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Basil and Gregory's Sermons on Usury: Credit Where Credit Is Due

BRENDA LLEWELLYN IHSEN

Significant features in St. Gregory of Nyssa's sermon *Contra usurarios* indicate that the younger brother of St. Basil the Great did not merely imitate the latter's earlier contribution on the destructive and corrosive nature of usury. Gregory's homily has an internal integrity that sets it apart from Basil's *Homilia in psalmum 14*. Though they used common themes when writing about usury—thrift, falsehood, anxiety, enslavement, heavenly usury, and the natural world—Basil and Gregory approached these themes differently, were inspired and influenced by different Scripture and philosophy, and had different motives.

The answer to the question posed by Psalm 15, "Lord who may abide in your tent? Who may dwell on your holy hill?" includes those who walk blamelessly and do what is right, those who speak the truth and do not slander, those who do no evil to friends or neighbors, and those who despise the wicked and maintain their oaths even to their own detriment. In addition to these persons and those who refuse bribes, individuals "who do not lend money at interest" are included among the righteous who will inherit the refuge of the Lord.

While commerce is accepted by the early church as a necessary—if unfortunate—factor, charging interest on a loan has traditionally been looked

I would like to thank T. Allan Smith at the Faculty of Theology, University of St. Michael's College, for suggesting that I work with these two texts and for his guidance during the construction of this scholarship; I would like to thank the Religion Department at Pacific Lutheran University for the insightful comments that they made when I presented this during our religion colloquium; I would like to thank David Brakke and the anonymous reviewers of *J ECS*, whose comments made this article immeasurably better; finally, I would like to thank Ellen Muehlberger, whose kindness and patient guidance made the editing process almost joyful.

upon as a particularly foul practice, primarily because it operates under the guise of helping an impoverished individual; while it appears as if the usurer is offering someone help in their time of trial, in fact they are setting up a condition of debt from which it is often unlikely that the destitute person will successfully emerge. Appearing charitable and altruistic when preying on those who most need the assistance of their comrades, the usurer throws an anvil rather than a rope to one who is drowning. Following the precedent set by Jewish and Greco-Roman law, the condemnation of usury is a consistent theme that runs throughout the writings by early church authors. They write that those who lend money at interest, who practice usury, or who are “usurious” in their behavior, are committing a sin against the individual, against the greater community of believers, and against God.

In the most recent century scholars have not been shy to write about commerce and the church, nor about the polarity that individuals previously believed to have existed between theology and economics. Prior to the twentieth century, scant academic attention was paid to the economic musings of early church authors, but as the conspicuous consumption of the two largest North American countries as well as those in Europe have driven other, less “consumer-driven” countries further into debt, it appears that now—as much as always if not more than ever—the problems of the imbalance in world economics need a theological answer. This the early church authors consistently attempted by addressing from the pulpit the radical financial imbalances that seem always to exist in any given circumstance, at any given time.

Concerning such financial imbalances of the first few centuries of Christianity, Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and most notably John Chrysostom are notorious for their condemnation of the behavior and greed of the wealthy. And like avarice, so too usury is regarded as a particular vice of the wealthy, but one which is considerably more under the control of the individual, and less the result of the mere circumstances of life. With usury, there is no “accidental” sinning, or small degree of sinning. One does not inherit the sin of usury as a side effect of inherited wealth; usury is premeditated and purposeful, a sin of wicked proportions and with enormous ramifications both moral and economic, equally detrimental for both the individual and society.

In the body of scholarship that addresses money-lending and its relationship with the church, Gregory of Nyssa’s *Contra usurarios*¹ has generally

1. Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra usurarios* (PG 44:433–52; J 195–207), *Gregorii Nysseni Opera, Sermons Pars I*, Vol. 9, ed. W. Jaeger (Leiden: Brill, 1967), 195–207;

gathered little respect, if any. Though residing in the shadow of Basil of Caesarea's highly influential and popular sermon on Psalm 15(14)—*Homilia in psalmum 14*²—significant factors in Gregory's sermon indicate that rather than merely parroting Basil's earlier contribution, Gregory's homily on usury has an integrity that sets it apart from Basil's sermon. Therefore this paper seeks to rehabilitate Gregory with respect to usury scholarship by highlighting the different scriptural and philosophical influences in his and Basil's work, different ways in which they used common themes when writing about usury—including theft, falsehoods, anxiety, the natural world, and “heavenly usury”—and possible motives for their sermons.³

The texts under consideration in this essay—Basil's *Homilia in psalmum 14*, and Gregory of Nyssa's *Contra usurarios*—are two unique sermons because rather than treating usury as a secondary subject which emerges during the course of a scriptural exegesis on greed, wealth, or poverty,⁴ the two Cappadocian bishops took usury as a primary subject and composed sermons around it.⁵

Casimir McCambley, “Against Those Who Practice Usury by Gregory of Nyssa,” *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 36 (1991): 287–302.

2. Basil of Caesarea, *Homilia in psalmum 14* (PG 29:264–80); *A Psalm of David against Usurers (On Psalm 14)*, in *Saint Basil Exegetical Homilies*, trans. Sister Agnes C. Way, C. D. P., FC 46 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1963), 181–91.

3. While I respect gender-inclusive language, I here refer to the “debtor(s)” and the “usurer(s)” as males as the original authors of the primary source material do in their sermons. This is not to say that usurious practices were restricted to men. In a chapter from the *Apostolic Constitutions* the author chastises widows who are financially supported by the church but engage in spiritually immoral economic activity: “For when they ought to be content with their subsistence from the Church, as having moderate desires, on the contrary, they run from one of their neighbors' houses to another, and disturb them, heaping up to themselves plenty of money, and lend at bitter usury, and are only solicitous about mammon, whose bag is their god.” The woman who participated in such activities was dealt with harshly at the discretion of her bishop: “But if without direction she does any one of these things, let her be punished with fasting, or else let her be separated on account of her rashness.” *The Apostolic Constitutions* 3.7 (Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson eds., *The Apostolic Constitutions*, ANF 7 [Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999], 428).

4. Early church authors who write about usury but *not* as the primary subject include John Chrysostom, Clement of Alexandria, Cyril of Jerusalem, Gregory of Nazianzus, Theodoret of Cyrrhus, and Ambrose of Milan.

5. Neither sermon stands independently. Basil's *Homilia in psalmum 14 secunda* is the second portion of his *Homilia in psalmum 14 prima* (PG 30:352–57), which addresses justice, moral thought, philanthropy, and the distribution of goods, rather than poverty. See Susan R. Holman, *The Hungry Are Dying: Beggars and Bishops in Roman Cappadocia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 111–12. Gregory's

MOTIVES

In his chronology of the works of Basil, Paul Fedwick places *Homilia in psalmum 14, prima* and *secunda* between the years 363 and 378.⁶ Despite the rather obvious problem in Basil's community of people drowning in debt, it is difficult to construct an immediate motive for the sermon, as there is no acute crisis specifically referred to in the text, unlike Basil's other sermons on famine or poverty.

Basil's *Homilia in psalmum 14* begins with an acknowledgement of his own debt, describing himself as a "debtor" to his audience, a shrewd portend of his theme. Basil addresses the Psalm specifically on this day because the previous day he had spoken on Psalm 14 in its entirety, but due to time constraints he neglected to finish his sermon. The actual degree of significance of this small passage is indicated by the layering of biblical passages which uphold a position he has not yet even established: in addition to quoting twice from the Psalm which concerns usury, Basil identifies five additional passages against usury: Ezek 22.12, Deut 23.19, Jer 9.6, Ps 54.12, and Matt 5.42.

For one text that is allegedly based on another, Gregory of Nyssa's *Contra usurarios* could not begin more differently than Basil's. While Basil begins the first sentence of *Homilia in psalmum 14* with reference to Ps 14⁷ and subsequent biblical passages, Gregory begins his sermon with an introduction brimming with a proper Platonic definition of those who love virtue as living "in accord with reason by following beneficial

Contra usurarios is one of three sermons delivered during the same period, all of which address problems of poverty. Only these two sermons of the total five, however, address specifically the issue of usury. Translations for the two additional sermons by Gregory—*De beneficentia* (PG 46:453–70) and *Quatenus uni ex his fecistis mihi fecistis* (PG 46:471–90) (W. Jaeger, *Gregorii Nysseni Opera*, vol. 9 [Leiden: Brill, 1964])—are provided in Holman's *The Hungry are Dying*. While the former of the two homilies—*On the Love of the Poor: 1 "On Good Works"*—is entirely devoted to the plight of the poor, it does not specifically address usury; the latter sermon—*On the Love of the Poor 2: "On the Saying, 'Whoever Has Done It to One of These Has Done It to Me'"*—addresses the attitude of the Cappadocian population towards those who are twice poor (in poverty and ill health; the disease described by Gregory refers most likely to leprosy).

