



Rendering Trauma Beneficial... for Whom? Gregory of Nyssa's Homily 12 on the Song of Songs

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Abstract: Gregory's *Homily 12 on the Song of Songs* offers one opportunity to trace the legacies of the compelling claim, in Galatians 6:17, that Paul bears "the marks of Christ" on his body. Gregory appeals to this verse to aid his exegesis of Song 5:7 (a violent passage he calls "repellant in its plain sense") and develop his claims that "the wound", after all, is "an admirable thing". My paper probes social and ethical dimensions of this exegetical and cultural conceptual lineage. It surveys wounds and marks in Homily 12; suggests how other works by Gregory support "striking and wounding" as enacting spiritual healing (ἰάσιν); considers contexts for violence in the name of guardianship and instruction in late antiquity; and closes by considering violence enacted in the name of Christianization and "civilization" in Canada's residential schools. This study embeds Gregory's treatment of Gal 6:17 in a larger attempt to raise critical questions about the persistence of benevolent understandings of trauma and violence across diverse Christian exegetical contexts and the harms such understandings may perpetuate.

Keywords: Gregory of Nyssa; Galatians; Song of Songs; reception; exegesis; allegory; trauma; wounds; blows; violence; benefit; instruction; healing; late antiquity; Christian; legacy; residential schools; Canada

1. Introduction

While questions of reception remain critical to this paper, Galatians 6:17 as invoked in Gregory of Nyssa's *Homily 12 on the Song of Songs* remains one allusion of many put to the task of interpreting a violent and troubling Scriptural passage "profitably". Properly speaking, the subject of Gregory's exegesis (and thus the text primarily "received") in this collection of homilies is the *Song of Songs*, not this passage from Paul; but of course, the array of allusions selected to aid this exegetical task and the ways in which they are deployed can tell us much about what kinds of texts were considered authoritative at this time and the practical con-

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texts in which they were embedded. In the section that follows, I briefly introduce Gregory's collected *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, gesturing at the audience he identifies and the exegetical concerns he outlines in a dedicatory letter defending his topic and method.

One of my simpler aims with this paper is to draw attention to the fact that Gregory, too, seemed to struggle to make sense of the violence elaborated in Song 5:7, the passage this homily treats. Reflection on the challenges and responsibilities of the exegete are not concerns unique to modern readers but rather represent one of the legacies I hope to set out here.

The other legacy which drives my inquiry is the link between trauma, violence, instruction, and spiritual progress I find variously expressed across this text – supported by allusions to Proverbs, Deuteronomy, and the Psalms alongside Gregory's allusion to Galatians 6:17. Gregory of Nyssa is not unique among his peers in asserting that enduring trauma can convey spiritual edification and identification with Christ; he does not, however, consider the harms that may result from attempts to bestow such edification and identification on others. For the purposes of this paper, I use "trauma" to refer to wounds and wounding, as the Greek term often connotes, and put aside distinctions between physical and psychic wounding (Gregory, for his part, seems to cover both). Tracing associations of trauma and violence with spiritual improvement across several intertexts (and some further-flung contexts), I argue that contemporary theological attempts to make sense of such associations ought to contend with the harms such associations have wrought. As an example, I reflect briefly on the violence inflicted upon Indigenous children in Canada's residential school system in the name of Christian education.

2. Gregory of Nyssa's *In Canticum Canticorum*²

Gregory's *In Canticum Canticorum* (a collection of fifteen homilies on the Song of Songs) is one of his later works, a work that Norris, following Daniélou, sees as belonging to "the very last years of [Gregory's]

² For the purposes of this paper, I work with the translation of Richard A. Norris, which is based on the Greek text of Hermann Langerbeck, published in 1960 as volume VI of Werner Jaeger's edition of the works of Gregory of Nyssa (*Gregorii Nysseni Opera*). I provide the corresponding references to this volume of the GNO throughout. *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on the Song of Songs*, tr. R.A. Norris Jr, Atlanta 2012 (hereafter: Norris).

life”, along with *De vita Mosis* (*Life of Moses*) and *De perfectione* (*On Perfection*), works with cognate themes³. The influence of Origen’s *Commentarius in Canticum* (*Commentary on the Song of Songs*) on Gregory’s homilies on the Songs is apparent in terms of content, method, and form⁴.

Gregory’s *In Canticum Canticorum* is prefaced by a famous dedicatory letter addressed to Olympias, a figure likely familiar to scholars of the fourth-century church fathers⁵. In this letter, Gregory writes that he has undertaken study of the Song of Songs in response to Olympias’ repeated requests⁶. While some scholars imagine a monastic audience for these homilies, Gregory appears to have intended these homilies for a lay audience; as he writes, “more fleshly folk”, so “that some direction may be given [...] for the sake of the spiritual and immaterial welfare of their souls”⁷. However, yet another intended audience is apparent: in this prefatory letter, Gregory also addresses himself to critics of his exegetical

³ Norris, *Introduction*, p. xx. Among the overlapping themes, prominent within these works is a) the necessity of bodily mortification/purification of the senses to progress in virtue and spiritual ascent; b) Gregory’s notion of *epektasis*, or the perpetuity of spiritual progress. Indeed, according to Ilaria Ramelli, Gregory reads the Song of Songs entirely as an “allegorical expression of the soul’s infinite tension (ἐπέκτασις) toward God”. (I. Ramelli, *Apokatastasis and Epektasis in Cant and Origen*, in: *Gregory of Nyssa: In Canticum Canticorum: Analytical and Supporting Studies. Proceedings of the 13th International Colloquium on Gregory of Nyssa, Rome, 17-20 September 2014*, ed. G. Maspero – M. Brugarolas – I. Vigorelli, Leiden 2018, p. 314).

