

SALVATION IN THE COPTIC LITURGY OF ST. GREGORY THE NAZIANZEN*

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Abstract

The Liturgy ascribed to Gregory the Theologian is extant only in Coptic and is still used by the Coptic Orthodox Church. Scholars put the origin of this liturgy as either Syria or Egypt from the fact that it is one of the few ancient liturgies, which are addressed to the Son. This paper, traces the theme of salvation throughout the stages of the Liturgy:

1. *Introductory Prayer of Reconciliation.*
2. ***Thanksgiving:*** After thanking God for his creation, the liturgy quickly moves to his work in salvation starting by the Old Testament. The loving God is described in various pictures—the Good Shepherd, the Good Father, and the Physician who uses ‘remedies which conduce to life’. He sends the Prophets and gives the Law to help man.
3. ***Anamnesis:*** Gregory stresses the Eastern Fathers’ doctrine of ‘*Salvation by Incarnation*’. He applies the earlier patristic pictures in describing Christ as Savior: Teacher, Victor and Victim (Sacrifice).
4. ***Prayer of the Fraction:*** This is a characteristic feature of Coptic liturgies, as an introduction to the Lord’s Prayer. In a prayer still directed to the Son the liturgy refers to Baptism and Eucharist, the two Sacraments essential for salvation, as having their types in the water and blood that issued from the side of Christ on the Cross.

The liturgy ascribed to St. Gregory the Theologian is still used by the Coptic Orthodox Church. It is one of the few extant ancient liturgies that are addressed to the Son. Gregory Dix pointed out in his *Shape of the Liturgy* that liturgies directed to the Son were not unknown in the ancient world. There was a strong tradition on this in Syria, including the Liturgy of SS. Addai and Mari and the many liturgies derived from it. He counted three Ethiopic liturgies and another ancient Egyptian liturgy as addressed to the Son. He also found evidence that such liturgies were also found in the West.¹ The Liturgy of St. Gregory has been preserved in Coptic, although Arabic, English and possibly other modern translations are in common use. Fragments of a 14th century Greek manuscript have been discovered early in the twentieth century in the Monastery of St. Macarius at Wadi-Natrun, denoting

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1 Dix G: *Shape of the Liturgy*. London: Black, 1945: 180.

that it was celebrated in this language at least in certain occasions in the monastery at that time.²

Some scholars have dated the origin of this liturgy to the pre-Nicene period, with changes throughout the later centuries.³ Others insist that it reflect the theological teachings of Gregory the Nazianzen. It is a witness to the teaching of the third and fourth century Eastern Fathers on salvation. Every Eucharist is an *anamnesis* of the salvation history wrought by Christ. However, in no other liturgy is this theological doctrine demonstrated so vividly as it does in this Liturgy. The title 'Liturgy of the Savior' was a name suggested for it.⁴ This paper traces the theme of salvation in the stages of the Liturgy, and shows how much similarity it has to the teaching of The Eastern Fathers in general and St. Gregory in particular.

(1) Prayer of Reconciliation

One of the features of Coptic liturgies is an introductory prayer which is called the 'Prayer of Reconciliation'. In this prayer, so early in the Liturgy of St. Gregory, we see an essential teaching of the early Eastern Fathers on Salvation, that of God coming in the flesh, which is given the term 'Salvation by Incarnation':

“Thou who dost exist, who didst pre-exist, who abidest forever,
The everlasting, of the same substance and throne and joint-creator with the Father,
Who of thy goodness alone didst create man out of nothing,
And didst place him in the Paradise of delight,
And when he fell from thence by the deceit of the enemy and through disobedience
to thy holy commands,
Didst will to renew him and to replace him in his former dignity,
Entrusting no Angel or Archangel, or Patriarch or Prophet with our salvation,
But, unchangeable, didst assume flesh and becomest man,
Being made like unto us in all things, sin only excepted-
Didst become our Mediator with the Father,
And didst take away the middle wall of partition,
Didst destroy the ancient enmity,
Didst reconcile things on earth to things in heaven,
And madest of twain one,
Didst fulfil the dispensation in the flesh. . . .”⁵