6. Paul Fedwick, "A Chronology of the Life and Works of Basil of Caesarea," in Paul Fedwick, ed., *Basil of Caesarea: Christian, Humanist, Ascetic. A Sixteen-Hundredth Anniversary Symposium*, vol. 1 (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1981), 9–10.

7. Basil, *hom. in Ps.*, PG 29:264–65.

laws and ordinances.”⁸ Without these qualities, Gregory claims, an individual is unable “to live well,” excepting he “has virtue for a mother and puts evil to flight.”⁹ The differences between the texts continue, for while Basil’s homily was based on a single line from Ps 14, Gregory’s sermon is thematic; although Gregory quotes Ezek 22.12 in the first paragraph, he never returns to it, but instead uses a variety of Scripture passages for his position, which will be considered below.

Jean Daniélou, in “Chronologie des sermons de Saint Grégoire de Nysse,” writes that Gregory’s sermon was probably delivered during the month of March, in the season of Lent in 379, and possibly in Caesarea.¹⁰ If Basil died January 1 of 379, and if Gregory was delivering this sermon in Caesarea only a few months later, perhaps Gregory’s audience would have been familiar with the Basil’s previous sermon on usury. This could explain why Gregory initially adopts a tone of reluctance and is loath to compete with his brother’s memory, Basil having so recently departed.¹¹ Gregory states that his metaphorical treatment of the subject matter is that of being

8. Gregory of Nyssa, *usur.*, PG 46:433; J. 195; ed. McCambley, “Against Those Who Practice Usury,” 294. This passage is reminiscent of a passage in Plato’s *Republic*, for Socrates claims that “virtuous persons are noted by two common characteristics: the first distinction is that of being ‘inimical to wickedness,’ and the second is they ‘favour good deeds’” (*Rep.*, 4.444d–e; trans. Shorey, LCL).

9. Gregory of Nyssa, *usur.*, PG 46:433; J. 195; ed. McCambley, “Against Those Who Practice Usury,” 294.

10. “Nous pensons donc que ce sermon a été prononcé au début de Carême de 379”; Jean Daniélou, “Chronologie des Sermons de Saint Gregoire de Nysse,” *Revue des Sciences Contra usurarios Religieuses*, 29 (1955): 348. Jean Bernardi, in his brief section on *Contra usurarios*, does not support Daniélou’s date unequivocally, but in light of a more convincing alternative, agrees: “S’il est vrai que les voyages de Grégoire en 380 ne lui permirent guère de prêcher, comme l’avait établi Kiekamp, il ne s’ensuit pas nécessairement que l’année 379 puisse seule être retenue, bien qu’elle soit assez probable en définitive”; Jean Bernardi, *La predication des peres cappado-ciens: le predicateur et son auditoire*, Publications de la Faculté des lettres et sciences humaines de l’Université de Montpellier 30 (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1968), 264–65.

11. Bernardi suggests that this sermon was delivered during the Feast of the Forty Martyrs, when the Cappadocian bishops gathered together in Caesarea to assist the Metropolitan, and, in this case, to elect a successor to Basil. It would not have been uncommon for Gregory and the others to deliver several sermons at this time: “Il est normal que Grégoire ait eu, au cours de ce séjour, comme ses collègues, et peut-être plus qu’eux en sa qualité de frère et d’héritier spirituel du défunt, l’occasion de prêcher devant les fidèles de Césarée”; Bernardi, *La predication des peres cappado-ciens*, 265.

“yoked to an ass or ox,”¹² and asks his audience not to reproach him—one who is “skilled in speaking and philosophy and trained in every type of learning”¹³—for having thus far not spoken on the subject of usury,¹⁴ but promises that now he will “descend to the contest at hand.”¹⁵ However, McCambley’s translation of καθήκα as “descend” and ἡ ἄμιλλα as “contest” are only partial translations, in no way incorrect, but not complete. A fuller understanding of καθήκα (from καθήκω/κατήκω) includes to “come, or go down, (esp.) to fight,” while a more comprehensive definition for ἡ ἄμιλλα includes “contest for superiority, conflict,” and “rivalry, generally a struggle.” Of course Gregory did not use the opportunity of his Lenten sermon to “one-up” his recently deceased brother, but it is noted by more than one scholar that Gregory often worked as a spiritual complement to Basil, the grand ecclesiastical organizer. Anthony Meredith notes that Gregory made a career of composing mystical versions of works already accomplished by Basil: *On Virginity*, which he claims is a “philosophical underpinning to Basil’s own *Rules*, and Gregory’s *On the Six Days of Creation* and *On the Making of Man*, which Meredith labels as “critical continuations of Basil’s own works in the same areas.”¹⁶ Jean Daniélou makes a similar claim about Gregory’s relationship with Basil’s scholarship, claiming that Gregory’s obligation was “not merely to carry on the work of Basil; he has also to bring it to completion.”¹⁷ Virginia Woods Callahan¹⁸ also states that Gregory’s theological output consistently reflects

12. Gregory of Nyssa, *usur.*, PG 46:436; J 195–96; ed. McCambley, “Against Those Who Practice Usury,” 294–95. Additional examples of metaphorical comparisons to Basil are abundant: “The small always appears with the great and the luminous moon with the radiant sun. . . . A merchant ship is carried along by the wind and a small boat traverses the deep; trained athletes as well as youths sprinkle sand over themselves before wrestling.”

13. Gregory of Nyssa, *usur.*, PG 46:433; J 195; ed. McCambley, “Against Those Who Practice Usury,” 294.

14. Gregory mentions in a letter that “Divine Scripture forbids accumulation and usury as well as the appropriation of another person’s possessions, even though it is done under the pretext of a contract”; Gregory of Nyssa, *Epistola Canonica AS S. Letoium Melitines Episcopum* (PG 45:233B), in McCambley, “Against Those Who Practice Usury,” 291.

15. Gregory of Nyssa, *usur.*, PG 46:433; J 195–96; ed. McCambley, “Against Those Who Practice Usury,” 294.

16. Anthony Meredith, *The Cappadocians* (New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1995), 53.

17. Jean Daniélou, *Glory to Glory: Texts from Gregory of Nyssa’s Mystical Writings*, trans. Herbert Musurillo (London: John Murray, 1962), 5.

18. *Saint Gregory of Nyssa: Ascetical Works*, trans. Virginia Woods Callahan (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1967).

a passionate commitment to Basil's interests, and notes that Gregory's *Life of Moses*, *On the Psalms*,¹⁹ and *On the Canticle of Canticles*²⁰ reflect Gregory's desire to provide philosophical, theological, and mystical interpretation of Basil's *Rules*.²¹ With this in mind, Gregory's *Contra usurarios* surely functions in a similar way to many of the works mentioned above: as a *complement* to Basil's earlier homily, as an attempt to *complete* the homiletic exploration of the topic, and as further evidence of a theological rivalry, which may or may not have existed at least in the mind of Gregory, if not his brother's as well.²² But in addition to the conception of competition lies that of responsibility, and Daniélou acknowledges the tension that surely existed between the two and—at the same time—claims that Gregory was fully aware of the responsibilities that fell to him at his brother's death:

It may well have been that Basil's dominant personality had, up till then, prevented Gregory from expressing himself. . . . But now, with Basil's death, Gregory was forced to stand on his own, and thus in the years that followed he was able to reveal himself as he really was.²³

This may have been yet another opportunity for Gregory to bring theological closure to his brother's work; Gregory rose to the occasion.

INFLUENCES

A glut of biblical quotations at the beginning of Basil's sermon predicts a strong scriptural foundation. Surprisingly, this is not the case; nor does it appear that Scripture is even the sole foundation for Basil's homily, though he uses Scripture liberally throughout his text. Robert P. Maloney

19. Gregory of Nyssa, *In psalmorum inscriptiones* (PG 44:431–608) (W. Jaeger ed., *Gregorii Nysseni Opera*, vol. 5 [Leiden: Brill, 1962]), in Callahan, *Saint Gregory of Nyssa*, xiii.

20. Gregory of Nyssa, *In Canticum Canticorum* (PG 44:755–1120) (W. Jaeger, ed., *Gregorii Nysseni Opera*, vol. 6 [Leiden: Brill, 1962]), in Callahan, *Saint Gregory of Nyssa*, xiii.

21. Basil of Caesarea, *Opera Sancti Basilii: Regulæ Fusius Tractatæ* (PG 31:890–1052); in Callahan, *Saint Gregory of Nyssa*, xiii.

22. Werner Jaeger would never tolerate my suggestion of competition, as he claims that it is not by chance that Gregory's texts often complement Basil's, for Basil "must have impressed him from the beginning with the idea that they could prevail only if they combined their forces, and Gregory clung to this ideal even after Basil's death"; Werner Jaeger, *Two Rediscovered Works of Ancient Christian Literature: Gregory of Nyssa and Macarius* (Leiden: Brill, 1965), 19.