⁴ As Ramelli puts it: “Origen’s importance in shaping the Christian exegetical tradition of the Song of Songs is hard to over-estimate; his importance in shaping Gregory’s Cant is still harder”. (Though she warns: “This does not mean that every exegetical solution in *Cant* depends on Origen. Gregory’s reception of Origen was insightful and creative; it is the deepest, most intelligent and exact I know”. Ramelli, *Apokatastasis and Epektasis in Cant and Origen*, p. 313).

⁵ A young widow (and, eventually, deaconess) of noble descent and high reputation, Olympias is known for her devotion to (and correspondence with) prominent Christian ascetic and ecclesiastic figures in the fourth century.

⁶ Gregorius Nyssenus, *Prologus, In Canticum Canticorum homiliae*, GNO VI 4, Norris 2:4-6. Norris reasons (Contra Daniélou) that such requests must have come “in the year 391 or shortly thereafter” and dates the delivery of Gregory’s homilies to the years after that, *circa* (and perhaps even after) 394. See Norris, *Introduction*, p. xxi.

⁷ Gregorius Nyssenus, *Prologus, In Canticum Canticorum homiliae*, GNO VI 4, Norris 2:12-14: ἀλλ’ ἐφ’ ὅτε τοῖς σαρκωδεστέροις χειραγωγήαν τινὰ γενέσθαι πρὸς τὴν πνευματικὴν τε καὶ ἄϋλον τῆς ψυχῆς κατάστασιν. Olympias is markedly set apart from this group: Gregory is convinced the “eye of her soul” “looks without hindrance toward the undefiled beauty” by means of this work. See Gregorius Nyssenus, *Prologus, In Canticum Canticorum homiliae*, GNO VI 4, Norris 2 lines 10-12.

method (and, allusively, the “allegorical method” associated with Origen)⁸. So, while these works of exegesis arise at the request of Olympias, they are intended for a broader audience: at one level, everyday Christians who need assistance discerning the “usefulness” of this provocative text; at another level, for more authoritative readers, his exegetical opponents. Both of these intended audiences figure into my own (ongoing) reckoning with this homily, its reception of Gal 6:17, and the question of violence (symbolic and otherwise) as preserved and perpetuated by these interpretive histories.

3. Homily 12: Survey of wounds/wounding

Wounds and acts of wounding/marking are represented frequently throughout this homily with a variety of terms and range of meanings. I offer a brief survey of these occurrences here in order to convey something of this range before focussing on section four of the homily and the benefits it accords to wounding.

- Section 1, Passions wound. Gregory describes the passions as possessing the capacity to “wound the soul” (τη ψυχη λυμαινόμενον)⁹. This occurs in a discussion of the voluntary mortification of the bodily passions and “earthly members”¹⁰.
- Section 1: Blows attend vice. Couched within a discussion of the “dual nature” of humans, the attendant (opposed) motions of these two natures, and our powers of self-rule (stationed between the two)¹¹

⁸ Gregorius Nyssenus, *Prologus, In Canticum Canticorum homiliae*, GNO VI 4, Norris 3: “It seems right to some church leaders [...] to stand by the letter of the Holy Scriptures in all circumstances, and they do not agree that Scripture says anything for our profit by way of enigmas and below-the-surface meanings (δι’ αἰνιγμάτων και ὑπονοιῶν). For this reason I judge it necessary first of all to defend my practice against those who thus charge us”. Norris confidently identifies these as “representatives of the so-called Antiochene School, teachers such as Diodore of Tarsus or Theodore of Mopsuestia” (Norris, *Introduction*, p. xxiii).

⁹ Gregorius Nyssenus, *In Canticum canticorum homiliae XII*, GNO VI 344, Norris 364:8.

¹⁰ Gregorius Nyssenus, *In Canticum canticorum homiliae XII*, GNO VI 343-45, Norris 362-65.

¹¹ Gregorius Nyssenus, *In Canticum canticorum homiliae XII*, GNO VI 345, Norris 364:19-20: “For in us there is a dual nature. The one is fine and intelligent and light, while the other is coarse and material and heavy”.

is a reference to the Parable of the Faithful or Unfaithful Servant¹² in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Posed in counterpoint to the “faithful and prudent steward” who “feeds his master’s ‘household’” (Matt 24:45/Luke 12:42) is the “wicked slave” who “afflicts God’s household with blows (πληγαῖς αἰκιζόμενος) because he keeps company with drunkards (Matt 24:48–49/Luke 12:45), for in truth a blow (πληγή) marks the flourishing of vice as over against the virtues”¹³. This is then related to what Gregory calls the (main) theme of work: “it is through death that the soul is raised up”¹⁴.

- Section 1, Humanity bears the mark of life. A description of humanity as created bearing not “the melancholy mark (χαρακτῆρα) of death’s downcasting” but with “the joyous mark of life” (τῷ φαιδρῷ τῆς ζωῆς χαρακτῆρι)¹⁵. Accompanied by language of beauty (κάλλος) and likeness (ὁμοίωμα)]¹⁶.
- Section 4, Wounding provides benefits¹⁷. The benefits of striking are elaborated via Scriptural precedent (Prov 23:13-14; Deut 32:39; Ps 22:5-6). Gregory claims it is “a fine thing” to be found by watchmen, laying out the benefits of belonging to a master who provides. The bride boasts of her wounds (as integral to progress upwards); the bride is marked by her wounds; the “divine rod and comforting staff which by a blow works healing” is revealed to be the Spirit; Paul bears similar wounds and similarly exults in them (Gal 6:17). Ultimately, Gregory tells us, this means that wounds mark vices transformed to virtues by the power of Spirit, and wounding leads to the unveiling of the Bride’s beauty (see “tunics of hide” teaching, footnote 18 below).
- Section 4: Analogy w Isaiah’s vision (Isa 6:1-7). Like the rod’s blow, the burning coal purifies and occasions revelation. “For just as in our text the Bride says that she was struck and wounded by the watchmen

¹² See treatment in K.R. Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus*, Grand Rapids 2018.

