

# A HOMILY OF CONSOLATION CONCERNING PULCHERIA

## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

To be sure, the profuse outpouring of grief in this *oratio consolatoria* strikes the modern reader as not simply excessive but contrived. However, familiarity with addresses of a similar vein not only composed by Gregory of Nyssa but by other ancient Christian authors reveals that this style is fairly typical of the period in its lavish expression of sorrow<sup>2</sup>. As I had remarked in the first note just above, Pulcheria<sup>3</sup>, the daughter of the Emperor Theodosius (+395) and Empress Flacilla, died quite young. Therefore little is known of this child of illustrious Christian rulers who had championed the cause of Christian orthodoxy against Arianism which denied the divinity of Jesus Christ. Gregory, bishop of Nyssa and brother of Basil the Great, was indeed on familiar terms with the imperial household, and his intimate glimpse into its affairs as detailed in this *oratio* reveals a lively popular attachment for the emperor's private affairs.

In accord with this popular sentiment, Gregory mentions that "we experienced a real tremor (*seismos*) which did not mitigate these harsh circumstances" (J.462.29-463.1). Here he most likely was comparing the child's death to a recent earthquake to which the area of Asia Minor and the seat of the Eastern Roman Empire, Constantinople, was prone. His homily was given on the occasion of "that time of year...when we recall [Pulcheria]" (J.461.6-7). Not only does the image of an earthquake dominate Gregory's opening words-- for they are perhaps the most graphic image at his immediate disposal--but the same image reverberates to the faithful's memory (*mneme*) which "shudders with sorrow" (J.461.7-8). As Jean Danielou has commented, "Il [the text] s'agit de la destruction de Nicomédie, qui a eu lieu le 24 août 358. Notre sermon est donc du 25 août 385"<sup>4</sup>. Certainly Gregory had in mind the grief-stricken Flacilla, mother of Pulcheria, who perhaps saw in

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<sup>1</sup> I finished this translation in January 1996 after which I intend to work on Gregory's homily concerning the mother of Pulcheria, Flacilla (**Oratio Funebris in Flacillam**). Since both *oratio*s have a close affinity, I omit biographical details in **Pulcheria** with regard to Flacilla and her illustrious family, notably the emperor Theodosius.

<sup>2</sup> For references to the relationship between the relationship between such an *oratio consolatoria* and rhetoric, see the following: **Die Trostreden des Gregorios von Nyssa in Ihrem Verhältnis zur Antiken Rhetorik** by Johannes Bauer (Marburg, 1892), **Consolation Philosophy: Greek and Christian Paideia in Basil and the Two Gregories** by Robert Gregg (Cambridge, MA, 1978), and **Rhetorik und Theologie in den Grabreden Gregors von Nyssa** by Andreas Spira in **Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der Altchristlichen Literatur (Studia Patristica, vol. 9)** (Berlin, 1966), pp.106-14.

<sup>3</sup> Pulcheria is not to be confused with the Byzantine empress bearing the same name (+453) who was a strong adversary against Nestorianism.

<sup>4</sup> From an article entitled, *La Chronologie des Sermons de Gregoire de Nysse* in **Revue des Sciences Religieuses** #29 (Paris, 1955), p.364.

her child a not entirely unselfish reason for mourning the lack of a female successor to the imperial throne. Nevertheless, the close connection between the anguish shared by the mother and crowds ("as if the entire world, *oikoumene*, had run to gather for this tragedy," J.463.20-1) reveals a sympathy in the literal sense of the word very much alive in the ancient world where a member of the royal household was often considered as one's own relative. Today we would find the healing effect of this outpouring of compassion in, for example, the shared grief experienced at the funeral of a dignitary when broadcast into our homes.