23. Daniélou, *From Glory to Glory*, 5.

remarks that Basil's text is marked by the influences of Aristotle²⁴ and Philo,²⁵ but a close reading of the text indicates that it was Plutarch who actually made the greatest impression on the Cappadocian bishop. In the nineteenth century, Eugene Fialon, who noted the similarities, provided a side-by-side examination of seven passages from Basil's *Homily* and Plutarch's "That We Ought Not To Borrow" from *Moralia* in his *Étude historique et littéraire sur Saint Basile suivie de l'hexameron*.²⁶ Fialon's conclusions, which were partially summarized and then summarily dismissed by Stanislas Giet,²⁷ were that prior to delivering his homily Basil had read and removed portions of Plutarch's treatise against debtors.²⁸ But, Fialon asserts, the bishop does not reproduce Plutarch verbatim, but introduces some significant differences to the text: primarily, Basil removed the mythology and secular history inserted by Plutarch and replaced it with biblical truth.²⁹ Despite this structural change, and though Basil's homily is more lively, animated, and sympathetic to the misfortunate person,³⁰ it is in the end, Fialon claims, Plutarch who speaks from the Christian pulpit through the mouth of Basil.³¹ As Basil's congregation has received a properly Christian ethical position concerning wealth and specifically usury, one wonders why such a notion as Basil's Greek influence should be so offensive to Giet, who works very hard to demonstrate Basil's scriptural basis for his position. Giet dismisses Fialon's claim as "non sans une exagération évidente,"³² but does not produce any other influence that is more persuasive, and eventually settles with Basil's main passage—Ps 14—and legislation of the Council of Nicaea. Giet is forced to admit:

24. Robert P. Maloney, "The Teaching of the Fathers on Usury: An Historical Study on the Development of Christian Thinking," *VC* 27 (1973): 248.

25. Maloney, "The Teaching of the Fathers on Usury," 249.

26. Eugene Fialon, *Étude historique et littéraire sur Saint Basile suivie de l'hexameron* (Paris: Ernest Thorin, 1869), 191–95.

27. Stanislas Giet, *Les idées et l'action sociales de saint Basile* (Paris: Librairie Lecoffre, 1941), 121–22. See also Stanislas Giet, "De Saint Basile à Saint Ambroise: La condamnation du prêt à intérêt au IV^e siècle," *Science Religieuse: Travaux et Recherches* (Paris, 1944), 120.

28. Fialon, *Étude historique et littéraire sur Saint Basile*, 191.

29. "La mythologie et l'histoire profane ont disparu dans l'homélie pour faire place à la Bible"; Fialon, *Étude historique et littéraire sur Saint Basile*, 195.

30. Fialon, *Étude historique et littéraire sur Saint Basile*, 195.

31. "Toutefois, il faut le reconnaître: à part ces différences, c'est Plutarque qui parle dans la chaire chrétienne par la bouche de Basile"; Fialon, *Étude historique et littéraire sur Saint Basile*, 196.

32. Giet, "De Saint Basile à Saint Ambroise," 120.

Il est difficile de savoir si Basile a connu quelques-uns de ces textes puisqu'il n'en cite aucun; mais il ne pouvait ignorer—et peut-être avons-nous ici la raison pour laquelle, entre tous les textes de l'Ancien Testament, il s'est attaché au commentaire du psaume 14—le dix-septième canon de Nicée contre les clercs adonnés à l'usure.³³

Therefore, in the absence of a more explicit influence, we can conclude that Basil was guided by the spirit of Plutarch as he composed his sermon, with Plutarch's "That We Ought Not to Borrow" functioning as a sub-structure for Basil's *Homily*.

Gregory's sources and influences—as in his other writings—are not overt; unlike Basil's, they do not provide so clear a point of reference, and therefore also do not present such a clear foundation for Gregory's sermon as Plutarch does for Basil's. As mentioned previously, there is the rather Platonic introduction, but—consistent for Gregory—he does not cite his influences.³⁴ Aside from this it is possible to note in this text Gregory's thoughts on the purification of the soul, themes which are similar to those found in his text *On the Soul and Resurrection*—a document inspired by Plato's *Phaedo*;³⁵ in *Contra usurarios*, Gregory writes that the aforementioned humiliations of the usurer will not condemn him merely to the misery of the present time: "Then an ineffective repentance accompanied by heavy groans and the inevitability of punishment will seize you. In no way will gold assist you nor silver defend you since the distribution of loaned money is a more bitter wrath."³⁶ Gregory presents in *Contra usurarios* as he does in *On the Soul and Resurrection*, the notion of the "scent" of the material world clinging to the soul of an individual through death into the afterlife, contaminating a post-death existence either with further pains or diminished pleasure. This echoes Plato's notion of the soul being gripped by the needs of the flesh, with the result that it "has been polluted."³⁷ Such a soul, Plato writes, will continue to be saturated by what is temporal and, as a result, will be "dragged back to the visible region."³⁸

33. Giet, "De Saint Basile à Saint Ambroise," 121.

34. "Even so, Gregory of Nyssa is by contrast reticent, especially since he is thought of, rightly, as more deeply imbued with philosophy than his namesake. He may at times use ideas derived from philosophy but he does not attribute these ideas to their sources"; Anthony Meredith, *Gregory of Nyssa* (London: Routledge, 1999), 82.

35. Plato, *Phaedo*, trans. G. M. A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1977), 81, C.

36. Gregory of Nyssa, *usur.*, PG 46:449; J 204; ed. McCambley, "Against Those Who Practice Usury," 300.

37. Plato, *Phaedo*, ed. Grube, 81, C.

38. Plato, *Phaedo*, ed. Grube, 81, C.

Gregory baptizes this concept and applies it not to gluttony, drunkenness, or wanton behavior, but to the unjust acquisition of wealth, a sin which also follows the sinner into the afterlife; he writes in *On the Soul and Resurrection*: “The rich man still sticks to the fleshly life as if with bird-lime which he has not thoroughly cleaned off even when he has ceased from life. He is still concerned with flesh and blood. . . .”³⁹ While Gregory is not claiming that the usurer is unable to attain salvation because of this sin, or that these individuals pass into other forms of life,⁴⁰ still, through their grievous actions they have humiliated their own nature and they will bear this stench into the next stage of existence; the “inevitability of punishment” will render the usurer’s gold and silver acquired in lifetime fundamentally useless. But even beyond this next immaterial existence, there are no guarantees for the avaricious in this lifetime; Gregory, in his *Fourth Homily* in his *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, sadly concludes that the abundance of wealth does not guarantee that one “will thereby become wise, sagacious, reflective, learned, a friend of God, prudent, pure, passion-free, detached and aloof from all that draws him towards evil.”⁴¹ Gold, Gregory notes, might transfer its luster to our bodies, but it cannot cover a deformity or heal an ailment, and its malevolent qualities will follow the soul beyond the grave.

SCRIPTURE

Basil does not comment further on the five biblical passages previously mentioned, but after quoting them launches straightaway into his tirade against the practice of usury. Enlisting a passage from Proverbs 5—a proverb which cautions against adultery—and drawing directly from Plutarch, Basil encourages the poor to tap into all available resources before dipping into another’s well:

39. Gregory of Nyssa, *S. Gregorii episcopi Nysseni De Anima et resurrectione cum sorore sua Macrina dialogues* (PG 46:11–160) (J. G. Krabinger, ed. [Lepzig, 1837]); *On the Soul and Resurrection*, trans. Catharine P. Roth (New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1993), 75–76. Both Meredith and Roth note the influence which Plato’s *Phaedo* had on Gregory’s *On the Soul*, not only in Gregory’s staging of the text, but in the relationship between the Platonic immortality of the soul and the Christian resurrection of the body. Roth, *On the Soul and Resurrection*, 75; Meredith, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 2–5; 85.

40. Grube, *Phaedo*, 82, E.

41. Gregory of Nyssa, *hom. 4*, from *homiliae in Eccl.* (PG 44:615–754), ed. W. Jaeger, *Gregorii Nysseni Opera, In Ecclesiasten homiliae*, vol. 5 (Leiden: Brill, 1986), 195–442, in *Commentary on Ecclesiastes* (trans. Stuart George Hall and Rachel Morarty; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1993), 78.

“Drink water out of thy own cistern.”⁴² That is, examine your own resources, do not go to the springs belonging to others, but from your own streams gather for yourself the consolations of life. Do you have metal plates, clothing, beasts of burden, utensils of every kind? Sell them; permit all things to go except your liberty.⁴³

In the course of his text Basil also directly quotes Prov 19.17⁴⁴ and Matt 5.42.⁴⁵ Though his sermon is a direct response to a passage of Scripture, he does little with it other than to use these passages to make it immediately clear that Scripture encourages giving rather than lending to those in need, and that those who lend to the poor are lending to God.