¹³ Gregorius Nyssenens, *In Canticum canticorum homiliae* XII, GNO VI 346, Norris 366:1-2.

¹⁴ Gregorius Nyssenens, *In Canticum canticorum homiliae* XII, GNO VI 347, Norris 366:13-14.

¹⁵ Gregorius Nyssenens, *In Canticum canticorum homiliae* XII, GNO VI 348, Norris 366:29; 366:30-31.

¹⁶ Gregorius Nyssenens, *In Canticum canticorum homiliae* XII, GNO VI 348, Norris 366:24-31.

¹⁷ Closer analysis of this section follows.

and that in this way she was stripped of the covering of her veil, so in the case of Isaiah's vision, instead of the veil, the 'lintel of the door' was lifted so that he might have an unhindered vision of the shrine, while instead of watchmen the seraphim are mentioned, instead of the rod, a coal, and instead of the blow, a burning. What is more, the purpose is the same, both in the case of the Bride and in that of the prophet's soul, namely, purity. Hence just as the prophet was not hurt when burned by the coal but was made spending and bright, so too in this case the Bride is not occasioned any suffering by the blow she receives but glories in the freedom of access accorded her by the removal of the curtain, which is here called a veil"¹⁸.

- Section 4: Wounds represent unattainable desire. Gregory offers an alternative reading: the soul that seeks the "Unattainable" and "Incomprehensible" is, "in a certain sense, struck and wounded by the hopelessness of what she seeks, judging that her desire for the good is imperfect and falls short of its fruition". The bride is "struck in the heart" by "God's chosen arrow"¹⁹.

4. The "sweet blow" that heals/provides/delivers: Gregory's treatment of Song 5:7

“Εὔροσάν με οἱ φύλακες οἱ κυκλοῦντες ἐν τῇ πόλει, ἐπάταξάν με, ἐτραυμάτισάν με, ἦραν τὸ θέριστρον ἀπ ἐμοῦ οἱ φύλακες τῶν τειχέων –

¹⁸ Gregorius Nyssenus, *In Canticum canticorum homiliae XII*, GNO VI 369, Norris 388:2-11. Norris emphasises Gregory's association of "veil" with the "tunics of skin" of Gen 3:21, a motif developed across many of his works. Its connection to baptismal ritual and theology is clearer in *Cant 11*, where Gregory "recalls the baptismal ceremony of the removal of the tunics of hide and the clothing in white garments that restore all of its beauty to the soul" (L.F. Mateo-Seco, *Mysticism*, in: *The Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa*, ed. L.F. Mateo-Seco – G. Maspero, Leiden 2010, p. 526-527). See also the entry by Mateo-Seco, *Tunics of Hide*, p. 768-770: "The theme of the 'tunics of hide' has a long tradition among the Alexandrians. The interpretation of the symbolism is however various [...] according to Gregory, the 'tunics of hide' do not designate the human body, but the 'mortality' of the said body, its 'carnal' character". Mateo-Seco notes that according to Daniélou, "Gregory appears to be the first Christian to use the theme of the 'tunics of hide' in the perspective of the spiritual ascent" (L.F. Mateo-Seco, *Tunics of Hide*, in: *The Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa*, ed. L.F. Mateo-Seco – G. Maspero, Leiden 2010, p. 769).

¹⁹ Gregorius Nyssenus, *In Canticum canticorum homiliae XII*, GNO VI 369; 370, Norris 388:16-18; 25-6.

“The watchmen who go their rounds in the city found me, they struck me, they wounded me, the guards of the walls took my veil away from me”.

Gregory explicitly addresses the difficulty of contending with this verse in its ‘plain sense’ (κατὰ τὸ πρόχειρον): “Now the things that the Bride adds at this point refer in their plain sense to very unhappy circumstances”, he admits. “Yet for all that they seem to me to serve the very same purpose and to be concerned with ascent to higher and nobler things [...]”²⁰. Gregory thus works to recuperate this verse by aligning it to his ongoing discussion of spiritual ascent. Gregory’s drive to recuperate this challenging verse (and to resolve the difficulties the Song as a whole presents to “fleshier” readers) reflects his commitment to the interpretive principle articulated in his prefatory letter: “In our earnest search for what is profitable in the inspired Scripture (2Tim 3:16), there is nothing to be found that is unsuitable”²¹. The authoritativeness of Scripture requires Gregory to make suitable sense of what strikes him at first as repugnant. He does so via multiple angles.

According to Gregory, the logic of poem dictates that “what prepares the way for the good is itself in every sense a good”²². “If then the removal of the veil is a good thing (ἀγαθὸν)”, he writes, “so too, in every way, will be the blow (ἡ πληγὴ) and the wound (τὸ τραῦμα) by which its removal is accomplished”²³.

Gregory then appeals to Scriptural precedent to see whether such terms “are employed to refer to something nobler and then to interpret the sense of this text accordingly”²⁴. The first allusion he offers is from

²⁰ Gregorius Nyssenus, *In Canticum canticorum homiliae XII*, GNO VI 363-65, Norris 379: 20-23.

²¹ Gregorius Nyssenus, *Prologus, In Canticum Canticorum homiliae*, GNO VI 4-5: “[...] if something is stated | in a concealed manner by way of enigmas and below-the-surface meanings, and so is void of profit in its plain sense, such passages we turn over in our minds, just as the Word teaches us in Proverbs, so that we may understand what is said either as a parable or as a dark saying or as a word of the wise or as an enigma (cf. Prov 1:6). One may wish to refer to the analogical interpretation of such sayings as ‘tropology’ or ‘allegory’ or by some other name. We shall not quarrel about the name as long as a firm grasp is kept on thoughts that edify”, Norris, *Preface*, 2-4.