Not only does the lofty status of this child permeate the opening words of Gregory's text, but her "royal virtues (*arete*) extend over and embrace the entire world like branches" (J.463.3-5). This improbable association between an adolescent and her protective, virtuous embrace is not to be derided; rather, it shows the kindness subjects expect under a particular reigning sovereign. Although not explicit, we see a connection between this young inheritor to the throne and its ideal Christian predecessor, King David (cf. J.464.4). Gregory does not give particular references to David's "own hymns," but every common Christian was familiar with the Psalms, the common prayer of the Church. The very first direct biblical quotation we encounter in **Pulcheria** is that of First Thessalonians 4.13: "Do not grieve over those who have fallen asleep" (J.464.15-16) which in Gregory's own blunt words provide "a statement directed only towards persons who have no hope" (1.16-17). Introduction of this verse marks a turning point in his *oratio* which, although continuing with more embellished details regarding Pulcheria, now shifts attention to the immortal nature of humankind as summed up by the word *apokatastasis* ("restoration" of all things in Christ), perhaps the major theme of this homily which I will develop later. Nevertheless, while referring to this passage which deals with the ultimate reality of death, Mariette Canevet comments that 1Thes 4.13 "est une banale parole de consolation dans diverses Oraisons funebres"<sup>55</sup>. The two passages in question are:

How is it possible to surmount the passions while remaining in nature and not be constrained by grief at this sight when death draws night not in old age but in the prime of life? (J.464.19-23)

Brethren, let us express grief over those who have fallen asleep because only persons with hope will hold out. Christ is our hope to whom be glory and power forever. Amen. (J.472.15-18)

The second passage which also contains the concluding words to **Pulcheria** implies reference to 1Thes 4.13 where Gregory presents his listeners with the only bond we all hold in common, hope (*elpis*). From the introduction of the Thessalonian passage one can feel a distinct tension between the tragic death of young Pulcheria and lofty flights of theological expression which seek to abrogate death's sting. Gregory then

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<sup>55</sup>Gregoire de Nysse et L'Hermeneutique Biblique, (Paris, 1983), p.218.

develops a fuller expression of his faith in Christ's resurrection from the dead by citing Mt 19.14: "Let the children alone and do not prevent them from approaching me, for to such belong the kingdom of heaven" (J.465.3-4). Note the use of two contradictory concepts, "kingdom" (*basileia*) and "children" (*paidia*): not only do they serve to make a point in the Gospel but in Pulcheria's life as well because she died so young and with the promise of the imperial throne held out to her. This theme is highlighted by Gregory's contrast between that which is perishable and imperishable as the following five paradoxes (J.465.6-11) disclose:

- the child is snatched / we run towards the Lord
- her eyes are closed / her voice resounds
- your table is removed / the angelic one remains
- this plant wastes away / it flourishes in paradise
- the blossom of purple departs / she assumes the heavenly kingdom's garment

All five verbs depicting corruptibility, a feature of entropy or the breakdown of order, are contrasted with their opposite, namely, eternal values. Although the message of Christ's triumph over death runs the risk of undue familiarity, an outline such as the one above excerpted from **Pulcheria** cannot but show the radical nature of its teaching since everything with which we are familiar is subjected to entropic decline and hence extinction. The last set of contrasts relates to Pulcheria's exchange of imperial purple for "the heavenly kingdom's garment" and suggests a major theme in the thought of Gregory of Nyssa, namely, the mutability of human nature which he views as a "garment of skin." This theme is borrowed from Gen 3.21, "And the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins (*chitonas dermatinous*) and clothed them." We should parallel this aspect of Gregory's doctrine to humankind as being made in God's image and likeness (cf. Gen 1.26). Contrary to his illustrious predecessor Origen, the bishop of Nyssa does not perceive the "garments of skin" as the body *per se*; rather, body and soul were part and parcel of human nature when God had created them. More specifically, these garments comprise mortality and corruptibility which humankind freely embraced. Following the Genesis text, Gregory says that the garments (it should be noted that God himself had woven them) were a remedy, not a punishment, for this abuse of human freedom. I will cite several passages from Gregory's writings which are to be viewed in conjunction with the text from **Pulcheria**:

The blossom wastes away but it flourishes in paradise and is transferred from one kingdom into another...Am I speaking here about the material of this divine garment? It is not linen, wool nor anything which the silk worm had spun. I have heard David exclaim when he had finished weaving

garments for God, "I will clothe myself with a confession [of gratitude] and glory" (Ps 103.1, lxx). Do you see what he got in exchange for all these? The body's beauty no longer causes you grief, and the true beauty of the soul which is now proclaimed in the heavenly assembly remains invisible. **Pulcherai**, J.465.8-19

Our human nature yoked to the flesh provides healing provided that it is not deprived of any need. If necessary, we must warm this chamber alone [that is, the body] and shadow it over again when the sun burns us. A garment provides covering for the naked body. It does not have to be purple, scarlet, have gold thread, nor silk from Seres whose garments are woven from gold and purple. Similarly, food relieves hunger and provides pleasure by means of culinary techniques. Content with few advantages, our needs are cared for while we glorify God's work, not our own, so we need not make our vanity public as we learn from the words, "I enlarged my work" (2.4), not God's. Compelled by vain desires instead of need, I enlarged the dwelling of my flesh. **Commentary on Ecclesiastes**, J.326-7.

