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THE THEORY OF ἀποκατάστασις
IN *THE LIFE OF MOSES* BY GREGORY OF NYSSA

The term "apocatastasis" (ἀποκατάστασις) which now expresses the Origenistic teaching of universal salvation, used to imply return to the original condition and restoration. In this meaning, it was initially used in various fields of natural sciences. In medicine, for example, it meant the recovery of sick people and in astronomy – the rotation of planets and the cyclic tides. This astronomic interpretation of the term then moved to the teaching of Stoics, denoting the condition, where planets revert to their original position and ἐκπύρωσις takes place, which is followed by the restoration of the old world – apocatastasis.

Neo-Platonists perceived apocatastasis as the restoration of an individual soul.¹ This term is encountered very seldom in the Holy Scripture. In particular, it can be found twice in the *Old Testament*: in the first case, it denotes the return of the Jewish people to the Promised Land (*Jeremiah*: 16, 15; 50, 19) and in the other, the restoration of long-suffering Job to the original condition (*Job*: 8, 6; 33, 25).²

In the *New Testament*, this term acquired a new connotation. According to the Gospel of St. Matthew it implies the coming of Elijah, who will restore everything ("Elijah comes and will restore all things" – *Matthew*: 17, 11-12). Acts of the Apostles are of particular importance: "so that there may come times of refreshing from the presence of the Lord, and that he

¹ Ludlow M., *Universal Salvation: Eschatology in the Thought of Gregory of Nyssa and Karl Rahner*, Oxford 2000, 30-31. Since Neo-Platonists regard salvation as complete liberation from matter, not reincarnation, and apocatastasis implies cyclic reincarnation in future times, it has almost no soteriological connotations with Neo-Platonists.

² For the history of the term "ἀποκατάστασις" see Ludlow M., *Op. cit.*, 38-44.

may send Christ Jesus, who was ordained for you before, whom heaven must receive until the times of restoration of all things (ἄχρι χρόνων ἀποκαταστάσεως πάντων), which God spoke long ago by the mouth of his holy prophets.³ It is quite clear that in this case, apocatastasis acquires an eschatological meaning, implying the end of the world in accordance with the divine plan.

According to the dictionary by Friedhelm Mann, the term ἀποκατάστασις and the verb of the same root ἀποκαθίστημι can be encountered in 40 episodes in the works by Gregory of Nyssa⁴ and are used in almost all meanings in the works of the Cappadocian father. The theological perception of apocatastasis by Gregory of Nyssa is the most disputable issue in his theology. Gregory himself defined the most important aspect of the concept in the following manner: Resurrection is nothing other than restoration in the original (αρχαῖον) condition (ἀποκατάστασις).⁵ Thus, apocatastasis is peoples' restoration to their perfect original condition, which, according to the divine plan, has become possible through the mystery of resurrection. At the same time, the apocatastasis theory of Gregory of Nyssa has a universal context and it is this second aspect that gives rise to a dilemma in his theology: how can the idea of universal salvation be combined with individuals' ability of making a free choice and its role on the path of individuals' spiritual activities and their communion with God?

The idea of universality becomes most obvious in several works, in particular in the dialogue *De anima et resurrectione*, in which Macrina explains Psalm 118 and then the Epistle to the Philippians 2, 10.⁶ Another work is *The Life of Moses*, which is precisely about the idea of universal salvation (ἀποκατάστασις). In particular, the Cappadocian father explains the Egyptian Plagues.⁷ According to Gregory of Nyssa, the solar eclipse is an image of Hell (γεέννα) separated from the bosom of Abraham. The context makes it clear that the term γεέννα comprises the meaning of intermediate eschatology, as it is the Purgatory.

³ Acts 3, 20-21: ὅπως ἂν ἔλθωσιν καιροὶ ἀναψύξεως ἀπὸ προσώπου τοῦ κυρίου καὶ ἀποστείλῃ τὸν προκεχειρισμένον ὑμῖν χριστὸν Ἰησοῦν (21). ὅν δεῖ οὐρανὸν μεν δέξασθαι ἄχρι χρόνων ἀποκαταστάσεως πάντων ὃν ἐλάλησεν ὁ Θεὸς διὰ στόματος τῶν ἁγίων ἀπ' αἰνῶς αὐτοῦ προφητῶν.

⁴ Mann F., *Lexikon Gregorianum I*, Leiden 1999, 473-475.

