

Fed to Perfection: Mother's Milk, Roman Family Values, and the Transformation of the Soul in Gregory of Nyssa

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Prompted by Michel Foucault's observation that "salvation is first of all essentially subsistence," this essay explores Gregory of Nyssa's discussion of Christian spiritual formation as a kind of salvific and transformative feeding of infants. This article argues that the prominent role of nourishment—and specifically breast milk—in Gregory's theory of progressive Christian perfection reflects broader Roman era family values concerning the power of breast feeding in the proper development of a child. With particular attention to Gregory's Encomium for Saint Basil, the Life of Moses, and his Homilies on the Song of Songs, this article demonstrates that references to the power of nourishment are no "mere metaphor" but rather represent an intensification of the prominent belief in antiquity that human nature can be altered according to the food a person eats. As such, Gregory employs the female body and its putatively maternal function as a regulatory symbol for Christian identity-formation. Mother's milk is thus offered as a mechanism for preserving and transmitting the ideal form of the Christian community that Gregory found embodied in the ambiguously gendered characters of the Song of Songs. True Christians, in Gregory's account, are identified by the milk on which they were fed and, in turn, the nurturing care they offer to others.

"Salvation is first of all essentially subsistence."¹

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¹Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977–1978* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 126–127.

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I. INTRODUCTION

At the end of his *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, Gregory of Nyssa makes the following observation about the power of food: “The one being nourished is certainly formed according to the kind of nourishment consumed.”² The link between the Song of Songs and theories of human transformation through food is a curious one. Gregory speaks here with clinical confidence. Although he is discussing the “good pastures” on which the soul feeds, he also evokes the dominant medical and moral wisdom of his day regarding nourishment and its role in the ongoing development of the human person. For Gregory, Christians are saved and perfected by what they eat and by the one who feeds them.

The connection between nourishment and the formation of the soul was fixed in the early Christian imagination by the Apostle Paul. In 1 Corinthians 3:1-3, the Corinthians are referred to as infants who require Paul’s breast milk rather than the solid food of adults. In his landmark commentary, Hans Conzelmann unequivocally dismissed the idea that Paul was appealing to ideals of education and human development in this passage. For Conzelmann, Paul uses an “expanded metaphor” to argue that the Corinthians can “make progress, but they must show it . . . This is immediately understandable.”³ Yet the notion that a metaphor is *immediately understandable* ought to give the reader pause. Throughout 1 Corinthians, Paul uses nebulous terms like “fleshly,” “psychic,” and “spiritual” to describe states of Christian growth. These designations seem to evoke levels of development or perhaps even distinct kinds of people—though precisely what sort of anthropological claim Paul is making with each remains somewhat opaque. And the additional invocation of two types of nourishment complicates the picture still further. That the apostle also references breast milk and solid food as involved in the progression from a fleshly state to a spiritual one suggests that the metaphor operates in a more complex way than Conzelmann was willing to admit.⁴

²τῷ γὰρ εἶδει τῆς τροφῆς συνδιατίθεται πάντως καὶ τὸ τρεφόμενον (*Cant. Homily 15*). I refer throughout to the recent edition by Richard A. Norris, Jr., *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on the Song of Songs*, Writings from the Greco-Roman World 13 (Atlanta, Ga.: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), 468.9-10; henceforth “WGRW” with volume, page, and line numbers provided in parentheses. The Greek text found there is the same as that in Langerbeck’s 1960 edition for Brill’s *Gregorii Nysseni Opera* series. Norris provides page references to Langerbeck’s edition to the right of the Greek on each page. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

³Hans Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians: A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia, Pa.: Fortress, 1975), 71–72.

⁴As Margaret Mitchell has persuasively argued, the various categories Paul used to describe Christian identity in 1 Corinthians 3 became a problem that the Apostle bequeathed to later Christian exegetes. Mitchell provides an excellent summary of this problem: “[The Apostle Paul was] not providing a hermeneutical map, but offering a provocative diagnosis, meant to prod the Corinthians by an insulting label flung out to change their behavior. Given that this is his

Rather than a simple turn of phrase, then, the trope of breast milk and solid food carried for Paul and his interpreters a crucial symbolic power resulting from a *conjuncture* of social values, embodied practices, and ambient political ideologies about familial relations and human formation.⁵ The force of Paul's reference to breastfeeding in 1 Corinthians (and its interpretation by later exegetes) must be read within the broader structures of power relations that were operative in the Roman world—specifically the relations of power established between those who feed, those who are fed, and the effects of the food transferred from the one to the other. Thus nourishment—and specifically mother's milk—occupied a central place within Roman imperial era discussions of intellectual development and social legitimacy. In the Roman Empire, growth in virtue and wisdom was the result of proper feeding.

Therefore, as it functioned within a broader Roman discourse surrounding proper human formation and the stabilizing of a social order, the female body was imbued with significant power to transmit the “stuff” of cultural or familial identity to a child. In the texts that moralize and theorize breastfeeding from the period, we witness a widespread appropriation of this power by male authors. Virginia Burrus has noted how “[ancient] masculinity incorporated characteristics or stances traditionally marked as ‘feminine’—from virginal modesty, retirement from the public sphere, and

retorical aim, Paul must certainly leave open the possibility for hermeneutical change and growth, even as in ‘systematic’ terms there appears to be an ontological fixity. The lack of precise fit can be seen in the sheer mathematical difficulty with mapping the duality mature/childish onto the triad spiritual/psychical/fleshly. And the reasons Paul gives or implies for these statuses are at least theoretically different: one is spiritual by endowment (‘but we received the Spirit which is from God’), but fleshly or psychical by nature, a condition subject to change either by spirit-infusion or by proper maturation. Furthermore, the literal-allegorical template is doubly confusing here, in terms of the reality Paul describes and the words he chooses to do it: are all three properly ‘real’ states, or is the spiritual person no longer (allegorically? Literally?) also a person of flesh?” See Margaret M. Mitchell, *Paul, the Corinthians, and the Birth of Christian Hermeneutics* (New York: Cambridge University, 2010), 43.

⁵For metaphor or the symbolic power of language in this sense, see especially Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1999); and Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc J. D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1992). Bourdieu develops his theory of language as “conjuncture” in response to linguistic theories that isolate the meaning of individual human speech from the social world in which it becomes intelligible and acquires its power. He explains, “Linguistic relations are always relations of symbolic power through which relations of force between the speakers and their respective groups are actualized in a transfigured form. Consequently, it is impossible to elucidate any act of communication within the compass of linguistic analysis alone. Even the simplest linguistic exchange brings into play a complex and ramifying web of historical power relations between the speaker, endowed with specific social authority, and an audience, which recognizes this authority to varying degrees, as well as between the groups to which they respectively belong” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, *Invitation*, 142–143).

reluctance to challenge or compete on the one hand, to maternal fecundity and nurturance on the other.”⁶ *Pace* Conzelmann, it is not immediately apparent why nurturance in particular would provide Christian (male) authors with a literal and figural resource for thinking through identity formation in the Christian community unless this social ideology is first brought into sharper focus.

Building on the work of Burrus, this article turns to the inheritance of (and engagement with) the aforementioned Pauline legacy in the work of Gregory of Nyssa (c. 330–c. 395). It argues that this important early Christian thinker incorporated Roman values about nurturance in particular within his broader theory of progressive growth in perfection. Infancy, maternity, and breast milk were potent symbols for Gregory because they had already come to function as indices for social legitimacy and the transfer of cultural identity within the family values of the Roman Empire. This article will begin with two examples of how nourishment and the formation of the soul were linked within Roman era texts about childrearing and intellectual development. Moving to Gregory of Nyssa’s work, it will then examine the theme of nurturance in Gregory’s *Encomium for Basil* and the *Life of Moses* and demonstrate how these texts emphasize the maternal food given to an infant as the foundation of and guarantor for later intellectual prowess and social position. Turning next to the *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, the article will analyze the ways in which maternity, infancy, and breastfeeding enable the transformations of the soul that take place throughout Gregory’s reading of the Song. That is to say, Gregory identifies the bride, bridegroom, and maidens at various points as infants and mothers, food and ones being fed. The Song is thus an itinerary of trophic mutations premised on the assumption that all food contains an essence, a “being,” which is shared with and assimilated by the one who eats it. Throughout his writings, Gregory depicts human nourishment as a mimetic process in which the eater becomes like that which she consumes.

II. FOOD FOR THE MIND, MILK FOR THE SOUL: NOURISHMENT AND HUMAN FORMATION IN THE ROMAN WORLD

In his treatise *The Soul’s Dependence on the Body*, Galen of Pergamum (c. 129–c. 200 CE) explores whether a dietary regimen, in producing a change in the state of the body, can yield a correlative change in the state of the soul. His answer is a clear affirmative. As Jacques Jouanna notes, “Modifications in

⁶Burrus, *Begotten Not Made: Conceiving Manhood in Late Antiquity* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University, 2000), 5–6.

the humoral mixture of the body, and particularly of the organ in which the rational soul is situated, produce disturbance in these [rational] faculties.”⁷ Galen contends that, when one is endowed with a gifted intellect, a proper diet will greatly enhance ones intellectual capacities.

So it would be wise of my opponents—those men who are unhappy at the idea that nourishment has this power to make men more or less temperate, more or less continent, brave or cowardly, soft and gentle or violent and quarrelsome—to come to me even now and receive instruction on their diet. They would derive enormous benefit from this in their command of ethics; and the improvement in their intellectual faculties, too, would have an effect on their virtue, as they acquired greater powers of understanding and memory.⁸

Here the body is depicted as an intricate ecological system of essences and faculties, both corporeal and intellectual. Nutritional discipline has the power to sustain and even improve or strengthen the humoral balance of the intellect. Neglect of nutrition can throw it into disarray. And although the rational soul sits atop this system, it is nonetheless dependent upon a precisely calibrated intake of food for its full attainment of wisdom and virtue. Proper nourishment, in Galen’s dietary program, increases a person’s powers of reasoning and improves moral character.

A second example comes from an anecdote about the sophist Favorinus found in Aulus Gellius’s *Attic Nights* (completed c. 180 CE). While visiting a woman in a senatorial family who has just given birth, Favorinus is astonished to learn that the mother does not intend to breastfeed her own child. His shock and disdain reveals something significant about Roman ideologies surrounding mothers, breastfeeding, and childrearing—especially since the use of wet-nurses among families of some social means was not at all uncommon.⁹ Nevertheless, in rebuking the *matrona* Favorinus draws

⁷Jouanna, “Does Galen Have a Programme for Intellectuals and the Faculties of the Intellect?” in *Galen and the World of Knowledge*, ed. Christopher Gill et al. (New York: Cambridge University, 2009), 196–197.

⁸*Quod animi mores corporis temperamenta sequantur* 9, *Claudii Galeni Opera Omnia* 4, ed. C. G. Kühn [repr. Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1964–1965], 808; trans. Peter Singer, *Galen: Selected Works*, Oxford World Classics [New York: Oxford University, 1997], 169): ὡστε σωφρονήσαντες [καί] νῦν γούν οἱ δυσχεραίνοντες, <ὄτι> τροφή δύναται τοὺς μὲν <σωφρονεστέρους, τοὺς δ’ ἀκολαστοτέρους ἐργάζεσθαι καὶ τοὺς μὲν> ἐγκρατεστέρους, τοὺς δ’ ἀκρατεστέρους καὶ θαρσαλέους καὶ δειλοὺς ἡμέρους τε καὶ πρῶους ἐριστικούς τε καὶ φιλονείκους, ἠκέτωσαν πρὸς με μαθησόμενοι, τίνα μὲν ἐσθίειν αὐτοὺς χρή, τίνα δὲ πίνειν. εἰς τε γὰρ τὴν ἠθικὴν φιλοσοφίαν ὀνήσονται μέγιστα καὶ πρὸς ταύτη κατὰ τὰς τοῦ λογιστικοῦ δυνάμεις ἐπιδώσουσιν εἰς ἀρετὴν συνετώτεροι καὶ μνημονικώτεροι γενόμενοι.

⁹Nurses and other child-minders were common figures in the Roman social landscape and are attested on epitaphs and inscriptions. On this, see Keith R. Bradley, “Wet-nursing at Rome: A Study in Social Relations,” in *The Family in Ancient Rome: New Perspectives*, ed. Beryl Rawson (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University, 1986), 222. Many hypotheses have been put forth

upon the well-attested ancient medical tradition that viewed maternal milk as blood frothed up by the heat of the mother's post-parturient body. As such, the essential material contained in breast milk, for Favorinus, is just as potent as the father's seed in the transmission of both physical and intellectual characteristics. Depriving a son of the "nourishment from his own familial and accustomed blood" is framed as an act of abandonment, no different than an abortion in Favorinus's view.¹⁰ By being consigned to a wet-nurse rather than the biological mother, the child is not only handed over to another's care but quite literally *becomes* the product of another. "Foreign" milk results in a foreign nature. According to Favorinus, the maternal milk carries within it the power to "form likenesses of body and mind" in the child.¹¹ Through breast milk, an infant "draws the spirit [of the woman] into its mind and body."¹² Breastfeeding is thus understood here as a powerful transfer of elemental essences that have a transformative effect upon the child's entire nature and establish its bonds of kinship, physical vitality, and intellectual capacities.