Those of you who, according to the advice of St. Paul, have stripped off the old man with his deeds and desires are you would a filthy garment and have wrapped yourselves by the purity of your lives in the bright garments of the Lord which he displayed upon the mount of transfiguration; you who have put on the Lord Jesus Christ with his holy robe and have been transformed with him into a state which is free from passion and more divine, listen to the mysteries of the Song of Songs. **Commentary on the Song of Songs**, J.14-15.

"I have put off my coat; how shall I put it on? I have washed my feet; how shall I defile them" [Sg 5.3]? Rightly the bride heard her spouse summoning her to be a sister, companion, dove, and perfect one, so that through these words truth might dwell in her. She did what she had heard, that is, she removed her garment of skin with which she clothed herself after her sin. **Commentary on the Song of Songs**, J.327.

The first excerpt from the **Song Commentary** above are the words which begin Gregory's First Homily and set forth the theme of transformation in Christ, the divine Bridegroom. **Pulcheria** also speaks of that heavenly "bridal chamber [which] is far superior, and a more fitting room exists which has no fear of widowhood" (J.466.13-19). Gregory is fond of contrasting this nuptial chamber with two Psalm verses depicting our longing for it: "My soul longs and yearns for the courts of the Lord" (Ps 83.3, J.467.15-

16), and "Lead my soul out of this prison" (Ps 141.8, J.467.17). Such are the sentiments of those "ancient holy men who had great aspirations in the present life" (J.467.18-19).

In **Pulcheria** the first of Gregory's greatest models for enduring the afflictions of "fleshly existence" (J.467.21) was Abraham who also figures significantly in his other writings. More precisely, he focuses upon the "severe test" Abraham underwent when commanded to sacrifice his son Isaac whose "sweet youth" resembled that of Pulcheria (J.468-469.2). The second model Gregory introduces to his audience is Job<sup>66</sup>, noted for his endurance under tribulation, especially his loss of "three daughters and seven sons who were endowed with every blessing" (J.469.24-25). Here Gregory embellishes their tragic demise with details of their deaths, a feature consistent with his elaboration of the young Pulcheria's death. An excerpt from Gregory's Second Homily **Concerning the Forty Martyrs** as noted with regard to Mariette Canevet's observations concerning Job in the note above is worth mentioning here:

Suffering was the course for these athletes; their path was both sacred and severe, and their struggle crowned their confession. They shared the same zeal for victory. No one ever beheld such fervor since they were of one mind as if they were to remove their garments in a public bath. They gave voice to Job's words, "We have come into the world naked and leave the same way" (Job 1.21). "We bring nothing into the world and cannot take anything out of it" (1Tim 6.7). Having uttered these comforting words, they exposed their bodies to the cold. Once the natural elements ran their course, the martyrs attained victory. (J.154)

What happened to them [Job's children]? At the climax of their feast an earthquake caused the roof to collapse while the ten youths were present, and the cup was mixed with their blood and their food was defiled by their gore. When these calamitous events were reported to Job (It seems to me that he was an athlete not that you may admire just his victory, a small gain from such admiration, but that you may also be prepared in similar circumstances) **Pulcheria**, J.470.9-16.