²² Gregorius Nyssenus, *In Canticum canticorum homiliae XII*, GNO VI 361, Norris 380:20-21.

²³ Gregorius Nyssenus, *In Canticum canticorum homiliae XII*, GNO VI 361, Norris 380:22-23.

²⁴ Gregorius Nyssenus, *In Canticum canticorum homiliae XII*, GNO VI 361, Norris 380:26-29.

Proverbs: striking with a rod delivers (ῥυσθῆναι)²⁵ the soul from death. “How does Wisdom free the soul of a youth from death? What does she plan to do to prevent the youth from dying? [...] ‘If you strike (πατάξῃς) him with a rod (ῥάβδος)’”, says she, ‘he will not die. For you will strike him with a rod, and you will free his soul from death’ (Prov 23:13-14)”²⁶.

Gregory thus understands the Bride’s “they struck me” to signify immortality: “It is not possible for the soul to be freed from death except it be struck with the rod”²⁷. “We are shown, then, by these words that it is a fine thing to be struck, precisely because it is truly a fine thing for the soul to be freed from death. The prophet says that God too acts in this

²⁵ Gregorius Nyssenus, *In Canticum canticorum homiliae XII*, GNO VI 361, Norris 380:35. From ῥύομαι; *to draw to oneself*, i.e. *draw out of danger; to rescue, save, deliver; to save from*; also, *to save from an illness, cure; to set free, redeem*, II.; ἐκ δουλοσύνης. II. generally, *to shield, guard, protect*, of guardian gods, chiefs, etc. See H.G. Liddell – R. Scott. *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon: Founded upon the Seventh Edition of Liddell and Scott’s Greek-English Lexicon*, v. 7, Oxford 1889, p. 720.

²⁶ Gregorius Nyssenus, *In Canticum canticorum homiliae XII*, GNO VI 361, Norris 380:30-33. The rod that strikes and heals/delivers from death sounds very much to my ears like the implement of a ritual specialist. Indeed, the online LSJ includes rod, magic wand, staff of office, wand borne by the ῥαψωδός, and rod for chastisement among the wide range of meanings for ῥάβδος. Additionally, the entry offered by the *Encyclopedia of the Bible and its Reception* on Moses’ Rod in the Hebrew Bible notes that “Moses’ rod is a serpent-rod, which transforms into a snake, and it can be the biblical equivalent of the Egyptian serpent rod or caduceus (Nissim: 223). In Egypt the serpent or serpent rod was associated with magical powers” “[...] Since the context of the motif of Moses’ rod is mostly Egypt, its origin may also be sought there” (*Moses’ Rod, Hebrew Bible/Old Testament*, in: *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception*, v. 19, Berlin – New York 2021, p. 1163). Homily 12 explicitly treats wonders worked by Moses’ rod, and Moses remains an oft-invoked analogue and model of spiritual ascent throughout the *Cant.* While the wonderworking qualities of the Mosaic rod *qua* wand still resonate here (as well as its role in providing deliverance), Philo’s take on the rod is even more telling: “In Leg. 2.89-90 Philo [...] offers an allegorical interpretation of Moses’ rod as ‘instruction’ (παιδεία). This elucidation of Moses’ rod is accompanied by Philo’s construal of the hand as ‘the symbol of action’ (σύμβολον πράξεως). For it is a virtue for one’s actions to be supported by education, as one’s hand is supported by a rod” (*Moses’ Rod*, p. 1164). Gregory, too, understands hands as related to action and indeed, agency: the Bride’s hands, dripping myrrh (Song 5:5) are “those motions of the soul that bring action about”, with myrrh representative of the voluntary mortification of the passions. I suspect this is Philo’s influence, mediated through Origen, but that remains a matter for further investigation. The link between the rod, instruction and virtue is particularly compelling here.

²⁷ Gregorius Nyssenus, *In Canticum canticorum homiliae XII*, GNO VI 361, Norris 380:34-6.

way: by killing he gives life, and by striking, heals. For it says: 'I will kill and I will make alive; I will strike (πατάξω) and I will heal' (ιάσομαι) (Deut 32:39)"²⁸. Unfortunately, Gregory does not elaborate on the nature of this healing, though one can infer from the preceding (footnote 25) that understandings of baptism and catechism as dying to the old man to put on the new apply.

Gregory here shifts slightly in his estimation of the rod's benefits: not only does it heal, it provides:

That is why David said that the effect of a rod of this sort is not affliction but comfort: 'Your rod and your staff, they comfort me' (Ps 22:5-6). Through them the divine table is prepared for him, and all the other things that this psalm mentions in the lines that follow this one: both the oil that anoints his head and the unmixed wine in the cup, which works a sober drunkenness; and the mercy that happily pursues him; and length of life in God's house. If, then, that sweet blow (ἡ γλυκεῖα ἐκείνη πληγῆ) supplies these good things according to both the teaching of Proverbs and the word of the prophet, it is assuredly a good thing to be struck by the rod that is the source of the abundance of so many good things²⁹.

Note that the association of the rod with striking still inheres; but the source of the blows is also the source of abundance. This "sweet blow" that "supplies good things" anticipates resonant images to come: Moses striking the rock (Ps 77:20); the wound from which water pours forth³⁰. Allusions to the rod and staff and shepherding imagery here bear affinities with baptismal imagery (more to come). Here, Gregory merges the motifs of striking and provision, a merger he maintains for the remainder of the homily.

Gregory's exegesis of the actions of the watchmen in this verse turns on two (interrelated) points of analogy. The first is the motif of "finding": the Bride is found by the watchmen, as the Good Shepherd finds the lost sheep (Luke 15:4-7); as the lost drachma was found (Luke 15:8-10); as

²⁸ Gregorius Nyssenus, *In Canticum canticorum homiliae XII*, GNO VI 362, Norris 382:2-4.