These two examples—Galen's diet for the health of the soul and Favorinus's theory of breast milk as a carrier of maternal *spiritus*—are but two points within a broader constellation of moral, medical, and educational texts from the Roman Empire that viewed nourishment as central to the process of human intellectual development.¹³ While the tradition of education known as Greek

regarding the decision to use a wet-nurse. Some have suggested that breastfeeding was domestic task that was viewed as beneath the honor of a Roman matron (cf. Bradley, "Wet-Nursing at Rome," 216) or that the high mortality rate of the infant (or the mother during labor) may have prompted a period of separation (cf. Bradley, *Discovering the Roman Family: Studies in Roman Social History* [New York: Oxford University, 1991], 51–61 or Garnsey, "Child Rearing in Ancient Italy," in *The Family in Italy: From Antiquity to the Present*, ed. David Kertzer and Richard Saller (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University, 1991), 61). Malnourishment would have also been a significant concern and the presence of nurses would have ensured a more sufficient food supply for infants (see Keith Bradley, "The Roman Child in Sickness and in Health," in *Roman Family in the Empire: Rome, Italy, and Beyond*, ed. George Michele [New York: Oxford University, 2005], 80). For more on malnourishment, especially among children, see Peter Garnsey, *Food and Society in Classical Antiquity* (New York: Cambridge University, 1999), 43–61. In general, it can be concluded that *nutrices* (and their milk) were viewed as a strategic means for coping with the vulnerability of children.

¹⁰NA 12.1.9 (ed. J. C. Rolfe, *Attic Nights*, volume 2, Loeb Classical Library (hereafter LCL) 200 [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1927], 354): *consueti atque cogniti sanguinis alimonia privare*.

¹¹NA 12.1.14 (LCL 200:356): *Quamobrem non frustra creditum est, sicut valeat ad fingendas corporis atque animi similitudines vis et natura seminis, non secus ad eandem rem lactis quoque ingenia et proprietates valere*.

¹²NA 12.1.17–18 (LCL 200:356–358): *... et spiritum ducere in animum atque in corpus suum*.

¹³This essay is drawn from a chapter in a larger project that analyzes early Christian appeals to the power of nourishment and breast milk in light of the broader Roman imperial era discourse of

paideia had long emphasized the human potential for transformation, the Roman imperial era added to this an increasing concern over the nourishment given to infants. If we take Favorinus as an index for broader anxieties about childrearing during the Roman Empire, we can conclude that preserving and transmitting cultural identity through pedagogical formation was a process largely viewed as beginning at the breast.

In Werner Jaeger's estimation, it was Gregory of Nyssa—not Basil, Gregory Nazianzen, or even Origen—who “was able to see the nature of Greek *paideia* in all its aspects.”¹⁴ At the core of Gregory's insight into the formative process of Classical education was his emphasis on the concept of *morphosis*—the ongoing transformation of the human person into something better, something more perfect. Jaeger was thus at the vanguard of scholarship on Gregory of Nyssa that, for the next half century after his *Early Christianity and Greek Paideia*, would expend considerable energy unpacking the theme of *morphosis* and “progressive perfection.”¹⁵

However, Jaeger's keen insight into Gregory's understanding of human transformation was limited by the clean-cut partition he set up between the development of the soul and that of the body. Thus, with respect to Gregory, Jaeger concludes:

The metaphor of the gradual growth of the human personality and its spiritual nature implies the analogy of man's physical nature; but it is specifically different from the development of the body, and the nourishment of the soul must be apportioned differently from the material

human formation. This section, in particular, distills a large opening chapter that provides a more extensive treatment of what I call the Roman era “discourse of formation.”

¹⁴Jaeger, *Early Christianity and Greek Paideia* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1961), 86.

¹⁵For more on Gregory's understanding of “progressive perfection,” see Kristina Robb-Dover, “Gregory of Nyssa's ‘Perpetual Progress,’” *Theology Today* 65 (2008): 213–225; Bernard Pottier, S.J., “Introduction,” in *Grégoire de Nysse: Homélie sur le Cantique des cantiques*, Donner Raison 23, trans. Adelin Rousseau, O.C.S.O. (Bruxelles: Editions Lessius, 2008); J. Warren Smith, *Passion and Paradise: Human and Divine Emotion in the Thought of Gregory of Nyssa* (New York: Crossroad, 2004); Paul M. Blowers, “Maximus the Confessor, Gregory of Nyssa, and the Concept of ‘Perpetual Progress,’” *Vigiliae Christianae* 46 (1992): 151–171; Mareite Canevet, *Grégoire de Nysse et l'herméneutique biblique: Études des rapports entre de langage et la connaissance de Dieu*, Série antiquité 99 (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1983), 253–254; Everett Ferguson, “Progress in Perfection: Gregory of Nyssa's *Vita Moysis*,” *Studia Patristica* XIV (Leuven: Peeters, 1976): 307–314; Ronald E. Heine, *Perfection in the Virtuous Life: A Study in the Relationship between Edification and Polemical Theology in Gregory of Nyssa's De Vita Moysis*, Patristic Monograph Series 2 (Cambridge, Mass.: Philadelphia Patristic Foundation, 1975); J. Fontaine and C. Kannengieser, eds., *Epektasis: Mélanges patristiques offerts au Cardinal J. Daniélou* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1972); Jean Daniélou, *Platonisme et théologie mystique: Doctrine spirituelle de Saint Grégoire de Nysse*, Theologie 2, rev. ed. (Aubier: Editions Montaigne, 1954).

food we consume. The spiritual process called education is not spontaneous in nature but requires constant care.¹⁶

Similar to Conzelmann, Jaeger downplays the connection between physical growth and intellectual development—specifically the connection between the nourishment of the body and the nourishment of the soul. Instead, he frames the relationship between the two primarily as a linguistic or conceptual coincidence without broader significance. This reading has gone largely unchallenged, despite the growing amount of scholarship on the prominent place of children, child-care, and the feeding of infants in Roman antiquity.¹⁷

Why would bodily and spiritual nourishment be quarantined from one another when, especially in the Roman imperial period, there was such clamor about the proper nurture and breast milk provided to infants?¹⁸ Why the moralizing surrounding the role of the wet-nurse if her food had no

¹⁶Jaeger, *Early Christianity and Greek Paideia*, 87. Jean Daniélou offered a similar, though less drastic, conclusion: “[Bodily nourishment] is like the brick mason’s mold that fills up and empties again, and its capacity never increases; there is simply a constant passing through. Spiritual nourishment, on the other hand, increases the capacity of the soul that receives it; all of it can be assimilated, and nothing lost. Hence in the spiritual order the soul can grow perpetually; always filled to capacity, it can always receive more.” See Daniélou, “Introduction,” in *From Glory to Glory: Texts from Gregory of Nyssa’s Mystical Writings*, ed. Herbert Musurillo (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1961), 63.

¹⁷See for example, Tim Parkin, “The Demography of Infancy and Early Childhood in the Ancient World,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Childhood and Education in the Classical World*, ed. Judith Evans Grubbs and Tim Parkin (New York: Oxford University, 2013), 50–57; Janet McWilliam, “The Socialization of Roman Children,” in *Oxford Handbook of Childhood and Education*, 264–285; Patricia Salzman-Mitchell, “Tenderness or Taboo: Images of Breast-Feeding Mothers in Greek and Latin Literature” in *Mothering and Motherhood*, ed. Lauren Hackworth Petersen and Patricia Salzman-Mitchell (Austin: University of Texas, 2012), 141–164; Véronique Dasen, “Childbirth and Infancy in Greek and Roman Antiquity,” in *A Companion to Families in the Greek and Roman Worlds*, ed. Beryl Rawson (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2011), 307–310; Peter Garnsey, *Cities, Peasants, and Food in Classical Antiquity* (New York: Cambridge University, 1998); Peter Garnsey, “Child Rearing in Ancient Italy” in *The Family in Italy: From Antiquity to the Present*, ed. David Kertzer and Richard Saller (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University, 1991), 48–65; Valerie Fildes, *Wet-Nursing: A History from Antiquity to the Present* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1988); Sandra R. Joshel, “Nurturing the Master’s Child: Slavery and the Roman Child-Nurse,” *Signs* 12, no. 1 (Autumn 1986): 3–22; Beryl Rawson, “Children in the Roman Familia,” in *The Family in The Family in Ancient Rome: New Perspectives*, ed. Beryl Rawson (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University, 1986), 170–200; Keith R. Bradley, “Sexual Regulations in Wet-Nursing Contracts from Roman Egypt,” *Klio* 62 (1980): 321–325.

¹⁸For texts that moralize and prescribe child-rearing practices—and specifically breastfeeding—see especially Tacitus, *Dialogue on Oratory* 28 (ed. M. Hutton et al, *Tacitus, 1: Agricola, Germanica, Dialogus*, LCL 35 [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1914], 306; Quintilian, *Institutes of Oratory* 1.1.2-5 (ed. H. E. Butler, *The Institutio Oratoria of Quintilian*, LCL 124 [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University], 64–66); Ps. Plutarch, *On the Education of Children* 1-3 (ed. Frank Cole Babbitt, *Plutarch: Moralia*, vol. 1, LCL 197 [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1927], 4–16).

impact on the development of the child's intellect and soul?¹⁹ Indeed, if we acknowledge that the early Roman Empire produced a discourse of formation surrounding the proper nourishment, nurture, and rearing of infants, it is a mistake to assume that this discourse had no tangible effect upon the ways in which early Christians understood and theorized the ongoing development of the soul among the faithful.²⁰ Thus by partitioning the growth of the body from that of soul—and especially the nourishment apportioned to each—scholars like Conzelmann and Jaeger have dismissed the relationship between the two as a mere metaphor without accounting for how such a metaphor acquired its force in the first place. The metaphor of the nursing breast was powerful in the early Christian imagination precisely because it was a central piece of Roman family values and imperial political ideology that was grounded in embodied practices and real social relations. As I will demonstrate, early Christian authors like Gregory of Nyssa readily elided this putative distinction between literal and figural nourishment in order to construct their own account of spiritual development.²¹

III. “REASON WAS THE MEASURE OF HIS NOURISHMENT”: BASIL, MOSES, AND THE MILK OF *PAIDEIA*

Within Gregory's understanding of the progressive transformation of the human person, nourishment is a crucial trope. Accordingly, when seeking to make sense of this complex theme in his thought, any stark analytical division between “spiritual” and “physical” growth obscures more than it reveals. The symbolic logic of the former relies on the power derived from the embodied social relations of the latter. Indeed, Gregory's broader

¹⁹Likewise, see the extensive discussion about criteria for selecting a wet nurse in book 2 of Soranus's *Gynecology* (Gyn. 2.18.4 in ed. Johannes Ilberg, *Sorani: Gynaeciorum Libri IV*, Corpus Medicorum Graecorum 4 [Leipzig: Teubner, 1926], 65 and the translation in Owsei Temkin, *Soranus' Gynecology* [Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University, 1956], 89–90.)

²⁰The nurture and formation of infants was also a focal point of the strict laws enacted by Augustus Caesar to reform Roman marital practices. A free man in Augustus's Rome was one who fulfilled his duty to the Empire primarily through overseeing the nurture and growth of the children within his *familia*. We see a clear example of this in a speech delivered by Augustus before the Senate that construes fatherhood and childrearing as the primary area in which an elite male demonstrates his *pietas* (see Cassius Dio's *Roman History* 56.3.3–5). On Roman “family values,” see also the work of Richard Saller, especially “Family Values in Ancient Rome,” Fathom Archive, Digital Archive, The University of Chicago Library, <http://fathom.lib.uchicago.edu/1/777777121908/>; and “Familia, Domus, and the Roman Conception of the Family,” *Phoenix* 38, no. 4 (Winter 1984): 336–355.

²¹In the larger project from which this essay is drawn, I examine how the discourse of formation—and specifically the power attributed to breastfeeding—that was so prevalent in Roman family values operates in a variety of early Christian authors including Irenaeus of Lyons, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Augustine.

understanding of human nature precludes any clean division between the corporeal and incorporeal.²² Soul and body are intertwined for him in the ongoing maturation of each person. Gregory views the journey toward God and toward perfection as a protean movement characterized by unending transformations, mutations, and shifting identities. And throughout the various texts in which he describes this movement, he regularly refers to various forms of nourishment as the basis, the marker, or the catalyst for each new transformation. The crucial Gregorian concept of *epektasis*—the eternal stretching and straining and expanding of human nature into the fathomless depths of the divine—entails a story about the intimate connection between human *trophe* and the human *telos*; that is, between food and the ongoing perfection of the soul. This connection is central to Gregory's account of the infancies of Basil (his older brother) and the biblical character Moses.

A. THE CHILDHOOD OF BASIL

In a curious letter, Basil declares that although he has many friends and relatives and is a “father” to many others, he has but one foster-brother (σύντροφος).²³ The translation is imprecise. Basil describes this singular man as “the son of the woman who nursed me.”²⁴ It is clear from the letter that Basil considers this family an extension of his own, a fact established by the language he employs: he refers to it as “the household in which I was brought up” and “the family in which I was nourished.”²⁵ In describing his relationship with this family, Basil's brief letter uses variations of the noun *trophe* or the verb *trephe* seven times. He references the food and nurture he received as a child as well as the resources by which he is presently nourished at the time of the letter.²⁶ This family fed, nurtured, and reared the young Basil, and it seems that Basil had given his *suntrophos* some slaves and a portion of the family estate as well. He insists that he remains indebted to his foster-family—and to this man in particular—for his present sustenance as much as for his childhood upbringing.