In **Forty Martyrs** Gregory reveals the true reason why he introduces the figure of Job, namely, as "a gymnastic teacher (*paidotribes*) whose example will anoint your soul for patience and fortitude when trials come your way" (J.470.17-20). Pulcheria should

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<sup>66</sup> Again, Mariette Canevet remarks with regard to Job: "La figure de Job illustre l'attitude chretienne devant la mort, exprimee parfois en termes voisins de ceaux du Stoicisme: 'le Seigneur a donne, le Seigneur a repris' [noted in **Pulcheria**, J.470.30-1] pensent les Quarante Martyrs." Ibid, p.117. Refer to this excerpt from **Forty Martyrs** within my Introduction of the **Pulcheria** text.

not be considered as sharing the same spiritual maturity as Job; nevertheless, for Gregory her tragic death is indicative of patience when confronted with the death of a loved one, especially one who has been snatched away in the "prime of life" (*en te prote helikia*, J.464.22-23). Gregory also has written a short treatise, **Concerning Infants Who Have Died Prematurely** which, although different in tone from **Pulcheria**, does have an affinity in that both works deal with children who have passed away before attaining the fullness of human growth. The bishop of Nyssa presents his argument in **Infants** as follows:

We achieve virtue and alienation from pleasure only with much effort. This is what happens to a person involved in a distressing situation who indeed shares in temporal existence or who has struggled for virtue or who has been afflicted by evil in life by the reward of sufferings. Nothing of the sort pertains to those who have been born prematurely; their death is considered beneficial if what we believe comes to pass. Therefore if a lack of unreason is deemed better there is no reason for virtue. If no penalty pertains to the good and virtue, it would be useless to be distressed over this when [an infant's] lack of reason is taken into consideration at God's judgment. (J.75)

In **Pulcheria** Gregory continues with his portrayal of Job's fortitude: "he has passed from tribulation to a spirit of philosophical musing" (*eis episkepsin tes peri ton onton philosophias*, J.471.8-9). Here Gregory means philosophy in the literal sense as "love of wisdom" as recounted in a similar passage from **Infants** from which I quote again due to its parallel with **Pulcheria**:

Both an educated and uneducated person can observe the beauty of heavenly wonders by looking up at the sky, yet whoever considers them by using philosophy sees them differently instead of relying upon sense perceptions...We can never behold the stars' hidden location, but they all lead the mind on high through wisdom. (J.71)

This text concerns an inquiry to discover that reality lying behind appearances while Job in **Pulcheria** applies this same spirit of philosophical inquiry into "the present life [which] is like a seed for the future" (J.471.10-11). Gregory gives the analogy of an ear of corn whose seed contains the fullness of its beauty (J.13-14), an image of immortality intended to comfort those mourning Pulcheria:

Job considers this [the necessity for what is corruptible to put on incorruptibility, 1Cor 15.53] and is heartened by the good fate of his children; although young, they have shed the chains of life. (J.471.16-18).

After presenting Job's example to whom God finally bestowed children, Gregory concludes his *oratio consolatoria* with some remarks concerning his well known doctrine of *apokatastasis*, "restoration" (J.472.6-18), which he defines as "the resurrection which is a renewal (*anastoicheiosis*) of our original nature" (J.472.10-11)<sup>77</sup>. Gregory also equates *apokatastasis* with resurrection in his **Commentary on Ecclesiastes**:

The soul existed right from the beginning; it had been purified in the past and will appear in the future. God, who fashioned the human body, will show the resurrection at the proper time, for that which comes after the resurrection was indeed fashioned first. The resurrection is nothing other than the restoration (*apokatastasis*) of all things to their original state. (J.296)

In another text entitled **Concerning Those Who Have Died**, Gregory speaks of human nature's mutability and uses the following terms to express it: *allattesthai* (J.62.14), *hupallayenai* (J.65.14), *metapoiesis* (J.62.20), *summetatithesthai* (J.63.1) and *metastoicheiousthai* (J.62.26). All these terms unite to form an *akolouthia* or sequence of ideas; they refer in one way or another to the unstable condition of our human nature which requires divine transformation. The prime example for such transformation or growth is portrayed by means of the detailed description with regard to an ear of corn which may be compared with the text from **Pulcheria**. Corn starts from a seed hidden in the ground and reaches culmination in the ear which we eat, "the final goal" (*teleioseos*, J.49-52). The entire process includes a whole series of deaths as they relate to the previous stages until the farmer reaps his harvest. Gregory applies this example to our true goal in an important passage:

The final goal of our journey is restoration (*apokatastasis*) to our original state or likeness (*homoiosis*) to God. Just as the corn grows and puts forth green shoots which include the husk, grain, stem and the plant's various segments without our assistance, the edible fruit attains maturity through all these stages. In a similar fashion we await the goal of blessedness. (J.51)

He [Job] knew well that life rests in hope and that the present life is like a seed for the future. What is hoped for by the beauty belonging to the ear of corn. **Pulcheria**, J.471.13-14)

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<sup>77</sup> For more information on *apokatastasis* as related to **Pulcheria**, refer to the article *Protologie et Eschatologie chez Gregoire de Nyssa* by Monique Alexandre in **Arche e Telos: L'Anthropologia di Origene e di Gregorio di Nissa** (Milan, 1981), pp.122-7.

