses's career, it is influenced throughout by the hand of an author intent on guiding his reader to draw very specific lessons from Moses's example. There are direct instructions to the reader in the prologue, as I have mentioned, that alert him to the work of interpretation he will be required to do. In addition to these instructions, the author tells the story of Moses no fewer than four times in the text; each of these retellings serves an educational purpose. The first third of the treatise after the prologue is tagged a "history" of Moses. It retells the biblical story with one recurring adjustment, repeatedly pointing the reader to the hand of a "divine power" acting in events in Moses's life, keeping watch over Moses and

¹⁴ See the warnings of Anthony Grafton, *Forgers and Critics: Creativity and Duplicity in Western Scholarship* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990), where he suggests a significant portion of identified medieval documents were not written by their "authors." Though this perspective has not been extended to the late ancient world, scholars would be wise to acknowledge that late antiquity, like the Middle Ages, was replete with textual critics and the idea that a text held a certain kind of authority—conditions that lead to insecure associations between authors and texts. This is not even to raise the issues of pseudonymity and intertextuality.

arranging situations to his benefit.¹⁵ A second retelling constitutes the second book of the *Life*: this time, the moments in Moses's life are explicitly interpreted at length for the reader as the narrative progresses. A third recap (*Life of Moses* 2.227–30) and a fourth (*Life of Moses* 2.305–14) summarize Moses's career in the middle and at the end of the book. The complex nest of tellings and retellings frames Moses's life and guides the reader to draw the best possible conclusions from Moses's actions. Thus the multiple tellings are hints about the social situation of the author, his educational aim in sharing the Moses story, and the social situation he assumes for the readers who will take his lessons.

The text of the *Life of Moses* has often been interpreted as a guide to mystical progress for any Christian, but its details suggest that the ideal reader will in fact apply its lessons to his leadership of a group of people. Scholars have focused on the *Life's* description of Moses's meeting with God on Sinai and have built on its three-fold pattern of illumination, entry into the cloud surrounding the mountain, and the eventual darkness that descends when Moses encounters God, as a pattern of mystical experience that could be enacted by a Christian.¹⁶ Moses's experience on Sinai is a climactic moment in his life, to be sure, but the *Life of Moses* presents that experience rather briefly in comparison with Moses's overall trajectory of experience journeying from Egypt to Canaan. Moses's time alone with God is actually but a minute fraction of the text's recounting of his life; much, much more of Moses's time, according to the *Life*, is spent freeing, then managing the Israelites. He is called to lead them out of Egypt, through the Red Sea, through the wilderness, away from idolatry, and finally to Canaan. If Moses's experience on Sinai is important, it is for the "freedom" and "boldness" it granted him, which allowed him to then lead others to the same freedom. For the reader, the lessons about leading the Israelites are given greater weight, for examples regarding how to lead one's own "Israelites" are by far the largest part of the text.

The specific advice offered by the *Life of Moses* about how to lead these "Israelites" can help identify the social situation of both the leader who imitates Moses and those he leads. Problems related to life in community are the topic of many of the *Life's* interpretations of scenes between Moses and

¹⁵ Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses* 1.16–77.

¹⁶ See especially Daniélou, *Platonisme et théologie mystique*.

the Israelites. For example, the instance of the manna from heaven becomes a moment to emphasize the equality of all persons among the Israelites and to showcase the futility of hoarding food.¹⁷ A second example addresses group discipline: when he returned from the mountain and found the Israelites engaged in idolatry, Moses allowed some Levites to attack and to kill the idolaters and those around them. This, the *Life of Moses* suggests, offers a lesson to those who need to require the corporeal punishment of those under their care, whether singly or as a group.

The discourse here aids us in another way: When they all decided *en masse* to act badly, and the whole encampment became as one in their evil-doing, they were whipped, first one then another, indiscriminately. For when someone is caught up in a group being tracked down for evil deeds and is tortured by blows to this or that part of his body, he knows, as he endures the whipping, that the pain he experiences in various parts of his body will spread to the whole. In the same way, a group of people who decide together to engage in evil are punished as a whole. For when [they see] parts of the group being whipped, they realize that the whipping is being directed at all of them. So, when some comparable evil is enacted by many, it is not always the many that suffer the wrath of God, but only some. It is appropriate to think that the correction [in this case] is done for the love of humanity: not all are struck, but all are brought to consider turning away from evil by the blows inflicted on some.¹⁸

If one were to draw a lesson from Moses's life in this regard, it is that the leader needs to chastise those he leads, sometimes corporately, sometimes the part for the whole. Both of these vignettes, the manna and the punishment, speak to a leader who deals with issues like the equitable sharing of resources and the discipline of a corporate body. There are many contexts to which this could apply in late ancient culture—discipline was the backbone of ancient schooling, the army, and emergent Christian congregations—but the monastic context is most salient among them.