2 Evelyn White HE: *The Monasteries of the Wadi 'N Natrun*. Part I: New Coptic Texts from the Monastery of Saint Macarius. New York, 1926: 200- 213

3 Furman JE: *The Coptic Liturgy of Saint Gregory*. In: *Coptic Church Review*, 1987:16.

4 Ibid, 17.

5 *The Liturgies of St. Basil, St. Gregory, and St. Cyril* (translated from a Coptic Manuscript of the 13th century), London: Rivingtons, 1870: 2.

(2) Thanksgiving

The first part of the Eucharistic Liturgy, which the liturgical scholars referred to earlier in this century as the *Preface*, is an integral part of the Prayer from which it has taken its name *Eucharistia* since the earliest centuries. After thanking God for his creation, the Liturgy of St. Gregory quickly moves to his work in salvation starting by the Old Testament. The loving God is described in various biblical pictures, as the Good Shepherd, the Good Father, and the Physician who uses 'remedies which conduce to life'. He sends the Prophets and gives the Law to help man:

"Thou, my Lord, didst convert my punishment into Salvation;
Like a Good Shepherd didst hasten to seek that which had gone astray;
Like a Good Father didst labor with me who had fallen;
Didst bind me up with all remedies which conduce to life.
Thou it is who didst send forth the Prophets on behalf of me who was sick;
Didst give the law for my help."⁶

All these OT methods which God tried in order to help the fallen and corrupted humanity proved to be a failure. The Liturgy continues without interruption:

"It is Thou who didst minister Salvation to me, though I had transgressed thy law;
Didst arise, as the true light, upon me who had erred and was in ignorance."⁷

Here the Liturgy resumes the theme of 'Salvation by Incarnation' which has been started in the 'Prayer of Reconciliation'.

Salvation by Incarnation

This teaching, a cornerstone of the Soteriology of the Eastern Fathers, is found as early as Irenaeus, and also in Athanasius, Cyril of Alexandria and others.

There was no other way to save man, as St. Athanasius explains:

"What then was God to do? Or what was to be done save the renewing of that which was in God's image, so that by it men might once more be able to know Him? But how could this have come to pass save by the presence of the very Image of God, our Lord Jesus Christ? The Word of God came in His own person, that, as He was the Image of the Father, He might be able to create afresh the man after the image."⁸ He took a mortal body in order to conquer death and corruption in it.⁹

6 *Ibid.* 3.

7 *Ibid.*

8 Athanasius: *Incarnation of the Word (Inc.)*, 13: 7. (NPNF, second series, vol. 4).

9 *Inc.* 13: 7, 8 (NPNF, op. cit. 43).

Gregory elaborates more on the theme in his Oration on Theophany, using nearly the same words of the liturgy. It is highly significant that he brings the theme of salvation in the feast of Epiphany, which at that time included the whole cycle of the Coming of Christ:

“(Man,) having been first chastened by many means, ... by word, by law, by prophets, by benefits, by threats, by plagues... at last he needed a stronger remedy, for his diseases were growing worse... As these required a greater aid, so also they obtained a greater. And that was that the Word of God Himself-Who is before all worlds, the Invisible, the Incomprehensible, the Bodiless, Beginning of Beginning, the Light of Light, the Source of Life and Immortality...the unchangeable Image, the Father’s Definition and Word, came to His own Image, and took on Him flesh for the sake of our flesh, and mingled Himself with an intelligent soul for my soul’s sake, purifying like by like; and in all points except sin was made man.”¹⁰