In the first passage we have another reference to that celebrated though controversial term, *apokatastasis*, the restoration of all things [in Christ], when every type of alteration or mutability belonging to the created realm will achieve its fulfillment. Within the context of Gregory's essay, our earthly form or human bodies must be abandoned which is an argument against Origen's position, whereas Gregory's **De Anima** and **De Opificio Hominis** supports its restoration. As T.J. Dennis points out<sup>8</sup>, the relatively early treatise, **Concerning Those Who Have Died**, is more radical in its application of *apokatastasis* than these other two related works in that it stresses the disappearance of the earthly body. Furthermore, it seems that Gregory's severe attack on the corporeality of our bodies leaves little or no room for a more balanced Christian picture of the resurrection, that is, of the role of the human body. Despite this generally negative attitude towards the body, the bishop of Nyssa does acknowledge its role in God's plan for our redemption:

The senses perceive beauty in their own way whereas the soul perceives that [divine] beauty transcends understanding; sense can only judge by color, mass and similar qualities. Once the soul is no longer identified with appearances after exiting the body, it is united to that good which is in accord with its nature. No more does the sight of beautiful colors entice the eye, nor do we choose anything else which delights the senses; every bodily perception (*pases somatikes aistheteria*) has now been shaken off. (J.48)

Despite the lofty sentiments expressed by such terms as *apokatastasis*, there remains at least for the eyes of mortal flesh that final barrier of death which even Gregory of Nyssa admits in the second last sentence of **Pulcheria**: "Brethren, let us express grief over those who have fallen asleep because only persons with hope will hold out" (J.472.15-17). Here he alludes to Thes 4.13 which was mentioned midway through the homily (J.464.15-16), a "statement directed only towards persons who have no hope," that is those who fail to say in the very last sentence that "Christ is our hope."

The critical text to **A Homily of Consolation Concerning Pulcheria** was edited by Andreas Spira and is found in **Gregorii Nysseni: Sermons, Pars Prior**, vol. ix (E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1967), pp.461-72. The text by J.P. Migne may be found in **Patrologia Graeca** (Paris, 1858), cols. 864-77.

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<sup>88</sup> **The Easter Sermons of Gregory of Nyssa** (Cambridge, MA, 1981), pp.67-8.



## THE TEXT

[J.461 & M.864] I am at a loss as how to begin. I see two reasons for sadness, and I can easily shed tears when considering either one. As our pastor has informed us yesterday, that time of year is present when the city's various neighborhoods shudder with sorrow when we recall [Pulcheria]. Who can possibly not shed a tear? She is indeed renowned; among all fair cities under the sun [ours] experiences another trembling and lacks no small adornment with regard to its resplendent brilliance by which it lavishes praise upon the revered empress, thereby sharing the anguish of kings in mourning. But you are not uninformed about this matter since you behold a great assembly here where we too gathered to join in the mourning. I am uncertain with regard to which shock I should direct my attention, that is, the present situation or what had already taken place. How can I curb the extreme sorrow which is present and the city's own grief by offering some reflections? If everyone does not share the congregation's affliction which equally afflicts those present as well as those who are absent, to these my words will [M.865] will be addressed. For example, wise physicians trained to practice their art among persons in extreme distress [J.462] certainly can treat lesser pains. Professionals claim that if two physicians treat the pains of one body, the discernment of only a single person helps to alleviate the patient's excruciating pain.

