

## The Poem as Offering in Gregory of Nazianzus' Poetry

Recently, scholars have paid increasing attention to Gregory of Nazianzus' poetry, both through editions of individual poems (e.g. Simelidis 2009) and through studies of the poems' relationship to the classical tradition (e.g. Faulkner 2010 and Simelidis 2011). This paper, however, will focus not on a particular poem or on Gregory vis-à-vis the classical tradition in general, but on a particular concept: the poem as offering. The function of this concept in pagan Greek poetry has been well developed (Calame 1997, 2011), but it has yet to be applied to Gregory's poems, where it is complicated by Gregory's immense debt to both the classical and Judeo-Christian traditions. I will argue that Gregory, despite his self-conscious and often brilliant verbal imitation of pagan Greek literature, departs from pagan tradition by adding spiritual purity (καθαρότης) as a prerequisite for acceptable sacrifice, and from the Septuagint by affirming his own complete inability to please God on his own merits. By integrating these two contributions into the notion of poem as offering, which he inherits from both pagan and Christian texts, Gregory achieves a remarkable synthesis of the two traditions.

In pagan Greek religion, purity is often understood in terms of cleanliness: worshippers and the altar must be purified before sacrifice by, for example, hand-washing and sprinkling water around the altar (e.g. *Iliad* 1.312-17). In the Septuagint, which along with the Homeric poems would have been a major component of Gregory's education and intellectual milieu, this concern with physical cleanliness is certainly present. But several Septuagint passages go beyond the physical, claiming that spiritual purity is a necessary condition for acceptable sacrifices. David, for example, after his adultery, recognizes that his animal sacrifices will not please God until he has received a "clean heart" (καρδίαν καθάραν) and an "upright spirit" (πνεῦμα εὐθέως) (Psalm 51:10). True sacrifice, he says, is a broken spirit (πνεῦμα συντετριμμένον); thus external

acts of sacrifice are ineffective if the worshipper has not repented and become internally pure. The same idea appears elsewhere in the Septuagint. In 1 Samuel, for example, “hearing” and “listening” are considered superior to “sacrifice” and “the fat of rams” (15:22). In pagan Greek religion, however, the spiritual state of the worshipper does not receive the same emphasis: the sacrifice itself, if properly performed, can (but does not always) propitiate the god.

In one respect, however, pagan Greek religion and Judaism largely agree: the worshipper’s own merit – whether understood in physical or spiritual terms – could be sufficient, at least in principle, if not always in practice. The Psalmist often affirms his own innocence and uprightness as a basis for God to grant his request; Job, too, claims that he has done nothing unjust and that he has a pure prayer (εὐχὴ καθαρά) (Job 1:5). Christian theology, however, requires an intermediary: Christ, without whom the worshipper cannot please God.

For this reason, expressions of one’s own utter unworthiness are common in Christian writings, from Paul (1 Tim. 1:15) to Arsenius the Great, who said “I have done nothing good in your sight” (Migne 1864, col. 88). Gregory joins the chorus: “For I have never done anything worthy of you” (*Carm.* II.1.1.418). In fact, Gregory must ask God even for the privilege of praising him: “Father, be gracious to me. | Allow me to forever offer you | This act of worship (σέβασμα)” (*Carm.* I.1.30.36-38). The “act of worship” seems to be the hymn itself, a request echoed elsewhere in Gregory’s poetry. In this way, the right to make an offering – which previous traditions took for granted, even if the result was never guaranteed – has now become a privilege which must itself be requested. Thus Gregory unites the pagan and Judeo-Christian traditions, both of which allow the metaphorical sacrifice of hymns and poems, but at the same time he adds the Christian notion of the worshipper’s utter inability to please God without having already received his mercy.

## Bibliography

- Calame, Claude. 1997. "L'*Hymne homérique à Déméter* comme offrande: regard rétrospectif sur quelques catégories de l'anthropologie de la religion grecque." *Kernos* 10: 111-133.
- . 2011. "The *Homeric Hymns* as Poetic Offerings: Musical and Ritual Relationships with the Gods." In *The Homeric Hymns: Interpretative Essays*, edited by Andrew Faulkner, 334-58. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Faulkner, Andrew. 2010. "St. Gregory of Nazianzus and the Classical Tradition: The *Poemata Arcana qua Hymns*." *Philologus* 154: 78-87.
- Migne, J.-P., ed. 1864. *Patrologia Graeca*. Vol. 65. Paris: 1864.
- Simelidis, Christos. 2009. *Selected Poems of Gregory of Nazianzus*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht.
- . 2011. "Callimachus, Epigram 9.6 G.-P. and Gregory of Nazianzus, *Carmen* I.2.14.101." *ZPE* 176: 60-62.