⁵ Eccl., GNO V, 296,16-18; De hom. op. PG 44, 188C.

⁶ An et res., PG 46, 96C.

⁷ VM 57, 8-15; as well as: VM 58, pp. 7-13.

Having looked into Gregory's eschatological teaching, Italian scientist Salvatore Taranto concluded that in the 2nd century, the term "γεέννα" had the same meaning of intermediate purgatory as in Gregory of Nyssa's *The Life of Moses* and *De hominis opificio*. The scientist says that terms ἄδης and χάσμα differ from it, as the former denotes eternal Hell in Gregory's work. According to Gregory's allegorical explanation, in this episode, ashes (ἡ καμινιαία κόνις) are an image of the fire in Hell (διὰ τοῦ πυρός κατὰ τὴν γεένναν).⁸ In another episode, Gregory calls it purifying fire (καθάριστος πῦρ), which will melt and destroy evil.⁹

We can speak about two kinds of purgation with Gregory. One is ascetic life and moral perfection, when people purify themselves in their life in this world by means of their own choice and second is punishment after death, which, according to Gregory, continues for a certain period.¹⁰ Explaining the punishments allegorically, he, on the one hand, makes clear his idea that all kinds of passions and evil originate only from the free will of people, but on the other hand, he speaks about the possible (τάχα τις) ultimate salvation of the souls that find themselves in the darkness and fire of Hell.

There is a problem linked to this episode in Greek manuscripts. Most manuscripts are about apocatastasis – renewed restoration, which is to be expected after the purgatory punishments are administered. However, in the 8th century, Germanus of Constantinople regarded it as a false Origenistic insertion into Gregory's text. Based on this, the text is changed in some later manuscripts and it tells about movement from sin to virtue through belief in the Crucified and prospects for those, who previously lived like the Egyptians. In this regard, it would be interesting to simultaneously consider the critically established Greek text, an Old Georgian translation of the early 11th century, and a later Greek text with changes represented in a critical apparatus:

GNO VII/I VM 57, 8-58,13:

εἰ δὲ μετὰ τὴν τριήμερον ἐν σκότῳ κακοπάθειαν γίνεται καὶ τοῖς Αἰγυπτίοις ἢ τοῦ φωτὸς μετουσία, τάχα τις ἀπὸ τούτων ὀρμώμενος πρὸς τὴν ἀποκατάστασιν τὴν μετὰ ταῦτα ἐν τῇ βασιλείᾳ τῶν οὐρανῶν προσδοκωμένην τῶν ἐν τῇ γεένῃ καταδεδικασμένων ἀγάγοι τὸ νόημα.

⁸ The Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa, ed. By L. F. Mateo-Seco, G. Maspero, Brill 2010, 57.

⁹ Cf. Holl K., *Amphilochius von Ikonium in seinem Verhältnis zu den Kappadoziern*, Darmstadt 1969, 208.

¹⁰ Ludlow M., *Op. cit.*, 97-99.

καθώς φησιν ἡ ἱστορία, πρὸς γὰρ τὸ ἐξώτερον τὸ ψηλαφητὸν ἐκεῖνο σκότος πόλλην ἔν τε τῷ ῥήματι καὶ τῷ νοήματι τὴν συγγένειαν ἔχει. Λύεται δὲ τούτων ἐκάτερον τοῦ Μωϋσέως, καθὼς καὶ ἐν τῷ πρὸ τούτου νενοήται, ὑπὲρ τῶν ἐν τῷ σκότῳ τᾶς χειρας ἐκτείναντος. ὡσαύτως καὶ ἡ καμινιαία κόνις ἐκεῖνη, ἡ τὰς ὀδυνηρὰς φλυκτίδας τοῖς Αἰγυπτίοις ἐπάγουσα κατὰ λόγον ἂν νοηθεῖη διὰ τοῦ κατὰ τὸ ὄνομα τοῦτῆς καμίνου αἰνίγματος, ἡ διὰ τοῦ πυρὸς κατὰ τὴν γέννηαν ἀπειληθεῖσα κόλασις, ἡ μόνων ἀπτεται τῶν Αἰγυπτιαζόντων κατὰ τὸν βίον. εἰ δέ τις ἀληθῶς Ἰσραλίτης ἐστὶ καὶ τοῦ Ἀβραάμ υἱὸς καὶ πρὸς ἐκεῖνον τῷ βίῳ βλέπει ὡς δεῖξαι τῇ προαιρέσει τὴν πρὸς τοὺς ἐκλεκτοὺς ἀγχιστεῖαν τοῦ γένους, οὗτος ἀπαθῆς φυλάσσειται τῆς καμινιαία ἐκεῖνης ὀδύνης. γένοιτο δ' ἂν κακεινοῖς ποτὲ ἡ ἀποδοθεῖσα τῆς ἐκτάσεως τῶν Μωϋσέως χειρῶν ἐρμηνεῖα, θεραπεία τῆς ὀδύνης καὶ ἀπαλλαγὴ τῶν κολάσεων.