Gregory’s use of Scripture is more subtle than Basil’s; urging the poor to take the example of John the Baptist and scorn usurers as a “brood of vipers,”⁴⁶ Gregory stretches the comparison to further warn the poor against a “poisonous serpent”⁴⁷ which preys on the soul of the needy. Gregory directly quotes Matt 5.42—“Do not refuse him who would borrow from you”—then offers an allusion to the parable of the rich man and Lazarus found in Luke 16.19–31, a parable which emphasizes the hard-heartedness of the wealthy even against the wisdom of Moses and the prophets. Gregory reminds his congregation that they are blind to the

42. Prov 5.15.

43. Basil, *hom. in Ps.*, PG 29:269; ed. Way, *On Psalm 14*, 184.

44. “Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the Lord,” in Basil, *hom. in Ps.* (PG 29:277); Basil does not finish the line, which reads: “. . . and will be repaid in full.”

45. “The Lord has laid a clear command on us, saying: ‘And from him who would borrow of you, do not turn away.’” Basil, *hom. in Ps.* (PG 29:265); ed. Way, *On Psalm 14*, 182.

46. Gregory of Nyssa, *usur.* (PG 46:436; J 196); ed. McCambley, “Against Those Who Practice Usury,” 295. Reference to Matt 3.7: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?”

47. Gregory of Nyssa, *usur.* (PG 46:436; J 196); ed. McCambley, “Against Those Who Practice Usury,” 295. Referencing the appearance of the serpent in Gen 3.1, Gregory uses this metaphor for greed in his *Commentary on Ecclesiastes* as well:

Perhaps that is why the sense of pleasure is called in scripture a *serpent* (Gen 3.1), which has the natural ability, if its head slips into a chink in the wall, to pull all the rest of its coils in behind it. What do I mean? Nature makes housing necessary for humans, but pleasure, slipping by means of this need into the clink in the soul, turns the need into an immoderate extravagance in beautification and transfers the urge to that. . . . After this she comes to a peak of arrogance and winds pride around her, fastening under her the dominion of over her own kindred. She drags her coil of desire for money over these, and with that necessarily goes license, the hindmost part and tail of the bestiality of pleasure. (*hom.* 4, ed. and trans. Hall and Moriarty, 82)

needs of those seated at their gates: “The destitute person is making supplication and is seated outside your door.”⁴⁸ Hearing this, the audience might well remember that while starving and covered with sores licked by dogs, destitute Lazarus sits at the gates of an unnamed rich man, who dresses in finery and feasts daily on fine linens.⁴⁹ As Gregory exclaims, “in his need he seeks your wealth to bring relief,”⁵⁰ those listening might recall that while both men died, only one received comfort in the afterlife, while the other—the selfish and unnamed rich man—received the torment of Hades for his outrageous comportment.⁵¹ Gregory warns his audience that their refusal to aid those who are in need will do more than provide stability for the bankbook of the wealthy, but it will, in fact, “turn him [the poor] into an adversary.”⁵² This is exactly how the rich man now views Lazarus, who resides under the protection of Abraham and enjoys the comforts that the rich man sought to eradicate during their time on earth.

Scriptural allusions do not end for Gregory, and he uses them to chilling effect; after these accusations he digresses from the usurer as the object of his wrath, and focuses his attention on the activity of money-lending itself. In what can only be described as an eerie passage, Gregory personifies money-lending as an evil, beast-like spirit, rapacious and valueless, delighting in banquets and producing that which it has not tilled. Continuing the image he writes that “Money-lending” has alternative, if not unnatural, tools: “. . . a reed for a plough, papyrus for a field, and black ink for seed.”⁵³ His description grows disturbingly vivid, and usury is described as praying “for affliction and misfortune,” despising “people contented with their possessions,” watching “courts of law to find distress in persons,” and using their wealth as dangled “bait as a wild beast to those in distress in order to ensnare them in their need.” This evil daily “counts its gain and cannot be satisfied, and is disconcerted by gold hidden in a person’s home because it remains idle and unprofitable.”⁵⁴ Vaguely reminiscent of

48. Gregory of Nyssa, *usur.* (PG 46:436; J 195); ed. McCambley, “Against Those Who Practice Usury,” 295.

49. Luke 16.19–21.

50. Gregory of Nyssa, *usur.* (PG 46:436; J 195); ed. McCambley, “Against Those Who Practice Usury,” 295.

51. Luke 16.22–26.

52. Gregory of Nyssa, *usur.* (PG 46:436; J 195); ed. McCambley, “Against Those Who Practice Usury,” 295.

53. Gregory of Nyssa, *usur.* (PG 46:437; J 197); ed. McCambley, “Against Those Who Practice Usury,” 295.

54. Gregory of Nyssa, *usur.* (PG 46:437; J 197–98); ed. McCambley, “Against Those Who Practice Usury,” 295–96.

God's warning to Cain that "If you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it,"⁵⁵ Gregory's device demonstrates the all-consuming nature of an evil which so penetrates the soul of the money-lender that the person no longer exists as a "being," but as a personification of evil.

THEFT

According to Basil, the act of usury begins with deceit, proof alone that the usurer knows that such actions are foul, and therefore must formulate a ruse in order to bring about the desired result: "Calling down curses on himself and swearing that he is entirely without money . . . he is believed in his lie because of his oaths, and incurs the guilt of perjury as the evil gains of his humanity."⁵⁶ Basil presents his audience with a miscellany of falsehood in his description of the initial transaction: first, the usurer claims that he has no money; second, the usurer has taken oaths to this end; third, the usurer claims that the money on his person is actually not his own, but is the possession of a friend or relative to whom the funds have been entrusted in order to remove himself from the act of usury itself; finally, the amount of interest is "lowered" for the debtor, as the usurer feigns that he is taking a loss—no doubt on account of his great humanitarianism, for which the debtor should be appropriately grateful.

Gregory considers usury as theft in a manner less obvious, but deeper and more disturbing, and more in keeping with the Jewish understanding of theft. Gregory's concern with the nature of the body results in an application of unique metaphors that combine the valuable properties of metal and flesh. In *Contra usurarios* he makes reference to the usurer's body as already being "composed of copper and gold,"⁵⁷ implying that seeking more of the same is equivalent to consuming the flesh of the poor, who still share in nature if not in wealth. If one cannot give up one's own flesh, but yet still must remit that which they cannot give, then it can only be taken or grasped. Those who are greedy and grasping take not just a possession, but opportunity for life; this can be the equivalent not only to theft, but to murder as well.⁵⁸

55. Gen 4.7b.

56. Basil, *hom. in Ps.* (PG 29:265–68); ed. Way, *On Psalm 14*, 182–83.

57. Gregory of Nyssa, *usur.* (PG 46:441; J 200); ed. McCambley, "Against Those Who Practice Usury," 298.

58. "Over and above the economic loss involved in theft and the moral effect on the individuals concerned, the rabbis were clearly aware of its effect on the social and

For Gregory the body itself is—for an individual—a sign of great fortune, a valuable possession; despite this, some still fall into need, and those who are petitioned for more are asked to recall that “the need for a loan is a request for mercy cheerfully bestowed,”⁵⁹ not an opportunity to “force poverty on those who are rich.”⁶⁰ He reminds the congregation of the scriptural injunctions against usury in the Pentateuch,⁶¹ as well as that of Luke 6.34⁶² and the parable of the unjust servant,⁶³ and addresses to the congregation the same question he addresses the usurer in *Sermon 5, Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors*: “How can you pray like this, oh usurer? How can you make a request from God in good conscience since he has everything and you do not know how to give?”⁶⁴ One must consider that the inability of the lender to give is the least of his sins, as the prayers of the lender consist of “contemptuous words,” paid for by the “misfortunes, tears and lamentations of others.”⁶⁵ That Gregory considers usury to be equivalent to theft is more explicit in another sermon delivered within the same time period as *Contra usurarios*:

Starve to death your greed for Mammon! Let there be nothing in your house that has been acquired by violence or theft. What good is it to keep meat out of your mouth if you bite your brother with wickedness? . . . Judas, after all, fasted along with the eleven, but failed to master his greed; his salvation gained nothing by fasting.”⁶⁶

moral fabric of society. Judaism has always maintained that evil actions and wrongdoing, such as theft and robbery . . . are not only the problem of the parties concerned. Rather, by perverting concepts of what is permitted and what is forbidden, they eventually undermine the whole basis of society. Permissiveness in regard to theft sooner or later affects man’s religious behaviour, his sexual mores, and even his regard for the sanctity of human life.” Meir Tamari, “*With All Your Possessions*”—*Jewish Ethics and Economic Life* (New York: The Free Press, 1987), 41.

59. Gregory of Nyssa, *usur.* (PG 46:441; J 201); ed. McCambley, “Against Those Who Practice Usury,” 298.

60. Gregory of Nyssa, *usur.* (PG 46:441; J 200); ed. McCambley, “Against Those Who Practice Usury,” 298.

61. Exod 22.25: “If you lend money to my people, the poor among you, you shall not deal with them as a creditor; you shall not exact interest from them.”