²²This is best articulated in *On the Soul and Resurrection*, where Gregory explicitly describes how the soul permeates all the elements of the body without diminishing in its own integrity. See especially the translation in Catherine P. Roth, *On the Soul and Resurrection*, Popular Patristics 12 (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary, 1992), 47–48. Gregory's description of humanity as a mixture of intellectual and corporeal natures is strikingly similar to Galen's argument in *The Soul's Dependence on the Body*.

²³*Ep.* 37 (ed. Roy J. Deferrari, *Basil: The Letters*, volume 1, LCL 190 [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1926], 192–195).

²⁴*Ep.* 37 (LCL 190:192–194): Σύντροφον δὲ τῆς θρεψαμένης με υἱὸν τοῦτον ἔχω ἕνα.

²⁵*Ep.* 37 (LCL 190:194): τὸν οἶκον ἐν ᾧ ἀνετράφημ and τῆς οἰκίας ἣ ἐνετράφημ.

²⁶*Ep.* 37 (LCL 190:194): ὡς ἐμοὶ τῆς τροφῆς τὴν χορηγίαν.

Though the letter lacks an address, Basil is clearly leveraging his own episcopal status with the addressee in order to ensure that his foster-family be allowed to manage the estate without any loss of value to the property. To that end, Basil's appeal hinges on the idea that the food and nurture he received from this family—food he received side-by-side with his *sunthropos*—helped him to become the man he is today. Implicit within Basil's logic is an argument that the food and formation he shared with his foster-brother establishes the bona fides of both men, demonstrating their social and even legal legitimacy. They are uniquely and irrevocably tied to one another through a bond of a kinship that, for Basil, is as strong as any biological relation. Indeed, his emphasis on *trophe* throughout the letter suggests that this common nourishment and nurture was tantamount to a biological relationship.²⁷

This anecdote provides an interesting contrast to the depiction of Basil's upbringing in Gregory of Nyssa's *Encomium of Saint Basil*. Late in the *Encomium*, Gregory breaks from the convention of panegyric and declares that his brother's homeland (πατρις), birth (γένος), and the nourishment received from his parents (τὴν ἐκ γονέων ἀνοτροφίην) are all ancillary details—happy accidents unrelated to Basil's sanctity.²⁸ Gregory turns the Greek idea of "noble birth" (εὐγένεια) on its head, arguing that Basil's holiness is the product of individual choice (προαίρεσις) and not the result of birth and rearing and education.²⁹ At the moment when encomiastic style would require the author to praise the circumstances of his subject's nurture—and, presumably, describe his rearing in the family of his *sunthropos*—Gregory instead depicts his brother as an autodidact and an auto-*tropheus*, a self-nourisher.

Basil's example as an auto-*tropheus* is elaborated in an earlier passage in which Gregory compares his brother to the prophet Elijah: both men are praised for their remarkable control of diet. Gregory observes that Basil was not fed by any other human, but rather received his nourishment from heaven as prepared by angels.³⁰ "Reason," Gregory concludes, "was the

²⁷In *The Education of Children* 3, Ps. Plutarch observes that "feeding together results in a bond of goodwill" (ed. Frank Cole Babbitt, *Plutarch: Moralia*, volume 1, LCL 197 [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1927], 15): ἡ συντροφία γὰρ ὡσπερ ἐπιτόνιον ἐστὶ τῆς εὐνοίας.

²⁸Bas. 24 in Sr. James Aloysius Stein, *Encomium of Saint Gregory Bishop of Nyssa on his Brother Saint Basil*, The Catholic University of America Patristic Studies 17 (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America, 1928), 50.

²⁹Bas. 24-25 (Stein, *Encomium*, 55-57). For a classic example of encomiastic conventions, see Plato's *Menexenus* 237A-B in which the speaker proceeds from the subject's noble birth (εὐγένεια), to their nurture and training (τροφή καὶ παιδεία), and concludes with the issue of their deeds (τῶν ἔργων πράξις). In the *Encomium*, Gregory has opted only to narrate the last of these even though he, of all people, would have been capable of a full encomium for his brother. See Plato's *Menexenus* 237 A-B (ed. R. G. Bury, *Plato*, volume 9, LCL 234 [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1929], 340-343).

³⁰Bas. 16 (Stein, *Encomium*, 34): τεκμήριον δὲ ὅτι οὐχὶ τῶν ὁμοφύλων τις αὐτῷ σιτοποιήσας τὴν τροφήν παρεθήκατο, ἀλλ' ἀγγελικῆς παρασκευῆς ἐνεφορήθη.

measure of his nourishment.”³¹ Gregory seems here to minimize the circumstances of Basil’s childhood, arguing that his nurture and nourishment as an infant were of little consequence. The *Encomium* focuses only on the man as he was in his full maturity—the self-made and self-fed man. In this way, Gregory largely ignores the conventions of genre that require some commentary on the childhood and upbringing of his subject in order to demonstrate that his brother’s prowess was evident from an early age—but, at the same time, was not due to any human help. Basil’s diet was reason, and his whole nature was conformed to this nourishment.

Yet Gregory’s disregard for rhetorical convention in the *Encomium* is not total. In his attempt to draw parallels between Basil and a panoply of biblical characters, he cannot resist reading his brother into the narrative of Moses’s upbringing in Egypt.

An Egyptian princess, having adopted Moses, trained him in the *paideia* of her country. Yet he was not removed from the breast of his mother so long as his early age needed to be nursed by nourishment such as hers. And this is also true for our teacher [i.e. Basil]. For although nourished by outside wisdom, he always held fast to the breast of the Church—growing and maturing his soul by way of the teachings drawn from that source.³²

The analogy is a curious one. Gregory’s aim is not to compare the infancy and childhood of the two men. Rather, it is to connect the breastfeeding of Moses by his biological mother and his education under the Egyptians to the fact that Basil never abandoned the teaching of the church (here construed as the “breast” of Basil’s “biological mother”), even though Basil was trained by “outsiders” in a “foreign” country. The logic of the analogy, however, appeals to pervasive notions of the power of breast milk to establish and safeguard identity. Just as the milk Moses received from his biological mother guaranteed his intellectual and religious prowess, so too does the breast of the church prove Basil’s quality.

Is it possible that under the constraints of encomiastic literature, Basil’s childhood upbringing in the home of his wet-nurse and subsequent departure for training in Greek *paideia* required just such a figural explanation in order to prove the unbroken legitimacy of his nurture and training? For no matter how steadfastly Basil clung to the breast of the church, it is likely he spent very little time among his own venerable biological family throughout

³¹Bas. 16 (Stein, *Encomium*, 34): μέτρον τῆς τροφῆς ὁ λογισμὸς.

³²Bas. 20 (Stein, *Encomium*, 40-42): ἄρχουσά τις τῶν Αἰγυπτίων εἰσποιησαμένη τὸν Μωϋσέα παιδεύει τὴν ἐγγώριον παιδευσιν, οὐκ ἀποστάντα τοῦ μητρώου μαζοῦ ἕως ἔδει τὴν πρώτην ἡλικίαν τῇ τοιαύτῃ τροφῇ τιθηνήσασθαι. τοῦτο καὶ τῷ διδασκάλῳ μαρτυρεῖ ἡ ἀλήθεια. ἀνατρεφόμενος γὰρ ὑπὸ τῆς ἕξω σοφίας ἀεὶ τοῦ μαζοῦ τῆς Ἐκκλησίας εἶχετο, τοῖς ἐντεῦθεν διδάγμασι τὴν ψυχὴν αὐξῶν καὶ ἀδρυνόμενος.

childhood—at least compared to his younger brother and their sister Macrina.³³ Indeed, it is unlikely he was ever nursed and nourished in his own home. The milk of the church, in Gregory’s *Encomium*, inoculates Basil against the charge that he was the product of a wholly foreign *trophe* and unchristian *paideia*. Despite presenting Basil as a self-fed man, Gregory is at great pains to demonstrate that his brother was raised on Christian “milk.”

B. THE CHILDHOOD OF MOSES

The comparison of Basil’s upbringing to that of Moses in the *Encomium* serves as a kind of first draft for Gregory’s *Life of Moses*.³⁴ Many of the themes touched on in the *Encomium* are expanded upon and amplified in the *Life*. Especially prominent in the latter text is Gregory’s emphasis on the role that nurture and nourishment played in Moses’s education—and the importance of these events in understanding how the life of Moses offers a blueprint to Christians for attaining the “perfect life.”³⁵ Through the upbringing of Moses, Gregory is able to emphasize the link between *trophe* and *telos*—between the food Christians eat and the perfection they seek.

From the beginning of the treatise, Gregory defines growth as the *conditio sine qua non* of the perfect life. He deploys a variety of terms to unpack this theme, none more important than the verb *epekteino* (ἐπεκτείνω)—a concept Gregory pulls from Philippians 3:13 (“straining forward,” NRSV) and expands into an entire paradigm for the development of the soul.³⁶ Starting

³³I will return to this point below.

³⁴The *Encomium* is usually dated to 380 (Stein, *Encomium*, xxxi) or 381 (Lucas Francisco Mateo-Seco and Giulio Maspero, eds., *The Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa*, *Vigiliae Christianae Supplements* 99 [Leiden: Brill, 2010], 93). Gregory’s *Life of Moses*, despite some difficulty, is usually dated to the final period of his literary output in the early 390s (see either Mateo-Seco and Maspero, *Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa*, 788 or Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson, “Introduction” in *Gregory of Nyssa: The Life of Moses* [Mahwah, N.Y.: Paulist, 1978], 1). This was also the period in which Gregory produced his *Homilies on the Song of Songs*.

³⁵In *Vit Moys.* 1.2-3, Gregory explicitly states that the treatise was written to provide “counsel in the perfect life” (ὑποθήκην εἰς τὸν τέλειον βίον) in response to a request from an acquaintance for an essay on that topic. Citations are from Daniélou, *Grégoire de Nyssse. La vie de Moïse*, 3rd ed., Sources Chrétiennes 1 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1968), 44–326 for ease of correspondence between the section numbers found also in the English version of Malherbe and Ferguson.

³⁶*Vit Moys.* 1.5 (SC 1:3; trans., CWS, 30). See Heine, *Perfection in the Virtuous Life*, 60: “Continual transformation to the better, while being movement, is nevertheless real stability for it does not involve a falling and slipping backward. The latter, which is also movement, is unstable, for lacking progress it is a continual alternation between good and bad.” In addition, Gregory uses the verb *χωρέω* to discuss the unceasing motion and forward progress that perfects human nature: *Vit Moys.* 1.10 (SC 1:4; trans., CWS, 31): ὅσον ἂν ἔνδον τοῦ ζητουμένου χωρήσομεν· τάχα γὰρ τὸ οὕτως ἔχειν, ὡς αἰεὶ ἐθέλειν ἐν τῷ καλῷ τὸ πλεον ἔχειν, ἢ τῆς ἀνθρωπίνης φύσεως τελειότης ἐστί.

from this emphasis on progressive growth at the outset of the treatise, Gregory then delves into the particular historical events of Moses's life before offering his interpretation of them.

Three centuries earlier, the Jewish philosopher and exegete Philo of Alexandria expanded in a similar way upon the biblical account of Moses found in Exodus, giving particular attention to Moses's breastfeeding and early education in Egypt. For Philo, God had devised that Moses would be breastfed by his biological mother so that "the child's first food be prepared from a legitimate source."³⁷ The legitimacy (γνήσιος) of the breast milk Moses received secured his place among his people, ensuring his connection to its wisdom and Law. Given how brief the discussion of Moses's upbringing is in the biblical account, Philo's use of γνήσιος is a significant amplification of the text. Philo was keenly aware of—and strategically engaged in—the broader ideological system of Roman imperial family values.³⁸ His emphasis on the legitimacy of Moses's infantile nourishment is but one facet of this broader appropriation of Roman morality for Jewish interpretive purposes.

Gregory evokes Philo's exegetical precedent as well as the Roman imperial ideology undergirding it when he also highlights the fact that Moses was nurtured by his birth mother.³⁹ Gregory glosses the text, suggesting that the princess plucked the infant from the Nile because she was struck by the grace that shined through him.⁴⁰ He then adds the following observation: "But when [Moses] naturally refused a foreign nipple, he was nursed at the breast of his mother through the planning of his biological family."⁴¹ This rendering, like that of Philo, takes liberties with the canonical account in order to spotlight the importance of Moses's first nourishment being derived

³⁷*Mos.* 1.17 (LCL 289:285): ἐπινοία θεοῦ τοῦ τὰς πρώτας τροφὰς τῷ παιδί γνησίας εὐτρεπίζοντος.

³⁸The work of Mary Rose D'Angelo has helpfully illuminated Philo's engagement with Roman family values. See, for example, "Gender and Geopolitics in Philo of Alexandria: Jewish Piety and Imperial Family Values," in *Mapping Gender in Ancient Religious Discourses*, ed. Todd Penner and Caroline Vander Stichele (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 63–88.

³⁹For more on Gregory and Philo, see Albert C. Geljon, *Philonic Exegesis in Gregory of Nyssa's De Vita Moysis*, Brown Judaic Studies 333, Studia Philonica Monographs 5 (Providence, R.I.: Brown University, 2002).