²⁹ Gregorius Nyssenus, *In Canticum canticorum homiliae XII*, GNO VI 362, Norris 382:4-12.

³⁰ Gregorius Nyssenus, *In Canticum canticorum homiliae XII*, GNO VI 367-8, Norris 386:18-20.

God finds His servant David and anoints him (Ps 88:21)³¹. The second is the motif of ownership and the benefits conferred by belonging to (being the possession of) an owner/benefactor. Elaborating on the analogy with David, found and anointed by the Lord, Gregory enumerates the benefits that follow:

And since David became the possession (κτημα) of the one who had found him, let us hear what he was counted worthy of: ‘My hand’, it says, ‘will help him, and my right hand will strengthen him. His enemy will gain nothing from him, and the son of lawlessness will not harm him, and I will cut his enemies to pieces before his face and put those who hate him to flight (Ps 88:22-24) – not to mention the rest of blessings that the list contains³².

The striking/wounding the Bride endures is also a good thing because it occurs at hands of watchmen, understood by Gregory to be “angels” or “ministering spirits” guarding the walls of the city (soul)³³. These figures represent benevolent/protective force rather than violent aggression:

[...] if either ‘the dangers of Hades’ (Ps 114:3) found her or it said that she had been come upon by thieves, it would have been a hard thing indeed for her [...]; but if the watchmen who make their rounds in the city find her, to be apprehended in that way is the happiest thing possible. For the person that has been found by the watcher cannot be robbed by thieves³⁴.

This passage in particular calls to mind discussions of baptismal sealing in the homilies of the Cappadocians. Gregory of Nazianzus, for example, writes: “If you fortify yourself with the σφραγίς, marking your souls and your body with the chrism and with the Spirit, what can happen to you? This is, even in this life, the greatest security you can have. The sheep that has been branded (ἐσφραγισμένον) is not easily taken by a trick, but the sheep that bears no mark is the prey of

³¹ Gregorius Nyssenus, *In Canticum canticorum homiliae XII*, GNO VI 364, Norris 382:33-37; 384:1.

³² Gregorius Nyssenus, *In Canticum canticorum homiliae XII*, GNO VI 364-5, Norris 384:1-6.

³³ Gregorius Nyssenus, *In Canticum canticorum homiliae XII*, GNO VI 364, Norris 382:29-32.

³⁴ Gregorius Nyssenus, *In Canticum canticorum homiliae XII*, GNO VI 363, Norris 382:19-23.

thieves”³⁵. Gregory of Nyssa similarly encourages: “Hasten, sheep, towards the σφραγίδα and the σημεῖον of the cross, a protection against evils”³⁶. Belonging to the right master confers protective benefits³⁷.

As my colleagues have noted, the sealing imagery deployed in early Christian texts spans a variety of origins and inflections: the branding of sheep, the tattooing of slaves, criminals and military recruits, and the consecration of religious devotees by way of stigmata are all Greco-Roman social practices of marking the body that resonate with fourth- and fifth-century baptismal figurations of the σφραγίς³⁸. The σφραγίς, the σημεῖον and the στίγμα are associated with identifiability, possession, and power. Though subjugated, a marked sheep, slave, or recruit enjoys (at least, as per common patristic interpretation) the protection of the entity to which it belongs. Daniélou likewise notes precedents for this confluence of marked bodies, ownership and protective power in the Hebrew Bible, spanning the mark of Cain (Gen 4:15)³⁹, the marks of the future

³⁵ Gregorius Nazianzus, *Oratio* 40, 15, SCh 358, p. 228, tr. J. Daniélou, *The Bible and the Liturgy*, London 1964, p. 56-57. Drawn from my discussion of baptismal sealing in M. Dasios, *Revealing from Above What Is Hidden Below: Macrina's Seal and Gregory's Hermeneutics of Optimism*, JECS 30/1 (2022) p. 41-42, n. 36.

³⁶ Gregorius Nyssenus, *Adversus eos qui differunt baptismum oratio*, PG 46, 417B, tr. J. Daniélou, *The Bible and the Liturgy*, p. 56 n. 5); as above: Dasios, *Revealing from Above*, p. 42, n. 37.

³⁷ The paragraph that follows is slightly adapted from my discussion of sealing in *Revealing from Above*, p. 41-42. Gregory's treatment (*Vita Macrinae* 31) of the cruciform scar on Macrina's breast, marking the site of a miraculous cure, bears further analysis here but must be put aside for another time.

³⁸ See V. Burrus, *Macrina's Tattoo*, “The Journal of medieval and early modern studies” 33/3 (2003) p. 403; J. Daniélou, *The Bible and the Liturgy*, London 1964, p. 54-69. Both discuss these usages.

³⁹ Interestingly, the figure of Cain, who bears a mark signifying both punishment and protection, also informs fourth-century disciplinary contexts: when Chrysostom counsels on child-rearing, Cain is linked for the sake of instruction to scrutiny and fear of judgment. Blake Leyerle relates that Chrysostom instructs parents to convey Cain's state to their children by describing his punishment thusly: ‘Just as when you are standing before your teacher full of anxiety over whether you are about to be beaten, you tremble and are afraid, even so did that man live continuously, because he had offended God’ (B. Leyerle, *John Chrysostom and the Strategic Use of Fear*, in: *Social Control in Late Antiquity: The Violence of Small Worlds*, ed. K. Cooper – J. Wood, Cambridge 2020, p. 176). Here and elsewhere Leyerle charts Chrysostom's complex assessments of the benefits of fear for Christians, especially for children. According to Leyerle, Chrysostom advocated that “Others in childlike positions of dependency, such as women and slaves, should also be

Israel (Ezek 9:4), and early Christian characterizations of circumcision as a sealing or consecration⁴⁰. In these contexts, the branded or marked body denotes belonging, protection and the promise of restitution, liberation or salvation⁴¹. This resonates, too, with Paul's proclamation in Galatians: "From now on, let no one make trouble for me; for I carry the marks of Jesus branded on my body" (Gal 6:17)⁴².