In a similar fashion I regard the present situation: our new grief is intensified by the recollection of distress. Who here cannot help but be unmoved? Whose soul cannot remain indifferent? Who is like iron which lacks feeling? You must realize that this tender dove [Pulcheria] adorned with royal beauty which has just flown away on a bright wing and has left behind her youthful prime, having disappeared from our sight. Jealousy has immediately snatched her from our hands whether we call her a dove or a tender little flower who not yet has shone with full splendor even though she has already sparkled. She had hoped to shine and to continue ever more brightly regardless whether she was imperfect or had already attained perfection. As soon as she sprang up like a shoot, the grave snatched her away even though nobody had plucked her nor wove her into a crown;

indeed nature had labored in vain. Where goodness was anticipated, a jealous sword has dealt a mortal blow to this aspiration. It was clear, brethren, that we experienced a real tremor [in the sense of an earthquake] which certainly did not mitigate these harsh circumstances. Neither can the beauty of buildings, any lifeless object, flowery letters nor the sight of choice stones on the ground replace her; rather, the radiant dwelling of her own nature is magnificent in itself because it excels **[J.463]** in grace, yet this jolt suddenly loosens it.

I have seen that sublime shoot, most lofty of palms (by this I mean her imperial authority) whose royal virtues extend over and embrace the entire world like branches. I have seen it surpass all others, bending and inclining in order to shed its blossoms. I have seen a noble branch embraced by a palm tree which on our behalf has given birth this flower whose pangs for a second time lend support to the soul, not the body, because this shoot has been plucked. Who among us cannot but sigh and disregard such a calamity? Who has not deplored its destruction? Who has not shed a tear at its misfortune? Who has not joined one's own words to that of a funeral dirge? I have seen an incredible phenomenon and created marvels which hardly can be believed. **[M.868]** I have seen a sea of men crammed together who appear like water to the eyes: the full temple, its vestibule, the open expanse before it, people in mourning, the nearby streets, public areas, the side streets and houses. Wherever one looks there are crowds of people as if the entire world had run to gather for this tragedy. The sight everyone beheld is that holy flower adorned upon a golden bed. How cast down and disheartened are all those faces! How tearful is this sight! They strike their hands together and mourners pour out their heart-felt grief. At that time there appeared to me (not to others who were then present) gold radiated from its own nature. But gleaming stones, anything woven from gold, pearls of silver, light radiating **[J.464]** from fire and a great many lights made from bee's wax which seemed to be coming from every side were darkened by mourning and shared a common anguish. Then the great David joined his own hymns to such lamentations, and instead of choral gladness we have lamentation and bereavement caused by such dirges. Every pleasantness was forgotten at that time and tears had replaced joy.

Since reason evaporates when confronted with such passion, it would be opportune to strengthen anew as far as possible your drooping mind with words of advice. The Apostle's [Paul] words with regard to condemnation are fraught with danger for persons who have no hope. His penetrating words are as follows: "Do not grieve over those who have fallen asleep" [1Ths 4.13], a statement directed only towards persons who have no hope. But in my opinion weak souls are unable to follow the divine Apostle [his words] and transcend [human] nature by his precepts. How is it possible to surmount the passions while remaining in nature and not be constrained by grief at this sight when death draws nigh not in old age but in the prime of life? Eyelids darken the

eyes' rays, ruddy complexion becomes pallid, the mouth is silenced and the blossoming flower of the lips is darkened, something difficult not only for the parents but for anyone who happens to behold this sight.

What, then, can we say? We use **[J.465]** not our own words but those from the Gospel which comfort us. I have heard the Lord saying, "Let the children alone and do not prevent them from approaching me, for to such belong the kingdom of heaven" [Mt 19.14]. Although the child is snatched from you, **[M.869]** we run towards the Lord. Her eyes are closed for you but her voice resounds for eternity. Your table is removed but the angelic one remains. This plant wastes away but it flourishes in paradise and is transferred from one kingdom into another. The blossom of purple departs but she assumes the heavenly kingdom's garment. Am I speaking here about the material of this divine garment? It is not linen, wool nor anything which the silk worm had spun. I have heard David exclaim when he had finished weaving garments for God, "I will clothe myself with a confession [of gratitude] and glory" [Ps 103.1, Septuagint]. Do you see what he got in exchange for all these? The body's beauty no longer causes you grief, and the true beauty of the soul which is now proclaimed in the heavenly assembly remains invisible [cf. Heb 12.22, Ps 88.6]. How lovely is that eye which sees God! How sweet the mouth which adores him with divine songs! "From the mouth of children and of babes I will bring perfect praise" [Ps 8.3]. How exquisite are those hands which are not put at evil's service! How beautiful are those feet which do not tread upon an evil way nor step in the way of sinners [cf. Rom 10.15, Is 52.7]! How lovely is the soul's countenance unadorned with stones [cf. 1Tim 2.9-10, 1Pt 3.3-4] but radiant in simplicity and purity!