⁴⁰*Vit Moys.* 1.17 (SC 1:8; trans., CWS, 33): ὀφθεις δὲ μετὰ τῆς ἐπιφαινομένης αὐτῷ χάριτος. In her description of the "divine sage" character type, Patricia Cox observes: "The idea that the greatness of the man must have been already evident in the child was a popular biographical convention" (see Cox, *Biography in Late Antiquity: A Quest for the Holy Man*, Transformation of the Classical Heritage 5 [Berkeley: University of California, 1983], 22). The source of the sage's nurture and nourishment as an infant was a prominent strategy for demonstrating the divine character of the person in question from childhood.

⁴¹*Vit Moys.* 1.17 (SC 1:8; trans., CWS, 33): ἀποστραφεὶς δὲ φυσικῶς τὴν ἀλλόφυλον θηλῆν, ἐπινοία τινὶ τῶν πρὸς γένους οἰκείων ἀνατραφῆναι τῷ μητροφῷ μαζῶ.

from his own mother.⁴² Why does Moses “naturally” (φυσικῶς) refuse the breast of a foreigner? Why would Gregory frame the narrative in this way when, in his own day, wet-nursing had become so widespread that even his own brother spent the better part of his youth in the home of a nurse? Echoing the perspective of Favorinus in the *Attic Nights*, here the instinctive refusal of a foreign woman’s breast milk establishes a deeper intellectual, social, and even ethnic legitimacy for Moses through his source of maternal care.

Immediately following the passage above, Gregory describes the development of Moses: “After he had departed from the age of childhood and was educated in the culture of foreigners during his royal nurturance . . . he returned to his natural mother and joined with those of his own race.”⁴³ There is a logical symmetry at work in Gregory’s narrative: Moses first refused a “foreign” (ἀλλόφυλος) nipple and was breastfed by his biological mother; he was then educated in that same “foreign culture” (παιδευθεὶς τὴν ἕξωθεν παιδευσιν), and eventually reintegrated into his own “race.”⁴⁴ What is implicit here, I would argue, is that because of his primary grounding in the proper (i.e., maternal rather than foreign) breast-milk, the kingly nurture Moses was given in the court of the Pharaoh was no impediment to his growth and development in wisdom among the Hebrews. In this way, Gregory again accentuates the “biological” or “natural” nourishment Moses received at his mother’s breast as the foundation of his intellectual development. Mother’s milk takes on a strikingly elemental significance, protecting Moses’s religious and ethnic identity while also suggesting the means by which that identity was initially implanted within him. Biological milk precedes and overrides the time of his royal nourishment (ἐν βασιλικῇ τῇ τροφῇ), giving him mastery over worldly wisdom while also establishing his access to divine wisdom as a kind of birthright.

This stands in stark contrast to the narrative of events offered for Basil’s childhood in the *Encomium*—or, rather, the explicit erasure of Basil’s

⁴²Gregory follows Philo’s terminology (using ἐπινοία) in describing how Moses came back to his own mother. For Gregory, it was through family members. For Philo, however, it was ordained by God.

⁴³*Vit. Moys.* 1.18 (SC 1:8-9; trans., CWS, 34): Ἐκβάς δὲ ἤδη τὴν ἡλικίαν τῶν παίδων, ἐν βασιλικῇ τῇ τροφῇ καὶ παιδευθεὶς τὴν ἕξωθεν παιδευσιν . . . ἀλλ’ ἐπὶ τὴν κατὰ φύσιν ἐπανελθεῖν πάλιν καὶ τοῖς ὁμοφύλοις ἐγκαταμιχθῆναι. While I think a case can be made for the translation of “pagan learning” offered by Malherbe and Ferguson (on the grounds that this is the sense Gregory will give it in the second section of the *Life of Moses*), I nonetheless maintain that the translation “culture of foreigners” is more appropriate insofar as it clarifies the symmetrical structure between kin and foreigners so crucial for the force of Gregory’s framing at the opening of his historical interpretation. Gregory applies the boundaries of belonging and otherness to the sources of Moses’ nourishment as much as to the content of his education. In fact, nourishment and education are folded together into a single process of formation.

⁴⁴Literally, “mixed back into his kin” (τοῖς ὁμοφύλοις ἐγκαταμιχθῆναι).

childhood nurture from Gregory's hagiography. Indeed, in praising Basil, Gregory had argued that one's birth, family, and homeland were irrelevant details. Yet for Moses these serve as evidence of his deep-seated virtue and wisdom among his own people. Nourishment functions as a regulatory symbol, ensuring the proper development of Moses's character and the replication of his family's culture at the level of biology. And while Gregory minimizes the significance of Basil's actual infancy and nurture—presumably because he was not breastfed in a manner similar to Moses—he does so by heightening the symbolic power of the “food” his brother received.

One reason for this disjoint between the *Encomium* and the *Life* is that Gregory's primary objective in the latter is to demonstrate how it remains possible to imitate the life of Moses even when the details of one's birth, parentage, nurturance, and education are unremarkable. Maternal provision of material sustenance during Moses's infancy becomes an archetype for all Christian infantile nurturance. The ever-expanding familial bonds of the church must have its own kind of nursery system in which the proper “nourishment” of its most vulnerable members can be achieved. For Gregory, the slippage between “literal” and “rhetorical” family—like the slippage between material and spiritual nourishment—grew out of the intricate and expansive web of kinship relations that comprised the Christian community of the fourth century.⁴⁵

One way that Gregory, among other early Christian thinkers, worked within this slippage was by appropriating the power of maternal nourishment to transform infants. In the *Encomium*, he simultaneously downplays his brother's actual nurture as an infant while retaining and even heightening the symbolic power of nurturance as such. Whether figural or literal, breast milk was invested with the power to establish bonds of kinship, legitimate social identity, and intellectual potential. This much is clear when, in the opening of the second section of the *Life*, Gregory asks, “How then are we to imitate the circumstances of this man's birth through our own choice?”⁴⁶ Gregory

⁴⁵I follow Rebecca Krawiec here, who has aptly noted that “Gregory does not present the asceticized household as in conflict with itself, but rather as a new coexistence of ‘family’ and family.” This blending of *literal* (or biological) family with *rhetorical* family had already been taking place in the expanding web of social relations found in the Roman household of the early Empire. So the slippage between “family” and family in Christian discourse can be understood as a further development of the ways in which ancient kinship bonds were flexible enough to be transferred to non-biological relationships while retaining the same rhetorical force. See Krawiec, “From the Womb of the Church: Monastic Families,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 11, no. 3 (Fall 2003): 301. For the link between “real” and “rhetorical” families in early Christianity, see especially Andrew Jacobs and Rebecca Krawiec, “Father Knows Best? Christian Families in the Age of Asceticism,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 11, no. 3 (Fall 2003): 261–262.

⁴⁶*Vit. Moys.* 2.1 (SC 1:32; trans., CWS, 55): Πῶς οὖν τὴν συντυχικὴν τοῦ ἀνδρὸς γέννησιν ἐκ προαιρέσεως ἡμεῖς μιμησόμεθα;

contends that anyone can imitate the noble birth and rearing of Moses if, like Basil, they choose to cling to the breast of the church—if they all become *suntrophoi* through Christian “milk.” Gregory explains that the primary function of free choice is to “give birth to ourselves”⁴⁷ in virtue and “to nourish this offspring with the food proper to it.”⁴⁸ “Free choice” is, in this sense, how wise men give birth to, breastfeed, and educate themselves. The milk Christians draw from the breast of the church and the milk Moses drew from the breast of his mother contain the same transformative power.

When he comes “to uncover the hidden meaning of the history”⁴⁹ of Moses’s breastfeeding, Gregory emphasizes the point that Moses was never separated from his “natural mother.”⁵⁰ He explains: “It seems to me this teaches that, if we should interact with foreign teachings during the time of our education, we should not separate ourselves from being nourished on the church’s milk. This means the laws and the customs of the church, by which the soul is fed and strengthened.”⁵¹ The historical account of Moses being breastfed by his natural mother while being educated by his adopted parents thus serves as a structuring paradigm for the growth and nurture of Christians who, like Basil, choose to cling to the breast of the church even while they participate in outside education. The milk of the church functions identically to that of Moses’s mother and becomes a kind of prophylactic against the world’s vices, a guarantor of access to divine wisdom, and a marker of legitimacy within the Christian community—especially for those who engaged in the “Rumspringa” that was Greek *paideia*. Just as Moses became the man he was because of the woman from whom he received his nourishment, so too do all Christians grow toward perfection because of the maternal food given to them—whether that food comes from the body of an actual mother, from the milk of the church, or some combination of both. The figural rendering of breastfeeding found in the *Life of Moses*, as in the *Encomium*, draws its sense and rhetorical force from a set of cultural assumptions about character, knowledge, and social/ethnic identity being contained in the potent milk of a biological mother and subsequently transferred by such means directly to her infant.

In both the *Encomium of Saint Basil* and the *Life of Moses*, nourishment is a marker of one’s identity—either as foreigner or as kin. Indeed, nourishment is

⁴⁷ *Vit. Moys.* 2.3 (SC 1:32; trans., CWS, 56).

⁴⁸ *Vit. Moys.* 2.6 (SC 1:33; trans., CWS, 56): ταῖς καθηκούσαις τροφαῖς τιτηνήσασθαι.

⁴⁹ *Vit. Moys.* 2.5 (SC 1:33; trans., CWS, 56): ἐκ τῆς ἱστορίας . . . διακαλύπτει τὸ αἰνίγμα.

⁵⁰ *Vit. Moys.* 2.12 (SC 1:35; trans., CWS, 56): φύσις μήτηρ.

⁵¹ *Vit. Moys.* 2.12 (SC 1:35; trans., CWS, 56): ὅπερ μοι δοκεῖ διδάσκειν, εἰ τοῖς ἐξωθεν λόγοις καθομιλοῦμεν ἐν τῷ καιρῷ τῆς παιδείσεως, μὴ χωρίζεσθαι τοῦ ὑποτρέφοντος ἡμᾶς τῆς Ἐκκλησίας γάλακτος. Τοῦτο δ’ ἂν εἴη τὰ νόμιμά τε καὶ τὰ ἔθη τῆς Ἐκκλησίας, οἷς τρέφεται ἡ ψυχὴ καὶ ἀδρύνεται.

the very mechanism by which that identity is secured and transmitted. Likewise, the milk received in infancy is figured in both texts as a guarantor of future wisdom, access to divinity, and growth in perfection. While the *Encomium* allegorizes Basil's upbringing in order to demonstrate his quality as a self-made, self-fed, and self-educated man of the church, Basil himself remained forever grateful for the "foreign" nourishment he received at the breast of his wet-nurse and viewed his *suntrophos* as a uniquely important bond of kinship. Gregory may not have viewed this period of Basil's upbringing as theologically significant, but Basil's *Epistle 37* demonstrates just how powerful the relationship could be between a wet nurse, her family, and the child placed under her care. Interrogating the source of infant nourishment—whether deemed legitimate or illegitimate, kin or foreign—was a primary strategy for working out social identity in the Roman world. In the *Encomium* Gregory views the milk of a "natural" mother in terms similar to that of Favorinus: that is, as the only sure means of preserving and passing on familial identity. He merely had a more capacious understanding of what qualified as a person's "natural family" than the sophist did.

When viewed alongside the *Life of Moses*, however, Gregory's suggestion that Basil remained fixed to the breast of the Church even while educated outside its walls provides a model of formation for people from diverse backgrounds of nurturance and instruction. Anyone can achieve the perfection exemplified by Moses if they but choose to be fed on the milk of the church, regardless of the circumstances of their birth, nurture, and education. Perfection, for Gregory, is not simply progressive in an abstract sense. It is a kind of dietary regimen that requires vigilance about the source and quality of food ingested at every stage. And since the Logos is the food on which Christians are fed, there can be no satiety, no stasis in Gregory's trophic theory of spiritual transformation. Proper nourishment constantly expands the capacity of one's mind and its desire for God.⁵² In this way, Basil's sense of kinship with his foster-family was not so radical after all: in the Christian community of the fourth century, one's "natural mother" was a role that could be filled by a surprisingly wide range of social relations. What mattered most was whether those who filled this role had ever been separated from the milk of the church.

⁵²See especially *Vit. Moys.* 2.238–39 (SC 1:108-9; trans., CWS, 116) for Gregory's discussion of *epektasis* at the conclusion of the *Life*. When viewed in relation to his discussion of how material food changes to suit the capacities of the one eating, *epektasis* takes on a new dimension of meaning in which certain kinds of noetic food instigate the intellectual expansion and the stretching ever-outward toward the divine by people of varying capacities.

IV. “THE GRACE THAT FLOWS FROM RATIONAL BREASTS”: MILK AND MORPHOSIS IN GREGORY’S *HOMILIES ON THE SONG OF SONGS*

The church as a site of endless feeding and formation is also a thematic focal point of Gregory’s magnum opus, the *Homilies on the Song of Songs*.⁵³ Behind all his references to nurture and nourishment within the *Homilies* lurks the idea that humans are transformed in accordance with the food they consume. Gregory’s close association of material forms of nourishment with human spiritual transformation is as much an indication of his complex anthropology as it is of his exegetical method. In fact, the two are mutually supportive: human nature is both flesh and spirit and requires nourishment that can preserve and strengthen both aspects. The nutritive process, however, functions in the same way for each: we become in body and mind whatever we eat. Indeed, Gregory’s theory of progressive perfection has at its foundation the Pauline categories of “fleshly” and “spiritual” Christians who must be properly fed so as to mature from one to the other.