It is on this basis that others have suggested that the *Life of Moses* was written in order to develop for Basil's growing ascetic community a mystical perspective that it previously had lacked. Yet there were many different types of ascetic communities in late ancient Christianity, and the particular guidance that the *Life of Moses* offers does not coincide with what we know of Basil's community. This is especially clear in the terms in which the *Life of Moses*

couches the inevitable struggle of maintaining the discipline of an ascetic life. A collection of interpretations of the plagues that God brought on Egypt, for instance, reveal the author's assumption that the leader who imitates Moses will have to both convince his Israelites that they want freedom and also prepare them for it by the execution of some rather harsh actions. Moses, when he "sought to lead those of his nature to a free life," needed to show them the alternative, so in order to "induce a desire" for that life of freedom, he acted as God instructed him, bringing about the plagues that struck Egypt (see Exodus 7:1–12:30). By these disasters, he could teach the Israelites the necessity of utterly destroying the "first genesis of evil," by which he means the firstborn children among the Egyptians. Elsewhere in the treatise, Gregory identified Egyptians with evil thoughts, or demons, and here too, he reads the Egyptian firstborn children as the first among the passions: lust and anger.¹⁹ To fight off such "Egyptians" there are special practices. If we "want to grasp more keenly the message of this story," Gregory wrote, we should understand that "when the destroyer has been found inside, we do not cast him out through concentration, but instead we fashion a chief guard by using the law against him gaining entrance to us."²⁰ To some students of ancient Christianity, this kind of defense against the dominant passions—anger, lust, gluttony, and the like—by means of the law will sound familiar. Evagrius of Pontus proposed such a practice against passions in his treatise *Talking Back*, where he offered a different passage of Scripture to be used as a talisman against each of various situations in which an ascetic might be tempted by a passion.

The prospect of Evagian-style advice appearing in a treatise of Gregory's may seem far-fetched, but the anthropological assumptions of the treatise, too, are detailed and resonant with the way human constitutions are described in Evagrius's work. Immediately following the section of the *Life I* have just described, in which Moses stands as an example of the leader who kills off the firstborn of evil, namely lust and anger, Gregory provides a framework in which to understand the action of such passions on the human being. Three parts of the human—the rational, the desiring, and the passionate parts—need to remain in the proper hierarchy for the Christian to be safe

19. Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses* 2.93.

20. Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses* 2.95 (ed. Musurillo, *De vita Moysis*, 62.5–7). This and the following several lines of *VM* appear to be only slightly paraphrased versions of a fragment of a commentary on Exodus by Origen; cf. PG 12:285, 15–20.

17. Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses* 2.141–43.

18. Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses* 2.205–6 (ed. Musurillo, *De vita Moysis*, 104.19–105.8).

from attack. If they happen to fall out of order, with the desiring or passionate part taking the fore, then there is a chance that the "destroyer will be able to steal into the person" and disrupt his calm.²¹ The mechanism by which the "destroyer" slips in to the person's interior is rather specific, being directly tied to the thoughts (λογισμοί) a person holds, which are the "parents of virtue."²² So, if one allows only "temperate and careful" thoughts, then all is well, but the allowance of more lax or even wicked thoughts causes ruin.²³ The author of the *Life of Moses* feels so strongly about the importance of thoughts as the index of an individual's state that he equates them with wicked people who must be killed.