While Gregory does not use the term σφραγίς to describe the marks the Bride "boasts" of receiving, he does use the related term "τύπος" alongside the terms "τραύμα" and "πληγή" to refer to the Bride's wounds⁴³. The allusion to Gal 6:17 works within Gregory's exegesis to connect the motifs of the "divine rod and comforting staff" which deliver "healing blows" with continence or control, understood as one of the fruits of the Spirit (Gal 5:22-23):

And the meaning is this: that divine rod and comforting staff, which by a blow works healing, is the Spirit, whose fruit is those good things that Paul enumerates, and, among their number continence, the teacher of the virtuous life (ἡ παιδαγωγός τῆς ἐναρέτου πολιτείας ἐγκράτεια). For Paul too, who bore the mark of such blows, similarly exulted in wounds of this sort when he said, 'I bear on my body the marks of Christ' (Gal 6:17), displaying that weakness in every vice by which the power that belongs to Christ is brought to perfection in virtue⁴⁴.

constrained by fear" (Leyerle, *John Chrysostom*, p. 174, n. 6). This clustering of concepts (mark/seal/brand; ownership/dependence; instruction/punishment/fear; providence/protection/deliverance) remains of interest.

⁴⁰ Daniélou, *The Bible and the Liturgy*, p. 60, 63. See also Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, p. 196, 486, 514, 559-560, cited in Dasios, *Revealing from Above*, p. 42 n. 38.

⁴¹ Tertullian's association of the ring given to the prodigal son in Luke 15:22 with the "sign of baptism" (understood, as Ferguson suggests, in contractual terms) similarly resonates with these themes of belonging and the promise of restitution. See Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, p. 348, cited in Dasios, *Revealing from Above*, p. 42, n. 39.

⁴² See H. Lietzmann, *An die Galater*, Handbuch zum Neuen Testament 10, Tübingen 1932, for Paul's marks as/and amuletic protection. Cited in Dasios, *Revealing from Above*, p. 42, n. 40.

⁴³ Gregorius Nyssenus, *In Canticum canticorum homiliae XII*, GNO 365, Norris 384:10-16.

⁴⁴ Gregorius Nyssenus, *In Canticum canticorum homiliae XII*, GNO 365-66, Norris 384:17-20.

This explanation deepens the connection to Galatians while simultaneously preserving echoes of the associations we've been tracing between the rod, instruction/guardianship, and virtue. Here the rod and the endurance of blows, even if understood allegorically, remain emblematic of productive pedagogy.

In the verses Gregory assembles from Scripture to help him read the "unhappy circumstances" the Bride endures as beneficial, being "struck" is the act of a benevolent power, an act that occasions transformation. The Bride is marked and improved by her wounds. The rod, the blows, and the wounds it inflicts connote healing, deliverance, and instruction bearing spiritual fruit. It is worth asking, however: what paradigms does the rod (even when read anagogically) set up for contemporary Christian understandings of guardianship, dependence, and care? What might it mean for contemporary Christian pedagogies that patristic interpretive traditions preserve the marks of social institutions (slavery) and modes of control (violence in the service of discipline or instruction) we (mercifully) reject?

5. Healing Blows: Trauma and *Therapeia* at the Shrine of the Forty

Gregory's *Encomium in xl martyres II*⁴⁵ offers another homiletic context where Gregory represents striking with rods as yielding healing and transformation. Here, Gregory relates an incident that occurred at the dedication of the Shrine of the Forty Martyrs in Iborra when he was a young man. Not keen to attend, and wearied by the services, he wandered out to the garden where he received a bracing dream visitation from the Forty Martyrs themselves, who threatened him and beat him with rods. Duly corrected and full of remorse at his earlier recalcitrance, he returned to the service. Vasiliki Limberis reports: "The violent incident had such a tremendous effect on him that not long afterwards he changed his life. Within several years he was baptized"⁴⁶.

It is noteworthy that Gregory precedes narration of his own violent visitation with narration of a cure he witnesses at the same shrine, in

⁴⁵ PG 46, 773-788. For the purposes of this paper, I work closely with the account given in V. Limberis, *Holy Beatings: Emmelia, Her Son Gregory of Nyssa, and the Forty Martyrs of Sebasteia*, in: *Social Control in Late Antiquity: The Violence of Small Worlds*, ed. K. Cooper – J. Wood, Cambridge 2020, p. 39-58.

⁴⁶ Limberis, *Holy Beatings*, p. 40.

which a lame soldier is similarly visited by the Forty Martyrs in a dream⁴⁷. Incubation at the shrines of saints and martyrs, especially at the annual *panygeris*, was a common practice undertaken for special blessing and particularly for the purpose of healing. As Limberis notes, “Widespread was the belief that when the martyr visited in a dream, especially at a *panygeris*, it proved the piety of the believer. Even more, it was an almost certain guarantee of an ensuing miracle, one of the chief sources of medical remedy in the fourth century”⁴⁸. In this homily, Gregory presents his experience of being struck by the rod at the hands of the martyrs as both necessary and salutary.

As noted by Kate Cooper and Jamie Wood, Christian sources of fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries “tend to be written from the point of view of those responsible for maintaining small worlds: the masters and teachers, and of course the bishops”⁴⁹. When Gregory’s attempts to read blows as instructive in *Cant XII* are viewed in concert with the personal episode narrated in *Encomium in xl martyres ii*, one catches a glimpse of Gregory in both roles: that of the recalcitrant son/student being disciplined, and that of the bishop now tasked with maintaining what he understands as a divinely ordained and benevolent social order. “Strikes”, “blows” and “wounds” whether understood literally or metaphorically, as punitive, corrective, or circumstantial, are rendered transformational. Symbolic or otherwise, do they remain central to Christian pedagogies?