Nevertheless, you are tormented by the fact that **[J.466]** she did not attain old age. Tell me, then, do you perceive beauty in old age? By this I mean that beauty which makes the eyes shed tears, draws in the cheeks, makes teeth protrude from one's mouth and produces indistinct words, trembling hands, stooping to earth, halting steps, need for support, loss of mental faculties and an inaudible voice: all are characteristics which belong to this time of life. Do not these frailties offend us when we attain such an end? No congratulation is in order for those exhausted by life and who lack feeling, nor do people recognize them. When a soul lacking these comes to judgment, it has neither fear of Gehenna nor of judgment but remains trusting and unperturbed since it lacks an evil conscience which is struck by dread at the thought of judgment [cf. 1Tim 5.24]. But he says that we must all come to judgment and enjoy the nuptial chamber. The true bridegroom [Jesus Christ] tells you that the heavenly bridal chamber is far superior and that a more fitting room exists which has no fear of widowhood. Tell me, then, should we reject this corporeal life? Shall I tell you the beauties of this life? They consist in grief and pleasure, courage and fear, hope and desire, to which we are all joined in this

present life.

What brings freedom from evil of such a tyranny? When each affliction grips the soul, it tyrannizes us and makes us slaves to its intentions. What afflicts us when birth pangs do not subdue us, [M.872] when we are not worn down by the cares of [J.467] rearing children and when we are not susceptible to those afflictions which parents patiently endure? It is better to have no share in evil than to partake of human nature. Thus in his own writings the wise Solomon pronounces blessed those who have not been born [cf. Eccl 4.2-3], and the great David pours out laments over this existence [cf. Pss 89; 102.14-16; 119.5; 141.8]. Both lamps are magnificent within the kingdom and all share the resources of life's pleasures; by this I do not mean passing delights, but they pursue unutterable treasures stored up for that incorporeal life instead of the present life in the flesh. In the holy psalms I have often heard David desiring freedom from such demands: "My soul longs and yearns for the courts of the Lord" [Ps 83.3], and "Lead my soul out of this prison" [Ps 141.8]. Similarly Jeremiah judges as cursed that day when sentence was passed on him [cf. Jer 20.14-18]. We can find many such examples in divine Scripture of the ancient holy men who had great aspirations in the present life while being weighed down by fleshly existence.

Thus the great Abraham ardently offered his beloved son as a sacrifice to God because a superior change for something divine lay in store for his son. By experience you have knowledge of historical examples and are certainly not ignorant [J.468] of the stories about him [cf. Gen 12.2]. What does Scripture say? That when God made a promise with regard to the youthful Abraham's son, namely, that when the end of his life drew near and natural processes had ceased due to his advanced old age, Isaac was born [cf. Gen 21.3-7]. At the appointed time this son attained full stature and the radiance of his youth was sweet in his parents' eyes. Abraham was then put to a severe test to see if he keenly discerned beauty in present circumstances. God said to him, "Offer your son as a sacrificial holocaust" [Gen 22.1-2]. You who are fathers have learned from [human] nature, and you have sons and show them affection realize that a future life would be granted to Abraham if he forsook only this present life, remained in a servile condition and pondered over its [future] sweetness while living in this present one.

What can I say about fragile female nature? If a woman is not instructed by a man concerning divine things, she does not acknowledge the hidden life as better than appearances and would not entrust the care of her son to a man. Indeed a mother's affection envelops [M.873] her son, and she embraced him with her arms at the time of death. These words pertain to Abraham. Spare the child, oh man, that there be no sinister report concerning the generation of life and that we might not attribute [J.469] a myth with regard to this episode and not be jealous about the son's life nor deprive him of a

sweet ray. Fathers prepare a nuptial chamber for their sons instead of a tomb; a wedding crown, not a lethal sword; conjugal lamps, not fire at the tomb. Such things belong to robbers and enemies, for the hands of fathers are not raised against their sons. If evil is necessary, Sarah would not see Isaac slain; the sword would then pierce both, a destructive deed for which I am directly responsible. Since one plague suffices for both, let them share a common burial mound and let one monument testify to a single tragedy.