According to the *Life*, if one wishes to be a "friend of God," as Moses is, then one has to be willing to attack and kill even those who are closest to him, whether brother, stranger, or friend.²⁴ Gregory wrote, "Regarding progress, we think when we look to the contemplation that every person who looks to God and the law is purified by the slaughter of those who are evilly familiar with him.... We think these are the thoughts that share our nature, whose life is death to us, but whose death brings about our life."²⁵ To control these thoughts—to "slaughter," so to speak, those that are resident, but evil—was not simply a matter of exercising one's will or keeping the attention away from such thoughts. Instead, the author suggested that thoughts must be controlled at their source: the passions. Anger, lust, and greed all accomplish the perversion of the thoughts, but the audience of the *Life of Moses* should keep watch for one particular entity that this author includes among the passions: "Of all the existing passions that contend against the thoughts of human beings, none of them is more capable against us than pleasure."²⁶ "Pleasure," the *Life of Moses* warns, "reveals human beings to be wild beasts," conquering those who cannot be conquered by other means.²⁷ Thus, the wise leader who wishes to imitate Moses must already understand that the passions, especially pleasure, can

21. Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses* 2.98; cf. 2.123. This, too, echoes the same passage in Origen's Exodus fragments.

22. Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses* 2.4 (ed. Musurillo, *De vita Moysis*, 37.17–18).

23. Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses* 2.7 (ed. Musurillo, *De vita Moysis*, 35.9–10); cf. Athanasius, *Life of Antony* 55.

24. Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses* 2.207 (ed. Musurillo, *De vita Moysis*, 105.13–14).

25. Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses* 2.208 (ed. Musurillo, *De vita Moysis*, 105.18–20; 106.1–3).

26. Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses* 2.301 (ed. Musurillo, *De vita Moysis*, 136.20–137.2).

27. Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses* 2.302 (ed. Musurillo, *De vita Moysis*, 137.13–14).

influence the thoughts negatively and thus derail the advancement he seeks to produce among his own "Israelites."

What is more, the advice given to the ascetic leader in the *Life of Moses* anticipates the fluctuations in the progress of those he leads, as well as their eventual independence. The ascetic journey is difficult, just as the Israelites' journey was difficult. Many of the leader's group will be frightened off by attacks of the adversary, which begin the moment they start their program, just as Pharaoh attacked the Israelites immediately upon their departure from Egypt. Of those who choose the journey, some will gain fortitude by fighting the adversary and his temptations, but others who are weak will be "struck down" by those encounters, and even regret their decision to follow the leader. Those who imitate Moses's leadership should expect some of their charges to complain: "They say quite openly that they would rather have remained deaf to the call of freedom than have had these things happen to them for freedom's sake."²⁸ This is an essential time for the leader to give support, because some of the beaten and broken Israelites who would otherwise be liable to quit can be buoyed up by the promise of reinforcements. The *Life of Moses* says it is the duty of Moses, "or someone like him who leads the people like he does," to reassure frightened novices and to "fend off their fear with the sign of the hope of a divine ally, in order to embolden their fallen minds."²⁹

Elsewhere I have argued that this passage and others like it in the *Life of Moses* point to a tradition that developed in certain Egyptian academic and ascetic circles: that of expecting the assistance of a companion angel, whose presence would help the ascetic attain the "sweetness" of the discipline to which he submitted.³⁰ That tradition, as it developed, emphasized that each individual ascetic was responsible for his own progress. Such individual responsibility is a central theme that the advice given to the leader who imitates Moses also repeats. The exercise of choice is a part of human nature, the *Life of Moses* holds, and the status of any particular human being is directly related to the choices exerted by that person.³¹ Thus, when an individual is lifted or falls in

28. Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses* 2.57 (ed. Musurillo, *De vita Moysis*, 49.20–23).

29. Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses* 2.117 (ed. Musurillo, *De vita Moysis*, 69.11–14).

30. E. Muehlberger, *Angels in Late Ancient Christianity* (New York: Oxford, 2013), 135–45; see also *Life of Moses* 2.132, 193, 285, 316, which all speak of the sweetness of the path undertaken by those who are following the leader who imitates Moses, a trope common to the letters of ascetics Antony and Ammonas.

31. Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses* 2.80–81. As an example, even the plagues that happened to the

his pursuit of the perfect life, that change is the result of his own choice, not a determination by any other power.³² The importance of self-direction and selection extends to all areas of life, including the use of texts: the author of the *Life of Moses* even warns that different readers will inevitably draw different lessons from Moses's actions.³³ Taken together, these lessons for a leader suggest already that such a leader has a group of people to lead as Moses did the Israelites. What is more, the specific details of the guidance about how to lead those "Israelites" resonates with the anthropological perspectives preserved in a distinct set of ascetic networks, those associated with Evagrius of Pontus.