A. THE MILK OF THE BRIDEGROOM

In the preface to the *Homilies*, Gregory tells his correspondent Olympias that the goal of these writings is not to assist her in “in the conduct of [her] life.”⁵⁴ Rather, Gregory wants to offer “some assistance to the more fleshly people for the sake of the spiritual and immaterial state of their soul.”⁵⁵ In this way, he frames the *Homilies* specifically in terms of the Pauline diagnosis of nurturing and guiding “more fleshly people” (σαρκώδεστέροι) toward a spiritual existence—a task that Gregory describes as preparing the “divinely inspired words of scripture” in the same way one would prepare grain by making it edible and nutritional to human beings. In fact, Gregory argues that when these words are left “unprepared,” they remain a food unfit

⁵³Gregory is standing squarely within Origen’s exegetical method regarding the Song of Songs, while nevertheless utilizing that method toward his own ends. Indeed, the result of Gregory’s work on the Song is, despite debts to Origen, wholly his own. This is especially true regarding the theme of nourishment. For more discussion of the relationship between Origen and Gregory on this text’s history of interpretation, see Elizabeth A. Clark, “Origen, the Jews, and the Song of Songs,” in *Perspectives on the Song of Songs*, ed. Anselm C. Hagerdorn (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2011), 274–293; Mark W. Elliot, *The Song of Songs and Christology in the Early Church*, Studies and Texts in Antiquity and Christianity 7 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000); Andrew Louth, “Eros and Mysticism: Early Christian Interpretation of the Song of Songs,” in *Jung and the Monotheisms: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, ed. Joel Ryce-Menuhin (New York: Routledge, 1994), 241–254; R. A. Norris, “The Soul Takes Flight: Gregory of Nyssa and the Song of Songs,” *Anglican Theological Review* 80, no. 4 (Winter 1998): 517–532.

⁵⁴*Cant.* Preface (WGRW 13:2.9-10): οὐχ ὡς σοὶ τι χρησιμεύσω εἰς τὸ σὸν ἦθος.

⁵⁵*Cant.* Preface (WGRW 13:2): ἀλλ’ ἐφ’ ᾧτε τοῖς σαρκώδεστέροις χειραγωγίαν τινὰ γενέσθαι πρὸς τὴν πνευματικὴν τε καὶ αὐλὸν τῆς ψυχῆς κατάστασιν.

for rational human consumption.⁵⁶ Unprocessed, the nourishment of scriptural teaching in the Song is suitable only for beasts.⁵⁷ The Song of Songs must be made into a food that can assist Christians in their development from flesh to spirit.

Gregory's purpose in the *Homilies* can be understood in two ways: first, as a broader methodological argument for why scripture ought to be processed or digested by an authority in order for it to nourish more fleshly people and, second, as a specific digestion of the Song of Songs into palatable bites for the women under Olympias's supervision.⁵⁸ In his preface, Gregory is proposing to "work over" (κατεργάζομαι) the text of the Song—cultivating, kneading, peeling, shucking, and chewing until its words are fit to feed the rational mind of carnal Christians. But, more generally, he is also arguing that all scripture must be prepared as "food" in order to assist the progress of Christians at various stages of perfection. Gregory returns throughout the *Homilies* to the theme of feeding and the power of food to transform the fleshly into something more spiritual, something more perfect.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ ἄκατέργαστος; literally, undigested and indigestible.

⁵⁷ On the need to purify Solomon's text for "more carnal" Christians, see especially Andrew S. Jacobs, "Solomon's Salacious Song: Foucault's Author Function and the Early Christian Interpretation of the Canticum Canticorum," *Medieval Encounters* 4 (1998), 23: "Reading and interpreting powerful texts is a way of wielding power, and the particular power wielded by Origen and Gregory was that of defining the true Christian subject. Describing the nature of the true 'author' was for them a means of constructing not only the true 'meaning,' but also the true 'reader,' and of erecting cultural boundaries essential to the articulation of early Christian identity."

⁵⁸ It is worth noting that the *Homilies* were first delivered as a Lenten sermon series. But these were later revised and expanded before Gregory sent them to Olympias.

⁵⁹ Gregory's *Homilies on the Song of Songs* has received increasing attention from scholars, and the recent publication of a new English edition by the late Richard Norris will surely expand this interest. And while the themes of pedagogy, eros, and spiritual transformation have all received scholarly comment, Gregory's emphasis on nourishment throughout has not. For scholarship on the *Homilies*, see Hans Boersma, *Embodiment and Virtue in Gregory of Nyssa: An Anagogical Approach* (New York: Oxford University, 2013); Hans Boersma, "Saving Bodies: Anagogical Transposition in St. Gregory of Nyssa's *Commentary on the Song of Songs*," *Ex Auditu* 26 (2010): 168–200; Richard T. Lawson III, "Gregory of Nyssa's *Homilies on the Song of Songs*: Is the Erotic Left Behind?" *Sewanee Theological Review* 54, no. 1 (Christmas 2010): 29–40; Martin Laird, "The Fountain of His Lips: Desire and Divine Union in Gregory of Nyssa's *Homilies on the Song of Songs*," *Spiritus* 7 (2007): 40–57; Martin Laird, *Gregory of Nyssa and the Grasp of Faith: Union, Knowledge, and Divine Presence* (New York: Oxford University, 2004); Martin Laird, "Under Solomon's Tutelage: The Education of Desire in the *Homilies on the Song of Songs*," *Modern Theology* 18, no. 4 (October 2002): 507–525; Andrew S. Jacobs, "Solomon's Salacious Song"; R. A. Norris, "The Soul Takes Flight: Gregory of Nyssa and the Song of Songs," *Anglican Theological Review* 80, no. 4 (Fall 1998): 517–532; Franz Dunzl, *Braut und Bräutigam: Die Auslegung des Canticum durch Gregor von Nyssa*, Beiträge zur Geschichte der Biblischen Exegese 32 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1993); Verna E. F. Harrison, "A Gender Reversal in Gregory of Nyssa's *First Homily on the Song of Songs*," *Studia Patristica* 27 (Leuven: Peeters, 1991): 34–38; Ronald E. Heine, "Gregory of Nyssa's Apology for Allegory," *Vigiliae Christianae* 38 (1984): 360–370; J.B. Cahill, "Date and Setting of Nyssa's *Commentary on Song of Songs*," *Journal of Theological Studies* 32, no. 1 (April 1981): 447–460.

In his first homily, Gregory follows the paradigm established by Origen in which the works attributed to Solomon (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs) offer their own model of *paideia*—leading the initiate from moral exhortation to philosophical speculation.⁶⁰ For Gregory, the Song is a mystagogical itinerary. It is a roadmap, scrawled in secret signs, leading the soul further into the fathomless depths of God. The terminology of ancient mystery cults permeates the opening homily, including references to “secret rites” (μυστήρια),⁶¹ “mystical vision” (μυστικός θεωρία),⁶² and “initiation” (μυσταγωγία/μυσταγωγέω).⁶³ This is not a text to be handled by children whose souls are “still tender and malleable.”⁶⁴ Indeed, Gregory observes that those who gain entry into the divine mystery of the Song “have been transformed in their nature into something more divine by the teaching of the Lord.”⁶⁵ The carnal and erotic words cannot hinder such a person whose “nature is no longer composed of flesh and blood.”⁶⁶

The Solomonic classroom is, in this sense, not simply a paradigm for training Christians in a certain method of reading scripture or even in a particular way of life.⁶⁷ More drastically, as Gregory argues, it is a laboratory in which human natures are purified and reconfigured so that they may stretch themselves further into God’s mystery. The sustenance of the scriptural Logos, for Gregory, contains the power to reconstitute milk-drinking carnal Christians into solid food-eating spirituals. Does Gregory believe such Christians who follow his dietary regimen are no longer flesh and blood in some literal,

⁶⁰In the prologue to Origen’s *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, the Greeks are said to have derived their entire curriculum of education from Solomon. See also Heine, *Gregory of Nyssa’s Treatise on the Inscriptions of the Psalms: Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (New York: Oxford University, 1995), 75. Heine observes that Gregory’s *Homilies* begin “by speaking of the soul already ‘united to God’” whereas his treatise on the Psalms “embraces the whole spectrum of those seeking God.” This is not quite right. The later homilies do address the more advanced. But the prologue and the first two homilies are offered as a remedial course to the more fleshy people in the audience who must be properly fed on the text’s larger purpose before they can access its deeper, more substantial meaning.

⁶¹*Cant.* Hom. 1 (WGRW 13:14 and 26).

⁶²*Cant.* Hom. 1 (WGRW 13:14 and 26).

⁶³*Cant.* Hom. 1 (WGRW 13:22).

⁶⁴*Cant.* Hom. 1 (WGRW 13:18). On this theme, see Susan R. Holman, “Molded as Wax: Formation and Feeding of the Ancient Newborn.” *Helios* 24 (1997): 77–95. Holman aptly notes how ancient authors widely utilized the images of wax and the food of infancy as “formative tools—[which] similarly evoke the deliberate physical formation of a good social or spiritual character” (81). The malleable quality of the infant extended to both body and soul.

⁶⁵*Cant.* Hom. 1 (WGRW 13:30): μεταποιηθῆναι τῇ φύσει διὰ τῆς τοῦ κυρίου μαθητείας πρὸς τὸ θεϊότερον.

⁶⁶*Cant.* Hom. 1 (WGRW 13:32): τὸ μηκέτι ἄνθρωπος εἶναι μηδὲ σαρκὶ καὶ αἵματι συμμεγμένην τὴν φύσιν ἔχειν.

⁶⁷Gregory even dismisses debates about what such a method of reading should be called—*anagorical?* *tropological?* *allegorical?*—and argues instead that it is only the effect of reading that matters, not the method. See *Cant.* Preface (WGRW 13:2–4).

physiological, or otherwise materialistic sense? Like Paul before him, Gregory seems uninterested in such questions. The guiding principle for him throughout is simply that we become what we eat. The perfection of human nature from a corporeal nature to an incorporeal one is, first and foremost, a nutritive process. It is the weaning of the soul from flesh to spirit.

Having established the need to purify the words of scripture as well as the nature of the reader, Gregory then turns to the opening verse of the Song: “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth, for your breasts are better than wine.” The mystagogical metamorphosis is instigated by a kiss from the lips of the bridegroom that cleanses the fleshiness of human nature. Gregory observes: “For this kiss purifies all filth.”⁶⁸ The Song’s emphasis on the lips and breasts of the Bridegroom evokes, for Gregory, not an erotic union but rather the transfer of divine power through breast milk:

And the soul that has been purified, not covered over by leprosy of the flesh, gazes on the treasure house of good things. The treasure house is called the heart and from it the abundance of divine milk flows to the breasts—the same breasts on which the soul is nourished according to its proportion of faith as it drinks in grace. This is why it says “Your breasts are better than wine,” for the location of the breast indicates the heart. And certainly someone who thinks of the heart as the hidden and mysterious power of divinity will not be wrong. Likewise, someone might reasonably think of the breasts as the good activities of the divine power on our behalf. By these breasts God suckles the life of each person, giving the nourishment that is best suited to each of those who receive it.⁶⁹

The categories of “power” (δύναμις) and “activity” (ἐνέργεια) are central to Gregory’s theological lexicon.⁷⁰ The basic schema of this distinction is that,

⁶⁸ *Cant. Hom 1* (WGRW 13:34): καθάρσιον γάρ ἐστι ρύπου παντὸς τοῦτο τὸ φίλημα.

⁶⁹ *Cant. Hom 1* (WGRW 13:34): ἡ δὲ κεκαθαρμένη ψυχὴ μηδεμιᾶς σαρκώδους λέπρας ἐπιπροσθούσης βλέπει τὸν τῶν ἀγαθῶν θησαυρὸν. ὄνομα δὲ ἐστι τῷ θησαυρῷ ἡ καρδία, ἀφ’ ἧς ἐστι τοῖς μαζοῖς ἡ χορηγία τοῦ θεοῦ γάλακτος, ᾧ τρέφεται ἡ ψυχὴ κατὰ τὴν ἀναλογίαν τῆς πίστεως ἐφελκόμενη τὴν χάριν. διὰ τοῦτο φησιν ὅτι Ἄγαθοὶ μαστοὶ σου ὑπὲρ οἴνου, ἐκ τῆς τοπικῆς θέσεως διὰ τῶν μαζῶν τὴν καρδίαν ὑποσημαίνουσα. πάντως δὲ καρδίαν μὲν τὴν κεκρυμμένην τε καὶ ἀπόρητον τῆς θεότητος δύναμιν νοῶν τις οὐχ ἀμαρτήσεται. μαζοὺς δὲ τὰς ἀγαθὰς τῆς θείας δυνάμεως ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν ἐνεργείας εἰκότως ἂν τις ὑπονόησειε, δι’ ὧν τιηνεῖται τὴν ἐκάστου ζωὴν ὁ θεὸς κατάλληλον ἐκάστω τῶν δεχομένων τὴν τροφὴν χαριζόμενος.