62. Luke 6.34: “If you lend to those from whom you wish to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again.”

63. Matt 18.28–34.

64. Gregory of Nyssa, *usur.* (PG 46:444; J 201); ed. McCambley, “Against Those Who Practice Usury,” 298.

65. Gregory of Nyssa, *usur.* (PG 46:445; J 201); ed. McCambley, “Against Those Who Practice Usury,” 298.

66. Gregory of Nyssa, *De beneficentia*, (PG 46.453); ed. Holman, *Concerning Beneficence*, in Holman, *The Hungry are Dying*, 193.

Though the concept of “usury” is not explicit in this brief passage, what is evident is that Gregory draws a parallel between unjust business practices and grave sin. “Dishonest profits” is a clear indicator of usury and can refer either to excessive interest or to other forms of theft, such as overcharging on products or services, or selling faulty goods. Taking a “bite” out of one’s brother is reminiscent of one of the Hebrew words for usury, *nèsèk*, meaning a literal “bite,” as in the debtor being “bitten” by the lender.⁶⁷

ANXIETY

Basil begins by characterizing the debtor as a poor man, “one who is suffering misfortune beyond his desert.”⁶⁸ But as his sermon develops the debtor is portrayed in a new light. This debtor is not one who is experiencing financial distress and who wishes to temporarily ease a pressing economic burden, but instead one who has borrowed and adopted a lavish lifestyle which he could not otherwise afford, and the money—his or not—has attracted the usual bottom-feeders of society:

He who has received the money is at first bright and cheerful, gladdened by another’s prosperity and showing it by the change in his life. His table is lavish, his clothing more costly, his servants are charged to dress to something more brilliant; there are flatterers, boon companions, innumerable dining-hall drones.⁶⁹

But the situation grows desperate as the time for payment approaches, until “he sees in his sleep the money-lender standing at his head, an evil dream; if he is awake, his whole thought and care is the interest.”⁷⁰ Basil

67. Edward Neufeld, “Prohibitions against Loans at Interest in Ancient Hebrew Laws,” *Hebrew Union College Annual*, 26 (1955): 355.

68. Basil, *hom. in Ps.* (PG 29:265); ed. Way, *On Psalm 14*, 182.

69. Basil, *hom. in Ps.* (PG 29:268); ed. Way, *On Psalm 14*, 183.

70. Basil, *hom. in Ps.* (PG 29:268); ed. Way, *On Psalm 14*, 184. The opening scene of an early fifth century B.C.E. Hellenic comedy by Aristophanes, *Nubes*, deftly depicts a man torn by just such fears. Basil, having enjoyed a classical education, might possibly have been familiar with—even perhaps influenced by—this powerful opening scene: “Damn! I’m so bitten up by all these blasted bedbuggering debts and bills and stable-fees, I can’t catch a wink. And all because of YOU! Yes, you and your damned horses! Gigs, rigs, nags, ponytails . . . Hell, horses everywhere! Horses in your dreams! But *me?* I’m bankrupt, broke, ruined, waiting for the end of the month when all these debts come due.” Aristophanes, *Four Plays by Aristophanes: The Clouds, The Birds, Lysistrata, The Frogs*, trans. William Arrowsmith, Richard Lattimore, and Douglas Parker (New York: Meridian Classic, 1962), 23.

charts the unhappiness of the debtor in detail, and describes the descent of disquiet into which the debtor sinks as the time of payment draws near, not to mention the loss of personal freedom. The time for payment draws near and yet the debtor is no richer than he was prior to the loan; consequently, he becomes sleepless, anxious, covetous, and heavy-hearted, fearing each knock on the door and each barking dog. Desperately, he begins to formulate lies to defer the usurer.⁷¹ Gregory's depiction of anxiety is analogous in content, but different with respect to point of view:

Why do you harm yourself with anxiety by calculating days, months, the sum of money, dreaming of profit, and fearing the appointed day whose fruitful harvest brings hail? . . . Such an impatient disposition results in obsession. If the usurer has loaned to a sailor, he would sit on the shore, worry about the wind's movement, constantly examine their diminishment and await the report of a wreck or some other misfortune. His soul is disquieted whenever he sees the sea angered; he examines dreams and reveals his disposition through the events which had transpired during the day.⁷²

This passage is similar to Basil's,⁷³ but Gregory once again complements his brother's work by walking the same idea down a different road: here he presents the usurer rather than the debtor as the one suffering undue anxiety over the loan.⁷⁴ Further, the loss of personal freedom is also relevant to the usurer as he becomes enslaved by the notion of repayment, fearful that circumstances will forestall the coveted event. Gregory's suggestion that the usurer loses personal freedom through his occupation echoes that of Seneca, who wrote of the enslavement of wealthy to greed:

He who craves riches feels fear on their account. No man, however, enjoys a blessing that brings anxiety; he is always trying to add a little more. While he puzzles over increasing his wealth, he forgets how to use it. He collects

71. Basil, *hom. in Ps.* (PG 29:268–69).

72. Gregory of Nyssa, *usur.* (PG 46:440–41; J 199–200); ed. McCambley, "Against Those Who Practice Usury," 297.

73. "But, as the money slips away, and the advancing time increases the interest due, the nights bring him [the debtor] no rest, the day is not bright, nor is the sun pleasant, but he is disgusted with life, he hates the days which hasten on toward the appointed time, he fears the months, the parents, as it were, of his interest." Basil, *hom. in Ps.* (PG 29:268); ed. Way, *On Psalm 14*, 183–84.

74. This point is noted by both Holman in *The Hungry are Dying*, 123, and Maloney in "Teaching of the Fathers on Usury," 250; both observe that Gregory focuses on the usurer while Basil concentrates on the position of the debtor, an observation that serves as another example of how Gregory's reflection on this topic presents an alternative to Basil's sermon.

his accounts, he wears out the pavement in the forum, he turns over his ledger,—in short, he ceases to be a master and becomes a steward.⁷⁵

If one were to note influence, clearly Seneca's greedy individual who is entrapped or enslaved by wealth—or the idea of potential wealth—is closer to Gregory's usurer who covets the day of payment, than Basil's debtor, who dreads that very same day.

THE NATURAL WORLD

Basil employs metaphors from the natural world to describe the human whom envy has made venomous:⁷⁶ the usurer is lower than a dog, unable to be satisfied once he receives what he wants; the usurer is a beast to which the debtor has yoked himself; and the rapid growth of interest is compared to the fecundity of rabbits:

They say that hares bring forth and at the same time both rear young and become doubly pregnant. So also with money-lenders, the money is lent out and, at the same time, it reproduces from itself and is in a process of growth. You have not yet received it in your hands and you have been required to pay out the interest for the present month.⁷⁷

Because of this interest that gives birth to interest, Basil follows the fertility of the hares with a brief consideration of the fertility of money. Unlike the natural world in which animals and plants bring forth their offspring in due time, τόκος⁷⁸ is perverse because the offspring is born immediately, immediately begins to consume, and never grows to maturity:

Seeds spring up in time; and animals in time bring their offspring to perfection; but the interest is produced today, and today again begins its breeding . . . Everything that increases, when it reaches its proper size, stops increasing; but the money of avaricious men always increases progressively with time. The animals, after transmitting to the offspring the power of bearing, desist from conception; both the money of the money-lenders and the accruing interest produce, and the capital is redoubled. Do not, then, make trial of this unnatural beast.⁷⁹

75. Seneca, *Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales*, vol. 3 trans. Richard A. Gummere (London: William Heinmann, 1967), 110.

76. See also *Homilia de invidia* (PG 31:371–86), *Saint Basil: Ascetical Works*, trans. Sister M. Monica Wagner, FC 9 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press: 1950), 469.

77. Basil, *hom. in Ps.* (PG 29:273); ed. Way, *On Psalm 14*, 187.

78. Τόκος—birth, offspring, interest, or oppression. H. G. Liddell and R. Scott, *LSJ* 1803.

79. Basil, *hom. in Ps.* (PG 29:276); ed. Way, *On Psalm 14*, 188.

Gregory also draws from nature to describe the usurer, whom he likens to birds soon to be caught after greedily feasting on seed, or hunters who deplete each populated valley of wildlife, then move on with their nets to the next fertile valley.⁸⁰ The imbalance in the human world contrasted with the natural balance in the wild kingdom is a theme adopted from the Greek philosophers, who would hold the two domains up against one another for unfavorable comparisons.⁸¹ Despite his intellectual background, however, Gregory does not dwell on this as much in *Contra usurarios* as he does in *Concerning Beneficence*, where he writes movingly about the rape of the natural world to gorge the maw of the self-indulgent:

Our gourmands do not, in fact, even spare the bottom of the sea, nor do they limit themselves to the fish that swim in the water, but they also bring up the crawling marine beasts from the ocean bed and drag them to shore. One pillages the oyster banks, one pursues the sea urchin, one captures the creeping cuttle fish, one plucks the octopus from the rock it grips, one eradicates the mollusks from their pedestal. All animal species, those that swim in the surface waters or live in the depths of the sea, all are brought up into the atmosphere. The artful skills of the hedonist cleverly devise traps appropriate to each.⁸²

In both texts, Gregory addresses the human desire to hungrily harvest the world of its creatures to satisfy sensual pleasures of the belly, likening the usurer to those who hunt creatures who might otherwise have lived peacefully, residing safely in beauty and comfort, had it not been for the arrival of one with a perverted hunger, a net, and a hook.