Why the *Life of Moses's* Imagined Leader Is Not a Bishop

The specific instructions in the *Life of Moses* to the leader who imitates Moses point us, I have argued, toward a social context in which that leader is responsible for the progress of a group of people. For some, this context is specifically the situation of a bishop, and thus the *Life of Moses* is an extension of Gregory's thoughts about being a bishop, that is, the urban and authoritative leader and patron for a group of lay Christians. From this perspective, the *Life of Moses* coheres with Gregory's earlier eulogy for his brother Basil, delivered in 381 C.E. (*In Basilium fratrem*). There, Gregory offers an extended formal comparison (*synkrisis*) between Basil's acts of leadership and those of Moses. Marguerite Harl has argued that the elegy is Gregory's "plea for episcopal authority," and Andrea Sterk later agreed, saying that this speech is the clearest possible statement of Gregory's "theology of the episcopate."³⁴ If Basil, and thus Moses, represents the ideal bishop in this elegy, both scholars hold, then Moses as presented in the *Life of Moses* is another portrait of the same set

Egyptians, often interpreted as the result of the hardness of heart that Pharaoh exhibited, are in this text the result of the Egyptians' own "choices" (τοῖς προαιθέσι). Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses* 2.86 (ed. Musurillo, *De vita Moysis*, 58.2.4).

32. Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses* 2.74–76.

33. Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses* 2.305.

34. Marguerite Harl, "Moïse figure de l'évêque dans l'Eloge de Basile de Grégoire de Nyse (381): Un plaidoyer pour l'autorité épiscopale," in *The Biographical Works of Gregory of Nyssa: Proceedings of the Fifth International Colloquium on Gregory of Nyssa*, ed. Andreas Spira and Christoph Klock (Cambridge, Mass.: Philadelphia Patristic Foundation, 1984), 71–119; Andrea Sterk, *Renouncing the World Yet Leading the Church: The Monk-Bishop in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), especially the chapter "Gregory of Nyssa: On Basil, Moses, and Episcopal Office," 95–119.

of ideas. Thus Harl can say that "without a doubt" the events reported in the *Life of Moses* "prefigure the functions of the bishop."³⁵ Her interpretation of the various mentions of sight, eyes, and vision in the *Life* connects, with effort, at length to these tropes in the ongoing spiritual work of bishops: they are the ones who open the eyes of and provide illumination to their congregations.³⁶ Sterk, for her part, argues that the *Life of Moses* provides "a similar vision of the making of a Christian bishop" to what was laid out in Gregory's eulogy for Basil.³⁷ For the fact that the *Life of Moses* ends with "the patriarch, the friend of God, successfully interceding on behalf of the people" is a sign that it is a work about the episcopate. She summarizes: "Indeed, it is the image of Moses that perhaps best embodies Gregory's vision of episcopal leadership."³⁸ Both of these scholars make a solid case: the *Life of Moses* can be, and over time has been, read as a guide to the spiritual leadership a bishop can provide to a group of people, his own "Israelites."

Of course, in the *Life of Moses*, the role assumed for the leader who imitates Moses changes over time as a result of the changing status of those he leads as they make progress. According to the *Life of Moses*, the leader who wishes to follow Moses's example needs to understand that he is a goad, a source of encouragement and hope to his charges, but he does not always remain an authority figure for them in a traditional sense. This is most clear in a passage in which Gregory taught, by recounting the states in the journey of the Israelites, the progress the leader can expect from the Christians he will guide.

Do you see the sequence of the story? When the human being is weak, having been distressed by the wicked tyrant, he does not fend off the enemy on his own, because he is not able. But there is another who defends the weak ones, who strikes the warmer with blow after blow. When the human being is freed from servitude to those who rule him and when he is made sweet by the wood, and when he rests from the fight in the place of the palms, and understands the mystery of the rock and partakes of the heavenly food, then he no longer fends off the warmonger by the hand of another. Instead, because he has gone beyond the age of a child and has grasped the height of youth, he wrestles opponents on his own. No longer does he use Moses, the servant of God, as a general, but God himself, whose servant Moses has become.³⁹

35. Harl, "Moïse figure de l'évêque," 84.

36. *Ibid.*, 85.