⁷⁰ The work of Michel Barnes has unpacked the complexity and nuance of this theme in Gregory’s writing. See *The Power of God: DYNAMIS in Gregory of Nyssa’s Trinitarian Theology* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America, 1998). For more on this, see also fn19 in Norris, *Cant. Hom. 1* (WGRW 13:35); Lewis Ayres, “On Not Three People: The Fundamental Themes of Gregory of Nyssa’s Trinitarian Theology as seen in *To Ablabius: On Not Three Gods*,” in *Rethinking Gregory of Nyssa*, ed. Sarah Coakley (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2004); Verna E. F. Harrison, *Grace and Human Freedom according to St. Gregory of Nyssa*, *Studies in the Bible and Early Christianity* 30 (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen, 1992), 44–55.

for humanity, the “power” of God is inaccessible and inexpressible unless mediated to us through divine “activity.” For those newly purified infants, the wisdom of God is imparted first through the divine milk that flows from the breast of God. And this breast is identified specifically with the bridegroom of the Song in *Homily 1*.⁷¹

Gregory deflects the highly erotic content of the Song’s opening by transforming the bridegroom into a mother, the bride into an infant. The bride’s body becomes the malleable material through which the powerful milk of God is drawn into the soul. Hers is a body that is always reconstituting itself while the soul within expands and stretches further into God’s mystery. Likewise, the morphing body of the bridegroom marks a shift from nuptial bedroom to nursery. This shift is possible, according to Gregory, because “There is a certain correspondence between the actions of the soul and the faculties of the body.”⁷² The image of kissing lips and lingering eyes initiates a chain of signification, an index of body parts and their putative social or biological functions, that leads the reader through the intimate desire shared between husband and wife into the deeper significance of maternal nurture and the nourishment of human souls.

The erotic connotations of lips and breasts are transferred to nurturance and the transmission of knowledge, character, and social legitimacy that takes place for an infant at the breast of her mother. The praise of the bride is no longer one of erotic longing but of infantile hunger: “For what is produced by the breasts is milk, and milk is the food of infants.”⁷³ Gregory observes that the “milk of the divine breasts” is the “simpler nourishment of the divine teachings”—teachings that nevertheless exceed “all human wisdom.”⁷⁴ And while commentators have noted the bridegroom’s maternal transformation, there has been little attempt to observe why this transformation would resonate so readily for Gregory and his audience.⁷⁵ It is not simply that the bridegroom, Christ, or Wisdom might be understood as a breastfeeding mother because of passages from scripture that use similar language—though this was no doubt in Gregory’s mind as well. The force of Gregory’s argument about food and its impact on the

⁷¹Origen also emphasizes the nourishment provided by the bridegroom’s breasts throughout Book 1 of his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, though it is less developed than Gregory what we find in Gregory. Whereas Origen largely uses food to construct categories of identity for different kinds of Christians, for Gregory the emphasis is on food’s transformative power and how this aids an individual’s progress toward perfection.

⁷²*Cant. Hom. 1* (WGRW 13:36.2–3): ἀναλογία γὰρ τίς ἐστίν ἐν τοῖς ψυχικοῖς ἐνεργήμασι πρὸς τὰ τοῦ σώματος αἰσθητήρια.

⁷³*Cant. Hom. 1* (WGRW 13:36.21): ἐκ γὰρ τῶν μαστῶν τὸ γάλα φέρεται· νηπίων δέ ἐστι τὸ γάλα τροφή.

⁷⁴*Cant. Hom 1* (WGRW 13:36.17–20).

⁷⁵See, for example, Norris, “The Soul Takes Flight,” 526; Harrison, “A Gender Reversal,” 37; Laird, *Nyssa and the Grasp of Faith*, 152.

transformation of the bride's body and soul also resonates with the dominant social values concerning the family and child rearing in the Roman Empire. Gregory's reconfiguring of the bridegroom into a mother who breastfeeds infants on divine milk buttresses his theory of human transformation—a theory in which bodies and minds are shaped and reshaped because of the food they receive. The binding together of bridegroom and bride through the sharing of breast milk as a link of kinship—simultaneously “biological” and spiritual—evokes Favorinus's argument that a woman's *spiritus* is implanted within an infant's body and soul through her breast milk.

The first step, then, in the protean movement toward perfection is a return to infancy. Unlike in 1 Corinthians, where Paul used infancy in a derogatory way to represent stunted development, Gregory suggests that the growth of the soul and the purification of the mind are possible only insofar as one reverts to a childlike state free from the stain of erotic desire. Expanding on this point, Gregory shifts from the encounter of bride and bridegroom toward the relationship between the bride and her maidens. He notes that “the erotic desire for material things does not grip those who are infants (for infancy does not allow this passion).”⁷⁶ Following their bride, the maidens “stretch themselves out” toward the virtues of the bridegroom.⁷⁷ Gregory reconfigures the relationships found in the Song, identifying maidens and bride alike as infants seeking mother's milk. He thus views infancy as a state of dispassionate receptivity.⁷⁸ The growth and transformation of the bride and her maidens begins at the breast. For Gregory, then, infancy is the state in which the mind is purified of sexual passion, enabling it to imbibe the deeper meaning of the Song's erotic content and be transformed by it from the inside out.

There is a cyclical, mimetic aspect to the process of transformation described in *Homily 1*. The bride, who Gregory considers “the more perfect soul,”⁷⁹ was

⁷⁶*Cant. Hom 1* (WGRW 13.40.15–16).

⁷⁷*Cant. Hom 1* (WGRW 13.42.5). The verb used here to describe the growth of the maidens is ἐπεκτείνω. They are stretched and expanded so that they might be reformed into the likeness of the bride.

⁷⁸As I have argued throughout, infancy and maternity functioned in the ancient world as prominent and anxiously regulated sites for the work of cultural construction, wherein the values and concerns of particular social groups were worked out by regulating the bodies and behaviors of women and children. While infants were largely viewed as plastic and malleable by nature, Gregory's positive framing of infancy as a state of dispassionate potential is not totally consistent with broader Greco-Roman theories of childhood and education in which children are described as unruly and irrational. If anything, the plasticity of the infant soul tended to be viewed as a fundamentally precarious state in which the child is too readily shaped by bad behaviors of others. See, for example, Ps. Plutarch, *The Education of Children*.

⁷⁹*Cant. Hom 1* (WGRW 13:42.9): ἡ τελειότερα ψυχῆ. On the bride's perfection, see R. A. Norris, “The Soul Takes Flight,” 530: “Origen occasionally describes the Bride of the Song as ‘perfect,’ taking her to represent the mature Christian, but Gregory, with Paul's words in mind, invariably refuses this epithet and characterizes the Bride rather as ‘more perfect’; for in a sense,

“the first to come face to face with the Word, having been filled with good things, and was deemed worthy of hidden mysteries.”⁸⁰ Within a few short verses, this bride has morphed from virgin to infant to mother. The food she receives at the breast of the bridegroom begins a process of *morphosis* that culminates in her offering to others the same milk she once received at his side. The maidens, in Gregory’s account, praise her accordingly: “Just as you love the breasts of the Word more than wine, so too let us imitate you and love your breasts, through which the infants in Christ are given milk to drink.”⁸¹ Not everyone, it seems, is able to drink divine milk directly from the bridegroom. The maidens must receive the simple nourishment of divine instruction from the breast of another.

The progression of human transformation outlined by Gregory in *Homily 1* provides a précis for the themes that occupy the rest of the *Homilies*. Indeed, the importance of the Bridegroom’s breasts at the opening becomes a textual anchor for any reference to nourishment, children, and instruction that Gregory perceives throughout the Song. But even as she remains a source of maternal nurturance, the bride continues to be reshaped into new forms. Gregory identifies her as “the teacher” (ἡ διδάσκαλος) whose primary concern is the progress of “learning souls.”⁸² These souls are eager for “the grace that flows from her rational breasts.”⁸³ The bride is an “example” (ὑπόδειγμα) to the little ones in her care, a model in being made beautiful by the bridegroom’s milk.⁸⁴

B. THE MILK OF THE BRIDE

In Gregory’s reading, the content covered in *Homilies 1* and *2* is merely an introduction to the Song as a whole. These opening verses contain a “power of purification” that prepares novices for the pure Power offered in the later homilies.⁸⁵ Gregory marks this transition in *Homily 3* where the Word of

as he understands it, the proper Christian is always immature, since the goal is precisely never to arrive but always to respond to the ‘upward call of God.’” Norris is correct that Origen speaks of perfection in more emphatic terms than Gregory. However, I see no example in which the “more perfect” bride is characterized as nevertheless immature.

⁸⁰*Cant. Hom 1* (WGRW 13:42–44.25–1): τὴν πρώτην διὰ τοῦ κατὰ στόμα γενέσθαι τοῦ λόγου τῶν ἀγαθῶν πληρωθεῖσαν καὶ τῶν κεκρυμμένων μυστηρίων ἀξιοθεῖσαν.

⁸¹*Cant. Hom 1* (WGRW 13:44.3): ὅτι ὡς σὺ ἀγαπᾶς ὑπὲρ οἴνου τοὺς μάζους τοῦ λόγου, οὕτω καὶ ἡμεῖς σὲ μιμησώμεθα καὶ τοὺς μάζους, δι’ ὧν τοὺς νηπίους ἐν Χριστῷ γάλα ποτίζεις.

⁸²*Cant. Hom 2* (WGRW 13:50.1–2).

⁸³*Cant. Hom 2* (WGRW 13:50.4): τὴν ἐκ τῶν λογικῶν αὐτῆς μαζῶν ἀπορρέουσαν χάριν.

⁸⁴*Cant. Hom 2* (WGRW 13:50.15–20). Here Gregory draws explicitly on Pauline language of mimesis from Galatians and 1 Corinthians. The bride is a new Paul, offering milk to little ones so that they may grow into her likeness.

⁸⁵*Cant. Hom 3* (WGRW 13:78.21–25).

God speaks “in his own voice” to the bride. As a Lenten sermon series, then, Gregory says that his first two homilies were meant to purify the text and the souls of those listening to it. The words of the Song are like the filth that attaches to the flesh and must be rinsed off and washed away so that the pure Logos contained within can be accessed.⁸⁶ Yet this brief review offered by Gregory at the opening of *Homily 3* is more than just an outline of the previous sermons. In another sense, Gregory has inserted himself into the interpretation being offered—he has assumed the role of the bride, digesting what he has received from the bridegroom in order to pass it on to the infants under his care. And he has sent the *Homilies* to Olympias so that she might do the same. In this way, the later *Homilies* provide a schematic outline for how “mature” Christians become milk-providers to their infantile brothers and sisters.

In *Homily 6*, Gregory returns to the bride’s function as nurturer. She does not rest in her own progress, but wears Christ “between her rational breasts, which gush with divine teachings.”⁸⁷ The bride moves from perfection to perfection through a process of transfiguration. Gregory accounts for her transformation from virgin to infant to mother by drawing a comparison to the changing appearances of actors in the theater, where the same person may be seen as a slave or a soldier or a king: “In the same way, because of their desire for higher things, those who make progress in virtue do not remain in the same character while they are being transformed from glory to glory.”⁸⁸ Her maidens, having watched the bride’s *morphosis* in awe, now praise the marriage bed. Gregory is referring to Song 3:7-8 (“Behold Solomon’s bed: sixty mighty men surround it out of the mighty men of Israel. They all bear a sword, being instructed in war; each man has a sword on his thigh”). He offers a variety of ways to interpret this passage, but concludes by connecting it to Luke 11:7 (“The door is already shut and the children are with me in the bed”). The soldiers with swords girded on their thigh suggest, to Gregory, a pre-sexual and dispassionate character typical of children.

Thus the bridal chamber again takes the form of a nursery, but this time with the newly maternal bride and the infantile maidens sharing the bed. The maidens have become like infants, specifically male infants with “swords girded,” who repose on the bed where her rational breasts may feed them with God’s instruction. As the bride is transformed by the bridegroom’s

⁸⁶ *Cant. Hom 3* (WGRW 13:78.30-80.1): ὅσον ἐκπλῦναι καὶ ἀποκλύσαι τοῦ ῥύπου τῆς σαρκὸς τὴν ἐν τοῖς λεγομένοις διάνοιαν.

⁸⁷ *Cant. Hom 6* (WGRW 13:188.2-6): μεταξὺ τῶν λογικῶν μαζῶν, ὅθεν βρῦει τὰ θεῖα διδάγματα.

⁸⁸ *Cant. Hom 6* (WGRW 13:199.5-16): οὕτω καὶ ἐν ταῖς κατὰ τὴν ἀρετὴν προκοπαῖς οὐ πάντοτε τῷ αὐτῷ παραμένονσι χαρακτηρί οἱ ἀπὸ δόξης εἰς δόξαν διὰ τῆς πᾶν ὑψηλοτέρων ἐπιθυμίας μεταμορφούμενοι.

milk, so too do the maidens transform from young women to infants because of the bride's milk. Bridegroom, bride, and maidens are all linked to one another through a common food that is passed between them. Nourishment instigates the bodily alterations of all involved.