Georg. (P3, 363v):

As Moses stretched out (v) his hand, the Egyptians saw light. **Those alike, who entreated the true lawmaker, as we said above, were given the light and rescued from the darkness of sins and put under the light by Him.** And the ashes of the furnace, which brought a blister upon Egyptians, are an image of the torments by the fire of Gehenna, which hits only those, who live like the Egyptians. And if a genuine Israelite and a son of Abraham is similar to him, showing that he is a true son of outstanding parents, he will be immune to the torments of the furnace. **And those, who deserved the furnace with their deeds, may deserve healing and deliverance from the punishment by the stretching of the hand of Jesus, who is the genuine lawmaker.**

GNO VII/I 57

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10-14 post ὀρμώμενος loco πρὸς ... σκότος sequitur πρὸς τὴν ἀπὸ κακίας πρὸς ἀρετὴν δι᾿ ἐπιγνώσεως τοῦ σταυρωθέντος καὶ μετανοίας μετέστασιν τῶν πρὶν κατὰ τὸν βίον Αἰγυπτιαζόντων ἀγάγοι τὸ νόημα. τὸ γὰρ ψηλαφητὸν ἐκεῖνο σκότος, καθὼς φησιν ἡ ἱστορία, πρὸς τὸ τῆς ἀγνοίας καὶ ἁμαρτίας σκότος.

Jean Daniélou clarified the problem of authenticity of the idea of apocatastasis. He concluded that the change was added later to observe the holiness of the theological teaching of Gregory of Nyssa, because some doctrines of Origen were condemned in 543 and 553.¹¹

¹¹ Jean Daniélou, *Apocatastasis*, translated into Georgian by Magda Mchedlidze. In: *Attitude to Death in European Culture*, Tbilisi 2008, 163-184.

I would also like to touch on the Georgian translation of this episode here. Taking into account the fact that the translation was done in the 11th century by well-known figure Ephthymius of Athos, it is no surprise that he made changes in the original text. The Georgian translator abridged the original, eliminating the idea of apocatastasis and inserting instead a phrase, which indicates once again that genuine salvation is a result of genuine repentance (the first part of the translation in bold: those alike, who ... under the light by Him). However, the translator's last phrase is absolutely unexpected. On the one hand he replaced "the stretching of the hand of Moses" with the stretching of the hand of the genuine lawmaker – Jesus, which serves as an additional explanation and clarification of the soteriology of Gregory of Nyssa. On the other hand he translated the final phrase with a minor change, effectively agreeing to the salvation of those, who are in Hell or the idea of universal soteriology on salvation through the crucifixion of the genuine lawmaker (the second phrase in bold in the translation: (And those, who deserved ... the genuine lawmaker).

It is noteworthy that according to the critical edition by Werner Jaeger, a change was made in the first part of the episode and the last phrase remained unchanged. Presumably, the Georgian translator worked on the corrected version of the text by Gregory of Nyssa, which means that he translated the last sentence in accordance with the original text without changing it. However, the minor change made by Ephthymius in the translation points to a nuance: the translator seems to be speaking not about the dead, but about people living in this world, who are still able to avert punishment with God's mercy.