HEAVENLY USURY

Basil ends his homily with an invective against the rich. He questions if the rich among his listeners have noted that he has encouraged the poor and destitute that it is better to remain in such a condition than to put

80. Gregory of Nyssa, *usur.* (PG 46:445; J 202); ed. McCambley, "Against Those Who Practice Usury," 299.

81. One example can be found in Plutarch, who writes: "Swallows do not borrow, ants do not borrow, creatures upon which nature has bestowed neither hands, reason, nor art; but men, with their superior intellect, support through their ingenuity horses, dogs, partridges, hares and jackdaws in addition to themselves. . . . Do you not see how many opportunities are offered on land and in the sea?" Plutarch, *De vitando aere alieno, Moralia*, vol. 10, trans. Harold North Fowler (London: William Heinemann, 1936), 329–31.

82. Gregory of Nyssa, *De beneficentia* (PG 46.465–68); ed. Holman, *The Hungry are Dying*, 198.

themselves at the mercy of such afflictions as are accompanied by interest. Basil sadly notes that had his parishioners been heeding Scripture⁸³ that this sermon would be completely superfluous,⁸⁴ and he encourages his richer parishioners to place themselves in a more favorable position before God by lending to the poor without hope for repayment. Maloney, in “The Teaching of the Fathers on Usury,” writes that Basil’s closing resembles Philo’s *On the Virtues*, but it is difficult to find overt influence. Perhaps the best example is Philo’s statement that “if they are unwilling to give, they should at least lend with all readiness and alacrity, not with the prospect of receiving anything back except the principal.”⁸⁵ It appears that the two are in agreement of spirit, and one could make the claim that Basil’s allegation that “. . . if you are seeking additional payment, be satisfied with that from the Lord. He will pay the interest for the poor,”⁸⁶ shows evidence of Philo’s influence. This follows from Basil’s exhortation for the miserly to consider that their free gift to the poor is yet a loan, and here he quotes Prov 19.17 as assurance: “Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and will be repaid in full.”⁸⁷ This is more explicitly stated in his *Homilia dicta tempore famis et siccitatis*:

O poor one, lend to the rich God. Believe in the one who is at all times taking up the cause of the afflicted in his own person and supplying grace from his own stores. Trustworthy guarantor, he has vast treasures all over the earth and sea. In fact, even if you were to demand back the loan in the middle of the ocean, you would be guaranteed to receive the capital with interest.⁸⁸

Basil brings to a close *Homilia in psalmum 14* by telling his wealthy parishioners to “Give the money, since it is lying idle, without weighing it down with additional charges, and it will be good for both of you.”⁸⁹ By this statement Basil is attempting to change the perception that money that is *not* working for the wealthy is an unfaithful asset, and as such will lead the wealthy to their ruin. But God, assures Basil, is not inhumane, and will no more let the rich go to ruin than the poor. Loans, Basil would

83. Here Basil quotes Luke 6.35: “But love your enemies; do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return.” In Basil, *hom. in Ps.* (PG 29:277).

84. Basil, *hom. in Ps.* (PG 29:277).

85. Philo, *De virtutibus, On the Virtues*, vol. 8, trans. F. H. Colson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 14.83.

86. Basil, *hom. in Ps.* (PG 29:277); ed. Way, *On Psalm 14*, 190.

87. Prov 19.17; Basil, *hom. in Ps.* (PG 29:277).

88. Basil, *Homilia dicta tempore famis et siccitatis* (PG 31:321A); ed. Holman, *The Hungry are Dying*, 190.

89. Basil, *hom. in Ps.* (PG 29:277–80); ed. Way, *On Psalm 14*, 190.

claim, are not the enemy; it is interest that crushes the poor, for “interest, which you take, is full of extreme inhumanity.”⁹⁰

Basil concludes with sure-fire proof of the wickedness of the usurer and his interest (those who say “the bitter is sweet and the sweet bitter”⁹¹) pointing out that like the wicked master in the parable, the usurer claims an unnatural place in society as one who reaps without sowing, claims the seed along with the produce, and harvests the fruits along with demands for the principle.⁹² But the benefit of hope-filled Christianity, in this case, is evident, for the bishop closes his homily with an appeal for the wicked to do good and not to turn away from those in need, in order that when it might be their time to pass the wealthy might also “depart to the Lord with good hope, receiving there the interest from your good deeds.”⁹³

Gregory, for his part, worked diligently to unlock active fear in the lender, a fear which would alter the lender’s erroneous belief that paradise might be gained by placing a corruptible bond on a poor person; instead, he writes to the lender, construct a pledge with God, the caretaker of an incorruptible bond.⁹⁴ Gregory urges his listeners to put away the need for written contracts and bonds, for the only written contract with which one need be concerned is the Gospels, and those—Gregory claims—were written and authorized by four persons, not one; in addition, the oath of the Gospels is not limited to one transaction, but is relevant from the time of the salvation of Christians.⁹⁵ Through the contract of the Gospels the Christian has the assurance of a “pledge of paradise and a worthy token.”⁹⁶ Although Basil and other authors refer to such “heavenly usury,” God’s role is never more explicit as in Gregory’s sermon. By means of a bold twist of terminology that seems almost profane, Gregory refers to God

90. Basil, *hom. in Ps.* (PG 29:280); ed. Way, *On Psalm 14*, 190.

91. Basil, *hom. in Ps.* (PG 29:280); from Isa 5.20: “Ah, you who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!”

92. Basil, *hom. in Ps.* (PG 29:280). This reading equates the usurer directly with the wicked master (or harsh man)—who also believed that he was entitled to collect something for nothing, who was told by his servant that the servant did nothing on behalf of his master because “I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground.” Matt 25.24–25.

93. Basil, *hom. in Ps.* (PG 29:280); ed. Way, *On Psalm 14*, 191.

94. Gregory of Nyssa, *usur.* (PG 46:440; J 199); ed. McCambley, “Against Those Who Practice Usury,” 296–97.

95. Gregory of Nyssa, *usur.* (PG 46:440; J 198); ed. McCambley, “Against Those Who Practice Usury,” 296.

96. Gregory of Nyssa, *usur.* (PG 46:440; J 198); ed. McCambley, “Against Those Who Practice Usury,” 296.

as the “Debtor,” the “χρεώστης;”⁹⁷ now this is not a “debtor” as either we or Gregory’s audience understands the term, but one who has control over the entire world and its possessions, much like a parent over a child and all that the child possesses. In Gregory’s text, God is a debtor (parent) who will wisely attend to the lender’s needs in entirety if the lender (the child) will only give abundantly rather than demand what is not his to secure.⁹⁸ While Basil urges the human debtor to “see that the sun is free,”⁹⁹ Gregory takes the other direction, and beseeches the lender to consider as their pledge the present bounty of the earth, and all which is inheritable from God:

Consider the sky’s expanse, examine the boundless sea, learn from the earth’s magnitude and count the living beings which it nourishes. . . . Do not demand gain but give bountifully and without corruption. Then you will see God who abundantly dispenses his grace.¹⁰⁰

Gregory offers as insurance the promise Christ makes to Peter, who wonders for what benefit have they left their homes and families behind: “And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields, for my name’s sake, will receive a hundred-fold, and will inherit eternal life.”¹⁰¹ Gregory’s rhetorical question to the lender—“Are you aware of his generosity and goodness?”¹⁰²—leads to statements on the philanthropy of a God who freely gives to those who are charitable; Gregory contrasts this with the miserable condition of the money-lender who gives and spends his days and nights agonizing over the return.¹⁰³

97. Gregory of Nyssa, *usur*. (PG 46:440; J 198); ed. McCambley, “Against Those Who Practice Usury,” 296.

98. Gregory of Nyssa, *usur*. (PG 46:440; J 198); ed. McCambley, “Against Those Who Practice Usury,” 296. Gregory also uses this language in *Sermon 5* on the Lord’s Prayer: “For the forgiving of debts is the special prerogative of God, since it is said, *No man can forgive sins but God alone.*” Gregory of Nyssa, *Oratio 5* (PG 44:1178–94); Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds., *Gregory of Nyssa: The Lord’s Prayer; The Beatitudes*, ACW 18 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1954), 71.

99. Basil, *hom. in Ps.* (PG 29.276); ed. Way, *On Psalm 14*, 188.

100. Gregory of Nyssa, *usur*. (PG 46:440; J 199); ed. McCambley, “Against Those Who Practice Usury,” 297.

101. Matt 19.29; Gregory leaves out the implication that individuals will receive their “hundred-fold” at the consummation of God’s purpose, rather than during the individual’s earthly lifetime.