Gregory elaborates on the relationship between imitation, nourishment, and spiritual transformation in *Homilies* 7–10 through reference to the church as composed of various body parts (following 1 Corinthians 12). He observes that “it is possible to find in the common body of the church lips and teeth and tongue, breasts and womb and neck and, as Paul says, also those members of the body that seem shameful.”⁸⁹ The spiritualizing of body parts redirects the erotics of praise found throughout the Song, enabling a paradigm of Christian formation that nevertheless follows the Song's litany of body parts and the social or biological functions associated with them. This is no simple allegory. It is also an amplification of cultural values surrounding the female body and its power upon the formation of infant souls. In the laboratory of Solomonic education, human nature is formed in accordance with the food it is given.⁹⁰

The incorporeal function of the breast is derived specifically from its putative corporeal purpose: “For this reason, the text refers to the person who, after the likeness of the great Paul, becomes a breast for the infants and nourishes the newborns of the church with milk like two breasts that are created at the same time like twin fawns of the deer . . . he [i.e. the one who becomes a breast] does not lock up grace within himself but offers the nipple of the Word to those bound to him.”⁹¹ In response to the bridegroom's praise of the bride's breasts, Gregory appeals to the maternal function of the female body in nurturing and rearing children. This is surely an aspect of the “corporeal person,” but its deeper meaning is readily applied to the process of spiritual formation Gregory has been outlining throughout the *Homilies*. The

⁸⁹*Cant.* Hom 7 (WGRW 13:226.25–28): δυνατόν ἐστὶν εὐρεῖν ἐν τῷ κοινῷ σώματι τῆς ἐκκλησίας χεῖλη τε καὶ ὀδόντας καὶ γλῶσσαν, μαζούς τε καὶ κοιλίαν καὶ τράχηλον, ὡς δὲ ὁ Παῦλός φησι καὶ αὐτὰ τὰ δοκοῦντα ἀσχήμονα εἶναι τοῦ σώματος.

⁹⁰For example, in response to Song 4:5 (“Your breasts are like two twin fawns”), Gregory offers an anthropological consideration: “There are two human beings to be observed in each person: one is bodily and visible, the other spiritual and imperceptible. Yet the birth of either is always twofold, because they are brought into life together. For the soul does not exist before the body, nor is the body prepared before the soul. Both come into being simultaneously. And the nourishment that is natural to these is purity and fragrance and all such things produced by the virtues” (*Cant.* Hom 7 [WGRW 13:250.25–30]). The purpose of each body part is derived from this twofold nature and Gregory's discussion of parts' various functions resonates with medical and social values that were widely applied to the body—especially to the female body—in his day.

⁹¹*Cant.* Hom 7 (WGRW 13:252.3–13): διὰ τοῦτο τὸν καθ' ὁμοίτητα τοῦ μεγάλου Παύλου μαζὸν τοῖς νηπίοις γινόμενον καὶ γαλακτοτροφοῦντα τοὺς ἀρτιγενεῖς τῆς ἐκκλησίας δυνάδα μαζῶν ἀλλήλοις συγγενηθέντων τὸν τοῖς νεβροῖς τῆς δορκάδος . . . οὐκ ἐν ἑαυτῷ κατακλείει τὴν χάριν, ἀλλ' ἐπέχει τοῖς δεομένοις τοῦ λόγου τὴν θηλήν.

incorporeal and spiritual power of breasts, it turns out, is identical in form and function to that of the maternal, bodily power. For Gregory, as for Favorinus, breast milk signifies the raw material through which intellectual potential and cultural identity are passed from one person to the next.

This point is developed at length in Gregory's reading of Song 4:10 ("How your breasts have been made beautiful, my sister bride! How your breasts have been made beautiful from wine!"). Gregory exhorts his audience to listen to the words of scripture "as those already separated from flesh and blood, and as those whose basic composition has been transformed into a spiritual nature."⁹² The bride, who at the opening of the Song praised her groom's breasts, now receives a similar praise from him. These words are no "simple compliment" (ψιλὸν ἔπαινον) but rather have a talismanic quality.⁹³ They are, for Gregory, the means by which the bridegroom beautifies the bride in proportion to her good works. The increase of her beauty is directly identified with "her fountains of good doctrine" (ἐν ταῖς τῶν ἁγαθῶν διδασκαλιῶν πηγαῖς) that were the result of her nurture at the breast of the bridegroom. Thus the bridegroom "is explaining the reason why the bride's breasts have been altered for the better and made more perfect, no long pouring forth milk-nourishment for infants, but well-up with uncontaminated wine to the delight of the more perfect."⁹⁴ Whatever the bridegroom says in praise to the bride becomes her reality. She is augmented and beautified, first by his milk and then by his words. In turn, she becomes a source of nourishment and a model in virtue to others.⁹⁵ The composition of her body is altered—Gregory says it has been "enhanced"—so as to become the optimal maternal vessel carrying divine nourishment and "good doctrine" for all; that is, for infants and fully-grown alike.

Through the bridegroom's nourishing milk, the bride is transformed into his likeness. She is changed into a maternal body that dispenses God's mystery and feeds infants so that they, too, may become like her as she has become like the

⁹² *Cant. Hom 9* (WGRW 13:278.1–3): ἀκούσωμεν δὲ ὡς ἔξω γεγονότες ἤδη σαρκός τε καὶ αἵματος, εἰς δὲ τὴν πνευματικὴν μεταστοιχειωθέντες φύσιν.

⁹³ *Cant. Hom 9* (WGRW 13:278.10).

⁹⁴ *Cant. Hom 9* (WGRW 13:278.13–20): τὴν αἰτίαν λέγει τῆς πρὸς τὸ κρεῖττον τε καὶ τελειότερον τῶν μαζῶν αὐτῆς ἀλλοιώσεως, οἱ οὐκέτι γάλα βρῦουσι τὴν τῶν νηπίων τροφήν, ἀλλὰ τὸν ἀκῆρατον οἶνον ἐπὶ εὐφροσύνῃ τῶν τελειότερων πηγάζουσιν. Gregory's reference to the bride's breasts as "fountains of good doctrine" has a parallel in *On the Soul and Resurrection*: "The person who is nourished always grows and never ceases from growth. Since the fountains of good things flows unfaillingly, the nature of the participants who use all the influx to add to their own magnitude (because nothing of what is received is superfluous or useless) becomes at the same time more capable of attracting the better and more able to contain it. Each adds to the other: the one who is nourished gains greater power from the abundance of good things, and the nourishing supply rises in flood to match the increase of the one who is growing" (trans. Roth, *On the Soul and Resurrection*, 87).

⁹⁵ *Cant. Hom 9* (WGRW 13:294.9–10).

bridegroom. Bride and maidens are both molded into that which they consume. In fact, in response to Song 5:13 (“His belly is an ivory tablet”), Gregory envisions the whole church as a giant “belly” (κοιλία) for divine nourishment. He notes that scripture uses the term κοιλία to refer “to the intellectual and rational part of the soul, in which the divine teachings are deposited.”⁹⁶ Precisely how Gregory understands the deepest part of the rational soul as its “gut” or its “bowels” is unclear. Yet we have already seen how readily Gregory draws on the idea that food has the power to produce likeness of bodies and minds. The idea of “spiritual bowels,” then, is merely the logical extension of his belief that spiritual food reconstitutes our material bodies into their perfect, spiritual form, freed from the carnal constraints of flesh and blood.

The spiritualizing of human digestion in *Homily 14* illuminates Gregory’s claim about the power of food that opened this essay: “The one being nourished is certainly formed according to the kind of nourishment consumed.”⁹⁷ In context, Gregory is discussing how those within the flock of the bridegroom graze among the lilies (Song 6:2-3) and, as a result, become beautiful like the lilies. This, for Gregory, is how the virtues function in the Christian life. A person must be guided to them, as to good pasture, and ingest them into the belly of the soul. Gregory’s notion that the soul has a belly is, then, a robust application of ancient theories regarding the power of food to transform the one who eats from the inside out. The soul ingests, digests, and is remade by the nourishment it consumes. Food, maternity, and infancy all serve Gregory’s exegetical project to purify the carnal character of the Song of Songs while also providing a model of transformation, leading individual Christians from a nature of flesh to one of spirit.

When read in light of examples of Moses and Basil, the infancy of the bride and her maidens becomes a scriptural space in which Christians from any family background might locate themselves as infants to be breastfed and reared by their “natural mother.” There is no “foreign milk” in the model of formation described by Gregory. He offers the protean formation of the bride at the breast of the bridegroom as a paradigm for Solomon’s *paideia*, refracted through the Pauline terminology of growth from flesh to spirit, from milk to solid food. As a result, the bride’s identity, her access to divine knowledge, and her status within the community are all secured through the source of her milk. Likewise, the maidens who are fed by the bride share in

⁹⁶*Cant.* Hom 14 (WGRW 13:438.21–22): τὸ διανοητικὸν καὶ τὸ λογιστικὸν τῆς ψυχῆς, ᾧ ἐναπέθετο τὰ θεῖα μαθήματα, κοιλίαν προσαγορεύσας.

⁹⁷*Cant.* Hom 15 (WGRW 13:468.9–10): τῷ γὰρ εἶδει τῆς τροφῆς συνδιατίθεται πάντως καὶ τὸ τρεφόμενον.

her knowledge of God and in her legitimacy as she nourishes them. Similar to Galen's diet for the mind, Gregory's *Homilies* provide a regimen of Christian nourishment aimed at transforming and enhancing a person's intellectual powers and moral character.

In a sense, Gregory's *Homilies on the Song of Songs* could be read as the most explicit Christian appropriation of Greek *paideia* in its fullest scope. Jaeger was correct to note that Gregory had a singular depth of insight into *morphosis* as the foundational motif of classical education. But Jaeger did not see that this insight also included a complex account of nourishment and its power to instigate precisely the kind of transformation in question. To conclude that spiritual nourishment lacks any robust connection to its material corollary overlooks the pervasive and intricate role that food—especially the feeding of infants—played in ancient theories of intellectual formation. Thus to dismiss Gregory's subtle and complex engagement with the anthropological inheritance of 1 Corinthians 3:1-3 as “mere metaphor” is to offer an incomplete analysis of this prominent motif within his account of progressive perfection.

V. CONCLUSION “A NURSERY OF BISHOPS AND SAINTS”:

Commenting on the prolific reproduction of holiness that took place within the biological family of Basil and Gregory, John Henry Newman once observed: “Basil's family circle . . . was a nursery of bishops and saints.”⁹⁸ Newman's language unwittingly touches upon the prominence of nurturance, maternity, and especially breastfeeding in Gregory of Nyssa's theory of Christian formation. Emphasis on proper nourishment and the role of breast milk in intellectual development was, for Gregory, a way of creating, safeguarding, and replicating the kind of Christian cultural identity he found exemplified in the Song of Songs.⁹⁹ More than any other late ancient Christian author, Gregory achieved a remarkable synthesis of Greek *paideia* and Roman family values—including their attendant theories regarding human development—with the language and imaginative landscape of scripture. Gregory's Solomonic version of *paideia* found its true archetype in his sister Macrina. If the family of Basil and Gregory was a nursery for saints and bishops, Macrina was the nurse, the midwife, the mother, and even the father presiding over it.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸Newman, *Historical Sketches*, vol. 2 (New York: Longman's, Green, and Co., 1906), 17.

⁹⁹Franz Dunzl aptly observed that individual Christian formation, for Gregory, is not an isolated process. Rather, the church is the space in which all are fed together (*zusammenzuführen*). See *Braut und Bräutigam*, 243.

¹⁰⁰Gregory's eclectic depiction of his sister's character has received significant scholarly discussion. See, for example, Ellen Muehlberger, “Salvage: Macrina and the Christian Project of Cultural Reclamation,” *Church History* 81, no. 2 (June 2012): 273–297; Philip Rousseau, “The

Throughout the *Life of Macrina*, Gregory consistently links nurture, rearing and breastfeeding to his sister's exemplary character and to the care and instruction she offered to others (including to Gregory himself). Early on, he notes how Macrina was exceptional among her siblings in that she alone was nursed by her biological mother: "So the child was nourished, breastfed primarily in the hands of her own mother, despite having her own nurse."¹⁰¹ The inclusion of this detail at the outset of his hagiography is all the more striking when compared to the *Encomium of Saint Basil*, in which Gregory passes over the rearing and childhood of his brother in total silence. In fact, Macrina seems in this instance a more direct parallel to Moses than Basil—having been nurtured by her biological mother and not by some "foreign milk." Gregory's emphasis on his sister's nurture at the breast of her mother also suggests that the nobility of his family lineage—nobility demonstrated in the renowned spirituality of his maternal grandmother and mother—was passed matrilineally from mother to daughter through the breast milk.

Gregory then tells us that Macrina's mother educated her exclusively on Solomon's wisdom and that the girl demonstrated an unprecedented aptitude because of this rearing. Unlike Basil, the "tender and moldable" nature of Macrina's childhood soul was not subjected to the risky content of Greek *paideia*. In the *Encomium*, Basil's nurture is considered an insignificant detail while, in the *Life of Macrina*, Gregory explicitly describes how his sister never left the breast of her biological mother. Macrina was the

Pious Household and the Virgin Chorus: Reflections on Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Macrina*," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 13, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 165–186; Virginia Burrus, "Is Macrina A Woman? Gregory of Nyssa's *Dialogue on the Soul and Resurrection*," in *The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. Graham Ward (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2004): 249–264; J. Warren Smith, "A Just and Reasonable Grief: The Death and Function of a Holy Woman in Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Macrina*," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 12, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 37–60; Rebecca Krawiec, "From the Womb of the Church," 283–307. Virginia Burrus has offered a convincing analysis of the constantly shifting bonds of kinship that connect Gregory, his sister, and the whole cast of characters that appear in the *Life of Macrina*: "Macrina is at once the child who never left her mother's womb and all the husband her mother could want, her mother her own nursemaid, and she both her mother's maidservant and her brother's father. Conjunctions, displacements, and reversals of parent-child, husband-wife, and master-slave relations thus accumulate, intensifying and complicating the intimacy that envelops a family now reconfigured as a feminine community of pedagogical formation" (see Burrus, "Gender, Eros, and Pedagogy: Macrina's Pious Household," in *Ascetic Culture: Essays in Honor of Philip Rousseau*, ed. Blake Leyerle and Robin Darling Young [Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame, 2013], 175). The image of Christian formation found in the *Homilies on the Song of Songs* that I have been presenting replicates this "feminine community of pedagogical formation" with its similar emphasis on shifting relations of kinship in which the mother-child/nurse-infant model serves as foundation.