As regards the theory of apocatastasis and the theological issues that arise in connection with this teaching, the problem is that considering this idea in *The Life of Moses* or in other works, Gregory of Nyssa himself does not speak about its basis or connection with other theological problems. Gregory's teaching of universal salvation – ἀποκαταστάσις - originates from Origen. A. Mosshammer, who studied works by Gregory of Nyssa, considers his ideas diachronically, showing the evolution of his reasoning. In particular, Gregory is close to Origen at the initial stage, becoming mostly autonomous and original later.¹²

Differences between Gregory's and Origen's ἀποκαταστάσις teachings can be viewed from various angles. The difference lies first and foremost in Gregory's idea of transcendence and infinity of the divine nature. Man's

¹² Mosshammer A. A., *Historical Time and the Apokatastasis according to Gregory of Nyssa*, St. Patr 27, 1991, 70-93.

endless spiritual advancement towards the Almighty continues even after resurrection, i. e. the termination of the spatial and temporal diastemity, as the divine nature is always transcendent. It is possible for man to easily revert to God even after death through purification and perception of divine virtue. Therefore, the idea of universal salvation does not suppress human freedom.¹³ The idea of the infinity of divine nature rules out the adiaSTEMIC confluence of creatures with the genuine essence and Origen's theory of reach the Almighty, saturation (κόρος), and cyclic perfection. The Alexandrian theologian's teaching of the reversion of spiritual creatures to the initial holy intellectual state is absolutely incompatible with Gregory's theological system, as Gregory's anthropological teaching in general and his teaching of man's resurrection implies the preservation of the identity of body contrary to Origen's spirituality. According to Daniélou's observation, the Cappadocian theologian speaks about different states of resurrected and earthly body, while Origen regards psychical and spiritual bodies as two different bodies.¹⁴

Some researchers hold the opinion that the teaching of the unity of human nature does not provide grounds for universal salvation in the theory of Gregory of Nyssa.¹⁵ Numerous researchers studying his works confirm that he uses the concept of universal salvation in the theology of Genesis, but not in soteriology.¹⁶ The role of universal nature should be understood as a means for salvation, but not as a reason or foundation for salvation. The main foundation for the salvation of the world lies in the existential non-existence of evil and its defeat by the unlimited divine virtue. Evil is a space limited by boundaries (πέρας 201C, 208A op. hom.) and extreme edge, which is enveloped by opposite reality.

Apocatastasis or reverting to the initial blissful state and crossing this boundary are an act marked with the all-encompassing divine goodness. Providing an allegorical explanation of the punishments for the Egyptians in *The Life of Moses*, Gregory, on the one hand, clearly defines the idea that all passions and evil derive only from man's free will and on the other hand, speaks about possible ultimate salvation of the souls of those, who are in the darkness and fire of Hell. The genuine free will, which differs

¹³ Ludlow M., op. cit., 98.

¹⁴ Daniélou J., op. cit., 178-179.

¹⁵ Cf. Holl K., op. cit., 207-208. In: Kees R. J. Die Lehre von der Oikonomia Gottes in de Oratio Catechetica Gregors von Nyssa, Leiden-New York-Köln 1995, 271-277; Hübner R. M., Die Einheit des Leibes Christi bei Gregor von Nyssa, Leiden 1974, 63, 225-226.

¹⁶ Ludlow M., Op. cit., 89-95; Zachhuber, The Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa, 59.

from man's ambivalent free will, implies its absolute compatibility with divine will if only after death, which can be regarded as a certain resolution of this dilemma.

In *The Life of Moses*, this contradiction (free will/universal salvation) is weakened by the vivid image of crucified God in the context of salvation: the Egyptians, or the people living in infidelity, are relieved of punishment by the stretching of Moses' hand – allegorically, the crucifixion of the Messiah. Gregory's theology of cross put forward in *De Tridui ... spatio* makes it clear that the heavenly, earthly and subterranean worlds are ultimately presented to the almighty divine essence as a harmonious unity, not as a contradictory variety.¹⁷

Gregory of Nyssa describes a similar image of the universal return of creatures to the divine bosom and their unification in *The Life of Moses*, in which he contemplates ultimate purification of sinful souls and their elevation in the boundless goodness of God together with people of free will inclined to virtue, which means that the force of salvation of the Cross will finally destroy evil. This is Gregory's doctrine of the eschatology *συμφωνία* of united world (τὴν τοῦ παντὸς πρὸς τὸ ἀγαθὸν συμφωνίαν – An et res.), harmonious recognition of divine greatness and, correspondingly, destruction of evil.

¹⁷ The Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa, Cross, 191-195 TRID SPAT 739-742. In addition: Dolidze T., *κίνησις* – Begriff der griechischen Philosophie bei Gregor von Nyssa (Die Lehre über die kosmische Bewegung), in: Gregory of Nyssa, *Homilies on the Batitudes*, Proceedings of the 8th International Colloquium on Gregory of Nyssa, ed. R. Drobner, A. Viviano, Brill/Leiden/Boston, Köln 2000, 436-437.