102. Gregory of Nyssa, *usur*. (PG 46:440; J 199); ed. McCambley, “Against Those Who Practice Usury,” 297.

103. Gregory of Nyssa, *usur*. (PG 46:440–41; J 199–200); ed. McCambley, “Against Those Who Practice Usury,” 297.

Gregory's final statement to usurers is a call to alter their pernicious ways, but he ends on a less hopeful note than did Basil, for Gregory acknowledges those in his audience who are "murmuring under your teeth"¹⁰⁴ about his words; such persons, he claims, are likely to "shut their doors to persons in need."¹⁰⁵ Faced with this likelihood, he advocates the lending of money without interest or simple acts of charity, but his final words on the subject are that any who do otherwise are "hostile to God."¹⁰⁶

In a postscript, Gregory acknowledges that he will not address the plight of the debtor, and notes in a humble and demure statement that "our holy father Basil" has already quite sufficiently covered this problem.¹⁰⁷ "Humble and demure" is often the light within which Gregory is cast in relation to Basil, the bright star of this famous Cappadocian family, who often commands the greatest attention—and the evidence suggests that Gregory would consider this to be appropriate. But, if one accepts that the phrase mentioned earlier, to "descend to the contest at hand"¹⁰⁸ might imply a vague competition, as well as the statements of the scholars above that Gregory took on the task of completing *and* complementing his brother's works, then one might grant that Gregory set himself a task of moving the Christian ethical position on usury beyond his brother's previous homily on the same subject. While Gregory cannot have wanted to openly contend either with Basil or his memory, still, when the oppor-

104. Gregory of Nyssa, *usur*. (PG 46:452; J 206); ed. McCambley, "Against Those Who Practice Usury," 301. This gives us some impression as to how Gregory's sermon was received.

105. Gregory of Nyssa, *usur*. (PG 46:452; J 206); ed. McCambley, "Against Those Who Practice Usury," 301.

106. Gregory of Nyssa, *usur*. (PG 46:452; J 206); ed. McCambley, "Against Those Who Practice Usury," 301.

107. Gregory of Nyssa, *usur*. (PG 46:452; J 206); ed. McCambley, "Against Those Who Practice Usury," 301. This is not the first time Gregory adds a statement which draws the attention from himself to his brother, and Anthony Meredith points to Gregory's opening passage in *On Virginitate*, which Meredith considers to contain a direct reference to Basil; Gregory writes: "Since it is customary for everyone to participate more eagerly in a pursuit in which he sees someone especially outstanding, we have, of necessity, recalled the glorious unmarried saints; and since descriptions aimed at establishing virtue are not as powerful as the living voice and the actual examples of what is good, we have, perforce, referred at the end of the discourse to our most reverend bishop and father as the only one capable of teaching these things. We did not mention him by name, but the treatise refers to him enigmatically, so that the advice bidding the young man to follow in the footsteps of one who has gone before them may not seem incomprehensible to those who have access to the treatise." Gregory of Nyssa, *De virginitate* (PG 46.317–416); in Callahan, *Saint Gregory of Nyssa*, 7.

108. Gregory of Nyssa, *usur*. (PG 46:433; J 195–96); ed. McCambley, "Against Those Who Practice Usury," 294.

tunity presented itself, he rose to the occasion, or—in his own words—“descended.” If one accepts that Gregory sought to improve upon what Basil had done before, to write more thoroughly, to address other angles of the same problem which accompany usury and the sins which accompany such a foul deed, then quite clearly Gregory’s homily on usury can be understood and appreciated as it is, a sermon with its own integrity, independent of Basil’s homily.

CONCLUSION

Without question, Basil and Gregory wrote two distinct sermons on usury, with different audiences in mind and with dissimilar foundational influences. Their variances are evident from the first paragraphs: Basil’s homily addresses usury because he is completing a two-part homily on Ps 14, whereas Gregory is specifically addressing the subject of usury; this difference alone would indicate that they would take two distinct approaches. Basil begins by humbling himself and introduces the subject as one of such importance that he dare not neglect it for the sake of his audience.¹⁰⁹ Gregory, on the other hand, begins reluctantly, indicating that he does not wish to have to speak on this subject, either because Basil has already covered the material, or perhaps he knows that his audience will not be receptive. Previously noted factors also indicate that his “reluctance” might have been a rhetorical device contrived for appropriate humility before adding additional teaching to what is clearly a pressing issue in the community of Caesarea.

With respect to Scripture, Gregory relies more on Scripture than does Basil, who references a few passages and moves on. In all, there are twenty-six scriptural references in Gregory’s homily,¹¹⁰ to Basil’s seventeen references,¹¹¹ with five passages in common. The passages which they share in their homilies—Deut 23.19–20; Ezek 22.12; Ps 14.5; Prov 19.17; Matt 5.42—are even used in different ways: Gregory cites passages against usury found in Deut 23.20 and Ps 14.5,¹¹² and Basil—whose entire

109. Basil, *hom. in Ps.* (PG 29:264–65).

110. Exod 16.15, 17.6, 22.24–25 (twice); Deut 23.20; 1 Sam 1.20; Ezek 22.12; Isa 6.10; Amos 8.4–5; Ps 14.5; Prov 19.17; Matt 3.7, 5.42 (twice), 6.12 (twice), 18.28–34 (twice), 19.27; Luke 1.13, 2.7, 6.34–38 (four times), 8.13.

111. Deut 23.19; Ezek 22.12; Ps 14.5 (twice), 54.12; Prov 5.15, 19.17, 23.27, 24.34, 29.13; Jer 9.6; Isa 5.20; Judg 14.14; Matt 5.42 (twice), 7.16–17 (twice).

112. “Have you heard them [the usurers] cry out in one voice about love and compassion saying ‘To your brother you will not lend interest’ (Deut 23.20), ‘He has not

homily is based on the text found in Ps 14.5—utilizes Deut 23.19 at the beginning of his homily, referring to it as evidence of the law against the practice.¹¹³ Both brothers enlist Ezekiel’s condemnation in 22.12 within the first paragraphs, with neither of them quoting the prophet directly, but merely paraphrasing his words.¹¹⁴ Prov 19.17 is merely alluded to in Gregory’s text,¹¹⁵ while Basil quotes more specifically;¹¹⁶ either way, they both use the Proverbs passage as assurance to the lender that God will be bountiful to the one who extends his fortune to include others. The final Scripture that the brothers have in common is Matt 5.42, again alluded to in Gregory,¹¹⁷ and cited clearly in Basil.¹¹⁸ Gregory, whose homily is more heavily saturated with Scripture, quotes little, while Basil quotes Scripture explicitly. In addition, Gregory provides allusions to Genesis¹¹⁹

given his money on usury’ (Ps 14.5)” Gregory of Nyssa, *usur.* (PG 46:448–49; J 204); ed. McCambley, “Against Those Who Practice Usury,” 300.

113. “You shall not lend at interest to your brother, and to your neighbor.” Basil, *hom. in Ps.* (PG 29.264).

114. “This sin has been censured in many places in Scripture. Indeed, Ezekiel places it among the greatest of evils to take interest or any profit, and the law expressly forbids it.” Basil, *hom. in Ps.*, 29.265; ed. Way, *On Psalm 14*, 181; “Hence we are assembled here today to hear God’s commands and to pay close attention to the prophet. He slew the evil of money-lending whose child is usury and has banished from his life money gained through trade.” Gregory of Nyssa, *usur.* (PG 46:433; J 195); ed. McCambley, “Against Those Who Practice Usury,” 294.

115. “Make a pledge to him who is immortal and believe in his reliable bond which can never be sundered. Do not demand gain but give bountifully and without corruption (Prov 19.17).” Gregory of Nyssa, *usur.* (PG 46:440; J 199); ed. McCambley, “Against Those Who Practice Usury,” 297.

116. “Whenever you have the intention of providing for a poor man for the Lord’s sake, the same thing is both a gift and a loan, a gift because of the expectation of no repayment, but a loan because of the great gift of the Master who pays in his place, and who, receiving trifling things through a poor man, will give great things in return for them. ‘He that hath mercy on the poor, lendeth to God.’ Do you not wish to have the Lord of the universe answerable to you for payment?” Basil, *hom. in Ps.* (PG 29:277); ed. Way, *On Psalm 14*, 190.

117. “On the other hand we have the Apostle’s admonition concerning persons who give not through charity but out of greed.” Gregory of Nyssa, *usur.* (PG 46:437; J 198); ed. McCambley, “Against Those Who Practice Usury,” 296.

118. “The Lord has laid a clear command on us, saying: ‘And from him who would borrow of thee, do not turn away.’” Basil, *hom. in Ps.* (PG 29:280); ed. Way, *On Psalm 14*, 191.