This connection between Incarnation and Salvation which has been a cardinal feature of the patristic teaching was not emphasized by the Western Fathers who as early as Tertullian were more interested in the forensic aspect of the atonement. The connection was completely lost in the Middle Ages with Anselm’s doctrine of ‘Satisfaction’. Because of Anselm’s basic assumption that the required satisfaction must be done by man, he taught a human work of satisfaction, accomplished by Christ. The Sacrifice of Christ, which He accomplishes as man, is an offering made to God from man’s side, from below, a human work of satisfaction. This is totally in contrast to the teaching of the Fathers who speak of God who becomes incarnate and enters the world of sin and death in order to overcome the enemies that hold mankind in bondage, and Himself accomplishes the redemptive work.¹¹

The obsession in the West with satisfaction by man, since the justice of God has to be satisfied, left no other alternative for curing a sinful humanity except a laxity and lack of justice by God. According to this theory it is an indispensable necessity that God shall receive the satisfaction which alone can save forgiveness from being laxity; and this need is met by Christ’s death. To the patristic idea, on the other hand, it is essential that the work of atonement that God accomplishes in Christ reflect a Divine order, which is wholly different from a legal order. The Atonement is not accomplished by strict fulfillment of the demands of justice, but it transcends them. The problem of humanity was not how to satisfy an angry Father, but rather how to abolish Sin and Death.¹²

10 Oration 38. *On the Theophany*: 13 (NPNF, second series, vol. 7:348-9)

11 Gustaf Aulen: *Christus Victor*. London: S. P. C. K., 1961: 103, 104.

12 Ibid. 105- 119.

Kenosis

Although the work of Christ in salvation involves many stages, yet his mere self-emptying (*kenosis*) in taking human flesh was a saving blessing by itself, and which the Liturgy illustrates:

“Thou didst not think it robbery to be equal with God,
But didst empty thyself and take on thee the form of a servant,
Didst bless my nature in thyself....”¹³

In the sermon on Epiphany, Gregory comes to the same theme of Phil 2: 7:

“He that is full empties Himself, for He empties Himself of His glory for a short while, that I may have a share in His Fullness. What is the riches of His Goodness? What is this mystery that is around me? I had a share in the image; I did not keep it; He partakes of my flesh that He may both save the image and make the flesh immortal.”¹⁴

Athanasius illustrates by a metaphor how the Incarnation by itself blessed the whole humanity, “And like as when a great king has entered into some large city and taken up his abode in one of the houses there, such city is at all events held worthy of high honor”¹⁵

What Does Salvation by Incarnation Imply?

In the teaching of the Eastern Fathers we find that the life of Christ as a whole brings salvation; from his place in the bosom of the Father, to his Birth, **B**aptism, Teaching, Crucifixion, Resurrection, Ascension and Second Coming.¹⁶ While Gregory moves over the work of Christ on earth, he applies the earlier patristic pictures in describing him as Savior-Teacher, Victor and Victim (Sacrifice). The liturgy of St. Gregory makes of these dogmas themes of meditation and it continues thanking and blessing God for his work in salvation, the work that has its climax in the Paschal Mystery. In this, using the words of the Prophet Isaiah in the Songs of the Servant it follows the teaching particular to the Eastern Fathers, that Christ acted as the representative of humanity, not its substitute:

“Thou enduredst the injuries of the wicked,
Yieldedst thy back to the stripes,
Didst give thy cheek to blows,
For my sake, O my Lord, Thou didst not turn away thy face from the shame of the spitting

13 *The Liturgies of St. Basil, St. Gregory, and St. Cyril*, op. cit., 3 &4.

14 *On the Theophany 13*, op. cit.

15 *Inc.* op. cit. 9:3.