6. Instructive Violence in Late Antiquity

To be clear: coercion and violence deployed in the service of discipline or instruction were in no way unique to late antique Christian contexts but rather ubiquitous throughout the ancient Mediterranean. As Criboire reports, “references to coercive methods in Greek and Roman literature are legion” and widespread, from a third-century BCE poem where a mother begs the schoolmaster to beat her raucous son “until the sun sets”, to a Byzantine papyrus letter from a father asking a schoolmas-

⁴⁷ Though this interaction with the Forty, unlike Gregory’s, does not involve violence; instead, the martyr commands that the soldier give him his foot to examine through touch (the verb used is *ψηλαφήσαι*, which carries some medical connotations).

⁴⁸ Limberis, *Holy Beatings*, p. 55.

⁴⁹ Cooper – Wood, *Introduction*, p. 8.

ter to deliver the kinds of beatings his son was accustomed to at home⁵⁰. Influential philosophers such as Plato claimed that the child – like “a bent and twisted piece of wood” – had to be formed and straightened through discipline⁵¹. Prevailing moral ideologies made it so that Greeks and Romans largely “considered it normal to beat children and slaves, who could not be controlled by rationality and occupied an intermediate position between human and beast”⁵². Such beatings became commonly depicted literary and artistic topoi⁵³. Working to sustain and replicate the strict distinctions of the social order (and its moral imaginaries), disciplinary violence was an accepted component of what was seen as responsible guardianship.

Acceptance of coercive discipline did not wane in the schools of late antiquity and in the writings of Christian church fathers steeped in the traditions of Greek and Roman *paideia*. Like Gregory, these bishops, classically-trained in rhetoric and philosophy, likely with their own firsthand experiences of these disciplinary techniques, were heir to literary inheritances (Biblical as well as Graeco-Roman) that rendered disciplinary violence both necessary and benevolent. For the most part, they did not challenge prevailing social mores around education⁵⁴. Rather, “schools, monasteries, and churches played a pivotal role in enforcing and reproducing the social order, and their work of cultivating obedient subjects often involved symbolic or actual violence”⁵⁵.

7. Painful legacies of violent pedagogies?

This paper was first presented at the 2022 Meeting of the Canadian Society of Patristic Studies, within the larger gathering of the Canadian

⁵⁰ R. Cribiore, *Gymnastics of the Mind: Greek Education in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt*, ed. R. Cribiore, Princeton 2005, p. 67, 70; *Herodas Didaskalos* 88.

⁵¹ Plato *Prt.* 325d; *Lats* 7.808d-e, cited in Cribiore, *Gymnastics of the Mind*, p. 69.

⁵² Cribiore, *Gymnastics of the Mind*, p. 69.

⁵³ Cribiore, *Gymnastics of the Mind*, p. 70.

⁵⁴ Cribiore notes, “It is somewhat ironic that the same Augustine who complained about the harsh treatment he had received in childhood applauded in the *Letters* the practice of beating children” (Cribiore, *Gymnastics of the Mind*, p. 68). See also Blake Leyerle’s discussion of strategically-harnessed fear and Jonathan Tallon’s discussion of obedience in their respective treatments of John Chrysostom in the volume *Social Control in Late Antiquity: The Violence of Small Worlds*, ed. K. Cooper – J. Wood, Cambridge 2020.

⁵⁵ Cooper – Wood, *Introduction*, p. 10.

Congress for the Social Sciences and Humanities. The panel on the reception of Galatians 6:17 to which it contributed formed part of a larger workshop on Trauma and *Therapeia* in Early Christian Literature, a workshop I helped organize. As we put together the call for papers in fall 2021, the recent discoveries of unmarked graves at the sites of Canada's former Residential Schools were very much on our minds.

Alongside this confrontation with the traumatic legacies of our own nation's colonizing enterprises, and of suffering inflicted in the name of benevolence, two of the questions articulated within this call for papers continued to inform my inquiry into Gregory of Nyssa's citation of Galatians 6:17. The first was, in what ways was trauma figured (in early Christian literary works) as desirable or benevolent? Secondly, how might early Christian understandings of trauma and/or *therapeia* positively or negatively inform efforts to treat the trauma of colonization and systemic racism in contemporary historical and scholarly contexts? As my survey of Gregory's efforts to read Songs 5:7 "profitably" (with the aid of Galatians 6:17, amongst many other Biblical intertexts) developed, these questions fused and became more pointed: to what extent might we see inherited understandings of benevolent violence – violence inflicted in the name of guardianship, guidance, education, spiritual transformation/healing/salvation – as the legacy of a long Christian tradition extending to Canada's residential schools?

It is now widely acknowledged that the wholesale assimilation of indigenous cultures and peoples was a transparent aim of the residential school system in Canada. In 1883, Prime Minister John A. Macdonald, who simultaneously acted as minister of Indian Affairs, plainly told the House of Commons: "When the school is on the reserve, the child lives with his parents who are savages; he is surrounded by savages, and though he may learn to read and write, his habits and training and mode of thought are Indian. He is simply a savage who can read and write"⁵⁶.

The dramatic reconstitution of "habits and training and mode of thought" envisioned here entailed physical and symbolic violence institutionally sanctioned and deployed in the service of cultivating "civilized" and Christianized subjects. As observed in the interim report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada and corroborated by innumerable first-hand accounts, "the assault on Aboriginal identity began the

⁵⁶ *They Came for the Children: Canada, Aboriginal Peoples, and Residential Schools*, Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada – Interim Report, Ottawa – Ontario 2012, p. 6.

moment the child took the first step across the school's threshold", when they were stripped of their own clothing, their hair sheared, their names and identities discarded in favour of new (Christian) names and identities. In 1920, when the Indian Act was amended to allow enfranchisement without consent and make attendance at residential schools compulsory, Duncan Campbell Scot, deputy minister of Indian Affairs, vowed the government would "continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic, and there is no Indian question, and no Indian department"⁵⁷.