37. Sterk, *Renouncing the World Yet Leading the Church*, 100.

38. *Ibid.*, 116–17.

39. Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses* 2.148 (ed. Musurillo, *De vita Moysis*, 80.13–26).

Gregory clarifies precisely what he means by "God": as Joshua is the successor to Moses, so too, Jesus, whose name is a homonym for Joshua's, is the successor to the leader who imitates Moses. That leader should see this as a natural transition; as he led his own "Israelites" out of "Egypt," the events of the journey itself would harden them into people capable of fighting the enemy on their own. Thus the leader should strive to release his direct authority over his charges, training them to the point that they are able to be led by God directly. This is, to be sure, a much different theory of leadership than the ideas about the episcopate presented in Gregory's oration for his brother.

Additionally, both Harl and Sterk have also noted other divergences between Gregory's use of the figure of Moses in his elegy for Basil and the way Moses is presented in the *Life of Moses*. First, there is a difference in emphasis: in the elegy for Basil, Moses is in fact only one of a number of biblical patriarchs to which Basil is compared, whereas the *Life of Moses* focuses solely on Moses.⁴⁰ Second, the *Life of Moses* includes one biblical figure that the earlier texts avoid, namely Aaron. In the biblical account, Aaron is a troubling figure: he is Moses's brother and assistant, but also chief among the Israelite idolaters. For that reason, Harl explains, Gregory did not include Aaron in the speech for Basil, though Aaron plays a large role in the *Life of Moses* and in other contemporary works, like the *Apostolic Constitutions*.⁴¹ Third, Sterk notes a difference in the "genre and style" between the two works. In the case of the speech for Basil, she argues that because Gregory regularly returned to "Basil's role and functions as bishop," the speech as a whole was about that office. "Gregory's purpose to portray him as a model of episcopal authority," she writes, "is fundamental to the entire encomium."⁴² But the *Life of Moses*, Sterk notes, does not make the same explicit connections to the office of bishop that the oration does because it "is not much concerned with historical circumstances."⁴³ Even so, Sterk works hard to match the complaints in the *Life of Moses* about those who misuse or misunderstand power to the "personal experience" Gregory must have had of the abuses of other bishops he knew, though the references to such problems in the *Life of Moses* are so vague that they could

40. Harl, "Moïse figure de l'évêque," 79–80. See her description of the *Epitaph for Meletius*, which also uses multiple biblical *comparanda* and was written the same year as the elegy for Basil.

41. Harl, "Moïse figure de l'évêque," 82–83.

42. Sterk, *Renouncing the World Yet Leading the Church*, 105.

43. *Ibid.*, 111.

describe almost any situation in which different people vie for authority.⁴⁴ The differences between the presentation of Moses in the elegy for Basil and in the *Life of Moses*, the fact that one is clearly linked to episcopal office and the other is more abstract, even ascetic in tone, does not trouble Sterk. In fact, the opposite: she uses these divergences to argue that Gregory was offering a different portrait of the ideal for bishops than previously had been advanced, a hybrid model that resulted from "the intersection of [Gregory's] ascetic and episcopal ideals."⁴⁵

These are, of course, strong and well-supported readings of the *Life*. It is entirely possible that Harl and Sterk are correct, that the oration for Basil is an earlier version of the ideas about episcopal leadership and authority that came to full fruition in the *Life of Moses*. And yet, the option I have offered here is at least as strong, and perhaps stronger, because it acknowledges rather than apologizes for the large number of differences between Gregory's theory of the episcopate expressed in the elegy for Basil and the idea of leadership presented by the *Life of Moses*. What is more, it accounts for the coherence between the specific lessons of the *Life*—the management of thoughts and passions, the presence of "Egyptian" demons, and the Aaronic companion guide—and the world of ideas presented by ascetic literature of a certain stripe.⁴⁶

Conclusion: Looking Again at Moses's Life as Scripture

If the elements I have presented in this essay are convincing, then there are several results we should consider when we think about the *Life of Moses*. The first is the possibility that the *Life* was not written to express ideas about a general path of mysticism, episcopal office, or the community of ascetics founded by Basil. The ideas it assumes to be common among its readers point in a different direction, resounding with ideas extant in the letters and treatises written by ascetics in Egypt, Evagrius of Pontus among them. If this is the case, how did these ideas come to appear in the *Life*? One option is that Gregory's allegiance to Origen's teachings is sufficient basis for the assumptions

44. *Ibid.*, 111.