16 Bebawi G: *St. Athanasios: The Dynamics of Salvation*. In *Sobornost*, London, 1986: 8: 2: 29.

“Thou didst go forth like a sheep to the Cross,
Didst manifest thy solicitude for me,
Didst slay my sin in thy sepulchre,
Didst take my firstfruits up into heaven,
Didst reveal to me thy Second Advent...”¹⁷

(3) *Anamnesis*

The liturgy passes implicitly from the Thanksgiving to the Consecration and the *Anamnesis*. There is no limit for what the Church recalls and lives in the Eucharist. Finally, just before the *Epiclesis*, the priest enumerates the whole saving actions of Christ:

“Thus, therefore, also, O our Lord, we make the Commemoration of Thy Coming down upon the earth, and of thy life-giving Death, and of thy three days’ burial,
and of thy Resurrection from the dead,
and of thy Ascent into Heaven, and of thy Session at the right hand of thy Father,
and of thy Second Coming from the Heavens, tremendous and full of glory.”

In the anamnesis the Church lives the whole history of salvation from the incarnation till the Second Coming. This is totally different from the Scholastics’ teaching which limits the problem of humanity to its legal aspect of paying the debt of sin and reconciling an angry God, **and thus have Christ’s work of salvation completed on the Cross** when he said his last words, “it is finished” (John 19:30). In the biblical and Patristic teaching, Christ, as our ‘Representative’ and ‘High Priest’, offered himself on our behalf, conquered Satan and destroyed Sin and Death. As the Pioneer of our Salvation, He ascended to heaven, sat with our humanity on the throne of God, and will come again to take those waiting for him. This is what the words of the liturgy say in the anamnesis.

(4) *The Fraction Prayer*

The *Anamnesis* and *Epiclesis* are followed by ‘The Intercessions’, and then just before the ‘Lord’s Prayer’ comes the ‘Fraction Prayer’, which is peculiar to all Coptic liturgies. It serves as a preparation for communion. In the Liturgy of St. Gregory this prayer is directed to Christ, calling him ‘the Savior of the Church’. It refers to the Sacraments involved in appropriating the salvation wrought by Christ to individual Christians. Baptism and Eucharist are stated to flow directly from the Incarnation and the Cross:

17 *The Liturgies of St. Basil, St. Gregory, and St. Cyril*, op. cit., 4.

“Blessed art Thou, O Christ, God omnipotent, Saviour of Thy Church!
 O intelligible Word and visible man, who through Thy incomprehensible
 Incarnation,
 Hast prepared for us the Bread of Heaven, this Thy Holy Body in a mystery, and
 every way holy.
 Didst mingle for us a chalice from the true vine which is Thy divine and immacu-
 late side,
 Whence, after Thou hadst given up the Spirit, Thou didst give to us the water and
 the Blood which are for the purification of the whole world...
 Thou of thine abundant goodness hast made us all worthy of adoption through
 Holy Baptism...”¹⁸

Through Baptism and the Eucharist we become God’s sons and the *theosis* which was our created destiny becomes our recreated destiny. Actually Baptism is seen by St. Gregory the Theologian as the primary individual means by which the Holy Spirit appropriates the ‘deifying’ work of Christ to mankind. He says, “If the Spirit is not worshipped as God, how can He deify me through Baptism?” And he says also, “Baptism in the Spirit is the perfect Baptism. How then is the Spirit not God - if I may be a little presumptuous - if it is by him that you are made God?”¹⁹

St. Gregory of Nyssa explains how the Eucharist wipes away the corruption that entered into man through sin and becomes a means of deifying humanity:

“The God who was manifested mingled himself with the nature that was doomed to death, in order that by communion with divinity human nature may be deified together with him. It is for this purpose that by the divine economy of his grace He plants himself in the believers by means of that flesh, composed of bread and wine, blending himself with the bodies of believers so that man also may share in the immortality by union with the Immortal.”²⁰

18 Ibid, 8.

19 Winslow, op. cit., 133. The quotations are from Gregory, *Orations* 31: 8, and 40: 42 respectively.

20 *Or. cat.* 37. Translated in *The Later Christian Fathers* by H. Bettenson. London: Oxford University Press, 1970: 163