Besides such systematic assaults on the cultural subjectivities of students deliberately isolated from their families and communities, records show that corporal punishment was regularly deployed in the schools, often beyond the limits of its acceptability in public schools: "Corporal punishment was not uncommon in the nineteenth-century and even twentieth-century Canadian school system [...]. However, the residential schools bore a closer resemblance to schools for neglected, truant, or incorrigible children than to public schools"⁵⁸. The 2012 TRCC report notes that "Harsh discipline prompted children to run away, often at great risk to themselves. The coroner investigating the deaths of four boys who ran away from the Lejac school in British Columbia in 1937 called for an end to the school's 'excessive corporal punishment'"⁵⁹. Accounts of abuse are myriad in the stories told by survivors of the residential school system and their families.

Like the practices and moral ideologies of "benevolent violence" prevalent across the ancient Mediterranean, harmful pedagogical practices (such as corporal punishment) and violent campaigns to destroy and assimilate cultural difference cannot be seen as exclusively Christian (or as the clear product of any one tradition). Nevertheless, "biblical justification for corporal punishment was clearly an essential contributor to the terrible abuses that occurred" across Canada's residential schools⁶⁰. As Peter Robinson writes:

⁵⁷ *They Came for the Children*, p. 12.

⁵⁸ *They Came for the Children*, p. 38.

⁵⁹ *They Came for the Children*, p. 39.

⁶⁰ P. Robinson, *Acculturation, Enculturation, and Social Imaginaries: The Complex Relationship between the Gospel and Culture*, in: *Decolonizing Discipline: Children, Corporal Punishment, Christian Theologies, and Reconciliation*, ed. V.E. Michaelson – J.E. Durrant, Winnipeg 2020, p. 73-74.

Underlying and sustaining the practices in the residential schools was the assumption that the Bible legitimized and even required the use of corporal punishment in the formation of children. Passages such as Proverbs 13:24, 22:15, and 29:15 were regularly referenced to this end, and corporal punishment was a biblically authorized way of keeping order and of bringing children to the righteous path⁶¹.

Such observations might strike us as both obvious and rather far afield from where we started: the apostle Paul's assertion of the benefits of bearing the marks of Christ on his body, and the attempts of Gregory of Nyssa, in the fourth-century CE, to understand this assertion vis a vis earlier Scriptural precedent. But by moving through these far-flung contexts – from the Scriptural allusions to beneficial beatings to which Gregory appeals in his fourth-century context to help him understand an inherited depiction of trauma and violence in profitable, not harmful terms; to late antique contexts that help us understand how a beating visited upon young Gregory in a dream might offer healing and salvation; to modern colonial contexts where coercion and disciplinary violence are imagined by heads of a Christian “body politic” to function as a saving grace – I am suggesting that benevolent understandings of trauma as instructive may indeed perpetuate harm, and that contemporary Christian exegetical and pedagogical efforts ought to confront these harms face on. As Muir asks in his Introduction to this reception history, what happens when textual or conceptual echoes extend for centuries? How much changes when identification with trauma is undertaken by a group that now finds itself dominant rather than marginalized?

8. Conclusions: Rendering trauma beneficial... for whom?

The dynamic I have ended up probing coming out of this work thus arises at the interplay of the “plain sense” of passages such as Song 5:7 and the “tropological approach” to them, here modelled and theorized by Gregory. Let us return to a passage from Gregory's *apologia* for his exegetical method:

One ought not in every instance to remain with the letter (since the obvious sense of the words often does us harm (βλαπτούσης ἡμᾶς) when it comes to

⁶¹ Robinson, *Acculturation, Enculturation, and Social Imaginaries*, p. 72.

the virtuous life), but one ought to shift to an understanding that concerns the immaterial and intelligible, so that corporeal ideas may be transposed into intellect and thought when the fleshly sense of the words has been shaken off like dust (cf. Matt 10:14). This moreover is why he says, 'The letter kills, but the spirit gives life' (2Cor 3:6), for frequently the narrative, if we stop short at the mere events, does not furnish us with models of the good life⁶².

Gregory here acknowledges the potentially harmful effects of remaining at the "plain sense" of texts that describe "repellent" events. But of course, effective transposition from "mere event" to intellectual concept is not guaranteed in any given reception context; and moreover, it does not exempt a text from doing harm.

I find myself asking: who stands to benefit and who might yet suffer harm from an inherited model of instruction, healing, providence, and deliverance whose representative is the rod and the forceful relations it recalls? In raising such questions, I am not arguing for an attempt to "purify" received texts of the violences they contain. Rather, I suspect I am grappling still/anew with what Gregory of Nyssa knew well: our reading practices (and guiding metaphors and hermeneutic models) have ethical and social as well as spiritual implications⁶³. Our best efforts to draw something profitable from received texts cannot preclude hard looks at their "plain sense", the contexts in which they are invoked and engaged, and the practices perpetuated in their name.

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⁶² Gregorius Nyssenus, *Prologus*, *In Canticum Canticorum homiliae*, GNO 6-7, Norris 4:22-30.

⁶³ As Marianne Bjelland Kartzow writes in her compelling work of discourse analysis: "A metaphor can be so much more than an innocent figure of thought or speech" (M. Bjelland Kartzow, *The Slave Metaphor and Gendered Enslavement in Early Christian Discourse: Double Trouble Embodied*, London 2018, p. 1).

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