¹⁰¹ *Vit. Mac.* 3 (ed. P. Maraval, *Grégoire de Nyssse. Vie de sainte Macrine*, Sources chrétiennes 178 [Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1971], 149): Τρέφεται τοίνυν τὸ παιδίον, οὐσης μὲν αὐτῆ καὶ τιθνοῦ ἰδίας, τὰ δὲ πολλὰ τῆς μητρὸς ἐν ταῖς χερσὶ ταῖς ἰδίαις τιθνομένης.

archetype for Solomonic transformation—morphing from infant to mother, from one being fed to the one feeding others. Basil may have been a self-fed man, never leaving the breast of the church, but Macrina was raised solely on the Christian milk of her natural mother and instructed exclusively through the tutelage of Solomon. From this perspective, Basil begins to look like the black sheep of the family: fed and educated by “foreigners,” he overcame his unorthodox nurturance only through sheer force of will by fixing himself to the breast of the church.

Even Peter, Macrina’s youngest brother, is said to have benefitted from the nourishment received under her care. Gregory recounts how Macrina “tore [Peter] away from the breast of the one nursing him and nurtured him on her own, and led him to the whole higher education . . . She became all things to the little one: father, teacher, guardian, mother, adviser in every good thing.”¹⁰² Once again, the distinction between material food and spiritual nourishment is blurred. In snatching Peter from the breast of his nurse, Macrina assumed the role of food-provider and caregiver to her brother. The food and instruction offered to Peter results in a man of exceptional intellectual prowess—a man who, “without any guidance achieved a completely accurate knowledge of everything that ordinary people learn by time and trouble.”¹⁰³ Not only then does Macrina nourish her brother in his infancy, she also continues to nourish him on her deep wisdom of scripture as he grew. She plays the bride to Peter’s maiden, just as it seems she had done earlier with Gregory. Indeed, according to Gregory, many of the women who lived with Macrina at the end of her life had been rescued from starvation and nurtured to health by her while they were still children. These women called her both “mother and nurse” (μήτηρ καὶ τροφός) because Macrina “had nursed and reared” (ἐτιθηγήσατό τε καὶ ἀνεθρέψατο) them.¹⁰⁴

It seems likely, then, that as Gregory edited his *Homilies on the Song of Songs* for Olympias and the women in her care, he had in mind his own sister—a woman who was first and foremost a nourisher of others. Like the bride of the Song, there was in Macrina a “divine and pure *eros* for the unseen bridegroom, on which she had been nourished in the secret depths of her soul.”¹⁰⁵ Because the Song shifts abruptly from imagery of the erotic to

¹⁰²*Vit. Mac.* 12 (SC 178:182): μικρὰ τῆς θηλῆς αὐτὸν παρὰ τὴν πρώτην γένεσιν μετασχόντα εὐθύς ἀποσπάσασα τῆς τιθηνουμένης δι’ ἑαυτῆς ἀνατρέφεται καὶ ἐπὶ πᾶσαν τὴν ὑψηλοτέραν ἤγαγε παιδευσιν . . . Ἀλλὰ πάντα γενομένη τῷ νέῳ, πατὴρ, διδάσκαλος, παιδαγωγός, μήτηρ, ἀγαθοῦ παντὸς σύμβουλος.

¹⁰³*Vit. Mac.* 12 (SC 178:182).

¹⁰⁴*Vit. Mac.* 26 (SC 178:232). I take this to mean that one group of women under Macrina’s care were abandoned infants at the time of their rescue, requiring someone to provide life-saving sustenance and care.

¹⁰⁵*Vit. Mac.* 22 (SC 178:214): τὸν θεῖον ἐκεῖνον καὶ καθαρὸν ἔρωτα τοῦ ἀοράτου νυμφίου, ὃν ἐγκεκρυμμένον εἶχεν ἐν τοῖς τῆς ψυχῆς ἀπορρήτοις τρεφόμενον.

that of nurturance and, later, to the pastoral, those who follow the song's trophic itinerary must also undergo a parallel transformation from bride to infant until, at last, they can become a mothering shepherd to others. Nourishment is, in this way, a regulatory symbol in Gregory's reading of the Song. It signifies good pasture, safe doctrine, ecclesial belonging, and proper formation. It is the means by which progress in perfection is charted in the Christian life. For Gregory, one is identified as a Christian not by birth but rather by nourishment.

In a series of lectures titled *Security, Territory, Population*, Michel Foucault set out to describe "bio-power"—a concept that he had first introduced in the opening volume of his *History of Sexuality*. In the lectures, he defines bio-power as "the set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy, of a general strategy of power."¹⁰⁶ Foucault was primarily interested in the "technologies of security" that are exercised over a population through the governance and management of bodies—both individual and collective. He wanted to observe the ways in which bodies and their parts functioned as a site for social control and the reproduction of social order. While Foucault primarily viewed this phenomenon as emerging in the eighteenth century, he traces its origin back to early Christianity and, specifically, to the development of pastoral care.

The office of the pastor, for Foucault, realized a technique of social power exerted over the body of the "flock" in the form of care—that is, benevolent concern for the well being of the whole group as well as for each individual.¹⁰⁷ Foucault explains: "Salvation is first of all essentially subsistence. The means of subsistence provided, the food assured, is good pasture. The shepherd is someone who feeds and who feeds directly, or at any rate, he is someone who feeds the flock first by leading it to good pastures, and then by making sure that the animals eat and are properly fed. Pastoral power is the power of care."¹⁰⁸ In Gregory's discussion of progressive perfection, his appeal to nourishment and to breastfeeding as a regulatory practice suggests this pastoral appropriation of the basic biological features of the human body—especially the features and functions of the female body. The power ascribed to the social relations of mother, wet-nurse, and infant within the Roman Empire offered a ripe symbolic space for early Christians to theorize the preservation and transmission of the essential material of the faith.

The question I return to time and again is this: why should Gregory make recourse to the power of nourishment and breastfeeding in order to speak about instilling "good doctrine," for example, within the Christian community?

¹⁰⁶Foucault, *Security*, 1.

¹⁰⁷Foucault, *Security*, 126.

¹⁰⁸Foucault, *Security*, 126–127.

What was it about food and the feeding of infants that suggested the transmission of character, knowledge, and social legitimacy? Any answer to this question must first attend to the family values that had taken root during the Roman imperial era—a cultural system in which food was invested with the power to transform those who eat it. Gregory appeals to this power throughout his writings, and especially in his theory of progressive perfection. In so doing, he was appropriating the political, moral, and medical ideology concerning nourishment that had become a central component of Roman family values.

But this social and ideological background does not in itself explain why an ascetic male author like Gregory would so situate nurturance within his program of Christian formation. On the one hand, it is possible Gregory believed that incorporating one of the most regulated of “feminine” qualities within Roman political ideology could somehow overcome the temporal constraints of gender. The potential fluidity of coded household roles and biological functions might be construed as an indication of the evanescence of gender among the spiritualized bodies of the Christian household. Nevertheless, the prominent presence of actual women—his sister Macrina, his correspondent Olympias—complicates such a conclusion. Even as he figures himself as the mothering virgin of the Song, Gregory is unable to match his sister’s maternal virtuosity.

On the other hand, it is also possible that Gregory found nurturance more useful than, say, the language of “planting a seed”—though such imagery was certainly not uncommon in discussions of education and intellectual formation.¹⁰⁹ The idea of regular insemination was, for Gregory perhaps, poorly suited as a model for the ongoing work of pastoral care and formation among chaste men and women. Nevertheless, it is not immediately obvious why the intimate relational encounter symbolized by mother’s milk would not conjure any erotic or sensual associations at all. Breastfeeding is an outcome of sexual coupling—with all of its attendant desires. Likewise, it is also an action in which complex pleasures and desires are shared between mother and child.¹¹⁰ The fact that early Christians looked to the Song of

¹⁰⁹In his discussion of Gregory the Wonderworker’s oration for Origen, Richard Valantasis highlights Gregory’s claim that Origen had “planted a spark” in him. This language, Valantasis notes, has maternal resonances in the medical literature. However, Valantasis prefers the paternal and masculine sense with respect to Gregory and Origen. See *Spiritual Guides of the Third Century: A Semiotic Study of the Guide-Disciple Relationship in Christianity, Neoplatonism, Hermetism, and Gnosticism*, Harvard Dissertations in Religion 27 (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 1991), 28–30. Denise Kimber Buell also traces the language of “Sowing Knowledge” in her excellent study *Making Christians: Clement of Alexandria and the Rhetoric of Legitimacy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University, 1999), 50–68.

¹¹⁰As Cristina L. H. Traina has recently observed, acknowledging the reality of a maternal eroticism “furnishes a language and a logic for dealing more adequately with the ethics of parent-child relations in general, children’s sexuality, and the erotic dimension of, for example, teacher-student . . . relations.” See Traina, *Erotic Attunement: Parenthood and the Ethics of*

Songs as a governing paradigm for teacher-student relations—and that Gregory amplified the themes of maternity and nourishment within that paradigm—destabilizes the notion that breastfeeding necessarily bypasses the erotics of the text in question. For an intensity of desire was what made the text so generative in the early Christian imagination in the first place. The purified eros that compels the bride toward the bridegroom in Gregory's reading of the Song is, in this sense, not easily quarantined from those untidier desires that drive lovers to embrace or that binds mother and child together in nurturance.

Virginia Burrus has insightfully observed how Gregory uses his sister's nurturance of others "to reimagine the erotics of male receptivity, via performed reversals of gender. Allowing Macrina to take the lead as teacher, parent, and lover, Gregory turns the traditionally feminine necessity to submit into a desirable masculine virtue. In so doing, he decisively queers the family values conveyed by the ascetic household."¹¹¹ If Gregory queered the family values of his day for a program of formation within the Christian ascetic community, he nevertheless retained and, I would argue, amplified the ideology of nurturance that was at the bedrock of those values. Indeed, one place in which male receptivity was not viewed as socially taboo was within the context of Romany family values and the proper breastfeeding of (typically elite male) infants. For Gregory, as for the Apostle Paul, one could be a male and an infant—submissive, receptive, and under the nurturing care of another—without necessarily sliding into effeminacy. What is striking, however, is that the characteristically "feminine" biological function of breastfeeding, of offering milk from one's own body for the benefit of others, should become the *telos* of all Christian growth. Unlike the Pauline paradigm in which the "mature" are identified by the capacity to eat solid food, Gregory's account of progressive Christian perfection primarily emphasizes the milk; for him, maturity is found not in the food one eats but in the food one provides. And while Gregory subtly figures himself as a bride at the breast of the bridegroom, it is Macrina and Olympias who emerge as the dominant examples for how the infant soul ought to be fed, the maternal form of the mature Christian, and the proper provision of sustenance to others in need.

Sensuality among Unequals (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2011), 4, 45. For a similar critical intervention, see also Noelle Oxenhandler, *The Eros of Parenthood: Explorations in Light and Dark* (New York: St. Martin's, 2001). I am grateful to Mara Benjamin for her conversation on this issue and for suggesting the relevance of these sources to the current project.

¹¹¹Burrus, "Gender, Eros, and Pedagogy," 168.

Combined with Paul's evocative distinction between milk and solid food, the symbolic power of nourishment that was already latent within the broader discourse of Roman family values underwent an intensification in the work of early Christian authors such as Gregory. Drawing upon this potent conjuncture of cultural values and scriptural language, Gregory imagined the Christian community as an extensive nursery system comprised of mothers feeding infants. As within the Roman household, kinship, moral character, and intellectual prowess were not granted as a birthright within the Christian "family"—even in venerable households like that of Gregory, Macrina, and Basil. One had to be nurtured into such things. As a basic human biological function, breastfeeding was a site of significant cultural debate in Gregory's time and, as such, came to operate as a structuring symbol for social relations within the Christian community.¹¹² If we become what we eat, then those who nurse us as infants have a surprising amount of power over our future, our minds, and our souls. Gregory appeals to this cultural trope when he reconfigures all Christian growth in perfection as a movement from infancy to maternity, as a process of being nursed, weaned, and then nursing others. The Christian community, according to Gregory, is fed to perfection at the breast of the bridegroom or, at any rate, at the breast of those who have already been transformed by his nourishing care. Salvation is, in this sense, the subsistence of a mother's milk.

¹¹²In a different context, and with different ends in mind, Mary Douglas has commented on how the body and the functions of its parts are used to structure society: "The body is a model which can stand for any bounded system. Its boundaries can represent any boundaries which are threatened or precarious. The body is a complex structure. The functions of its different parts and their relation afford a source of symbol for other complex structures. We cannot possibly interpret ritual concerning excreta, breast milk, saliva and the rest unless we are prepared to see the powers and dangers credited to social structure reproduced in small on the body." See Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Purity and Taboo* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 142.