Sarah recounts in full these and similar episodes because she had witnessed them which are unseen by us. She realized that the end to fleshly life is the beginning of divine life for those who have migrated: she leaves shadows and embraces truth; forsakes deception, error and confusion and finds value beyond anything visible, what was reported and had entered the heart [cf. 1Cor 2.9, Is 64.3]. Neither does love (*eros*) cease nor sordid cupidity corrupt; pride does not inflate nor does any passion of grief afflict the soul; rather, God is all things to her [1Cor 15.28].

What about the great Job [cf. Job 1]? At once he was despoiled of everything he possessed in abundance first by calamities which consumed his soul. How could he bear the last one, a report of his childrens' death? He had three daughters and seven sons who were endowed with every blessing. They all had deep affection for each other, did not living apart [J.470] but delighted in visiting each other and took great pleasure in their presence. Once they had journeyed to meet their eldest brother for a banquet. Their cups were full, the table was spread and goblets were in their hands, a sight befitting such festival occasions; everything agreeable was present such as drinking bouts, joyful spirits, games and smiles; these youths enjoyed every type of cheerful activity at their feast. What happened to them? At the climax of their feast an earthquake caused the roof to collapse while the ten youths were present, and the cup was mixed with their blood and their food was defiled by their gore. When these calamitous events were reported to Job (It seems to me that he was an athlete not that you may admire just his victory, a small gain from such admiration, but that you may also be prepared in similar circumstances. Furthermore, [M.876] this athlete can be a [literally, gymnastic] teacher whose example will anoint your soul for patience and fortitude when trials come your way.), what did he do? A low born, abject person would entreat the names of those who have departed and bewail their memory either by word, his bearing, lacerating his cheeks, pulling out hair, by covering himself with dust, beating his chest, casting himself to the ground or by chanting songs of lament. The bearer of unfortunate news only mentioned the youths' fate which, as soon as he [Job] heard it, immediately pondered over the nature of things, considered their origin, what nature made them come into existence and what role they have in the scheme of things. "The Lord has given and the Lord has taken away" [Job 1.21]. He says that God is the source of the human race [J.471] and returns to him. Since God has the power to create and destroy [cf. 2Tim 4.6], he also has the power of

giving and of taking away. He is good who wishes good and knows what is beneficial [cf. Mt 19.17]. "As it pleases the Lord (it is indeed pleasing)," so he has brought it about: "blessed be the name of the Lord" [Job 1.21].

You see what lofty height the athlete has attained: he has passed from tribulation to a spirit of philosophical musing. He knew well that life rests in hope and that the present life is like a seed for the future [cf. Mt 13.31-2]. What is hoped for outstrips the present much like an ear of corn from which it springs. Life now resembles this seed which manifests the life hoped for by the beauty belonging to the ear of corn. "What is corruptible must put on incorruptibility, and what is mortal must put on immortality" [1Cor 15.53]. Job considers this and is heartened by the good fate of his children; although young, they have shed the chains of life. A two-fold sign promised by God lies in store for what has been snatched away; a two-fold restitution not only of children but ten take their place [cf. Job 42.10-15]. Since mens' souls are eternal, two compensations are given: the progeny of children is included along with their parents as all living to God, and the presence of death poses no [J.472] hindrance for those who have died. Death is therefore irrelevant for men unless they are cleansed from evil. Although from the beginning God has prepared for our nature a choice vessel filled with choice benefits [cf. 2Tim 2.20-1], [M.877] evil, the enemy of our souls, deceived us and snatched away any good residing there. Therefore, evil which is rooted in us does not endure forever; by a providential foresight time dissolves the vessel in a better type of death in order to renew humanity from this implanted evil and that evil not be mingled at life's restoration [*apokatastasis*] as was the case at the beginning [cf. Acts 3.21]. This is the resurrection which is a renewal of our original nature. Therefore [human] nature cannot be renewed without the resurrection; it cannot take place without death preceding it which is the beginning and way leading to our betterment. Brethren, let us express grief over those who have fallen asleep because only persons with hope will hold out [cf. Ths 4.13]. Christ is our hope to whom be glory and power forever. Amen.