45. *Ibid.*, 101.

46. I could add to these the way that Moses seeks to have no identifiable grave and possesses a luminous body, both characteristics of Antony in Athanasius's *Life of Antony*.

about human beings and their progress expressed in the *Life*; this option is less than convincing, however, because the *Life*'s version of Christian progress is more detailed than Origen's teachings. Its ideas were certainly influenced by Origen, but they represent a likely later, more ramified understanding of the human person in his or her pursuit of advancement. A second option is that Gregory, like Athanasius of Alexandria before him, utilized several existing sources about the character at the center of the holy biography he created; he wove these sources and their ideas together into a larger, composite document.⁴⁷ A third possibility is that Gregory himself continued to have contact with these kinds of ideas as they developed and become more specific in the workshop of Evagrius-style asceticism.⁴⁸ The fourth and most radical option to consider is that the *Life of Moses* has been attributed to Gregory, but may have been the work of another author. Even the most conservative of these options, however—that in which we continue to attribute this text to Gregory as a monograph—has radical consequences, because it forces us to acknowledge for Gregory the viability of ideas about human beings and human progress that have previously been associated only with Egyptian ascetic contexts.

Having chosen any one of these options, we also need to consider how, in the *Life of Moses*, the use of Moses as a pattern contributes to our evolving understanding of the use of Scripture in Christian late antiquity. Guy G. Stroumsa has written extensively about the emergence of certain scriptural practices within ascetic communities, arguing that "a new culture of the book was born" in the monastic environment of late antiquity. As he indicates, monks read Scripture directly and learned many works of Scripture by heart.⁴⁹ If the *Life of Moses* is indeed a set of guidelines for an ascetic leader, based on the

47. We have already seen above that one part of the *Life of Moses* has borrowed from Origen's *Commentary on Exodus*. Additionally, there are two later texts that reflect passages from the *Life of Moses*, albeit in a different order than the accepted text of the *Life*: the papyrus text discussed by Hugo Landwehr in "Griechische Handschriften aus Fayyum," *Philologus* 44 (1885): 1–29; and Pseudo-Caesarius's *Questions and Answers*, discussed by Rudolf Riedinger in "Neue Quellen zu den Erotapokriseis des Pseudo-Kaisarios," *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik* 19 (1970): 153–84, especially the tables on 168–71. These texts have traditionally been understood as later parts of anthologies or selections from the *Life* itself, but, when they are juxtaposed with Origen's text and the close reminiscence of Origen in 2.95–98 (Origen's being clearly the earlier work), they point to an interesting possibility: that the *Life of Moses* as we have it is not a monograph, but a patchwork pulled together from multiple existing traditions.

48. I argue this position in my book, *Angels in Late Ancient Christianity*, especially chapter 4, "Crossing Over," 119–47.

49. Guy G. Stroumsa, "The Scriptural Movement of Late Antiquity and Christian Monasticism," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 16 (2008): 68, 70–71.

example of Moses, it is crucial to recognize that that example is only loosely related to the texts of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers. The *Life of Moses* is not a commentary on the scriptural account of Moses's life; in fact, if there is a central text that the *Life of Moses* interprets it is the "history" that forms the first one-third of the work. The *Life* even offers an explanation for the utilitarian cast of its kind of interpretation: though Moses's life is important, authoritative, and necessary to interpret, anything not useful from the story can be skipped over "as something unintelligible and unprofitable for our goal."⁵⁰ This is, of course, the implicit way that Scripture was often treated in the theological work of the fourth century—as a wellspring of interesting narrative situations, divine speech, and descriptive words and phrases, the difficult sections of which could be passed over or not mentioned. But to adopt this approach in the narration of a life of a character whose career is abundantly represented in Scripture and whose figure looms large in subsequent Christian literature shifts that approach into a new genre: no longer just the practice underlying the writing of theology, this kind of reading can also inform biography. Such a shift also suggests a much wider use of Scripture, and texts related to Scripture, as teaching materials in ascetic communities than many scholars have yet recognized. As a teaching text, aimed at the eager leader of an ascetic community, the *Life of Moses* has much to teach us about early Christian culture and thought.

50. Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses* 2.50 (ed. Musurillo, *De vita Moysis*, 47.18–19).