119. Gen 4.7b; Gregory of Nyssa, *usur.* (PG 46:437; J 197–98); ed. McCambley, “Against Those Who Practice Usury,” 295–96.

and Luke,¹²⁰ which allows his audience to recall the Scriptures, even if he does not specifically refer to them.

In addition to Scripture, their philosophical influences are different, as well: Plutarch for Basil and Plato for Gregory. While scholars claim the influences of Aristotle and Philo on Basil's homily, Fialon's assessment that Plutarch "parle dans la chaire chrétienne par la bouche de Basile"¹²¹ should be included in the conversation about classical influences on Basil, with the addendum that in no way does Basil simply mimic the philosopher but—as Fialon also correctly noted—dimpled Plutarch's text with a distinctly Christian impression, providing the more hopeful Christian conclusion. Overt evidence of Gregory's philosophical influence is primarily limited to his introduction, but though he begins with a definition of virtue his Scripture-bound text clearly indicates that he understands either the limits of his subject, his audience, or both. Less candid—but perhaps still present in subtle ways—is the influence of *Phaedo*, which shapes Gregory's concerns for the afterlife of the usurer, tainted by his actions in this present world.

Even as it is clear that the brothers made use of similar themes in their sermons, they approached the same themes differently. First, both authors claim that usurers are well aware of the sinfulness of their actions. However, their methods of revealing the known sin of the usurer are completely different: in Basil's homily the usurer concocts an elaborate ruse, pretending to have no money and then producing the money by sheer coincidence, proof that he knows that his actions are despicable;¹²² Gregory, however, notes that the usurers turn Scripture upon one another, chastising each other as if the reproofs were meant for someone else and not for themselves.¹²³ The brothers both compare usurers to murderous physicians who treat their ill patients by afflicting them with further illnesses, wounding when they should be healing, and killing under the mien of offering a balm.¹²⁴ Basil

120. Luke 16.19–31; Gregory of Nyssa, *usur.* (PG 46:436; J 196); ed. McCambley, "Against Those Who Practice Usury," 295.

121. Fialon, *Étude historique et littéraire sur Saint Basile*, 196.

122. Basil, *hom. in Ps.* (PG 29:268); ed. Way, *On Psalm 14*, 182.

123. Gregory of Nyssa, *usur.* (PG 46:448; J 204); ed. McCambley, "Against Those Who Practice Usury," 300.

124. "A person burning with fever has an unquenchable thirst and earnestly begs wine. Although the cup given him out of charity satisfies for a while, the raging fever soon returns with a ten-fold vengeance. Thus whoever lends money to a destitute person intensifies his misery instead of relieving distress. Do not live with feigned charity nor

and Gregory each describe anxieties that abound when money is lent or borrowed, but while Basil portrays the mental woes of the one in debt, Gregory focuses on the distress of the usurer.¹²⁵ Both draw from the natural world to describe the characteristics of the usurer, yet while Basil describes the usurer in feral terms, like a wild beast,¹²⁶ Gregory casts the usurer in the role of the hunter of the beasts themselves, destroying nature and the free abundance of God.¹²⁷ Finally, similar to other early church authors who touch on the subject of usury, Basil asserts the primacy of “heavenly usury” (redemptive alms) to that of any interest gained on earth;¹²⁸ Gregory does this as well, but pushes this concept further, referring explicitly to God as a “debtor.”¹²⁹

While we know how Gregory’s homily was received—“For I know you are murmuring under your teeth,”¹³⁰—less is known about the reception of Basil’s homily. It is entirely possible that the greatest impact of these homilies was more literary than philanthropic or spiritual, as their themes and styles were adopted by other early church authors—contemporary to the Cappadocians and others in later years—who touched on the problem of usurers and usury in their own homilies.¹³¹ The fact that Gregory delive-

be a murderous physician with the pretence to heal for profit; if you do this, a person trusting in your skill can suffer great harm.” Gregory of Nyssa, *usur.* (PG 46:436; J 197); ed. McCambley, “Against Those Who Practice Usury,” 295. “Coming for assistance he found hostility. When searching for antidotes, he came upon poisons. It was your duty to relieve the destitution of the man, but you, seeking to drain the desert dry, increased his need. Just as some physician, visiting the sick, instead of restoring health to them would take away even their little remnant of bodily strength, so you also would make the misfortune of the wretched an opportunity of revenue.” Comparing both poverty and debt to illness or disease, Basil offers the following prescription to his audience: “No one treats wounds with another wound, nor cures an ill with another ill.” Basil, *hom. in Ps.* (PG 29:268); ed. Way, *On Psalm 14*, 183.

125. Gregory of Nyssa, *usur.* (PG 46:440–41; J 199–200); ed. McCambley, “Against Those Who Practice Usury,” 297; Basil, *hom. in Ps.* (PG 29:269); ed. Way, *On Psalm 14*, 184.

126. Basil, *hom. in Ps.* (PG 29:273–76); ed. Way, *On Psalm 14*, 187.

127. Gregory of Nyssa, *usur.* (PG 46:445; J 202); ed. McCambley, “Against Those Who Practice Usury,” 299.

128. Basil, *hom. in Ps.* (PG 29:277); ed. Way, *On Psalm 14*, 190.

129. Gregory of Nyssa, *usur.* (PG 46:440; J 198); ed. McCambley, “Against Those Who Practice Usury,” 296.

130. Gregory of Nyssa, *usur.* (PG 46:452; J 206); ed. McCambley, “Against Those Who Practice Usury,” 301.

131. Of the early authors who wrote on the topic of usury, St. Ambrose showed the greatest dependence on Basil’s text in his *De Tobia* (PL 14:759–94). See Giet, “De Saint Basile à Saint Ambroise”; see also Maloney, “The Teaching of the Fathers on Usury.”

red what was a second homily on the same subject for the same city does indicate the possibility of the extreme hard-heartedness of the wealthy in Caesarea,¹³² even though we know through Gregory of Nazianzus that Basil was able to work near miracles among the stingy in his see.¹³³

Though there is no dispute that the two usury homilies of Basil and Gregory have elements in common, it has been shown that those elements were applied quite differently; this, coupled with Gregory's own veiled statements, suggests that Gregory had no intention of merely parroting what was done previously by his elder brother, but that he set himself to the task of moving the Christian ethical position on usury beyond Basil's previous homily on the same subject. Basil's homily focused on three problems: the usurer, the poor who borrow rather than "make do," and those who borrow to continue living at a certain standard. Unlike Basil, significant factors indicate that for Gregory this homily was not merely about the practice of usury, but about the moral concerns that stretch beyond the needs of the present. For Gregory, the usurer fails to act in a way that properly mirrors the godly potential that is dormant in all humans, a moral failure that he ties to the usurer in additional texts beyond this homily.¹³⁴ For Gregory, proper understanding of shared humanity—even if that understanding comes by an evaluation of economics—can result in a goodness that moves both individuals involved towards the original state of purity; in this, acts of benevolence towards the needy clarify the divine image.

Clearly Gregory of Nyssa sought to improve upon what Basil had done before him: to write more thoroughly on the same subject, and to address other angles of the problems which accompany usury and the subsequent sins which accompany such a foul deed. Skirmishes with the stingy were just one of the many problems that bishops faced, but the unfortunate and unforgiving social conditions of Cappadocia required that even the most esoteric of bishops turn himself momentarily from the theological battles being waged about the doctrines of orthodoxy to attend to more finite

132. Justo González notes: "It is impossible to know how this particular sermon of Basil was received. We do know that he and a number of his colleagues were able to induce significance liberality, at least from a number of their parishioners." Justo González, *Faith and Wealth: A History of Early Christian Ideas on the Origin, Significance, and Use of Money* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), 176.

133. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration 43: The Panegyric on St. Basil* (PG 36:494–606) (Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds., *Cyril of Jerusalem, Gregory Nazianzen*, NPNE² 7 [Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishing, 1997]), 395–422.

134. Gregory of Nyssa, *Oratio 5* in Graef, 71–85; see also Gregory of Nyssa, *hom. 4* in Hall and Moriarty, 76–77.

concerns. These homilies show that both Basil and Gregory attended to the immediate and genuine concerns in their communities, and they did so with considerable theological and philosophical reflection. Further, in no way did they simply mirror what had been said before them; instead, each used influences readily available, improving upon what was said previously. A statement by Hans Urs von Balthasar—who was writing about Gregory of Nyssa at the time—sums up neatly the connections which exist between the one who influences, and the one who is influenced:

Never will looking backward towards the sources and the basic elements replace a looking forward that endeavors to grasp the synthesis that has been effected, the irreducible novelty that has been attained. The fruit of these labors, even though it is contained in the roots, is always something new and unexpected.¹³⁵

With their own styles intact and their influences accounted for, both Basil of Caesarea and his younger brother Gregory of Nyssa contributed and furthered the reasoned teaching against usury, in “new and unexpected” ways.

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135. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Essence and Thought: An Essay on the Religious Philosophy of Gregory of Nyssa*, trans. Mark Sebanc (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 17.